
SYOUGO KINUGASA
TOMOSESHUNSAKU
CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR 2
NOVEL
11

[redacted]


SYOUGO KINUGASA
TOMOSE SHUNSAKU
CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR 2
NOVEL
11

F

RoyalMTLs

1




CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR 2
NOVEL 11

RoyalMTLs

2



RoyalMTLs

3


“You’re early.”
There was still some time until the scheduled time, but she was already waiting.
“Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun.”
“Good morning. Sorry for calling you out so early.”
“It's all right. So, what did you want to talk to me about? Something you couldn't say on the phone?”

RoyalMTLs

4



RoyalMTLs

5


11
WELCOME TO CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

RoyalMTLs

6

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

NOVEL 11

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku

[redacted]

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR 2 VOLUME 11

SYOUGO KINUGASA

ROYALMTLs

RoyalMTLs

8



CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2 11

CONTENTS

YAMAMURA MIKI'S MONOLOGUE

1. THE ELUSIVE TWO-PARTY INTERVIEW
2. THE EXCHANGE TRAINING CAMP
3. REQUEST FROM HORIKITA AND REQUEST FROM AYANOKŌJI
4. A STRANGE DISCOMFORT
5. THE WATCHER, THE WATCHED
6. A QUIET RESOLUTION
7. A SETTLED NIGHT
8. THE COURAGE TO STEP FORWARD

E. WHO IS THE CHALLENGER?

POSTSCRIPT



RoyalMTLs

9



Yamamura Miki's Monologue

I REALIZED THAT I was alone.

It wasn't that anyone particularly disliked me.

I just didn't catch anyone's eye.

I was inconspicuous, lacking presence.

Before anyone could like me, they couldn't even hate me.

That was why I was always alone.

It was the same in kindergarten, elementary school, and junior high.

I didn't have any friends, and I spent a lot of time by myself.

I couldn't develop the ability to talk to people, so I remained invisible.

Even after becoming a high school student, nothing changed.

But I thought that was okay.

I forced myself to believe that it was my strength…

I thought it would be okay to live quietly alone even as an adult.

Even so, I am certainly here.

". .After all.. I don't think losing suits Sakayanagi-san..."

“Why don't you try telling her? No one has the right to criticize your actions.”

What is this sensation, this emotion that is seeping into my heart?

I didn't know.

I just didn't know.

—Until this day.

RoyalMTLs

10



Chapter 1:

The Elusive Two-Party Interview

A LITTLE TIME HAD passed since the survival and elimination special exam ended. Due to her close position to Sakayanagi, Kamuro becoming a new dropout surprised the second-year students. However, since Kamuro didn't have any close friends from other classes, the shock didn't last long.

But that wasn't the only reason. They were getting used to the feeling. That implication couldn't be ignored.

They were becoming increasingly desensitized to the pain of losing a comrade.

As soon as February came, the date and details of the announced two-person interview were announced.

It was said that they'd talk for about 15 minutes per person over the span of five days. The time needed for the interview was secured by making the afternoon classes self-study and using after-school hours, and students were called to a separate room as needed.

Due to the setting sun, the view outside the classroom window had greatly changed.

Today was the fifth and final day, the day of my two-person interview. I was assigned to the last slot.

While waiting in the classroom, I received instructions from the teacher on my phone to come to the career counseling room, so I decided to go immediately.

There were hardly any students left in the school, and the only ones I passed by were students returning from club activities.

When I arrived in front of the career counseling room, I lightly clenched my hand and used the first joint of my finger to gently knock three times. Naturally, I heard a voice from Chabashira-sensei allowing me to enter.

“Excuse me.”

When I quietly opened the door, I saw Chabashira-sensei seated at her desk, running her fingertips over her tablet.

“You're finally here. Have a seat.”

After a quick glance, she looked back down at her tablet.

“You seem busy.”

“As a homeroom teacher, I can't help but be busy during this time. But I feel a little better knowing that the two-person interviews will be over today. It was a good decision to leave the two oddballs for last.”



After answering, she instructed me to sit down, so I sat in the empty seat across the desk.

“Two oddballs, you say?”

“What, are you shocked to be treated on the same level as Kōenji?”

“I'd be lying if I said I didn't think anything of it.”

Chabashira-sensei laughed and placed her tablet on the desk.

“Do you think Kōenji is more of an oddball? Well, I can understand why you'd think that, but to me, there's not much difference. You're quite the oddball yourself.”

It seemed that was how I was perceived from a teacher's perspective. I didn't lack the desire to deny it, but I decided to bear it and let it slide.

“Well, I don't have many opportunities to talk with each student. Before we talk about your future plans, let's talk about your school life. If there's anything you want the school to improve, I'd like to hear it.”

“I don't have anything in particular. As an individual, I'm satisfied.”

“I see. Do you have any trouble in your relationships with friends, or anything you want to consult about?”

“I don't.”

Without hesitation, I continued to respond, and Chabashira-sensei showed a slightly bitter smile.

“Most students give one or two opinions, or at least show some sign of thinking, even if they don't have any. I don't think you're holding back.. ”

She seemed a little confused by my faster-than-expected response, but there was nothing she could do.

“I actually don't have any complaints.”

If I had any requests, I probably would’ve conveyed them without hesitation.

“Well, if that's the case, it's fine. . but you really don't have anything?”

As a homeroom teacher, her concern came forth, and she kept checking over and over.

“There's nothing. I'm satisfied with my school life and there's no particular trouble.”

She seemed unable to fully hide her concern, but for now, she seemed to have decided to take her student's words at face value. She began typing that into her tablet.

“Chabashira-sensei, you've changed quite a bit too.”

Perhaps she felt that it made sense to her, as she showed a bitter smile along with a sigh.

“I don't think I've changed. But I might’ve become more honest than before.”

The unanimous special exam she experienced as a student herself.



And the unanimous special exam she experienced as a teacher.

What she gained and lost from those two experiences.

At the beginning of the school year, it was nostalgic to think that I couldn't even imagine the teacher in front of me smiling.

". . Anyway. If there's anything you're concerned about in your school life, don't hesitate to tell me."

"Understood."

After I answered, the opening conversation ended shortly thereafter, and we moved on to the main topic of the two-person meeting.

"I'd like to know whether you're hoping to go on to higher education or get a job. If you've made up your mind, please tell me." For high school students, that crossroads was a major turning point in life.

That was why teachers had to show students the right path, so they don't get lost. However, I probably wouldn't be able to meet Chabashira-sensei's expectations.

"I think my family will decide what to do about my future. I don't think there's anything to discuss here."

"Your family will decide? In other words, you'll follow your father's plan?"

The school data showed that my mother wasn't present.

"Yes."

“I see. It's a rare case, but it's not like there are no students who prioritize their parents' wishes. But usually, they’d inform us in advance whether they wanted to go on to higher education or get a job. This school’s always open to communication from parents, and there are many cases where parents actually convey their thoughts to their children. But so far, we haven't received any consultation about going on to higher education or getting a job from your family.”

Indeed, it would be strange if I had no set plans, even if I followed my parents.

But for me, who won't go on to higher education or get a job, it would be unnecessary to inform them.

However, it would be impossible for Chabashira-sensei to understand that scenario.

“I think it's fine.”

“You say it's fine. . but if you want to go on to higher education, you should’ve already started planning. The effort to take exams at a level that matches the level of the university you want to go to.. ”

Chabashira-sensei started talking as if she was exasperated, but she stopped mid-sentence.

Then, she straightened her posture and looked me in the eye.

RoyalMTLs



“I don't know much about your past. I think it was wrong of me to pretend to know about it and try to leverage that. But now, as a homeroom teacher, I want to fully understand the abilities of the students I'm in charge of. That's my duty.”

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

I can't see the screen of the tablet well because of reflections, but if she leaves answers blank, Chabashira-sensei will be blamed when she submits it to the school. And it was probably up to the school, but whether a student's future plans came true or not, whether they could go on to a high-level university or job, that can sometimes be linked to a teacher's grades and evaluations.

“So tell me, if your parents want you to go on to higher education, can I assume that you have the ability to do so?”

No matter what I answered, the future wouldn't change.

But it was cruel to unnecessarily lower her evaluation because of a foreign existence like me.

If anything, it was probably best to give Chabashira-sensei a useful answer.

“I think I can pass any university.”

“. .Really? Normally, I would caution against such a ridiculous statement, but since it's you saying it, it must be true. I can conclude that much.”

Chabashira-sensei, who relented without any objection, continued.

“It seems you've received quite an elite education. If you’re smart enough to claim that without hesitating, I wish you would contribute more to the class on a regular basis.. but let's leave that aside for now.”

Having finished typing what we had just talked about on her tablet, Chabashira-sensei looked up.

“I understand the current situation. But Ayanokōji, what's your opinion? I understand that you're considering your parent’s wishes,

but don't you have a future vision you want to aim for?”

“I don't. Even if I did, unfortunately, I don't have the right to decide.”

As far as that goes, it was a pointless discussion to spend time on.

“I'm sorry. That might have been an unpleasant question.”

“I don't mind. In fact, I just don't have any dreams or hopes at the moment.

If I find something I want to aim for in the future, I'll ask about it.”

“I see. So for now, you'll follow your parent’s wishes. Then the three-person meeting will take place during the spring break after the third term. Is it okay to officially decide on the plan then?”

“That's right.”

However, a three-person meeting involving a parent probably wouldn't happen.



At best, that man's messenger will come and have a meaningless conversation. It was obvious.

There was no way he would bring up anything related to the White Room.

“Your three-person meeting is currently scheduled for April 1st. You'll see your father for the first time in a while. If necessary, we can also take more time. I want you to think of it as a good opportunity to talk freely about your future.”

She spoke as if she didn’t have a single doubt that my father would come.

No, is that actually the case?

“. .Can I ask you something?”

I thought it was unlikely, but I decided to ask because I thought it was worth checking.

“Hmm?”

“Is my father actually coming? Not someone else? Not a proxy?”

Unable to grasp my intention, Chabashira-sensei nodded while looking puzzled.

“Yes, that's what I heard.”

“I thought he would’ve immediately rejected the idea of a three-person meeting?”

While looking puzzled, Chabashira-sensei soon showed some understanding.

“Indeed, when I first informed him of the three-person meeting by email, he replied that he intended to send a proxy due to his busy schedule. In that sense, your statement is correct. However, when I informed him of the specific date for the three-person meeting on that premise, the situation seemed to have changed.”

While reconfirming on her tablet just in case, she continued.

“He called me and I received a reply that your father would visit directly. I heard it straight from him; there's no mistaking it.”

“. .That's unexpected.”

What kind of twist is this? That man wouldn't retract his previous response that easily. At least that was the case with us White Room students. Despite declaring that he wouldn't meet me at this school, why would he bother attending a three-person meeting?

From the fact that he initially refused, it should've developed the way I imagined it.

However, he changed his mind and expressed his intention to come himself?

It was impossible not to think there was a catch.

"You said you got a call from my father, what exactly did you talk about?"

"What? We didn't have any deep conversations. He had appointed a proxy, but he said he could attend the three-person meeting because he had time.

However, he said he wanted to be informed if there were any changes to the RoyalMTLs

schedule he had been given, even a little. That's not unusual for busy parents, is it?" "That's right."

Normally, he wouldn't have had time to attend a three-person meeting, but he looked at the set schedule and decided that he could make it, so he contacted the school. It was easy to understand and there was nothing strange about it.

"But.. oh no, that isn't something I can just tell you."

Chabashira-sensei started to say something but then stopped.

“But what?”

I was looking for a hint, so I asked for the rest of her sentence.

“It's not a big deal. But I thought it was a bit strange. It's natural to want to be contacted if the schedule changes, but that's usually limited to changes in the date and time of your child's meeting. However, your father said he wanted to be contacted if there was even a slight change in the schedule of the entire class that I was given.”

“Even if, for example, the meeting of an unrelated classmate on a different day is switched?”

“That's right. I thought he was being a bit paranoid, but there's no inconvenience in just informing him.”

So Chabashira-sensei agreed without thinking too deeply.

However, if that man had a reason to participate in the three-person meeting, there was a motive.

“Could you show me the schedule for the three-party meeting, if possible?”

“The schedule? Well, I suppose there's no harm in showing it.”

Chabashira-sensei operated her tablet and turned the screen towards me.

“This is the schedule for the three-party meetings of the entire class. It's basically structured the same way as the two-party meetings. That is, you’re scheduled for the last slot.”

March 26th, 28th, 30th, and April 1st.

That was the schedule for the three-party meetings that would take place over the span of four days.

As Chabashira-sensei had said, my name was listed at the end of the day on the 1st, at 5 PM.

“There's nothing special to see. Are you done now?”

“Yes, thank you.”

Chabashira-sensei turned the screen of the tablet she had been showing me back to herself.

“I won't tell you not to be nervous about your relationship with your parent.

I don't know the details, but there's no parent who doesn't love their child. He must’ve felt like he couldn’t leave you alone.”

RoyalMTLs



“That might be true.”

I answered as such, as there was no point in discussing her thoughts and that man here.

But in reality, I couldn't imagine him showing up for the three-party meeting for such a reason.

Did he want to expel me with his own hands, unable to leave it to others?

Even so, he should’ve already realized from the previous time that it was pointless to confront me directly.

I still didn't know for what purpose he agreed to attend the three-party meeting.

RoyalMTLs

18



1

So, I had to prepare in about an hour.

First, I had to go back to my room and wash my hands. As I was getting off the elevator while making detailed plans in my head..

“Hey, you're late coming home, Ayanokōji.”

A rare figure was waiting, leaning against the door of my room.

It was Hashimoto Masayoshi, a student from Sakayanagi's class. He tapped his knee lightly, as if he had been waiting for a long time.

“Seeing as you came up alone, it doesn't seem like you were on a date.”

He asked, confirming that the closing elevator was empty.

“Today was the day for the two-party meeting, so I was late.”

“Oh, I see. . I hadn't considered that possibility. I have something to talk to you about. Do you have time?”

He brought up the reason he had been waiting while reflecting on his own oversight.

“It doesn't seem like a conversation suited for standing.”

“You're right. It would help me if you could consider that.”

Then I had no choice but to consider his intentions.

“If you don't mind my room, you can come in.”

It seemed like it would cut into my dinner preparation time, but I could set aside a little bit of time.

I couldn't find any other reason to refuse, so I decided to invite Hashimoto in. “Sorry about this.”

“I can listen to what you say, but don't expect too much hospitality.”

“That's more than enough for me right now.”

He laughed self-deprecatingly and lightly tapped my back as I inserted the key into the keyhole.

When I opened the door, I glanced at the emergency stairs for a moment.

I felt a presence watching me, but it was difficult to determine whether Hashimoto was aware of it or not. For now, I entered without worrying about it.

“Excuse me. . oh, a boyfriend's room is indeed different.”

As soon as he stepped into the room, he whistled at the traces of Kei scattered around.

“Can I sit on the bed? Or is that too much?”

“Too much? You can do whatever you want.”

With that, Hashimoto wavered but slowly sat down on the bed.

He seemed to hesitate to sit on someone else's bed. He was considerate.

RoyalMTLs

“So? What's the story?”

“It's a pretty heavy matter. I'm struggling with what to do with myself. I want you to listen to my concerns.”

He seemed to get straight to the point without any detours, but I felt a snag early on. However, it would be rude to interrupt him right from the start, so I decided to let him continue.

“What do you mean by 'what to do with myself’?”

“Haven't you heard already? What caused Kamuro-chan to drop out?”

“I've heard some rumors. Someone leaked information to Ryūen during the special exam. As a result, Class A ended up at the bottom.”

“Exactly. If the information leaks, there's no chance of winning.”

As Hashimoto said, the decisive factor in the defeat was the betrayal caused by the information leak. If there hadn't been a leaker, there was a high possibility that Class A could have avoided being at the bottom.

“I was the first one to be suspected. Now, every day, I'm being looked at with suspicion by various people in the class.”

In fact, it was not limited to the class. The act of betraying one's own class was a shock and a threat.

“To be honest, I've heard such rumors too. I sympathize with the current situation.”

Currently, the most circulated rumor was that Hashimoto betrayed Class A.

He had supposedly contacted Ryūen and made a secret agreement. Considering the suspicious movements he'd shown in the past, it was a natural conclusion.

However, I hadn't heard anything with concrete evidence. At present, by a process of elimination, it was being suggested that it might have been Hashimoto.

"Do I have no choice but to accept this? Is it because of my everyday behavior?"

"If you don't want to accept it, you can take action to prove your innocence."

"I wonder. They say 'innocent until proven guilty,' but I think that's possible in the real world. If you raise your voice in a situation where you are suspected, the suspicion will only deepen. Those who have decided in their heads that you are the culprit without any basis will even doubt your cries of grief."

This was exactly what was referred to as the echo chamber phenomenon.

Students with similar opinions gather and mistakenly think they're correct. This tendency was particularly strong in this isolated school. Unfortunately, unless Hashimoto himself could produce decisive evidence that he wasn't the culprit, there was nothing he could do about that phenomenon.

"You might be right. I chose to remain silent."

"See?"

RoyalMTLs

Unless you have clear evidence to the contrary, opening your mouth won't change the situation. Rather, a careless remark might only arouse more suspicion.

“It makes me want to cry.”

Even as he pretended to press his eyes, I spoke up.

“Isn't that enough of an opening? Why did you betray Sakayanagi?”

At these words, Hashimoto's movements stopped abruptly, and his fingers slowly moved away from his eyes.

“Hey, let me build it up a little. I feel like an idiot for putting on the poor-me act.” “I just thought it was a waste of time. It's already late, and I'd like to prepare dinner as soon as possible.”

I told him this, keeping to myself that Kei would be coming to my room later tonight.

“What, do you have a date with your girlfriend afterward?”

“Something like that.”

“What do you mean 'something like that'? Our friendship should be thicker than a woman's.”

“Sorry, but it's impossible to change my schedule around. Besides, I don't remember us having a deep friendship either.”

When I told him the truth, Hashimoto put both hands on the bed and took a breath. “Well, if you understand the situation calmly, that's fine. It's more convenient for me now.”

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

“Why do you think I betrayed Sakayanagi?”

Before I could hear the answer, Hashimoto asked me to think about it myself. “I don't know that much. The only thing I can think of is that you received a large amount of private points in return.”

I voiced a scenario that outsiders would imagine. However, I was skeptical whether it was worth it. Certainly, Sakayanagi was hurt, but only once. And the class only lost 100 class points. Although Kamuro, a close aide of hers, dropped out, it was only a by-product of the ordeal, and the likelihood of it being included in the negotiations and rewards was low. The price to pay for betraying the class is expensive; 500,000 or 1 million, or even more, would be too cheap.

“What I want to hear isn't an answer anyone could come up with, but your opinion.”

Hashimoto seemed to be well aware that I wasn't answering seriously.

“I'm sorry, but I'm not in the mood to express my opinion.”

“Huh? Why? Because there's no connection between you and me?”

RoyalMTLs



“That's not it. It's because you're not talking seriously.”

“Huh? I'm seriously asking for advice. I'm desperately looking for a way out.” “If you're really saying that, it's too late.”

“Too late. .”

“Someone who can't decide how to conduct themselves and is lost from the start won't betray the class.”

Drawing a bow against Sakayanagi was tantamount to aiming for the general's head.

It wasn’t something you decided on the spur of the moment, but after considering all the subsequent responses.

“I see. Indeed, asking for advice on how to conduct myself is foolish.. ”

This was the snag I felt as soon as the discussion began.

Hashimoto apologized repeatedly for his mistake and then started the conversation over.

“The reason I betrayed Sakayanagi was because of your existence, Ayanokōji. The trigger was my attempt to persuade Sakayanagi to pull you into Class A at all costs.”

“Persuade? It's hardly persuasive. It's just self-harm involving the class.”

“Interesting expression. Well, it's mostly correct.”

Hashimoto answered with a laugh, but I couldn't tell if he was relaxed or not.

I sensed that he was deliberately hiding his feelings to hide his vulnerabilities.

He probably didn't want to show any weakness to me.

Even though he was telling me something that contained the truth, I had a feeling that he was still hiding many secrets inside.

“The questions just keep piling up. To begin with, betraying Sakayanagi by weighing me in the equation? Don't you think it's a story that would make other students scratch their heads in disbelief?”

“Those who scratch their heads are incompetent. There's no need for modesty in this situation. I've been working harder than anyone else to gather information and I'm convinced that you're the best. I can explain from scratch if necessary, but it’d be a waste of your precious time.”

“Even if I deny it, you won't be convinced, will you?”

“I won't. You have the ability to turn the class ranking upside down by yourself. That's why I threatened Sakayanagi that if she doesn't secure you, I'll betray her again. If she had listened to me, you would’ve come to Class A and it would’ve been solid. The winning formula would’ve been complete.”

Hashimoto clenched his fist tightly, but his plan was too reckless and unrealistic.



“I hate to say it, but it's too much of a pipe dream. Even if I had the ability you imagine, it would be meaningless if I made Sakayanagi my enemy. Besides, when I was invited before, I remembered saying that I would consider it positively, but I don't remember saying that I would officially go.”

He acted unilaterally without securing a commitment, clearly jumping the gun. “So, even if I manage to secure a transfer, you still won't come to Class A?”

“I can only say that's the case right now. I'm not interested in confronting Sakayanagi.”

When I conveyed what I had naturally thought, Hashimoto seemed shocked, but muttered, 'I guess that's the way it is.'

“The best answer would’ve been 'yes', but I guess it's not that easy.”

The fact that he answered calmly suggested that he had fully considered the possibility that I wouldn’t choose Class A.

If so, what was the purpose of this betrayal?

It was difficult to deduce clearly from the information I currently had.

“Hey, do I look like the kind of guy who would betray the class? Sakayanagi was the first to suspect me.”

“That's your character.”

“Defend me a little. . Just kidding. Even though I initiated it, I received a direct declaration of war. Normally, there's not a chance in a million that I could win.” Considering that Sakayanagi must have stronger feelings towards the traitor who caused her to regretfully abandon Kamuro than Hashimoto thinks, it was understandable.

“But, was this betrayal all my fault? I thought I was suggesting the best way to graduate from Class A. I just took a heavy-handed approach because she didn't listen. Where's the fault?”

“You're defiant. But your intuition isn't wrong. There's certainly no guarantee that you'll be able to stay in Class A in the future if you just continue to follow Sakayanagi's orders with their current power.”

The difference in class points was gradually narrowing in reality.

“I see.”

“But you've also made a big mistake.”

“Is it making Sakayanagi my enemy?”

“Correct, but wrong. It's not that making Sakayanagi an enemy is bad. The mistake was that you acted without any assurance of winning, even if you made Sakayanagi an enemy. If the chances of winning were slim, you should’ve taken a different approach.”

RoyalMTLs

“I thought about it in my own way. But I concluded that this was the only way.” “The answer you calculated and derived within you—I can't say for sure that it's the right answer.”

Hashimoto didn't deny and imagined what would come next.

“If I can't undo it, do you think I'll be devoured by Sakayanagi as I am?”

“That's likely. If you don't want that, the only remaining option is to beat her.” “Do you think I can fight and win against Sakayanagi?”

“Just to confirm, by defeating Sakayanagi, you mean getting her expelled, right?” Hashimoto nodded. In other words, there was no path to reconciliation. If so, there was only one answer.

“No matter how much I favor myself, the odds are too bad even with my help. I can't say anything because it depends on the special exams in the future, but in a sense, Sakayanagi should want to expel you more than Ryūen now. To put it bluntly, even if you retaliate and force Sakayanagi to drop out, you might be taken along with her in a mutual kill.”

If that happened, Ryūen could avoid accepting the troublesome existence of the traitor Hashimoto, and at the same time, he could bury a strong enemy, which would be killing two birds with one stone for Ryūen.

No, even if you were prepared for a mutual kill, it was difficult to defeat Sakayanagi.

There was an overwhelming difference in ability between Sakayanagi and Hashimoto at this point.

The opponent was always one or two steps ahead of Hashimoto and even had a Protection Point.

In other words, you'd have to stab her twice to defeat her.

And now, Hashimoto was only thinking about fighting Sakayanagi.

But that was a naive thought.

I understood the feeling of wanting to say that the problem would be solved all at once when the game was settled.

But even if he defeated Sakayanagi, it'd be just the beginning.

Rebuilding a collapsing class. Those who'd come for revenge. Problems would overflow one after another.

He betrayed the class knowing that he'd be at a disadvantage against Sakayanagi without any assurance that I would become an ally.

What else could I call this other than strange behavior?

"Something that stood out in our conversation is that you don't trust people."

He didn't reveal everything, and he judged and acted on his own.

It would be fine if he were successful, but if he were about to fail, he wouldn’t have anyone to rely on.

“I won't deny it. But Ryūen and Sakayanagi are the same, right? Other people are useless.”

“They have the power to fight on their own without personally acting themselves.”

“That's where the situation comes back.”

Hashimoto wasn’t one without the power to foresee the future.

He felt that he’d eventually lose if I were the enemy.

That wasn’t bad. But, until now and from now on, he would continue to think and make conclusions all on his own. The disadvantage of being unable to rely on others was what landed him in the predicament.

If Hashimoto had multiple people he could trust from the bottom of his heart, this current situation might’ve been a little better.

“I don't want you to think that I rebelled against Sakayanagi without any chance of winning. I'm not that foolish.” Hashimoto muttered that he had his own chances of winning.

I tried to listen to him continue, but he just looked at me and didn't attempt to elaborate.

“Before I let you hear what's next, there's something I really want to confirm with you.”

And so, Hashimoto threw a question at me.

Why did he betray Sakayanagi at that time and decide to take a big gamble?

A question to start the story.

RoyalMTLs

25



2

“Sorry. Karuizawa is coming after this, right? I've talked too long.”

“It can't be helped. It wasn't a topic that could be cut off in the middle.”

“Can I interpret this as a meaningful time?”

When I nodded affirmatively, Hashimoto also nodded back in response.

His face was different from before, which showed ups and downs, and was somewhat clear.

It seemed like he’d vented something he’d been holding back.

I decided to go out while seeing off Hashimoto.

“I'll buy dinner at the convenience store today.”

When I told Hashimoto, who was about to press the elevator call button, he stopped his finger before touching the button for the upper floor and immediately pressed the button for the lower floor.

“Can I join you then? Of course, no more heavy talk, okay?”

Naturally, Hashimoto also looked quite tired.

Feeling the need for a quick meal, I decided to head to the convenience store with him.

We got into the elevator and descended to the lobby.

Just then, we ran into Hashimoto's classmate Morishita, who seemed to have just returned home.

“What a coincidence, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka.”

“Indeed, a coincidence.”

It was a moment when I could feel the change in my human relationship.

I had crossed paths with Morishita many times during my two years of school life.

I used to not care about crossing paths with her, but now when we meet, we both naturally stop and start talking.

“And the traitor, Hashimoto Masayoshi, is here too.”

“Hey, hey, don't start with that. Give me a break.”

“Sorry. I haven't found definitive evidence yet. I will correct myself.”

Even if she corrected her statement, the fact that he was thought of in that way couldn't be changed.

He was indeed a traitor, but Hashimoto must’ve thought it was good that I was there with him.

“Ayanokōji Kiyotaka, you don't seem surprised.”

“It's been a rumor for a while now. Besides, unlike the people in Class A, I'm not that interested in the truth.”

“I see. I thought you might’ve been consulted by the traitor.”

RoyalMTLs



She bluntly stated what she was thinking and speculating, relentlessly pushing me.

Hashimoto intervened as I was admiring her audacity.

“Stop it. It's okay to suspect me of being a traitor, but it's better not to involve outsiders without instructions from the princess.”

He stopped Morishita with a confident tone that didn't seem like one belonging to a traitor.

“I see. But it's getting late. Where are you going now?”

Instead of forcing Hashimoto to engage further, Morishita directed her question at me.

“I’m going to the convenience store and buy dinner.”

“Me too.”

“I didn't ask you, Hashimoto Masayoshi, but I see. However, I thought you were a person who usually cooks for himself, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka—did you get caught up in a conversation with someone and lose track of time?”

I had been cooking for myself a lot lately, but where’d she get this information?

Morishita's suspicions seemed to be growing stronger, and she very deliberately voiced her doubts.

“I just happened to be in the elevator with Ayanokōji. It seems he was late because of a two-person meeting.”

Perhaps thinking it would be troublesome to be asked about it, Hashimoto casually answered.

However, Morishita seemed to become even more suspicious.

“That's strange. Ayanokōji Kiyotaka's two-person meeting should’ve ended a long time ago. It seems you two have been talking a lot today.”

Whether she had been investigating Horikita’s class’s internal affairs, she had a good grasp of things that even Hashimoto didn't know.

The attempt to casually brush it off seemed to have backfired.

“No, like I said, I have nothing to do with it. I have no idea what Ayanokōji was doing.”

“But you've been together since you got on the elevator on the fourth floor, haven't you?”

As if to block any escape routes, she said this, while glancing at the elevator monitor.

“Damn, were we being watched.. ?”

“It might not matter to others, but it seems you were unlucky with who saw you today.”

Hashimoto showed a bitter smile at the defeated situation.

But he didn't seem flustered or panicked by this encounter.

RoyalMTLs

27

[redacted]

“Is this how you act as a traitor?”

“Huh? What do you mean, traitor?”

“It means a backstabber.”

When she explained the meaning, Hashimoto exaggeratedly dropped his shoulders as if he was disappointed.

“Give me a break, Morishita. This is a completely different matter.”

“What do you mean by ‘different matter’?”

“I can't tell you that. There are things that only guys can talk about, right?”

Sensing that he wanted backup, I decided to go along with it.

“If it's a matter of gender, I can't pursue it any further. That’s an easy way to escape confrontation.”

“No matter what I say, it's no good.”

Hashimoto shrugged, giving up.

Just as we were talking about a moment ago, the more he opened his mouth, the more suspicion he aroused.

“Well, it's fine. Can I accompany you to the convenience store too?”

“That's fine, but do you have any particular reason?”

“Yes, I'm sure there will be one if I go. I should be able to think of something.”

She was revealing that she had no specific motive, but I had no right to refuse her.

Even if I refused, she would just follow us anyway.

“Alright. Well, since it's come to this, let's go together as a group of three.”

“Then I'll follow you.”

Morishita, who had turned around, started walking ahead.

“Why is she taking the lead.. She's as incomprehensible as ever. Sorry about this, Ayanokōji.”

“It's fine. It's not a big deal.”

Suddenly, I wondered how Morishita was perceived in Class A.

Her academic excellence must be well known from the OAA.

But honestly, I didn't know anything else. It might be a good idea to ask.

“What kind of student is Morishita in class?”

“She’s just as you see her. She's smart but eccentric, and she always acts alone.” “Does she have any close friends?”

“Not that I can recall.”

Judging that the statement was made by someone always busy gathering information, it seemed highly credible.

Watching Morishita's back, Hashimoto touched his chin with his index finger and thumb, looking puzzled.

RoyalMTLs

28



“That's why it's so unusual. She's not usually the type to start a conversation like this.”

After muttering that, he gave me a sidelong glance, so I took the initiative.

“Isn't she just keeping an eye on the traitor?”

“Well.. that's not impossible. . but you're not holding back either, are you?”

“If I need to be considerate, I'll be considerate.”

“Damn. What I'm curious about is that, to my understanding, Morishita doesn't seem to be an extreme follower of Sakayanagi. She's neither close nor distant to her. But she's not the type to take the initiative and solve problems on her own. In other words, I can't see a reason for her to probe.”

Morishita isn't the type to take initiative? Is that really the case?

Although our interactions had been limited, my impression was the opposite.

She seemed more like a person who actively worked alone to solve problems.

Of course, it was possible that Morishita changed her mind after witnessing Sakayanagi’s defeat, who had been steadily defending

their position until now.

However, it was hard to believe that Hashimoto was completely unaware of that detail. He spoke without showing any signs of deception, mixing truth and lies in similar proportions.

Even the current situation, the three of us walking together, might not be a mere coincidence.

Hashimoto might've wanted to make Sakayanagi indirectly realize that he'd contacted me.

It might be safe to assume that he had such a plan.

If he didn't want to be found out, he wouldn't have waited in front of my room where he could've been noticed. We both knew each other's contact information, so we could discretely communicate as much as we wanted.

Hashimoto, the traitor, had a purpose in making Sakayanagi aware of the fact that he contacted me, either directly or indirectly.

Of course, only Hashimoto knew the truth, but there were other things that I could deduce.

The truth and lies that Hashimoto revealed in my room.

All his actions were tied to his own benefit.

He wanted to be the only one to benefit.

He wanted to be the only one to survive.

He wanted to be the only one to win.

If a pacifist knew of this, Hashimoto would probably be despised as an evil entity. The more I knew about Hashimoto, the more I sympathized and agreed with him.

[redacted]

Because he lived according to his nature.

Normally, to carry out such evil, one needed undeniable power.

But Hashimoto didn't have that power.

So, like a chameleon, he learned to change colors to match his environment.

Trying to blend into the environment to survive.

That was exactly what he was doing at that moment and what he had been doing up until then.

We left the lobby and the three of us walked to the convenience store.

Then we went inside, picked up a basket, and I contacted Kei on my phone.

While listening to what she wanted, I decided on dinner for myself as well.

The convenience store's microwavable side dishes were quite delicious.

While shopping, I ran into someone who came in after us in the beverage section.

“Ah... H-hello. .”

The one who greeted me was Yamamura Miki, a girl from the same class as Hashimoto.

“I didn't expect to see you here.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

Yamamura agreed, looking somewhat uncomfortable at my response.

It seemed that it was indeed Yamamura who had been watching Hashimoto on the emergency stairs.

Even after leaving the dormitory, I’d hardly noticed her presence and didn't know who she was.

That was why I thought it might be Yamamura, and it seemed I was right.

I didn't know whether she was acting alone or if Sakayanagi was hiding behind her, but considering that she’d been on standby before I returned to my room by elevator, it was more likely that she’d been watching Hashimoto.

Moreover, I couldn't find any particular reason why Yamamura would be secretly watching me.

“Oh, it's Yamamura. What a coincidence.”

Hashimoto, who’d noticed us talking, approached us with a curry-flavored cup noodle in his hand.

“Good evening.. Hashimoto-kun.”

“This is the first time I've seen you use a convenience store.”

I wondered if this way of speaking was just a habit or if he’d sensed something.

While voicing information that he didn't know the credibility to, he observed Yamamura's reaction.

“Um, I. . I use the convenience store quite a bit.. about once or twice a week.. but I don't stand out.. I'm sorry.”

RoyalMTLs

30



“Oh, no, I'm sorry if I did something wrong. .”

Hashimoto seemed to have tried to probe her but ended up apologizing in a hurry since he pointed out Yamamura's lack of presence.

“It's rare to see Yamamura Miki talking to a boy.”

“Are you really one to say that, Morishita?”

“I'm just a little curious about Hashimoto Masayoshi. Is it love?”

“Don't deliberately throw me under the bus like that.. Well, I guess Yamamura is suspicious of me too.”

Is that so? In response to such a probing gaze, Yamamura looked down and averted her eyes.

The heavy silence didn't match the convenience store's atmosphere or the upbeat music, creating a discordant sound.

The one who broke the silence was not Hashimoto nor Yamamura, but Morishita.

“Let's shop together since we're all here. You don't mind, do you?”

“Eh, um, yes.. if that’s okay with you.. I mean.. ”

Her not reading the room from the get-go seemed to have paid off here.

Without waiting for her answer, Yamamura ended up shopping with us.

Well, after all, a convenience store was a place to shop. It wasn’t a strange thing for us to do.

I didn't often see Yamamura talking to other students, but she even seemed to struggle talking to her own classmates.

She was being led around by Morishita and forced to pick up items she recommended.

And without being able to refuse any of them, she put three or four items in her basket.

“You shouldn't push her around too much.”

“Why not? Yamamura Miki is happily accepting my recommendations.”

“I don't think she's happy at all. She looks troubled to me.”

“Is that so?”

“Um, uh...”

Not knowing how to respond to either side, Yamamura was at a loss for words. “Am I forcing you to buy anything?”

“No, that's not.. ”

Yamamura backed off at the mere pressure of words, and any words of defiance were swallowed up.

“Do you dislike this? Well, let me give you my next recommendation. It's a secret from everyone else.”

RoyalMTLs

31



Even though she wasn't a convenience store employee, Morishita was trying to get her to buy the next product.

She tried to take out a juice box from one of the reach-in coolers.

“Sorry to interrupt your friendly chat, but could you move a bit?”

While they were talking amongst each other, a new customer stopped by the beverage corner.

Morishita seemed to have noticed her, but Yamamura, who was nearby, seemed to have overlooked her, and their shoulders slightly collided.

“Oh, I'm sorry.”

The convenience store wasn’t very spacious, so if several people gathered, it could get in the way of other customers when they were choosing items.

It wasn't a big shock, but Yamamura apologized and made way.

“No, I'm the one who didn’t notice. I'm sorry.”

She gently fluttered her long silver hair and took out a bottle of green tea.

“I like this brand's tea. You can feel the umami and aroma as if it were brewed in a teapot, right Ayanokōji?”

The one who turned her gaze to me, speaking like a beverage brand's promoter, was Kiryūin Fūka from class 3-B.

“I've never had that brand before, so I can't answer.”

“That's a shame. You should try it if you have a chance.”

“Are you going home now, Kiryūin-senpai?”

“Yes. It's getting a bit late. I thought I'd just stop by the convenience store today. Is this female student… your new girlfriend?”

“No, she's not.”

“Ah, um... I'm Yamamura...”

“I'm Morishita Ai.”

“Yamamura and Morishita, huh? Are you in the same class as Ayanokōji?”

“No, they are in Class A.”

“Oh? It's good to have a wide circle. You should cherish your friends.”

“Are you one to say that, Kiryūin-senpai?”

That was unexpected advice from someone who stood out among the third-year students for being aloof.

“Nice to meet you, Kiryūin-senpai. I'm Hashimoto, also from Class A.”

Hashimoto greeted her, interrupting Kiryūin who was looking at Yamamura, and extended his hand.

Kiryūin nodded, lightly brushing off his hand.

“I'll remember all three of you.”

After a brief exchange, Kiryūin finished paying first and left the convenience store.

RoyalMTLs

32



It was a bit surprising that Kiryūin, who didn't seem to be interested in others, said she would remember the three of them, even if it was just a formality.

It might not have meant much.

“Are you close with Kiryūin-senpai? She's famous for not hanging out with anyone.”

“I wouldn't say we're close.”

Hashimoto continued to watch Kiryūin's back as she headed towards the dormitory for a while.

RoyalMTLs

33



Chapter 2:

The Exchange Training Camp

IT WAS 9:30 ON a Thursday morning. A flock of buses were parked.

While faintly smelling the exhaust gas from the engine’s idling, the students boarded with light steps.

For many second-year students, except those who went on expeditions for club activities and competitions, this was the third outing of the year following the deserted island exam and the school trip; a training camp for all years.

However, it was announced in advance that this year's mixed training camp was very different, and its nature had completely changed, even though it was included in the ‘camps’ category in terms of format.

Therefore, the term 'special exam’ wasn’t used.

Before the trip started, what was concerning was the number of buses prepared for the students.

Usually, it was one bus per class. In other words, if all three years participated, it would be 12 buses.

However, there were only nine buses gathered this time.

But the mystery was immediately solved by looking at the boarding students.

There was only one bus prepared for the third-year students.

Apparently, the number of students gathered was very small, only about 20.

I couldn't say for sure because I didn't see everyone's faces, but as far as I could see, it seemed that five students from each of the four classes, A to D, were called from the third-year.

When instructed to board the bus, there was no specific seating assignment, and we were told we could sit wherever we wanted.

Upon hearing this, Kei immediately clung to my arm.

“I'll sit with Kiyotaka.”

Despite receiving some cold stares from some of the boys, I agreed and boarded the bus, taking a seat by the window on the right side, three rows from the back. Kei sat next to me.

“Wouldn't it have been better to stick with the girls?”

“I'll do that on the way back. It's fine to be together on the way there, right?”

We spent most of our private time together, but she still wanted to be together on the bus.

I didn't know what was different, but she seemed happier than usual.

Once everyone had boarded, and the other buses were ready, Chabashira-sensei boarded.



“This reminds me of last year's training camp. We had a lot of exchanges with each other at that time too.”

“That's right.”

A year had passed since then.

At that time, neither of us thought our relationship would deepen this much.

Not only Kei, but the relationships with the people around us had also changed significantly.

“Oh, that's right. I found out yesterday that my favorite movie’s going to be screened soon. Let's go see it together when it starts.”

Kei showed me an image that looked like a movie poster, her eyes narrowing in delight.

To Kei, it was just one of the casual conversations she naturally brought up.

But there was one thing that bothered me.

“When is the movie scheduled to be released?”

“Um, when was it? The last time I saw the trailer, it seemed like it was going to be released in the spring.”

“I want to know the exact date.”

“Huh? Is there something wrong? Let's see. . Oh, it's listed here.”

The homepage that Kei showed me stated that the movie would start screening on March 26.

Fortunately, it was before the start of the new school term, during spring break. “I see. Let's go see it.”

“Yay! It's super interesting. I think you’ll enjoy it too,” Kei said with a smile, but her smile froze as she looked at my face.

“What's wrong?”

“No, it's nothing.”

Kei, who answered and took her eyes off me, started to prepare for the movie by looking at a page that seemed to be a character relationship chart while humming a song.

After that, the students each enjoyed the outside scenery while chatting casually.

About 20 minutes after the bus left the city, Chabashira-sensei held a microphone and looked at the students throughout the bus.

“I think it's about time to explain the details of the training camp. As I mentioned briefly at school, it has been decided to hold a three-night, four-day experiential learning exchange meeting for all years.”

Normally, this would be a tense moment, but there was no sign of tension among the students on the bus.

RoyalMTLs



While listening to Chabashira-sensei's words, they were enjoying the outside scenery or resting their bodies, creating a different mood than usual.

As I mentioned earlier, this is not a special exam, but a simple exchange meeting.

“Let me remind you not to take the exchange meeting as a special exam.

There will be no change in class points this time. Unless you engage in behavior that deviates from student life, there’s probably no risk of

expulsion. You can get private points for participating in some games, but it's more of a voluntary participation than a mandatory one.”

It was only natural that Chabashira-sensei was explaining this to emphasize it.

The students had become more cautious in their long life at ANHS.

They had a habit of suspecting that there might’ve been something behind the exchange meeting.

That was why she was announcing that it wasn’t a special exam, that class points wouldn't change, and that there were no penalties like expulsion waiting for them. This was what gave the students peace of mind.

“It's unfortunate that Ichihashi had to stay home due to illness, but it was a blessing in disguise.”

(TL Note: Chabashira is thankful that it is only a small illness. This also allows for less students to work with which is the “blessing” she is referring to.) There was a surprising amount of students with poor health due to the prevalence of colds at this time of year.

“I think some of you may have already noticed, but even though it's for all years, this time, only five representatives from each class of the third-years are participating. This is taking into account various circumstances.”

Chabashira-sensei briefly touched on it, but she didn't go into detail.

“Your main objective will be to interact with the first-year students, but it's not like you can get along with everyone just from our vague instructions. As soon as you arrive at the camp, all years will be divided into 20 groups. The 20 third-year students who will serve as representatives in each group have already finished organizing the members based on the full list of first and second-year students.”

This meant that the groups were already decided, and we just weren’t informed about which group we would be in.

“I will distribute the organization chart now, so remember which group you belong to. There may be some differences in the number of people and the gender ratio, but the balance of grades and classes has been adjusted as much as possible.

The games will be conducted between groups to determine the winner.”

RoyalMTLs

36



Chabashira-sensei handed out printouts to the students sitting in front of her on both sides.

The students took the necessary printouts and passed them on to the students sitting behind them.

“This printout also includes some rewards you can get from the games and the conditions for obtaining them. You should read it carefully.”

“It's not an exam, so I feel more comfortable, but I still want private points.

The win rate seems to change a lot depending on whether you get into a good group or not, right?”

“Yeah.”

It was natural to hope that you’d have as many excellent students in your group as possible.

Of course, it was unknown what skills would be required to determine the winner. Hondō, who was sitting in front of us, stood up and handed us the remaining printouts. Kei took them and passed them further back.

“I hope I'm with you, Kiyotaka.”

The printouts were clipped together in groups of five, with information about the group activities, rewards for the exchange meeting, and a list of students'

names from the third page onwards.

I noticed that there was also a folded card in the size of a regular business card inserted.

Fortunately, the printouts were made just for us, so there were marks on the names of the students in this class. This made it easy to find my name.

The names of those who were absent were also listed. There were two second-year students, Ichihashi and Ichinose, but there were four first-year students, which seemed to be quite a lot. Among them was Ishigami's name.

It was probably a coincidence that they were in poor health. Because of that, I wouldn’t get the opportunity to get involved with them.

“I'm in group seven with Tanaka-senpai. You’re not there. . but.. ”

Kei, who quickly found her name in the middle of the first page, looked disappointed but somewhat relieved. *I wonder why*.

“But what?”

“It seems that at the training camp, I'll be sharing a room with the girls in the same group, and there’s someone I don't want to be with.. I'm glad they aren’t there,” she said. At the beginning of the

printout, it was written that in addition to the games, we would be living together in a room separated by gender. That must have been her reaction to noticing that.

She didn't specify who, but there was no doubt that she was referring to Ichinose.

RoyalMTLs

37



In the last special exam, she was surprised to be consecutively nominated, even if it was part of their strategy.

“It's not that I hate Ichinose-san or anything, but, I don't know. I'm a little scared.”

She muttered this and then glared at me.

“You're close with Ichinose-san, Kiyotaka. Sometimes, I have doubts about various things.”

Kei whispered this to me in a voice that no one else could hear.

“So that's why you were feeling conflicted.”

“There's a chance that you could end up with Ichinose, right?”

Surprisingly, Ichinose's presence seemed to have grown negatively in Kei's mind. “I seem to be in group 20 with Kiryūin-senpai, at the end of the fifth page.”

I quickly looked through the list of all 20 groups, and as Chabashira-sensei had previously announced, the gender ratio balance was as fair as possible, and the distribution of students by class was either a

minimum of one or a maximum of three—basically, two each. It seemed to be as equal as possible.

However, I felt an eerie bias and inequality in some parts of each group.

Since the other students were still looking for their names, there were probably few who had noticed, but it was only a matter of time before questions would arise.

Kei, who hadn't noticed anything, was still looking at the list with a disappointed look on her face due to our separation.

I turned my attention back to the reward section at the top of the first page.

[Group Ranking 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 to 10th place: 5,000 private points for each student*
- *11th to 15th place: 3,000 private points for each student*
- *16th to 20th place: 1,000 private points for each student*

**The private points obtained in this exchange meeting cannot be transferred*

**Use is limited to shopping within Keyaki Mall*

**To receive the reward, you must meet the conditions of the point card* Because this wasn't a special exam, we couldn't get as big of a reward. It also wasn't a system where only certain classes benefit.

Even for high school students, an extra 1000 or 2000 yen was not something we could ignore, so naturally, we would want to aim for the top.

Although there were disadvantages such as the inability to transfer or the limited places where they could use it, it also meant that it was virtually impossible to use it strategically. The ability to use it freely without hesitation was an advantage.

The students stared at the list for a while.

"Um... Chabashira-sensei. May I ask a question?"

Sonoda raised her hand after getting a rough idea of the groups.

"You have something on your mind, don't you?"

"Yes. If we're going to play games in separate groups, is this.. fair? I mean, even if it's impossible to be perfectly fair, it seems a bit unbalanced.. I feel that way about Nagumo-senpai's group, for example."

"OAA standards of balance are not taken into account at all. It wouldn't be strange if there was a drastic bias."

In response to the question, Chabashira-sensei gave a curt answer.

"Wow, it's true. Isn't Nagumo-senpai's group quite dangerous?"

While listening to the question and checking the list, Ike, who saw the group led by Nagumo, spoke.

Nagumo was a well-known former student council president and a student who maintained all A's or above in the OAA.

But what was astonishing was that the group had faces with outstanding ability.

RoyalMTLs

39

[First-year Students]

- *Class A Takahashi Osamu, Toudou Rin, Amasawa Ichika*
- *Class B Hagiwara Chihaya, Fukuchi Hinano*
- *Class C Namekawa Azuki, Iguchi Yuri*
- *Class D Tatewaki Aoi, Osaki Noa*

[Second-year Students]

- *Class A Sanada Kousei, Sawada Yasumi*
- *Class B Horikita Suzune, Hirata Yosuke*
- *Class C Kaneda Satoru, Katsuragi Kouhei*
- *Class D Kanzaki Ryuji*

All of them were excellent in their studies, and they were either good at sports or able to follow instructions accurately. They didn’t hesitate in selecting students who could bring the group together.

If we talked about individual abilities, there were students with outstanding abilities such as Sakayanagi, Ryuuen, and Koenji, but it

was unknown what kind of chemistry would occur when they were thrown in the mix together.

Isn't this a well-rounded group formed to avoid that?

After seeing this, many other groups would inevitably fade away.

If you were in a group that had Sakayanagi or Ryuuen, students mentioned earlier as examples, they might be able to make a breakthrough and win against the strongest group, but for most other groups, defeat is inevitable. If there was a game that specialized only in academic ability, it would be almost impossible to win in terms of overall ability.

“Some of you may think the group assignments are a bit unfair, but there's nothing we can do about it. It's only natural that excellent students are attracted to stable groups.”

Chabashira-sensei, holding a printout in one hand, answered with a stern look. Sonoda, who asked, shrank back at her expression.

It was a reasonable argument that couldn't be refuted once said.

Perhaps thinking that the warning had gone too far, the teacher softened her expression and showed a slight smile.

“But just because they're excellent doesn't mean they'll always win.

Especially in this case.”

She told Sonoda that there was hope and continued her explanation.

“This exchange meeting will be a round-robin game spanning three days.

The groups will compete against each other, but it will be one group against RoyalMTLs

40

[redacted]

another, and the order of the matches will not be disclosed. Also, the content of the games will be randomly selected from a list each time."

Chabashira-sensei continued to verbally convey the detailed rules, but the rules of the exchange meeting can be summarized as follows.

RoyalMTLs

41

[redacted]

[Exchange Meeting Experiential Learning Game Overview]

- *Period: Conducted over three days*
- *Day 1: 5 matches; Day 2: 7 matches; Day 3: 7 matches*

※30-minute interval between each game

- *Match method: Conducted as a round-robin match among all 20 groups.*
- *The order of the matches is not disclosed.*
- *Rules: For every game, each group selects five players from the third-year's group.*
- *Only first and second-year students can be selected as participants in the game.*
- *The fundamental idea is one-on-one matches, with victory awarded to the first group achieving three wins.*

• *Games will continue for all five players even if defeat is assured.*

• *Unlimited participation, with no restrictions on the number of times one can participate.*

• *Game content: The school will randomly choose from a predetermined list, with game details announced periodically.*

• *Victory conditions: Rewards are distributed based on the highest number of victories.*

※ In the case of a tie for third place or above, additional games will be conducted.

As expected from something labeled as a game, the content seemed to be really light. It was clear at a glance from the list prepared by the school, with unique activities like 'flower pressing' and 'pottery wheel making,' which seemed unique to a training camp. There were also game-based activities like 'playing cards' and 'UNO,' as well as sports-based ones like 'table tennis.' Of course, there were also some that required a bit of brainpower and involved academic skills, but they didn't seem to be the main focus.

(TL Note: "Pottery wheel making" is the act of shaping pottery while it spins on a wheel.)

There were also activities like flower arrangement and bonsai, and looking at them, it was a truly interesting lineup.

And all these listed games seemed to be available for experience at any time, not just during the matches.

It also seemed possible that the same game could be selected two or three times. With the detailed explanation, it became clear. For the three nights and four days, the idea was to interact with the kōhais, make things, play games, compete for rankings, and deepen friendships.

It might be boring for students who weren’t interested, but I was honestly looking forward to being able to experience creating things.

“Attached to the printouts distributed on the bus is a point card. You can collect stamps when you participate in various experiential learning activities at the camp. Filling this out is a condition for receiving rewards, so be mindful.”

The point card seemed to be a method to encourage voluntary participation in experiential learning.

There were a few rules, like a limit on the number of stamps you can collect in a day and not being able to receive multiple stamps for the same game, but it didn't seem to be something to worry about.

Anyway, I wanted to try various things that I couldn't usually do at school.

With the content understood, it seemed that even groups with low overall OAA abilities could see plenty of opportunities.

With these rules, it seemed safe to say that there was a chance of winning against any group.

“I hope it's clear that there's no need to be too concerned about winning or losing this time. Of course, it's fine to aim for first place and work together for the sake of rewards, but as you can see from the list of various games, the main focus is on the interactions using experiential learning. It's perfectly fine to actively interact with other groups and focus on deepening friendships.”

So far, we’d been given various tasks and their rules from the school, much like special exams.

For the first time, they acknowledged that we didn’t have to win, and losing was okay as well.

“This trip really feels relaxed. Even if we're in last place, we'll still get 1,000

yen.” For now, many students, starting with Kei, were relieved by the contents of the trip.

“That's right. The fact that there's nothing wrong with losing this time is a big deal.”

The classmates who received the explanation began to loosen up and spent their time relaxed.

Some even started singing in high spirits.

“Don't forget to follow the school's schedule, even though you're free to a certain extent.”

RoyalMTLs

That was a bit of a downer.

Kei and I checked the schedule written on the printout.

Wake up

Lights out

Lunch break

7 a.m.

10 p.m.

1 p.m.~2 p.m.

Breakfast

Lunch

Dinner

8 a.m.~9 a.m.

12 p.m.~1 p.m. 7 p.m.~8 p.m.

Large bath

6 a.m.~8 a.m. & 8 p.m.~10 p.m.

Exchange meeting

Morning session 9 a.m.~12 p.m. Afternoon session 2 p.m.~6 p.m.

Other than the time spent on the games, we were basically free the whole time. In extreme cases, whether to take a nap without having lunch, or to immerse oneself in making things, was left to the individual's discretion.

If the group leader ordered participation in the game, that wouldn’t be the case, but it seemed that there were no penalties for refusing.

On the first day, it was announced that we’d arrive around noon, and from there, we would gather by group, have lunch, and then only the afternoon exchange meeting was scheduled.

“I hope you’ll behave in a way that is not embarrassing to a senpai at the training camp.”

With that, the explanation seemed to be over, and Chabashira-sensei turned off the microphone and sat down.

RoyalMTLs

44



1

After the bus had been on the highway for about two hours, the view from the window was completely covered by the mountains.

The bus stopped in front of a different facility than last year, and the students began to get off.

The area in front of the main entrance where the buses were lined up was much more open than I would've imagined.

The building where we would be staying for the camp was built like an old inn—one with a long history.

According to the explanation from the school, it was originally a lodging facility and activity center built during the bubble era.

(TL NOTE: The bubble era (バブル期) refers to a time of excessive speculation and asset price inflation in Japan from 1986-1991.)
Inside, there were classrooms for each activity.

That was probably why there were so many experiential games listed in the previous printout.

"Gather in your assigned groups. From now on, for the next three days, follow your leader's instructions, have discussions, and get along with everyone."

The 20 third-year students who were assigned as leaders for each group spread out.

Directly in front of me stood Kiryūin, hands in her jersey jacket pockets.

“Well, see you later, Kiyotaka.”

I watched Kei, who was reluctant to leave, for a moment, and then headed down to Kiryūin.

“I look forward to working with you for the next three days, Kiryūin-senpai.”

“I'm counting on you.”

The first and second-year members assigned to Kiryūin's group, Group 20, were as follows, totaling 16 people:

RoyalMTLs

45

[First-year Students]

- *Class A Toyohashi Goro, Kosumi Dan*
- *Class B Yanagi Yasuhisa, Eikura Mani*
- *Class C Tsubaki Sakurako, Shintoku Taro*
- *Class D Obokata Yukiki, Jute Misora.*

[Second-year Students]

- *Class A Hashimoto Masayoshi, Yamamura Miki, Morishita Ai*

- *Class B Ayanokōji Kiyotaka, Nishimura Ryūko*
- *Class C Oda Takumi, Shiina Hiyori*
- *Class D Hatsukawa Maho.*

Kiryūin was the leader of the group.

My impression was that there were students who could do sports and students who could study.

It was a balance that would be difficult to achieve in an evenly matched competition, but this was probably only possible because it was a casual exchange meeting centered around games.

Of course, among the second-year students, there were many who I had interacted with, but among the first-year students, I hardly knew anyone other than Tsubaki. In that sense, there must've been a great significance in holding an exchange meeting.

"Hey, I never thought I'd be teaming up with you in this way."

As the group gathered, right from the get-go, Hashimoto casually approached me.

"I agree."

Just the other day, I had many discussions with Hashimoto and the others, but it was strange that the four of us from that day were in the same group.

"I'm both happy and disappointed. I wish we could've been together in some high-stakes special exam."

He seemed to have high expectations for me. I hadn't said a word about whether I could meet those expectations yet, but I'd leave it at that.

“Even if it's just an exchange meeting, I would be grateful to receive a decent amount of money if I can get to the top. At least exchanging contact information with the first-years is a must. I'll invite you to join the group later.”

Even without asking, it was a great help to have someone who was willing to take on the coordinating role—a time-consuming job.

“I might delete your name from my contact list next month, though.”

“Hey, hey, stop with the Morishita-like unfunny jokes.”

RoyalMTLs

46

I know I was the one who said it, but it might’ve sounded a little like Morishita.

I wonder if that strange existence is influencing me in unexpected ways. As I was thinking that, a soft voice reached my ear.

“Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun.”

Hiyori, who had slowly walked up to the group, called my name.

“Good morning. I'll be counting on you starting from today. It's reassuring to have you here.”

“I feel the same way. I was relieved to know that we’re in the same group.”

I felt like anyone would accept Hiyori right away, unlike me, but the world that she saw was completely different from what others saw.

I was genuinely happy to have a reliable friend join me.

“Hashimoto-kun, I look forward to working with you as well.”

Hiyori, who was standing next to me, lightly bowed her head.

“I always welcome cute girls. But you know, you two look good together when you stand side by side.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't want you to take it the wrong way, but I think you two look more natural together than when you’re with Karuizawa.”

Is it because we have things in common, like reading, that makes it different from Kei?

But there was no need to take everything Hashimoto said seriously.

The person who made that claim had already shifted his interest away from us and started to focus on the entire group that had gathered.

Kiryūin was ignoring the group and was staring at the winter mountains.

So Hashimoto must have thought he had to make a move.

“Um, is that everyone? Ah, no, are we one short? One, two, three—”

Hashimoto quickly counted the number of people.

“Fifteen, and sixteen including me. Looks like we're still one short.”

One short? I thought everyone was here, was I mistaken?

“There are 17 of us here. Yamamura Miki is also here.”

“Oh, really, everyone was here. . Sorry, Yamamura.”

Hashimoto hastily corrected himself, seeming to have genuinely overlooked her. “No.. I'm sorry.”

For some reason, Yamamura apologized, even though she was just forgotten in the count.

Being unnoticed by Kiryūin and overlooked by her classmate Hashimoto, her inconspicuousness was on full display, but recently, it seemed to be even more pronounced.

RoyalMTLs

47



However, once her presence was recognized, a sudden change occurred where I felt her presence more because I couldn't sense her as much as others.

However, that might only apply to me.

When I asked Hiyori about Yamamura, she said she had never had a proper conversation with her before, so I decided to speak to her, introducing Hiyori in the process.

“We seem to be crossing paths a lot lately.”

“Yes, that's true. I look forward to.. this time as well.”

“Nice to meet you, Yamamura-san.”

When Hiyori gave her a gentle, enveloping smile, Yamamura stiffened.

“Ah, yes. You're Shiina-san, right...?”

Yamamura greeted Hiyori hesitantly, but she seemed restless, as if she had something on her mind.

“Oh? Do you have something you want to ask me?”

“Ah—that.. you're completely different from what I thought. .”

“Me?”

When Hiyori tilted her head quizzically, Yamamura muttered in a low voice.

“I thought you were more. . indifferent.. ”

Yamamura, who observed people from afar, seemed to see Hiyori in such a way. Indeed, I had the same impression of her before. It was only through talking and getting to know her that I realized the difference between what I imagined and reality. “I'm sorry. I'm not good at talking to people, so I might’ve said something rude...” “It's totally fine. I'm not good at talking to people either, so we're comrades.”

“Is that.. so?”

Even as she answered, Yamamura didn't seem to see it that way; her eyes said so. “You don't see it? If so, I think it's thanks to Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Ayanokōji-kun...?”

Mine?

The same question that Yamamura had was probably floating in my head.

“Yes. Even though I'm not good at it, I've come to love talking with my friends. So I think you will surely come to love talking too.”

Hiyori took Yamamura's hand, who was on guard, and reiterated her message.

Hiyori's statement that it was thanks to me was an exaggeration, but I hoped that Yamamura would feel the same way someday.

RoyalMTLs

48



Anyway, with that, all the members of the Kiryūin group were gathered together.

“Ayanokōji Kiyotaka. Nice to see you.”

There she was, Morishita, who called me by my full name without any honorifics but in a polite manner.

“Nice to see you too.”

“You’re—um. . Shiina Hiyori, right? I'm Morishita Ai. Hello, hello.”

She bowed her head slightly.

“I'm Shiina. Nice to meet you, Morishita-san.”

Starting with Yamamura, the second-year students exchanged light greetings. Then they started to greet the first-year students, who were nervously gathered in one place.

Kiryūin, who had been waiting without intervening in the ongoing conversations, turned around.

“Now that the greetings are over, let's have lunch. Let's disband for now.”

“Wait a minute, Kiryūin-senpai. Wouldn't it be better for us to have lunch together to strengthen the camaraderie of the group?”

Hashimoto quickly stepped in to counter Kiryūin's immediate declaration of disbandment.

Indeed, in that situation, Hashimoto’s suggestion wasn't a bad one.

In fact, looking around, it seemed that most groups were starting to act as a unit. “Then I'll leave it to you.”

Kiryūin accepted Hashimoto's proposal, but at the same time, indicated that she wouldn’t be joining them.

Then, she left the group and disappeared into the inn alone.

“Man, seriously? We've got quite a leader here.”

Hashimoto sighed in exasperation at the situation where the leader had gone absent. “We can ignore her. I agree with the group lunch.”

It was too much to leave all the decisions to Hashimoto alone, so I lightly backed him up.

“That's right. She said she'd leave it to us, so there's little reason to disband here.” Hashimoto decided that it was detrimental to think too long about the situation, which was confusing the first-year students, and started to act quickly.

Even if there were students among the first-years who were reluctant to have a meal with their senpais, given that this was considered an exchange meeting, objections were unlikely except from people with strong personalities like Hōsen.

“Wait a minute, hey! Kōenji!”

RoyalMTLs

Behind Hashimoto, who was explaining to the first-year students, there was a small issue in another group nearby. It seemed that Kōenji, who had been assigned to the sixth group, had left the gathering without following the leader's instructions.

The other second-year students in the same group, who were used to seeing this sort of behavior from Kōenji, didn't say anything to the bewildered first-year students, even though they found it somewhat nostalgic. Even Inogashira, a classmate, seemed anxious, but in the end, she seemed to have no choice but to let it go. For a moment, Inogashira and I made eye contact, but she quickly turned back to her angry leader's voice.

“I wonder what happened to Kōenji-kun.”

Hiyori, who apparently didn't understand, muttered as she watched Kōenji's retreating back.

“He's always acting alone. He probably won't come back.”

“Is that so?”

“Kōenji Rokusuke is a person who can't work in a group. It's something we already knew. My condolences.”

It seemed that Morishita knew exactly what was going on.

She clasped her hands together as if praying for the sixth group, which was already being hit with a lack of coordination.

“If you had been in the same group, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka, would you have stopped him as a fellow classmate?”

“Because we're in the same class, I would’ve been sure it was useless to stop him and overlook it.”

Whether or not we were in the same group wasn't important. If someone had called out to him and he stopped and listened, it wouldn't have been a problem.

“Alright. All the first-years have agreed. Let's go too.”

Hashimoto gave the order, and we, the 20th group, started walking without our leader.

As we entered the inn with our shoes on, a slightly damp smell hit our noses.

It might not have been a place that was often frequented. The students walked in a line, heading to the cafeteria.

Since our leader was absent, it seemed inevitable that Hashimoto, who took the initiative, would bear that burden.

While having a lively lunch as a group, Hashimoto took the lead and became the center of the conversation.

He encouraged the first-year students who were still hesitant and the less talkative ones, boosting their spirits without resorting to any foolish commotion, and skillfully broadened the conversation to include them.

Honestly, for students like me who were typically listeners, he was a lifesaver.

“Um. . Hashimoto-senpai. It was written in the rules of this exchange meeting, but we don't need everyone to be present for the games, right?”

“Yeah. The number of people participating in one game is up to five, and the same person can participate as many times as they want. It seems pretty flexible.”

All we needed was the required number of people plus the leader to be present at the designated time.

“Looking at Kiryūin-senpai, it seems like she's not interested in the exchange meeting, so we can just do whatever we want.. but I wish she had at least told us what she’d do.”

Since the leader is the one who decides the players, the plan was for Kiryūin to decide as soon as the game content was announced.

Hashimoto seemed to be bothered by the fact that Kiryūin hadn't asked anyone about what they were good at or anything.

“For now, all we can do is to try our best.”

“Kiryūin-senpai is amazing, isn't she? Maybe she already knows about us?”

A female student from the first-year Class D, Jitsute, asked Hashimoto.

Even without directly knowing her, it wouldn't be surprising to know about Kiryūin's exceptional abilities.

“That’s not possible. There's no way she could know who in this group is good at flower arrangement.”

Hashimoto was skeptical, and rightfully so. No one would know about each other’s individual strengths and weaknesses at this point.

“There was a reason why I suggested we all eat together. Let's rate our confidence in the game contents written on the printout on a scale of one to five.

One means you’re not confident.”

It was a simple but inevitable decision that the leader should take the initiative to make.

Everyone used their phones to rate their own game-related abilities.

However, the difficult part was that there were many unusual things.

If it was something you had never experienced before, you could only rate it a one, and even if you felt like you could do it, you could only rate it a maximum of two. Moreover, they didn't even provide a place to practice many of those activities in advance.

Things that required impromptu creativity were particularly difficult.

Everyone used their phones while eating.

There was a considerable amount of activities, so some people finished eating by the time it was completed.



Anyway, this way, we could gather data for everyone as a guide.

And it was immediately shared in the group chat that Hashimoto created.

“. .This isn't going to work.”

Hashimoto's first words after looking through it were harsh.

As feared, almost all of the students gave a rating of one to two to most of the games, and there were hardly any ratings of four or above. Hashimoto seemed to have given up on the chance of winning.

“Maybe we should just give up on the exchange meeting and just play around.”

But it was too early to make that judgment.

This phenomenon was undoubtedly happening in other groups as well.

“I feel like there are fewer groups that are serious about it.. Well, for now, I'll show this information to Kiryūin-senpai and let her decide on the plan.”

In the end, that was what it all came down to for this exchange meeting.

If Kiryūin was motivated, the kōhais would just follow her lead.

If she wasn’t motivated, she'd just participate casually and relax at the training camp.

Personally, I'd like to take it easy.

RoyalMTLs



After finishing lunch, I got up from my seat while looking at a message from a certain person on my phone.

It was just before one in the afternoon. There was about an hour left until the first game of the day.

“Sorry, but let me step out for a bit. Is it okay if we meet up in the shared room?” “Yeah, that's fine. I'll take the first-years and do some experiential learning or something.”

I thanked Hashimoto, who was taking on the hassle of being a senpai, and headed to the break room marked ‘Rest Area.’

Shortly after I arrived, I saw the person who had called me sitting alone on a two-seater sofa, looking bored out the window. There seemed to be another person, standing and glancing at the view outside the window. It didn't seem like a coincidence, considering the combination.

“Do you need something from me, Nagumo-senpai?”

“Need? Well, it's not much of a need, but I do have something to talk about.”

Using his fingertips, he gestured me over.

I complied and sat down on the empty sofa in front of me.

The person standing by the window, Asahina, turned around.

“Hey there, Ayanokōji-kun.”

Then, she left her spot, pushed Nagumo to the right end of the sofa, and forcibly sat down next to him.

“I was expecting some kind of special exam, but it turned out to be just an exchange meeting. I'm honestly upset.”

His first words, facing me directly, were of disappointment in this training camp. “I really have bad luck.”

Nagumo lamented his misfortune and shook his head lightly with a small smile. “You think so too, don't you?”

Nagumo, who was leaning on the armrest with his elbow and gently resting his cheek on it, asked with a look of disgust.

“Indeed, compared to last year's mixed training camp, it's undeniable that this one is a significant step down. That's probably why it's positioned as an exchange meeting rather than a special exam.”

Last year, there was a risk of expulsion, but this year, there wasn't even a penalty specified.

RoyalMTLs

I could understand Nagumo's great disappointment.

“But you knew this was coming, didn't you, Asahina? Considering the timing of the training camp.”

“...Yeah, I guess.”

Now that it was February, it was hard to imagine having a difficult special exam involving all grades. That was what Asahina expressed.

“It would’ve been virtually impossible for all the third-year students to participate, like last year.”

When I muttered that, Nagumo responded.

“Many of us third-years are dealing with exams and job hunting at this time.

Only those who have already decided their future and have spare time can participate in the training camp. No matter how many private points they can get in return, most of them would rather save every minute and second.”

The third-year students had created a rule to collect and manage private points by Nagumo. If they saved up to 20 million points, someone could be pulled into Class A.

However, this time, the reward was non-transferable, could only be used within Keyaki Mall, and the amount was not significant.

Even if they sought to further their studies, I wasn’t familiar with university circumstances, but private university entrance exams generally started from late January. For national and public universities, it would be late February.

Considering that it was early February, it seemed that many students were about to face their main exams.

In such a situation, spending three nights and four days taking care of their kōhais was too big a price to pay.

“Last year, the joint training camp was held a month earlier, but wasn't it quite tough for the third-year students even then?”

“I think so. There were quite a few third-year students who brought textbooks. I thought that might be why it was more relaxed this year.”

Considering this, Horikita Manabu's generation might have struggled a lot behind the scenes.

Perhaps the school had prepared some relief measures, but we couldn’t know that.

Even if it was a busy time and this trip was said to be more relaxed, the third-year students participating in this exchange meeting were likely limited to those who had a clear goal for further studies or employment.

“Can we assume that the third-year students who are participating in the exchange meeting did so voluntarily?”

In response to my question, Asahina nodded.

RoyalMTLs

54

“They were recruiting five volunteers from each class. If they didn't reach 20, they planned to reduce the number of groups and adjust.”

It seemed that the school was also considerate of the third-year students.

“I haven't asked until now, but what will you and Nagumo-senpai do after graduation?”

When I asked with the flow of conversation, Nagumo looked up, surprised by the question.

“Do you want to know?”

He seemed pleased to have sparked my interest.

I felt that if I answered vaguely here, he might get upset, so I nodded honestly.

“I'm going to university. I have no intention of using the Class A privilege.”

In other words, he was confident that he could pass on his own merit.

“I'm also going to a university, like Miyabi. But it will be different from his.

My self-scoring on the common test for the university entrance exams I took recently was just under the cut-off point, and it might be a bit impossible at my level. If I can graduate from Class A, I might be able to force my way in with the help of the school.. but I probably won't.”

The specific name of the university didn't come up, but the university Nagumo was going to seemed to be prestigious.

Asahina's decision not to aim too high was probably correct. Even if you forced your way into a higher-level university with ANHS’s authority, there were various risks after admission.

The Class A privilege was best used for job-related purposes, as Keisei mentioned before.

“I don't see any value in the Class A privilege itself. Do you know why?”

“Because you have the power to achieve your goals on your own.”

“That’s one of the reasons I dominated the third-year and became an overwhelming presence. Whether I'm in Class B or Class D at graduation, I believe I can get into the university I want and get a job at the company I desire with my own power.”

Asahina looked at Nagumo beside her with a deliberately disgusted look, but it was probably true.

“So even if everyone unites and drops you to Class B, they know what would happen. That wouldn't raise motivation, and it would be hard to maintain.

That's what led to the current results.”

Nagumo nodded in agreement.

However, of course, it was better to have the Class A privilege.

The difference was whether you relied on those privileges or considered it as just insurance.

RoyalMTLs

55



“By the way, Horikita-senpai is also at the university where Nagumo-senpai is going. That should show how much he admires him.”

The deciding factor for the university wasn’t where he wanted to go, but where Horikita Manabu was.

“Leave me alone. If you want, you can take the exam next year and come to the same university. I'll welcome you.”

“If I go, I'll have to work really hard on the common test.. right?”

“I'll refrain. I think it would be quite difficult even with my academic ability.”

Unlike Asahina, who honestly accepted my words, it didn't seem to get through to Nagumo.

He laughed at my not-serious answer and shrugged his shoulders.

“Let's get to the point. Honestly, the only thing you gain from this exchange meeting is private points, and there's nothing to lose. So it's a place where there are fewer people who take it seriously. I'm

not just lacking in excitement, but I decided to think positively that it's better than not having it at all.”

A game is a game, a match is a match. This will undoubtedly be the last opportunity.

“I thought that was the case. You want to compete with me in this exchange meeting, right?”

“That's right.”

For the third-year students, this was an exchange meeting with little return.

Nagumo had taken the time to make a match with me happen.

Upon hearing those words, Asahina moved her face closer to Nagumo.

“Is that what this is about? It's not fair to treat Ayanokōji-kun poorly, right?”

“So, you decided to join to protect Ayanokōji? You're quite kind.”

“But Ayanokōji-kun hasn't done anything wrong. It's not fair that he's being targeted by you. Why are you so persistent in targeting him?”

With her shoulders, Asahina forcefully pushed against Nagumo.

But that seemed to have slightly irritated Nagumo, who retorted with a half-smile. “Do you know why Horikita Suzune joined the student council, Nazuna?”

“Isn't it because she wanted to follow in her brother's footsteps?”

“No, that's not it. I don't know about now, but that wasn't the case when she first joined.”

“Is that so? Then what was her motive?”

“This guy right here. Ayanokōji was using Suzune to keep an eye on me.”

“Eh?” Asahina opened her mouth in confusion.

“I suppose he judged me to be a bad student council president, but in the end, that wasn't the case, was it?”

RoyalMTLs

56



Of course, it wasn't that there were no instances where Nagumo's actions were excessive, but he didn't cause any problematic behavior that warranted strong caution from Horikita Manabu.

“That's true. I think what you did brought about good changes to the school.”

“Maybe you were too influenced by Horikita-senpai, for better or worse?”

Before entering the school, I had no social interactions with others, so it was certain that I was greatly influenced by Horikita Manabu.

The school preferred stability, while Nagumo preferred reform. The two ideologies were never meant to converge.

“Horikita-senpai did pass the baton to me, after all.”

“So you admit it.”

“It's too late to deny it now.”

“Wait, wait a minute. Eh, what? This is a bit different from what I thought.”

Asahina, looking flustered, opened her mouth while looking back and forth between me and Nagumo.

“Despite his deadpan expression, he's pulling strings behind the scenes.

Anyway—”

Nagumo paused for a moment before asking again.

“I can assume you're willing to accept a match with me, right?”

“Why do we need to add conditions beyond the rules and rewards prepared for the exchange meeting?”

“I've thought about leaving it be, but it’s unacceptable. If I, who served as the student council president, were to trap you for personal reasons within the matches created by the school, it would cause problems.”

As Nagumo said, if the two of us, who weren’t even in the same year, were to impose risky bets with each other, the school wouldn’t be pleased.

“Actually, calling it a match is an exaggeration. It's more like a small bet.”

“A bet, you say?”

“Yes. If you win the bet, I'll give you a decent reward.”

“So, even if I lose, I don't have to give up my private points?”

“Sounds easy, right?”

It was more like a game than a match or a bet.

However, it was a bit suspicious that only Nagumo was at a disadvantage.

“I see no reason to refuse, but with the current rules, there's not much either of us can do. You're the leader, so you can't participate in the game directly, can you?” The one directing the students was Kiryūin, in other words, the third-year students.

And the ones playing were the first and second-year students.

RoyalMTLs

The stage we were put on was different from the start.

“Or are you going to ignore the exchange meeting and have a match in some other way?”

This experiential facility was well-equipped with places and tools to make that happen.

“It wouldn't be bad to have a match outside the exchange meeting, but if we do that, there's no need to stick to this training camp.”

“That's true. At school, we could have a more legitimate match.”

“If the school says to hold an exchange meeting, I'll follow the formal rules.” Saying that, Nagumo continued.

“At first, I thought about letting you be the leader and having a match by directing the first and second-year students.”

On the surface, third-year Kiryūin-senpai was the leader, but I would be the one who would actually give the appointments and instructions.

And it seemed that he had anticipated her not participating in the game.

“Not bad, right?”

“Well, yeah. But to make it work, we'd have to allow him to choose his group members, otherwise, it wouldn't be fair, right?”

Nagumo had chosen all the group members himself. On the other hand, if Kiryūin were to entrust the group members she had picked on her own, it certainly wouldn't be a fair starting line.

In fact, the first and second-years weren't told anything until we got on the bus. “And when you open the lid, it's a round-robin. If you only have one direct confrontation after dragging it out for three days, it's going to lack excitement, right? That's why I thought I'd stop insisting on the same conditions here.”

Saying that, Nagumo pointed his index finger at me.

“You participate in all the games. And when you lose three times, that's your defeat.”

“I don't have to worry about the group's win or loss, right?”

“Yeah. Even if Kiryūin's group loses 19 times in a row, if you don't lose to anyone, it's a win.”

All 19 games. So the condition is to win 17 of them individually.

“You're so kind to let me lose twice.”

“If I make being undefeated a condition and you lose in the first battle, it would be a real turn-off, right? It's more fun to keep you

around as long as possible.”

Nagumo said he set the line of three losses just for his own enjoyment.

RoyalMTLs

58



“Eh? Isn't that too disadvantageous for Ayanokōji-kun? Card games are all about luck.”

“He has nothing to lose even if he doesn’t win, right? The right to set the rules is naturally ours.”

“Ah, well, yeah.. Well, that might be true.”

I was a little dissatisfied, but even if I was confronted with the most harsh content, it was true that there was no reason to refuse if the risk on my side was zero. “All I want is your defeat. It's only natural for me to demand a high probability of victory. I'm also offering private points as compensation.”

“Is it okay to mess around with a kōhai from a distance just before your graduation?”

“That’s the way I like to treat you.”

Either way, it wouldn't hurt to respond to Nagumo's wishes in some way.

He'd be graduating in March anyway.

“Understood. Then I'll accept your proposal without hesitation.”

With my acceptance, Nagumo responded with a slight nod.

“Of course, I've told Kiryūin that you're participating in all the games.”

It seemed that negotiations had been conducted behind the scenes on the assumption that I would accept.

“It's not my place to say as an outsider, but you can clearly refuse if you don't like it, you know? Even if you say you won't pay anything when you lose, the fact that you lost will remain.”

That was exactly what Nagumo wanted, the matter of 'winning' and 'losing.'

“If Ayanokōji says he'll accept, you don't need to say anything unnecessary.”

Asahina, who was treated rudely, puffed out her cheeks in dissatisfaction but backed down when she saw that I was fine with it.

“But you really didn't hold back in your selection, Senpai. The students assigned to the other groups were a bit taken aback.”

When I pointed that out, he didn't show any discontent, but rather smiled as if it was natural.

“Even in a trivial exchange meeting, a game is a game. As a former student council president, I have to show my dignity.”

It seemed that he intended to win even in the exchange meeting where he participated as a leader, apart from the battle with me.

That was Nagumo's freedom; it was none of my business.

“Even if you start winning several in a row, it's easier to stop you if I can command the group directly.”

“Wow. You're really ruthless, Miyabi.”

“No, I don’t think so. I think Nagumo-senpai's way of thinking is correct.”

RoyalMTLs

59



It was a question of skill to be able to drag your opponent into your own ring after creating a favorable situation for yourself.

Given the structure of only facing each group once and the atmosphere of the exchange meeting, it was safe to say that it wouldn't be clear how many times a particular individual had participated in a game. But that was also in my favor.

It would be too conspicuous to take on a group as a second-year student, but if it was just an individual battle, it was possible to avoid attention.

While setting the stage for himself to take advantage of the situation, he had also taken care of me.

“Nazuna seems to misunderstand, but victory or defeat is not determined solely by whether one is excellent. If the person on top isn’t more capable, using a skilled person will only lead to their loss.”

What Nagumo was saying was correct.

No matter how many pieces you were given in shogi, if your skill was insufficient, you couldn't necessarily win.

“I'm sorry I'm late. Has the discussion been settled?”

Kiryūin showed up in the break room.

“Ah, everything's going smoothly. It's going to be a match between me and Ayanokōji as planned,” Nagumo said before turning to me. “Kiryūin must have sniffed out that I was planning to challenge you and volunteered for this role.”

“That's right,” Kiryūin nodded. “If you want, I can even give you the authority as the leader. Of course, on the surface, I'll make it look like I chose the participants. That way, we can compete as a group, can't we?”

She proposed a win-win situation, but I wondered if Kiryūin simply wanted to watch my victory or defeat from the nearest seat without doing anything.

“I see. That was a part that had been bothering me a little. I now understand why those three from Class A ended up in the same group.”

When Hashimoto and Morishita stopped by the convenience store, they ran into Yamamura, and Kiryūin happened to be there at the same time.

That might have been the deciding factor in choosing the same group.

If she handed over the authority to me, it was a consideration to save as much time as possible to deepen friendships.

“I don't know much about your current friendships. It was a chance encounter, and I just let you choose randomly. If you're uncomfortable in the group, it would be hard to show your true abilities, right?”

Thanks to Hashimoto and Hiyori, it seemed like the conversation could go smoothly.

“I appreciate your consideration, but I'll decline your offer. Unfortunately, I'm not good at socializing and I'm too busy trying to get along with my kōhais.”

Kiryūin responded with disappointment, but she didn't seem too bothered.

RoyalMTLs

60



“I didn't expect Kiryūin-senpai to get involved in this matter.”

Nagumo and Kiryūin weren't exactly friends. Rather, they stood in opposing positions.

When I responded that way, Kiryūin smiled happily.

“Anyway, I'm glad the match seems to be happening, Nagumo. It's a shame that third-year students can't participate in the game directly.”

Kiryūin expressed her feelings about the exchange meeting, whether they were true or not.

“If there was a rule that allowed participation, would you have given it your all?” “It's a rare opportunity involving Ayanokōji. Of course I want to meet his expectations.”

“Huh, you've really bought into Ayanokōji. If you want, I can challenge you individually and not just in this exchange meeting. If we're both third-years, there's no need to hold back. I'll even bet the ticket price for Class A.”

“Sorry, but I'll decline. That ticket price is soaked with the blood and sweat of the entire year. It's too heavy for me, who hasn't been

involved, to accept, isn't it?” Kiryūin was also the confident type who didn't consider her own defeat. Her words were strong.

She firmly implied that she’d win if she competed.

“That's a shame.”

Nagumo, however, was used to it and didn’t seem deeply interested in Kiryūin after having known her for three years.

“Well then, I have some things to do as a leader, so I'll excuse myself first.

Let's meet again later.”

After briefly taking care of her business, Kiryūin left.

“Fūka-chan is always cool.”

“She's just a woman, after all.”

“Wow, that's a terrible thing to say, Nagumo. In this day and age, you can't complain even if you're killed.”

“Don't get me wrong. I just want to be on top among the same sex, there's no discrimination or anything.”

He couldn't get passionate because she's a different gender.

“Even so, your way of speaking can cause misunderstandings, you know.”

That was also a valid point. He wouldn't be punished if he expressed himself a little more tactfully.

When I got up from the sofa, Nagumo and Asahina also stood up.

We all left the break room together.

“You should also practice or something and prepare for the match.”

RoyalMTLs

61



“I will.”

“Ah, finally you're out. You're done talking, right?”

Just before we disbanded, Amasawa appeared from down the hallway, looking as if she had been waiting impatiently, and approached us.

Nagumo scratched the back of his head at Amasawa's appearance and her words. “Didn't you hear my instructions? I told you to wait, didn't I?”

“It's okay. I’ll work twice as hard during exams.”

“I can't trust your words yet. If you do something on your own again, you better think you won’t be given another chance.”

“That's harsh. I understand, I'll follow the instructions properly.”

“Nagumo, this girl is.. um. .”

“Amasawa. From first-year Class A.”

“Oh, right. You're Amasawa-chan. You must be pretty good to be called into Miyabi's group, huh?”

“Well, not that much.. ”

It wasn't surprising, given that she had achieved the rare A in both academic and physical abilities on the OAA.

However, when considering overall ability and quick thinking, Amasawa wasn't necessarily the top candidate to be chosen.

“She wasn't my pick. Somehow, she heard rumors and knew about the next social gathering.”

RoyalMTLs

62







“That's why I promoted myself. I promised to contribute to getting first place.” “Honestly, I was a little hesitant to recruit her.”

Whether it was due to Amasawa's personality, or suspicion about her relationship with me, Nagumo didn't specify. He probably decided to recruit her because he deemed it a minor issue.

“You have to organize your own group too, Nazuna. You're a Class A student, so aim for the win. Can you always rely on us?”

“Eh, oh my gosh, it's already this late!? I have to go, but feel free to consult me if you have any problems!”

Asahina, who had checked the time on her phone, hurriedly ran off. She almost tripped on her way, but she turned the corner and disappeared.

“I wonder if Nazuna can lead a group with that attitude. .?”

Amasawa smirked and leaned in towards Nagumo, who was sighing in disbelief.

“Could it be that you're dating Asahina-senpai?”

“Huh? No, I'm not.”

“But you told me to wait because you had important things to discuss with Ayanokōji-senpai, but you kept Asahina-senpai by your side, right? That's special, isn't it?”

It might have been a leap to equate being special with being a lover, but who knows?

“That's none of your business.”

“Eh~ it is. Look, if I'm aiming for Nagumo-senpai, she's my rival.”

“You're aiming for a guy who's about to graduate?”

“I'm a patient woman, so I'm tolerant of long-distance relationships.”

“Sorry, but I don't like women who pretend to be cute or flatter me.”

Amasawa overreacted as if she was hurt by Nagumo's blunt rejection. He probably disliked that kind of behavior. He deliberately averted his gaze.

“I'm leaving now. Do your best, Ayanokōji.”

After Nagumo left, only Amasawa and I were left in the hallway.

“Am I disliked?”

“Well, if you say things to make yourself disliked, that's what happens.”

“But look, you’re also disliked, Ayanokōji-senpai, so I wanted to be included in the same group.”

What kind of group is that?

“I think it's true that they aren’t dating, but their relationship does feel special, doesn't it?”

“Well, yeah. It seems like they've gone beyond just being friends.”

I agreed with Amasawa on that point. It made sense.

RoyalMTLs



“By the way, it seems you knew about the exchange meeting in advance.”

“We were told in advance what kind of exchange meeting would be held.”

“We” here included Yagami who that man prepared and had Tsukishiro manage.

It seemed they were told the schedule for the year upon entering this school.

If they were going to expel me, it would be better to give them information in advance.

“I don't understand why you chose to team up with Nagumo.”

“Eh? Isn't it simply because the chances of winning seem high? After all, he was the student council president. I'm a girl of age, so I want private points.”

Amasawa answered, but it was clear that she was lying.

However, she quickly corrected herself, as if she had no particular intention of hiding her true feelings.

“I thought you and Nagumo-senpai would be competing soon. I thought it might be nice to be on your side and support you, but that wouldn't be fun, would it?” “That's the reason?”

“That's the reason indeed. I thought if I sided with Nagumo-senpai, we might have a good match.. ”

Amasawa sighed and held her cheek.

“I can see Nagumo-senpai's disappointment. The list the school provided is just full of games. It wouldn't be satisfying to win a game of rock-paper-scissors or cards against him. I didn't need to antagonize him.”

“There's nothing we can do about that.”

“I heard from Nagumo-senpai first, but the rules are that if you lose three times, it’s your loss, right? I could feel his desire to see you lose in any way. I'm looking forward to seeing what happens.”

“I hope it’s something to look forward to, but there's a good chance that I could lose three times in a row without showing any surprises.”

In reality, depending on the content, there's a high chance that I could lose without being able to do anything.

“But at least Nagumo-senpai and I don't think so.”

“Do you understand Nagumo's feelings too?”

“I'm the one who made fun of it, so I wasn’t allowed to come to the discussion.”

“Did you come here to greet me even though you were refused?”

“Was it not good?”

It wasn’t that it wasn’t good, but there was no reason to force contact with Nagumo and risk his resentment.

In order to get more limelight within the group, it seemed that not only ability but also whether you were well-liked would become significant.

“Well then, I've been called to my group, so I'll head back. See you later.”

With a quick turn, Amasawa cheerfully left.

It was a casual conversation with Amasawa, but there was one thing that bothered me.

Amasawa mentioned that she had been informed about this exchange meeting by Tsukishiro and others in advance, but if so, there was a slight contradiction in the conversation earlier.

“I wonder what she's up to.”

It might be a good idea to do a little research.

RoyalMTLs

66



3

Soon the details of the first round of the exchange meeting were announced and the game began.

Before that, I decided to tell Hashimoto, who was fiddling with his cell phone in the same room, about this matter.

Hashimoto would notice the unnatural situation even if I kept silent about participating in all the games. It was a waste to probe and be probed among groupmates, and it was best to avoid that.

I'm going to have some with Nagumo.

I told him a little about the contents of our match, but it was still a confrontation with the former student council president, and Hashimoto couldn't hide his surprise throughout.

And when he finished listening to the story, he sighed repeatedly, showing his understanding of the situation.

“You always do things that are beyond my imagination. You know that, right?” “It's not the development I wanted.”

“Even so, it's incredible that you're competing with Nagumo-senpai. And it's not about the results of this group battle, but about your individual performance.

That's amazing. You're being asked to win 17 out of 19 games.”

He expected this situation to be tough, but Hashimoto seemed oddly happy.

“That just means he’s interested in you. I knew my eyes were right.”

“Even if it's an informal exchange meeting, it's still selfish. It’s an act that disrupts the group's dynamic. That's why I asked to speak with you—to keep the group's cooperation intact.”

“So that’s where I come in. I understand what you want to say, but I don’t think you need to worry.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it. If this was a fun game, everyone might compete for a spot to participate, but do you think all high school students would want to make *oshibana* and embroidering to compete? No.”

(TL Note: Oshibana (押し花) refers to the traditional Japanese art of pressing flowers to preserve their beauty and create decorative

designs.) I was very interested, but it seemed that other students weren't.

"So it should be a welcome thing for you to participate in everything."

If things went as planned, I would be grateful.

RoyalMTLs

67



"Are you going to win the exchange meeting itself? I wonder how Kiryūin-senpai feels about it. I suppose it's okay to assume that you know because of the circumstances?"

"Ah, I'm not sure. I don't think she's completely uninterested, but I don't think she's as excited as Nagumo. She might even throw the whole thing to her kōhais."

Kiryūin was only interested in the match with Nagumo because of my record. Just enjoying the extra entertainment before graduation, that was all.

"Even if the private points I earned this time can only be used for pocket money, I can use the private points I have now for a more effective use. I honestly want to aim for a higher ranking and get the prize money."

For Hashimoto, who has made enemies both inside and outside, his battle funds were indeed important.

"Anyway, Ayanokōji, you should get along with the first-year students."

"Get along.. huh?"

“Do you think it's difficult to spend friendly time with the first-year students?”

After thinking for a moment, I nodded, and Hashimoto stood up, slapping his knee.

“All right, then, let's make the best of it. First, I'll loosen up the first-year students and try to get along with them by tonight.”

Hashimoto immediately declared that he had no problem getting closer to the first-year students.

“I'll also try to extract as much information as possible at that time, but if Kiryūin-senpai doesn't make a move, your power is indispensable. So when it gets dark, you'll have to cooperate to get along with the first-year students, okay?”

I couldn't just make demands without giving anything in return, and it was only fair to help.

It seemed better to support Hashimoto, who was aiming for a win in the group. “Right.. Of course, if I could do it, I would.”

But it would be better to let him know sooner rather than later that I'm not confident.

That’s what I thought, but Hashimoto could see right through it.

“Leave it to me. I'm pretty good at this kind of thing. I'm grateful to be able to act as your hands and feet. It will also serve as a check on the princess, and it's not something Ryūen can ignore.”

He was cooperating with me, while at the same time promoting his own interests as well.

Having a calculating mindset wasn't bad.

Rather, if there was a clear conflict of interest, that mindset would be much better than having the situation resolved out of goodwill.

“By the way, how much would you get for beating Nagumo-senpai?”

“I don't know. I didn't ask for the exact number.”

“Considering that he's a third-year representative, it's not just a few thousand or tens of thousands, right?”

What he wanted to know was not the amount, but where the reward money would go afterward.

“I understand. If we win, I'll distribute it evenly to the rest of the group, so you can rest assured.”

“I'm relieved to hear that. However, I'd be happy if you could give us different amounts based on our performance, not uniformly.”

He made it clear that he wanted to be paid more for taking the initiative, though it wasn't mandatory.

“Well then, I'll leave for a bit. I should be able to have a talk or two during my free time.”

As if cherishing every second, Hashimoto quickly left the shared room.

4

Thus, the first day of the exchange meeting and the first round began.

The school sent us the game and rules.

The group we were going to compete against was Group Nine. From Horikita's class, Ike and Keisei were there.

The game was ' *oshibana* creation.' The location was an *oshibana kyōshitsu*.

(TL NOTE: a specialized workshop space for teaching and practicing the art of oshibana, equipped with the necessary tools and materials.) Some students might have laughed when they heard it.

But I was very serious.

The question was how to compete with *oshibana*, and in this case, the quality of the finished product was of utmost importance.

The combination of many types of flowers.

Whether or not you could find petals with the right amount of moisture, and the selection of appropriate flower materials of different sizes.

Whether you could finish it without breaking or damaging it because they were delicate.

The winner would be decided by the total score of these factors.

I hadn't been able to experience anything since I hadn't been to the training camp yet and I was called up, so I decided to go straight to the actual facility.

We received a brief lecture just before, but this seemed much more in-depth than I had imagined.

The work itself was done by all participants at the same time, and in the end, we would compete in a one-on-one format.

From the first to the fifth, who would be in charge was decided in advance.

At the designated production site, there were participants from both groups, ten people and two leaders, and a few spectators including Hashimoto.

Among them was Takahashi Osamu, a first-year Class A student from the Nagumo group.

By the way, following the instructions from that time, I participated as the third person in line.

“Do you also make *oshibana*, Ayanokōji-senpai?”

Nanase Tsubasa from the first-year Class D, who was among the opponents, walked up to me and asked.

“No, I've never done it. I just got a little guidance from a friend.”

By the way, that friend was Hiyori.

She had been making bookmarks with *oshibana* for a long time and had a lot of experience.

“I see. I thought you were good at it because you were the only boy participating.”

Perhaps because it required dexterity, as Nanase said, nine out of ten participants were girls.

I was the only male participant, so I was a bit out of place.

I had a match with Nagumo, but there was no need to tell Nanase, who was irrelevant to our competition.

“I've only done it once or twice, so I don't know if I can do it well.”

“Please go easy on me.”

I was worried that the scoring criteria might be somewhat vague, but it seemed that the person in charge of *oshibana*, the same person running the facility, was well-informed and judged strictly.

Fortunately, the first-year girl who was my opponent wasn’t very good, so I was able to fight her head-on and win.

And as for the group's victory status, although the decision was tangled up until the fifth match, we barely won with three wins and two losses.

“You're amazing, Ayanokōji-kun. I think you're doing very well for your first time.”

“I'm nowhere near as good as Hiyori though.”

Both were beautiful *oshibana* at first glance, but the quality was worlds apart. If she had been my opponent, I would’ve been utterly defeated.

“You have a knack for this, Ayanokōji-kun. If you enjoy it, let's make it together next time.”

“Yeah, I'd like to get better at this too.”

I was relieved that such a formidable opponent was an ally. It was significant that I had won in the individual competition.

If possible, I would’ve liked to stay in the *oshibana kyōshitsu* and quietly continue making them.

I wouldn't mind competing in making *oshibana* for three days straight.

Such feelings were welling up, but unfortunately, I had to suppress them.

Sorry, oshibana. See you later..

After the first match, Kiryūin discreetly called out to me.

“A victory’s a good start. Though, I didn't feel any tension.”

“Well, that's true.”

While answering, I kept quiet about how serious I had been.

Whispering was allowed during the game. It was inevitable that the spectators would find it boring.

“But if it's a competition based on experiential learning, it's not strange for anyone to win or lose. If you consider the school's intentions, it's a very interesting RoyalMTLs



way to decide who wins. It's meaningless to just gather students with high OAA abilities. Every group has a chance to win.”

Even the great Nagumo couldn't foresee or determine whether Horikita and the others could make good *oshibana*.

That being said, the same could be said for us.

What we could and couldn't do. Use the spare time to experience as many experiential learning activities as possible and improve our skills. *A leader should be in charge of these things..*

“Hashimoto made this list for me, which makes things easier. He's surprisingly useful.”

To avoid the hassle as a leader, Kiryūin seemed to welcome it.

Well, that was fine too. It was good to enjoy the three days without getting too serious about winning.

“If we continue like this, there will be almost no need for you to take command.”

“I'm grateful for that. All I want to see is the match between you and Nagumo.”

As expected, she didn't seem to have any intention of doing anything.

“I don't think the results will meet your expectations.”

While having such a conversation with Kiryūin, I noticed Inogashira was looking at us alone.

Judging from the situation, she probably didn't participate in the first game.

She said she was good at sewing, and she might like *oshibana* too.

I thought she had come to experience *oshibana* in her spare time, but it didn't seem to be the case.

“What's up, Inogashira?”

When I asked her out of curiosity, she approached me with a bit of nervousness. Seeing this, Kiryūin stepped back to make it easier for her to talk.

“Um… uh, you're good friends with Kōenji-kun, aren't you, Ayanokōji-kun?” “Huh?”

I answered immediately. It was the first time I had heard that I was good friends with Kōenji.

“Is that so…? I see. .”

“What's the matter?”

“Well, Tatebayashi-senpai told me to bring Kōenji-kun back...”

Tatebayashi is the leader of the group to which Inogashira and Kōenji belong, the third-year Class D.

“He was really angry.”

“Yes...”

RoyalMTLs

As a member of the same group and his classmate, it seemed that the timid Inogashira was forced to take responsibility for managing Kōenji.

“I thought maybe you could do something about it.. ”

She had been watching the scene earlier and our eyes had met.

She must have come to ask for help out of desperation, but the problem was that the other party was too difficult to deal with.

“Why don't you ask Yōsuke?”

I tried to offer the most feasible solution, but Inogashira shook her head.

“I can't ask Hirata-kun to do something like this.. It's too much to ask.”

I wonder if it's okay to ask me. .? Well, it would be rude to compare myself to Yōsuke, who was very helpful. If asked, he would accept and if Kōenji didn't return, he would likely continue to persuade him until he did. I could understand why Inogashira would feel guilty.

“I'm sorry. I can't help you. There’s nothing I can do.”

“I see. . I'm sorry, I'll try to figure something out.. ”

Inogashira bowed her head slightly and slowly walked away.

“Should we just leave it like this?”

“I do feel sorry for her, but that man won't act according to our wishes.

We've tried various things over the past two years, and this is the conclusion we’ve come up with.”

“Of course, the decision is up to you. Regardless of the details, the fact that she came to us first is significant.”

“You're serious in strange ways. I won't deny it, but I'm not enthusiastic about it.”

My thoughts and policies towards Kōenji had solidified the last time I interacted with Mii-chan. Now, without a special exam threatening

expulsion, any unnecessary contact and communication would be a waste.

“There's still some time until the next game, why not give it a shot? From what I've seen, Tatebayashi's group is small and unlikely to win, but if Kōenji is competent, the situation might turn around somewhat. Right?”

He didn’t seem like the type to worry about others, but it would be inappropriate for me to say that.

I wanted to try many different things, but opportunities like that seemed hard to come by.

“I understand. I'll try contacting him for now. If Kōenji wins, he might appreciate the private points he'll earn.”

“That's a good idea.”

In fact, that was the only thing that could potentially motivate Kōenji.

While thinking that I had been asked to do something troublesome, I decided to give it a shot.

RoyalMTLs

5

I wanted to find Kōenji during the 30-minute interval between matches, however, it wasn’t an easy task.

I went to Kōenji's shared room, but as expected, he wasn't there, and he wasn't in the lobby or the lounge either.

After wandering around the building for about five minutes, occasionally asking acquaintances for information, I obtained a promising clue about 20

minutes before the next game.

I found Kōenji a little way up on a mountain path behind the building.

I arrived at an open area that used to serve as a dog park.

It seemed to have become quite a wasteland, perhaps because it was no longer in use.

“It took me quite some time to find this place. I didn’t know there was a place like this here.”

I found Kōenji, who was running around joyfully, kicking up the wasteland with his strong horse-like legs.

I couldn't help but wonder what he was doing here alone, but if I worried about it, I would lose to Kōenji.

Seeing a rare spectator, Kōenji slowed down and approached me.

I thought he would continue to ignore me, but I was met with a surprise.

“Ayanokōji boy, do you need something from me?”

I thought it was just a whim, but I couldn’t waste the opportunity.

“I saw you leaving the group on your own. I thought I'd ask you about how you felt.”

“I see. As long as you didn't come to call me back just because someone was counting on my abilities, that's fine.”

I guess this man didn’t need any pretense.

“Inogashira was looking for you. She appeared quite anxious.”

“So what?”

“Why don't you go back and help the group a little?”

“You already know the answer, don't you?”

“I don't know. Why won't you cooperate?”

“I'll tell you something special. One plus one equals two. The answer doesn't change no matter how many times you solve it.”

“That depends on how you look at it. In decimal, that's true, but in binary, one plus one equals ten.”

RoyalMTLs

74

(TL NOTE: The statement contrasts arithmetic in decimal (base-10) and binary (base-2) systems. In binary, used in computing, 1 + 1 equals 10, representing the decimal value 2.)

Kōenji didn't lose his smile even when I responded to his ridiculous statement with a ridiculous answer.

“Hahaha, you have a sense of humor. But your answer is nonsense. You see things in a twisted way, with logic-biased thinking. One plus one equals two is the answer. The world is always simple and clear.”

Kōenji expressed again that he had no intention of getting along with me.

“They should win using their own tactics, even without my ability. Isn't that right?” “Your group doesn't have that power. That's why I

intended to consider you.

If you’re present here, it’ll improve your impression. Won't it be easier for you in the future?”

“I pride myself on being the only, the best, and the strongest person. There's no need for me to show that to others. Your questions are all nonsense.”

Kōenji sneered and turned his back to me.

“This time, I've decided to take a complete break. In other words, I'm not involved in the exchange meeting at all. The game can be played smoothly with just five people, right? Please make sure to convey that.”

Indeed, there was no obligation for all group members to gather and hold an exchange meeting.

If Kōenji was uncooperative, it was a waste of time to invite him.

“I shouldn’t really say this to others, but I can't do anything about your uncooperativeness. It’s beyond my understanding.”

“Hmm. Beyond understanding, is it? Do you want to know why I'm uncooperative?”

As I was about to give up and turn back, he stopped me.

“Are you going to tell me?”

“I don't mind. But before that, can I ask you a question?”

When I turned back, Kōenji started talking.

“If a paper test is conducted here without any prior notice. Let's say, a test that questions basic academic abilities, who do you think would win, you or me?”

If it wasn't Kōenji, I wouldn't have answered seriously.

But here, I intuitively felt that it was best to speak from the heart.

“I would win.”

Without hesitation, I answered immediately, but Kōenji wasn't surprised.

Rather, he immediately responded as if it was the answer he had expected.

RoyalMTLs

75

“Your high confidence is not bad. Let's assume that your answer is *yes* in this situation. Then, do you think that our superiority, excellence, and value as human beings are determined by that alone?”

“No. That alone doesn't determine it.”

It was just a difference in the written test on basic academic abilities.

“Then next—if you and I fight seriously, what do you think the result will be?” A question about strength, not about brains or anything like that.

Having watched Kōenji Rokusuke for two years, I already had the answer in my mind.

“If it's a fight based on specific rules, I think you’d have the advantage.”

In terms of physique and muscle mass, Kōenji would undoubtedly be superior.

This was a number that couldn’t be overturned.

If rules were imposed here, such as boxing or judo, and Kōenji's skills were at least equal, I couldn’t deny the possibility that it’d be a tough battle.

“That's a funny answer. It's different from what I’d say, but I'll evaluate your thought as it is.”

From Kōenji's point of view, there was no possibility of losing, regardless of the presence or absence of rules. Of course, no one could deny that unless we actually fought.

“Do you think you can judge who’s better or worse with just this information?”

“It's a difficult question. But if I think about it in general terms, a third party would have to objectively and fairly evaluate both sides from various comprehensive perspectives, including not only written tests but also physical aspects, and quantify them. But that doesn't mean they can objectively perceive human value.”

“That's correct. No matter how objectively you look at it, determining human value isn’t something that can be easily judged. Even if you talk about comprehensive perspectives, you can't see everything.”

“If you have to compare, I would support the method I just mentioned.”

“I disagree, Ayanokōji boy.”

“Then, how do you judge the value of a person?”

As if waiting for me to ask that, Kōenji grinned.

“The answer is extremely simple. Whether it's me or not. That determines the superiority or inferiority.”

Even though he made me think a bit, in the end, it came down to that.

“What's the basis for your confidence?”



“I'll gladly tell you. The source is adaptability. I won't succumb to any environment. I have the confidence to survive in any of them. Whether it's in a large corporation or a jungle full of beasts, I have the power to adapt perfectly and *perfectly*. This is something that a third party cannot measure.”

(TL NOTE: The latter word “perfectly,” is written in Katakana for emphasis.)

He must be well aware that the “perfectly” and “*perfectly*” are redundant.

“This long question and answer session was meaningless. Even if you're perfect, it has nothing to do with your reason for not cooperating, does it?”

“If so, it's just that you didn't understand. Can you stand shoulder to shoulder with kindergarteners who can't do anything and work seriously? There's that much of a gap between me and the people around me. The reason I went out of my way to get first place in the deserted island test was to distance myself from such kindergarteners.”

He doesn't feel like competing side by side because he looks down on those around him.

That was Kōenji's reason for being uncooperative.

“You're not suited for this school.”

“You and I are completely different beings, but I thought you had a somewhat similar perspective. I didn't expect you to say that. I also think it would be more meaningful to devote myself to training by revisiting China than entering this school. I had circumstances that prevented me from doing so.”

No matter how I thought about it, it was a dead end.

When it came down to it, whether to cooperate or not was a decision he had to make.

I couldn't blame Kōenji for sticking to his guns.

“It's a shame, Kōenji. If you were different, you could attract more attention in a better way.”

“Like you, who's starting to be relied on by those around you?”

“I'm not really attracting much attention, though.”

We had our conversation.

Strangely enough, I often had the opportunity to talk with Kōenji like this.

I wondered if the atmosphere was similar at last year's training camp.

I was reminded again of the enigma that was the person in front of me.

“You understand now that you can't control me, don't you?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“So why do you bother with me? I'm not even in your group this time.”

Indeed, it was a strange story.

If someone else looked at my situation now, they would all say I should just leave him alone.

RoyalMTLs



It could waste time and potentially affect my bet with Nagumo.

“Even though I know it's useless, I can't help but try—”

“Because if you step out of the class, you won't be able to protect Horikita girl, right?”

As if linking with my thoughts, Kōenji said so.

I saw Kōenji as a hindrance to Horikita, who would continue to fight in the future. This man saw through that.

His extraordinary instinct was truly unpredictable.

Despite not giving many hints, he seemed to feel what was coming.

“If that's the case, there's no need to hesitate. You can try to exclude me at any time.”

“Didn't I tell you before that I don't feel like doing that?”

“Huhuhu. Well, if that's the case, there's nothing I can do.”

Kōenji, who never doubted that he was the best human being.

So far, there had been several people whom I urged to grow for the future of Horikita's class.

And if I thought they were beneficial, I had done the same for other classes as well.

This man, who had excellent abilities but a difficult personality to work with, was similar.

But the reason I didn't urge Kōenji to improve was because I judged the risk and effort of the measure to be high.

Just like how you couldn't turn an incompetent person into a competent one with a simple task like flipping a coin.

The man in front of me wouldn't change with just one or two steps.

It was easier to eliminate him before he became a nuisance than to change him into an asset. That was my conclusion.

“See you later then. I'll go back to my self-improvement time.”

Seeing that further conversation would be useless, Kōenji started running again. After watching his back for a moment, I decided to turn back.

RoyalMTLs



6

I came back near the inn to report on Kōenji's case.

But I couldn't find Kiryūin, and I didn't know where she had gone.

When I asked a few people, they told me there was a park with a handmade feel on the east side of the building, and they saw her walking there.

There wasn't much time until the next game, so I wondered what she was doing there.

The park had several wooden playground structures.

Unlike the rusty dog park, this place seemed to still be in use, with seesaws and balance beams that looked usable.

Now, where was Kiryūin—she was on one of the two swings.

Not alone, but with Asahina, a third-year student.

From a distance, it looked like Asahina was happily talking to her, and Kiryūin was listening with a warm gaze.

I thought it was an unusual combination as I approached to tell her about Kōenji. “We don't usually have a chance to talk, so it's kind of fresh.. Really unusual, isn't it?”

“Are you that happy to talk to me?”

“I'm glad. You’re always so cool, Fūka-chan. A lot of girls really look up to you.” Asahina's eyes sparkled. Perhaps Kiryūin was the type to be more popular with girls than boys.



This must’ve been because she rarely interacted with students belonging to the same year.

I think Kiryūin was a special case, but it seemed that this kind of interaction was also happening.

“Ayanokōji, you're back.”

“What were you talking about?”

It seemed better to tell her about Kōenji's situation later. With that thought, I asked about the content of the conversation.

“We were talking about various things, but right now, we were talking about our future plans. I was curious about Fūka-chan's future.”

I remember she said she would become a scholarship student and go to university when we met before.

“So, which university are you going to?”

The conversation had just started, and Asahina asked that question.

Kiryūin openly named the specific university she was planning to attend.

It was a famous university that I would’ve heard of many times if I had lived normally.

“It's their law department. But I'm not particularly attached to the department.”

Asahina shuddered at the thought of going to such a high-level university, thinking it was impossible for her.

“What do you plan to do, Fūka-chan?”

“Hmm? I’m not aiming for anything. I’m not trying to become anything.”

Just as she had told me before, she planned to live as an ordinary person.

She told Asahina that.

“Eh~ Isn't that a bit of a waste? You seem like you could become anything.”

She had no intention of showing off her talents, which would be envied by those who didn't have them.

That might be a waste, but it might also be the ultimate luxury.

“I can become anything. I don’t lack confidence, but there are many different things.”

“So you don't have a dream?”

“I have a dream of not becoming anyone. Does that answer your question?”

“That might be a dream, but I think it's better to have an ambitious dream.

Whether you can fulfill it or not, whether you can do it or not, isn't it something to think about?”

This was true especially if you were Asahina, who was expected to graduate from Class A. Kiryūin understood this and laughed.

“That's true. It's not that I've never thought about such a dream.”

“Then tell me. I might aim for it too.”

RoyalMTLs

81

Kiryūin reluctantly told Asahina, who kept her eyes sparkling.

“If I had to choose a job to achieve something, I might aim to be a politician.”

“A politician!? Wow.. but it's not common to think of becoming a politician.. even Miyabi has never mentioned becoming a politician, and I've never seen anyone around me do it.”

Asahina, eager to know how she came to have that dream, listened attentively.

“Do I have to talk about it?”

“No? Though, I think this might be the last chance to leisurely talk with you.. I want to hear it.”

At Asahina's request, Kiryūin said it was special and revealed the reason.

“When I was little, I had a lot of opportunities to meet politicians because of my family relationships.”

“Oh, so that's why you wanted to become one?”

“No? It was because of opportunities like that that I decided against becoming a politician. I just let their talk go in from one ear and out the other.”

“Ah, I’m biased, but.. politicians seem to be mostly bad people.”

“That's right. Most of them were corrupt people who were often featured on TV and in the media. It's not a profession I admire at all.”

If that was the case, there must’ve been another reason why she mentioned it as a dream.

“Because it's such a corrupt world, there are also those who shine. He was one of the few people I admired.”

“What's the name of the politician? Do I know him?”

“It's Kijima-san. He's become quite important now.”

“Eh, Kijima? Eh? The Prime Minister?”

Kiryūin affirmed. Asahina seemed quite surprised.

“I thought it wouldn't be so bad to aim for the same stage as him. He’s active on the front line.”

“But you're not aiming for that.. right?”

“I don't plan to at the moment.”

“It seems like you, Fūka-chan, could even become a politician.”

“Didn't I tell you there's a lot going on?”

The more she stood out, the more she hated having the Kiryūin name follow her around.

“Why don't you aim to be a politician instead of me, Ayanokōji, fulfilling my dream?”

“That's quite an unexpected suggestion. I've never even considered a career in politics.”



“My intuition tells me you might do surprisingly well.”

“I'm fine with being ordinary. I'll go to some suitable university and get a suitable job.”

“I see. Since I'm also aiming for the same path, we're both dream chasers in our own way.”

“Whether it's Miyabi or Fūka-chan, inviting Ayanokōji-kun, it must be something special, huh?”

“I'm just being targeted by curiosity seekers. The next game is about to start.” If we continued talking, we wouldn't be able to avoid being late.

“Oh, is it that time already? I need to hurry!”

Asahina jumped off the swing and waved frantically at us.

“See you later!”

“Don't rush and fall.”

“I know! Whoa, whoops!”

She almost fell as she started running.

I didn't expect to see the same pattern twice in one day, let alone in such a short time.

“Did you get to meet Kōenji?”

“I did talk to him. It was a waste of time though.”

I told her the purpose of my visit here, that I couldn't get Kōenji to participate in the exchange meeting.

“I see. So Kōenji is uncontrollable after all, huh?”

“I tried to find a way in, but there was no opening.”

“So there are things even you can't do, Ayanokōji. I'm glad.”

I was praised for my inability.

“Did you send me to see this result?”

“I can't deny that I wanted to see it.”

I thought it was strange to favor another group, but she was a rather mean-spirited senpai.

“But Tatebayashi is harsh. It's true that I can't bear to see a kōhai being oppressed.”

“It would be nice if he could be tough on Kōenji, but it doesn't affect him.”

Besides, there was a huge difference in ability.

Considering the possibility that Kōenji might bear his fangs, it wouldn't be strange for Tatebayashi to direct his stress toward another person in the group.

“Well, we can't help it. Let's move on to the second match.”

The game proceeded as follows.

[Pottery]

Everyone was a beginner, so it was a low-level battle. I took the lead with my dexterity and won.

[Table tennis] × 2

It was the same game twice in a row, but I had some experience with table tennis at school, so I won easily.

[Jewelry making]

I was worried about how it would go, similar to *oshibana,* but my opponent was also inexperienced, so I was able to compete on equal terms.

Including the *oshibana*, Takahashi was following all the games, probably because Nagumo had instructed him to confirm the results.

I thought I would be forced into a game with more luck elements, but overall, it was a good first day.

And perhaps influenced by my five consecutive wins, the group also managed to win five games in a row without losing.

Chapter 3:

Request from Horikita and Request from Ayanokōji THE NIGHT OF the first day of the exchange meeting.

This was probably the biggest difference from last year's camp: The rooms assigned to each student were grouped together. In other

words, the first and second-year students slept in the same room.

Depending on their personalities, this time of the day could be the most stressful time for both first and second-year students.

That was why Hashimoto hastily created an environment where they could break the ice.

It seemed to be working, as the first-year students had already gotten close enough to Hashimoto to be able to talk to him with a smile. Among the eight people in this room, I was the one who was the most reserved with everyone else.

“You did great winning all your matches on the first day, Hashimoto-senpai.”

“We didn't know who our opponents would be, so we honestly had no idea what would happen.”

Toyohashi and Yanagi happily said so.

Each of them had a turn at table tennis in today's third and fourth rounds, which probably influenced their mood.

Shintoku and Obokata also seemed to agree, nodding several times, but they seemed a bit shy.

“I'm sorry. We haven't participated even once yet.. ”

“Don't worry about it. From what I saw today, about half of the students haven't participated. Honestly, the gaming aspect is really just a bonus. For those who haven’t participated, their role is just to experience the games.”

The experiential learning format, where students collect stamps on a point card, was initially met with skepticism, but the system seemed to be more used than expected. It provided a good opportunity to deepen friendships by inviting friends, senpais, and kōhais.

As far as I could see, there wasn't a single group that was eagerly aiming for a win in the five games played today. Maybe that freedom had contributed.

However, that didn't mean it was easy to reach first place.

Considering today's game progress, a tough battle was expected from tomorrow onwards.

There were four groups, including ours, that won all five matches. Three groups won four out of five matches. There were also four groups that lost all five.

RoyalMTLs



The distribution of wins and losses showed the polarizing approaches to the exchange meeting.

Among groups that won one or two matches, there might’ve been some that were seriously engaged, but it was uncertain what would happen if they couldn't break into the top ranks from tomorrow onwards.

From the second day on, it seemed that we would be competing for first place with about half of the groups.

“Nagumo-senpai's group is a first-place contender, aren’t they?”

Takumi Oda, from Class 2-C, muttered, reflecting on the five matches.

“I thought so too. They seem to have won all their matches as well.”

Many students in that group were serious—that was their group’s strength.

There wasn’t a single student who thought it was okay to slack off. It was safe to say that it directly contributed to their win rate.

It was easy to imagine that they had been exposed to various experiences, gaining valuable lessons along the way.

Because it wasn’t a battle of academic ability, we were able to compete equally in that aspect. Though, it could also be said that a gap was created because many of the students were inexperienced in multiple games.

“By the way, Hashimoto-senpai, about my class—”

The conversation wasn't just about the exchange meeting, but also included trivial personal topics.

I watched the seven-people conversation, feeling somewhat detached.

Even though the group had only been together for a few hours, the first-year students already seemed to admire Hashimoto, and the conversation was naturally lively with him at the center.

As expected of someone who prided himself on his ability, there was no other way to put it.

He was beginning to build relationships as if they had been acquaintances or even friends for a long time.

Yōsuke and others who were good at blending in with their surroundings are also similar, but he was a different type.

What was a little disconcerting was that Oda had also managed to fit in quite well.. “But, it was a surprising day in many ways.”

Hashimoto groaned, holding a memo in his hand that recorded the wins and losses of each group announced by the school.

“Ryūen's group lost twice, and Sakayanagi's group even lost three times.

They might drop out of the race to the top tomorrow.”

Today, we didn't have a match with either of those two groups, so the details were unknown.

If Hashimoto hadn't taken on the role of organizing the first-year students, he might have gathered more information, but it seemed that he couldn't manage that. “It's surprising. I've always had the impression that Sakayanagi-senpai was strong. I wonder if it's different because a third-year student is in command.”

According to the OAA, a third-year Class D student named Iki had generally poor grades, especially in terms of academic ability. His grade was D+, which was quite unsatisfactory. From this, it seemed unlikely that he was participating as part of the college-bound group.

“If Sakayanagi wanted to win, it would be normal for her to take command, regardless of whether it's a third-year or whatever. She wouldn't back down even if her opponents were Nagumo-senpai or Kiryūin-senpai. Especially Iki-senpai, right? No matter how you think about it, she would quickly seize control.. No, even before that, she's the type who would want to leave everything to competent comrades.”

It seemed that Hashimoto knew a little bit about what kind of person Iki was. “So, is it simply a lack of ability?”

Kosumi, who had been quiet until now, muttered that, but Toyohashi immediately denied it.

“At least the first-years are quite good. The second-years are probably the same, right?”

As Toyohashi said, the group Sakayanagi was assigned to was not that bad.

Iki also seemed to have chosen reasonably competent members from both years and considered the possibility of winning.

So it was only natural that Hashimoto questioned why she had lost to an opponent she considered inferior in today's match.

“Whether it's a special exam or an exchange meeting, Sakayanagi always aims to win.”

Hashimoto, who had been by her side all along, knew this better than anyone.

Looking at the results of the three losses, Hashimoto must have had doubts in his mind.

“I think so too. I wonder if she's up to something.”

Oda also seemed to be troubled by Sakayanagi's three losses and was deep in thought.

However, thinking about it here wouldn't yield any answers.

Eventually, the seven of them started to get excited about a completely unrelated topic.

After a while, Hashimoto distanced himself from the first-year students and walked over to me, who had been watching from afar. On his way, he picked up the TV remote and deliberately turned on a variety show to make the room noisy.

“Could it be that the damage she took from losing Kamuro was significant?”

Hashimoto, who wanted to confirm the reason for the three losses, asked me this. “Maybe.”

It was difficult to judge based on the current results alone, but there was no evidence to the contrary.

“If she's really getting weaker, it's a good thing for me. If we go into the end-of-year exams like this, I might have a chance to win.”

As he said, Hashimoto wasn't simple enough to take these results at face value. “Can you find out what the real situation is with Sakayanagi, Ayanokōji?”

“That's your specialty, not mine.”

I tried to immediately refuse, but Hashimoto whispered in my ear just in case. “Please spare me this time. I'm Class A’s most wanted man right now.

Especially Kitō—he seems to be really angry. It's okay for now because Sakayanagi hasn't said anything, but who knows what will happen when my betrayal becomes clear.”

He muttered as he imagined it and hugged himself.

But his expression remained faintly amused.

“You don't seem to be scared, do you?”

“If I can't even bluff, I wouldn’t have the right to betray the class.”

That made sense too.

“Besides, I've moved on thanks to you. I'm grateful for that too.”

Hashimoto, who had visited my room on the day of the two-person meeting, had laid himself bare.

Now he can face forward thanks to the benefits of that conversation, but the effect was probably temporary.

Once the impact of his betrayal began to take effect, it would no longer be the case.

Hashimoto's time was running out.

“You can contact Sakayanagi directly, right?”

It was fine to feel a little better, but that was one thing, this was another.

“You are free to wish for whatever you want, but when did I become your ally? I don't intend to stick my neck into any trouble.”

“I'm thinking about it separately from that. But at least in this exchange meeting, we're on the same team. Even if she's lost three times, as long as RoyalMTLs



Sakayanagi is there, she's a first-place candidate that we should be wary of.

Considering that we might face each other tomorrow, it's not a bad idea to scout her out now.”

The man who didn’t care much about group battles was brave in his public appearance.

“That's reasonable. But as long as you and I are in the same group, Sakayanagi will be more wary than usual. I don't want you to expect useful information.”

“I understand. I'll just consider it as a bonus, okay?”

“. .Alright. I'll just do as much as I can for now.”

“I'm counting on you.”

I also wanted to know the reason for the three losses.

But whether or not I would pass on the information I gained to Hashimoto was another matter.

RoyalMTLs

89

1

The quickest way to get in touch with Sakayanagi was, needless to say, to contact her directly. However, it would be difficult to know her current situation in detail. She might speak honestly to me, but I could also predict that there would be many things she would intentionally hide.

Another option was to indirectly extract information from someone who knew Sakayanagi's current situation in detail.

But this also carried risks. I was interested in Sakayanagi's situation—it was unavoidable that they’d know that. Hondō and Shinohara from Horikita's class are assigned to the same group as Sakayanagi, but

neither of them were the type to keep their mouths shut or were good actors.

In the meantime, I decided to go out to the lobby to slowly organize my thoughts.

Depending on the timing, I might have been able to find Sakayanagi out and about. “Ayanokōji-kun.”

As I moved to the lobby, one student noticed me and approached.

It was Sanada from the same class as Sakayanagi.

He seemed to have just gotten out of the bath, as his hair was wet and I could see a few droplets of water on his glasses.

“Can we talk for a bit? There's something I've been meaning to ask you.”

“I don't mind. What did you want to ask?”

I was also grateful to have run into Sanada.

On the first day, he had won a game against the group Sakayanagi belonged to. “It's about Hashimoto-kun from your group. I guess you've heard various rumors about him.”

“Like how he had a hand in Kamuro's expulsion?”

“I don't intend to pry into it without any solid evidence, but regardless of the truth, I'm curious about his current situation.. I wonder how he's doing.”

Now, in Class A, not only Sakayanagi but also Hashimoto was attracting a lot of attention.

It wouldn't be strange if there were students like Sanada who were concerned about them.

“There's nothing particularly different from usual. He seems to be doing well, not just putting on a brave face.”

“I see. . That's good.”

“But how about Sakayanagi? Has there been any change with her?”

RoyalMTLs

Following the flow of the conversation, I tried to touch on Sakayanagi.

“As far as I could see at school, she seemed to be the same as always.”

“I thought the fact that her group had lost three times at the exchange meeting might have had some effect.”

“I'm not sure, but that might be the case. However, we haven't seen each other much since we came here, so I don't know the details.”

At least for now, Sanada answered that he didn't have a grasp on the situation.

“But didn't you play a game against Sakayanagi's group today?”

When I pointed that out, Sanada quietly shook his head.

“She didn't participate. I didn't see her giving any instructions nearby either.” She might’ve just been absent from that game, but it seemed more likely at that point that she hadn't been involved in the exchange meeting at all.

“What about you, Ayanokōji-kun? Do you know anything?”

“Unfortunately, no. The information I have is probably the same as yours.”

In fact, I might have had even less information.

“I'd be happy if you could keep an eye on Hashimoto-kun, as well as Sakayanagi-san, even a little.”

“As a member of the same group, I intend to keep an eye on Hashimoto as much as possible, but I don't know the details, so it's not my place to interfere.

What do your classmates actually think? Do they think Hashimoto really betrayed them?” “That is—”

Unable to immediately answer, Sanada couldn't continue.

“I haven't talked directly with my classmates, so I can't say for sure who thinks what. But there are definitely people who assume that's the case.”

The first person who came to mind from the conversation with Hashimoto earlier was Kitō.

He was a man of few words, but he had always been obedient to Class A.

He and Kamuro seemed to get along well, as they were often together.

After that, I talked with Sanada a little more, and then I spotted Horikita looking at us from a distance. She seemed to want to talk to me, so I ended the conversation at a reasonable point.

As soon as I was alone, Horikita approached me. Even though there were only 20 third-years, it seemed that the chances of running into someone were still high despite the large number of students.

“I'm glad I ran into you. I have a little favor to ask.. Is that okay?”

Horikita, who started off with a friendly attitude, didn't seem to have a problem with the exchange meeting.

RoyalMTLs

91



It was common knowledge that Nagumo’s group had been undefeated and was in first place with five consecutive wins since the first day.

“What's the favor?”

When I asked back, Horikita pulled my sleeve and forced me to move to the edge of the lobby.

“It's about Amasawa-san.. It's not something I can talk about out loud.”

“She's in your group, isn't she? Did something happen?”

When it came to confidential matters, the first thing that came to mind was trouble.

But that guess seemed to be off, as she immediately denied it.

“She talks a little too much, but she hasn't done anything problematic. She's been behaving well so far.”

Relieved at that, I waited for Horikita to continue.

“Did you know how good her physical abilities are? It seems that she’s also quite skilled in martial arts.”

“Setting martial arts aside, I do regularly check the OAA and have a rough grasp of it.”

While giving a noncommittal response, I urged for more information since the full picture was not yet clear.

“I think you wouldn't know about it unless you heard it from Amasawa-san, but I owe her a bit of a 'debt'—something I can't repay in my typical school life.”

Martial arts and the word 'debt.'

Although she avoided direct expressions, it seemed that she had a confrontation with Amasawa at some point.

Looking back, without thinking deeply, it seemed that the only stage for such a confrontation would have been the deserted island exam.

“It's hard to imagine the circumstances.”

I decided to say something that most people would say upon hearing this story. “Well, various things.”

Horikita evasively responded, showing no intention of elaborating on the

'debt.' Since it wasn't something I needed to pry into, I decided to move on.

“So, what's next?”

“I've been doing my best every day. But I don't know if I'm at a level that can compete with her. So, I want you to evaluate my current strength.”

“I understand you want to repay your debt to Amasawa, but it sounds quite dangerous.”

“It would be under normal circumstances, but her strength isn’t normal.”

RoyalMTLs

92



“Even if you say 'strength,' I don't know how strong Amasawa is. I can't be of much help.”

Without knowing the exact strength of the opponent, preparing a measure was meaningless.

—Well, in reality, I did know.

But I decided to keep that to myself.

“You just need to judge my strength in your own way. Of course, I would be happy if you could give me some advice.”

From her tone, it seemed that she might’ve been more interested in my advice. “It's up to you if you want a rematch, but has Amasawa agreed?”

“Not yet.”

However, Horikita quickly continued.

“If she refuses my proposal, I won't force her to do it.”

Despite her answer, it seemed that Horikita didn't consider the possibility of Amasawa refusing.

After all, she had gone through the trouble of confiding in me and asking for special training.

“Would you.. accept my request?”

“Accepting is a problem in itself.”

Facing Amasawa would be quite disadvantageous.

No matter how much Horikita had trained after her defeat, it was unlikely that the gap in their abilities could close that easily.

“Why don't you ask Ibuki over there? She would be happy to help.”

I called out to someone who was probably hiding nearby and listening in.

“Tch, you noticed.”

With an annoyed click of her tongue, Ibuki showed her face from around the corner of the hallway.

It was clear that this was a prearranged plan between the two, as Horikita didn't seem surprised.

“Unfortunately, I'm tired of sparring with Ibuki-san. There's little to gain from fighting the same opponent over and over.”

Ibuki, standing next to her, seemed to have a similar 'debt,' showed a similar reaction.

It seemed that this was a request made after doing everything they could.

“You're strong, so you should be willing to help a little.”

“Are you also up for it, Ibuki?”

“Of course. I can't stand losing to a little girl who's only been here a year.”

After throwing a few punches, she showed off a clean high kick.

She seemed desperate to land that kick.

RoyalMTLs

93



It was nice to be enthusiastic, but even though she referred to Amasawa as a little girl, there was only a one-year difference between them, and in terms of actual physique, Ibuki was actually smaller. .

“You decided to do this during the training camp because you wouldn't have trouble finding a place to spar, right?”

“It would be too conspicuous to have a fighting rematch at school.”

Horikita, who gave a small nod in response, seemed determined. Ibuki too, for that matter.

“I wonder. . Honestly, there’s nothing in it for you. .”

“Indeed, I don’t have anything to gain from this.”

“But if you were to accept, I'm willing to offer private points as compensation—”

She seemed ready to offer compensation, but it was pointless to accept such a thing. “I don't know how much it will help, but if you accept my conditions, I'm willing to take it on.”

I interrupted Horikita's offer and responded.

“Really? I wasn't expecting that at all. .”

“Whether or not both parties agree to it, there are more disadvantages to getting into a fight at school. If you want to pay back some kind of debt, you don't want to miss such a great opportunity. However, you can't just go out at night.”

“Thank you. I couldn't ask for more cooperation. So, what are the conditions?”

There were absolute conditions that had to be accepted in order to face Amasawa in a rematch.

“The first is to talk to Amasawa today. You're in the same group, so it shouldn't be hard to find an opportunity to do so. Of course, to avoid making a fuss, make sure no third party finds out. The timing should be early morning on the last day. You should get Amasawa to accept the rematch at that time.”

The chances were slim, but if she refused, the special training would be meaningless.

“Of course, I understand that. What are the other conditions?”

“I'll talk about that once you've finished this one. There's no point in special training if Amasawa doesn't accept. Besides, we can't do it in the middle of the night at the training camp, can we?”

Since this was a discussion based on the premise that she would accept, there shouldn’t be any objections even if they didn’t hear the remaining conditions.

“I'm ready to do it right now, you know?”

“You should keep quiet.”

Horikita, unlike Ibuki who had quickly agreed, had proper common sense.

RoyalMTLs

“If I get permission from Amasawa-san, I'll send a message.”

“Please do. I'll be ready in the morning.”

Amasawa wasn’t the type to refuse a fight.

On the contrary, if these two wanted a rematch, she would be happy to accept. She would understand that this camp was the perfect place with fewer watchful eyes.

As Horikita nodded and was about to return to her room, I stopped her.

“This isn’t related to the exchange meeting, but there's something I want you to investigate.”

“What is it?”

If she was planning to propose a rematch, she could probably deceive Amasawa's sharp sense.

I made a small request to Horikita.

“I don't quite understand, but I just need to keep that in mind, right?”

“Yeah. Don't tell Amasawa.”

“I understand. It's not a big deal.”

I thanked Horikita, who readily agreed, and the meeting was over.

“Well...”

I decided to look for Sakayanagi a little longer.

However, I wandered around the training ground aimlessly, but I couldn’t find Sakayanagi.

Around 9 p.m., as the crowd began to thin, I decided to call it a day.

When I returned to my room, Hashimoto, Toyohashi, and Shintoku were preparing to go to the bath and were waiting for me, so I decided to go to the large bath with them.

RoyalMTLs

95



2

After enjoying the bath at the large bathhouse for about an hour, I returned to my shared room with the three who came with me.

Then, I saw the third-year student, Tatebayashi, standing in front of a room, looking displeased and fidgeting with his right foot. He seemed quite irritated.

“You finally came back.. ”

Tatebayashi’s gaze wasn’t directed at us, but further back.

It was Kōenji, who had been doing as he pleased all day.

It was expected, but judging from Tatebayashi's behavior, he hadn't been able to make contact even after all that time. He didn't care about the irritated senpai and went to the front of the room.

“Could you move? You're in the way.”

“What the hell are you—”

Before the lecture began, Kōenji pushed Tatebayashi's shoulder and entered the room.

It wasn't that he had forced his way in, but rather that he had overpowered him with his superior physique and strength.

Rumors about Kōenji should have spread enough among the third-years, but if you didn't have any direct experiences with him, you'd just feel some irritation.

Without even trying to close the open door, Tatebayashi followed Kōenji who disappeared into the room.

"Hey, are they going to fight?"

Shintoku, a first-year, looked at Hashimoto for instructions on what to do.

"Kōenji really is a handful. Should we just watch for now?"

If the door had been closed, they could have ignored it, but it was left wide open. Everyone casually peeked inside.

Kōenji, who had entered the shared room, was already on the futon at the far end. Three first-years and.. it seemed that all the second-years except Kōenji were out.

He started stretching as if he ignored Tatebayashi, who was standing and looking down.

I wondered what feelings Shintoku and Toyohashi had when they saw this.

"I don't want to get involved with Kōenji-senpai..."

"Same here. ."

Disgusted, they said such things without thinking.

“What have you been doing until now!”

RoyalMTLs

96



Tatebayashi, who had a reputation as a leader, questioned him.

“Me? It's obvious, isn't it? I'm polishing myself.”

“Huh? Polishing yourself? Don't talk nonsense!”

No matter how loud he shouted, it wouldn't resonate with Kōenji.

“Cooperate properly tomorrow! We're on the edge here!”

“That's an impossible request.”

Kōenji answered without looking at Tatebayashi at all.

The eyes of the first-year students peeking in at Kōenji were beginning to turn cold.

It was hard to adapt to this guy in a short period of time.

The kōhais in the same room were silent, seemingly unable to move. The atmosphere was heavy.

“Impossible request? Do you even think about the group?”

Tatebayashi continued his relentless attacks.

Without caring about his group mates, Kōenji turned over the futon on the spot. “Then I'll sleep at the edge.”

“Don't decide that on your own! I’m supposed to decide where to sleep!”

When Hashimoto quietly entered the room, he asked the first-years in the same room to stop Tatebayashi.

He quickly stood up and rushed to Tatebayashi's side, trying to calm him down with soothing words.

Tatebayashi, who was breathing with both shoulders, noticed the presence of the kōhais and regained a little calmness.

“Okay? You still must obey the leader's instructions, right?”

But—

“I refuse. I hate going through unnecessary steps. Can you be quiet now?”

That was the last straw.

Tatebayashi, who had been comforting the kōhai, pushed them aside and shouted.

“It's not that I hate it!! There are first-years here too, I can't set an example as a senpai!!”

“Don't you know the saying, 'One should undergo hardships in their youth even if they have to pay for it'? At times like this, young people should take the lead and give the better place to their seniors.”

“Ah, yes, that's right. Don't worry about us.. yes.”

If a second-year student told them to give way, most first-year students would have no choice but to obey.

“Then I, a third-year, will order you. Undergo hardships!”

(TL NOTE: There isn't really a good way to translate this, basically just telling them to actively seek out and embrace challenges/hardship.)

"Come on, Senpai, calm down."

Hashimoto stopped Tatebayashi, who was about to raise his fist in anger, by putting his arm around him.

He then turned his attention to us and asked us to go back to our rooms.

"Let's go back."

"But, is it okay?"

"Hashimoto should be able to handle this situation."

Leaving Hashimoto behind, we returned to our shared room.

Ten minutes later, Hashimoto returned to the restless first-year students.

"Was everything okay?"

"He calmed down. It seems he was desperate because he really wanted to win." Class 3-D had little money to spend freely due to the tribute to Nagumo and their low class points. Because the rest of their school life was just nearing its end, they seemed to want every bit of pocket money.

"Nagumo-senpai and the other senpais took most of the good students, so they didn't have much leeway. So they took Kōenji from the leftovers and aimed for a one-shot reversal, and that's what happened."

If he could’ve handled him, he might’ve been able to make him take action.

It was no wonder he was angry if such faint hope was betrayed.

“It must be hard for you, Ayanokōji-senpai. . having someone like that as a classmate.”

I didn't think anything of it, but I gained some newfound respect from the first-year students.

“Well...”

From here, we started preparing for bed, but there was still a problem that Hashimoto hadn't solved.

That was who would sleep where.

Like Kōenji and Tatebayashi had been arguing, it was a trivial but unavoidable part.

I remembered that when students slept together, there was often a fuss about where to sleep.

Especially on school trips, it was a big deal when Ryūen and Kitō had a pillow fight.

“Let's decide the issue fairly here. To avoid something like Kōenji, right?”

Hashimoto volunteered to take on the unpleasant role.

“No, we really don't mind where. Right?”

“Yes. If anything, Ayanokōji-senpai can decide next!”

RoyalMTLs



“No, no, why Ayanokōji? You're fine with treating me badly?”

Hashimoto retorted with a bitter smile.

“It's not like that.. Ayanokōji-senpai is our aspiration!”

“Me too, Ayanokōji-senpai! I respect you!”

Shintoku and Toyohashi, with their eyes shining, revered me.

“. .You seem to be admired in a short time.”

“Well, even if you say that.. ”

I was the one who was most confused.

Until just a moment ago, there was no such thing.

Shintoku and Toyohashi, who had drastically changed their attitudes, were just tilting their heads, as were Kobayakawa and Yanagi, who were also first-year students.

RoyalMTLs



Chapter 4:

A Strange Discomfort

THE MORNING OF the second day.

The time was still before 6 a.m.

It was getting a little brighter, but it was hard to say that there was sufficient visibility.

I moved a short distance away from the building to avoid being seen.

Even without worrying, there wouldn't be many people who would come out at this time.

Soon, as promised, Horikita and Ibuki appeared.

“Yawn.. I'm sleepy. And it's cold.”

Ibuki yawned and stretched, shivering.

“If you don't like it, you can just go back to your room.”

“You're kidding. I can't let you get revenge on your own.”

Rather than against Amasawa, it seemed that the main driving force wasn’t wanting to let Horikita have her way.

“It seems she was happy to accept the rematch.”

“Yes. She agreed immediately. But I faced unexpected resistance.”

“Unexpected?”

“I asked for the morning of the fourth day as promised with you, but she negotiated to change it to the morning of the third day.”

“She wanted to move it up a day earlier.”

“Of course, since the condition for you to cooperate was the morning of the fourth day, I told her I couldn't compromise. In the end, she gave in, but it didn’t seem like she was any less inconvenienced. I wonder if she had some plans.”

“In the early morning? It's hard to say. Since she accepted it, isn't it okay to ignore it?”

If you hate getting up early, there wasn’t much difference between the third and fourth day.

“Since I was the one asking, I didn't dig too much into it since it was a private matter. There might be some problems unique to girls, so if you understand, could you give us permission to change it to the third day?”

Indeed, there was a cycle that could potentially be disadvantageous for women due to their physical structure.

But that was the same for Horikita and Ibuki, and I didn't think Amasawa would use that as an excuse.

“If the other party has agreed despite the inconvenience, we should proceed as planned. We should not reduce the number of special training sessions.”

RoyalMTLs

“You're relentless.”

“The morning of the fourth day is the decisive day. If you can't follow that, I can't accompany you in the special training.”

". .I understand. I feel a bit guilty, but let's stick with the current plan. Is that okay?" "Don't think about holding back out of consideration for the other party."

Horikita seemed to be troubled by something.

"I understand. She probably doesn't think she's going to lose at all. She's even worried about me."

She didn't seem to like that, but there was nothing she could do about it since she was on the side that wanted revenge.

"I'm going to beat her to a pulp."

Ibuki was fanning the flames of revenge next to me.

It was up to the individual to fan the flames, but going too far could be a big problem.

"Don't injure her face, okay? It's a hassle if the fight gets out."

"Huh? If it's a weak point, I'll aim anywhere. Actually, the first thing I should do is kick Amasawa in the face, right?"

Even if I warned her here, she would probably still kick mercilessly when the time came.

"It's good that you're motivated."

For now, I decided to leave it at that, as she was showing a positive attitude.

"Could you tell me the additional conditions for accepting the offer?"

"Yeah. There's only one more condition left. Promise to fight two against one if you judge it's difficult to win. Don't hesitate."

When I conveyed what I had decided in advance, neither Horikita nor Ibuki seemed to be able to swallow it immediately.

“I'm sorry. What do you mean by two against one—”

“Of course, you and Ibuki are the two I’m referring to. If you can't accept that, then I'm not willing to cooperate.”

When I told them again, Ibuki kicked the ground and thrusted her fist at me.

“Huh!? What's this two-against-one in a match? That's so lame. It's impossible.”

“I'm not saying you shouldn't do one-on-one. I said, `if you judge it's difficult,’ didn't I?”

“It sounds like you don’t think we’d win on our own.”

“I'd like to sugarcoat it, but yeah, that's about it. I'm sorry, but the chances of beating Amasawa one-on-one are almost zero. I'm not going to go along with something that's just a waste of time.”

RoyalMTLs

Honestly, even if they managed to make it two against one, there'd be a higher chance of it turning out like last time.

“I don't like it. I can't accept that condition.”

“I don't like it either. But from the way you talk, it seems you know exactly how strong Amasawa-san is, don't you?”

“That's right. To be honest, it's not exactly a match, but I've seen her strength.”

“. .And you think there's that much of a gap between us and her?”

When I nodded, Ibuki seemed to be even more upset and looked away with a click of her tongue.

“I can't do this. I don't need Ayanokōji's help, I'll do it alone. In fact, you should do the same.”

“Indeed.. you've put forward an unexpectedly hard-to-swallow condition.”

She must’ve been planning to accept most things without hesitation before coming here.

It was no wonder she was wavering now, but it was meaningless to receive special training without a purpose.

“If that's the case, that's fine. It's easier for me if I don't have to cooperate.”

“Let me ask you again. You understand Amasawa-san's strength, don't you?”

“I think I understand it better than you or Ibuki, at least. Although it's only for reference, I can also fight by estimating Amasawa's strength.”

Horikita probably just wanted a simple match, but if she could fight against an opponent of similar strength, she couldn't help but find it appealing.

“—I understand. I'm fine with that condition. But what if Ibuki-san refuses?”

“This conversation is over. It’s only possible if the two of you cooperate.”

“Will you judge after seeing my improved strength?”

“That's right. Let's give it a try then.”

I slowly pulled my foot back and drew a small circle on the ground, about one meter in diameter. Then, standing at the center of the circle, I positioned my left hand forward and my right hand back.

“I won't move from here. And I'll only attack with my left hand.”

“Huh?”

“If you can make me struggle in this state, you should be able to put up a good fight against Amasawa.”

“Are you mocking me?”

“You're free to interpret it however you wish, but you're the one who asked me to show you, right?”

“Funny. Well, I'll burn that arrogance to ashes first.”

What an interesting way to put it.

Ibuki, like the last time we faced off, fought mainly with kicks.

Her sharpness might’ve improved, but honestly, it was a negligible difference.

I quickly determined the direction of her foot and dodged.

“How cheeky! If I can grab your left arm, it's my game!”

Apparently, Ibuki intended to grab my left arm to prevent me from attacking.

If that was what she wanted, I'd let her grab it to her heart's content.

When I deliberately held my left hand in an easy-to-reach position, she seized the opportunity and grabbed my left wrist. Immediately after, I spread the fingers of my left hand and took a big step with my left foot, placed right behind Ibuki. While drawing my captured hand in an arc from left to right, I used my left foot to step out and free myself.

Ibuki, who was brushed off, was left in a defenseless state with her back fully exposed in front of me before she realized it.

“Eh—!?”

I thrusted my clenched left fist into Ibuki's back, who was still catching up on what happened, and lightly tapped it.

“W-What the hell. .!?”

“It's a kind of Aikido. The result won't change no matter how many times you try.”

(TL NOTE: Aikido (合気道) A type of Japanese martial art. The use of twisting and throwing techniques and in its aim of turning an attacker's strength and momentum against themselves.)

In a one-on-one fight, the difference in ability couldn’t be overridden no matter how many times you fought.

To have a chance, you needed to accept a two-on-one and outnumber your opponent.

“Could you switch with me, Ibuki-san?”

“Do you have to experience it to understand it?”

“That's not it. Even with the short exchange just now, I could fully recognize the extent of your strength. That's why I want Ibuki-san to see it objectively. There wouldn’t be any progress if you don't know what happened.”

She seemed to want to let Ibuki gain experience on her own.

“Similarly, I'll also bind your left hand. But I don't intend to let it go down the same way.”

“That's better. It's foolish to come and purposely get defeated in the same manner.”

I let Ibuki step back and now Horikita stood in front of me.

“You can start anytime.”



“I intend to.”

I thought she might take a moment to breathe, but she started moving immediately.

She quickly tried to grab not my left wrist, but further down.

I guess she wanted to test my instincts before she said anything else.

However, by skillfully adjusting myself and pulling my arm, I forced her to grab my wrist.

“Kuh...!”

Instead of grabbing me, she ended up being grabbed herself. Even if Horikita recognized this, she had already started the motion and couldn't stop halfway. Even though she understood in her head that it was a disadvantageous position, she moved in the exact same way Ibuki did.

Instead of letting her latch onto where she aimed, I forced her to take hold of what she didn't want to.

The human mind is a strange thing, and even if you knew you shouldn't grab it, your brain would still judge it would be better than to not do so.

It was because she hadn't accumulated the experience that not grabbing could turn the situation to her advantage.

“So the pattern I was caught in was the same as just now.. ”

“That's right.”

“. .I wasn’t going to let the same thing happen to me, but before I knew it, I was forcibly taken.. ”

While oozing frustration, Horikita's eyes stared at me intensely.

“This is the difference in ability between us and Amasawa-san right now, isn't it?”

“Yeah. At least, unless you can make me break the rules I set for myself, I don’t see any chance of winning.”

Whether to drive me out of the circle or make me use my right arm.

Challenging for revenge without achieving either of those would only be laughable.

“Are you convinced now? How reckless it is to fight Amasawa one-on-one?” Horikita was still keeping her expression in check, but Ibuki

was clearly showing her frustration.

Let's assume that she's stopped boasting about defeating her and made some progress in understanding her situation.

"How much is it…?"

"What do you mean?"

"The difference between me and Amasawa. Can't you tell me in a way that's easier for me to understand, like with numbers?"

RoyalMTLs



Indeed, just having a vague feeling of it might not be enough to maintain future motivation.

"If we talk about physical ability, if we treat you two as equals and give you a score of 50, then Amasawa would be 60, so a difference of about 10."

When I answered like that, both of them looked at each other, perhaps surprised that the difference was less than they thought.

"However, if we include technical skills, it's a different story. You two focus on one style of martial arts, while Amasawa focuses on a wider variety of them.

Taking that into account, the difference becomes even bigger."

I used numbers as a rough estimate, but this was just a guideline.

The outcome could change due to the conditions of the day, unpredictable events, misreading, and luck. But the greater the skill

difference, the more trials would be needed.

“From now on, you two will fight me at the same time.”

“I don't like it.”

“I agree with you, Ibuki-san. But you understand why it's necessary, don't you?” “I'll definitely make him use both hands. Okay?”

“I wonder about that. I think it's easier to drive him out of the circle, don't you?” “I don't care. You should adapt to me.”

They started arguing about how to fight before they even started.

Horikita and Ibuki were like oil and water. They probably didn't have any intention of cooperating from the very start.

For now, I'd let them do as they pleased without mentioning it.

“We can't adjust to each other. Fine, let's attack as we please.”

“I agree.”

It seemed they weren’t going to compromise, but rather attack at the same time, each doing their own thing.

RoyalMTLs

105

1

“Shall we stop here?”

Both of them were greatly exhausted, partly because they were forced to fight as an unfamiliar pair. When I called it a day, they both sat down at about the same time.

“Even if we do this for another day, it won't make much difference, but it should be somewhat better.”

If they had challenged Amasawa for revenge without receiving any guidance, they wouldn't have any hopes of winning.

“How did you become so strong.. ?”

“I've been learning martial arts since I was little. That's all there is to it.”

“I've been doing the same. I've been trying not to lose to those around me, with karate as my main focus.”

Maybe I was a little too harsh. *Did I damage Horikita's confidence?* It seemed to have been backed by her experience.

I was thinking of inserting some mental care in a hurry, but it seemed that there was no need to worry about that.

“But I've decided to think of you as an exception. The fact that my brother recognized you is now a great source of support for me.”

“Hmm...”

Unlike Horikita, Ibuki, who was still grumbling, stood up and turned her back away.

“I'll definitely make you use both hands tomorrow.”

Leaving those words behind, she stomped on the ground and returned to the camp. “She really is a sore loser.”

It wasn’t a bad thing, but it was a shame that her vision was narrowed because of it.

I wasn’t sure if she was able to absorb all the moves and fighting styles.

“It's okay. I'll have a talk with her later and review today's experience. Even if I have to force it upon her.”

That was reassuring.

I walked back to the camp with Horikita.

“I didn't think you would cooperate so much. I thought you would hold back more, or stay within a safe range. .”

There were several reasons stacked up, but the main reason for not revealing too much of my hand was that I had judged it to be too harsh for the future Horikita.

RoyalMTLs

“Sometimes I do charity work.”

“It's suspicious. I can't help but suspect there's something behind it.”

“There's no choice but to be prepared for when it happens.”

When I said that, with deliberate implications, Horikita narrowed her eyes in disbelief.

“Right. Let's be patient with each other.”

After she accepted it, I parted ways with Horikita in front of the building and decided to return to my room separately.

It would be better if Amasawa didn't know that I was teaching them.

And by the time I returned to my shared room, it was just before seven o'clock.

It was just then when Hashimoto was waking up and sitting in his bed.

As we were quietly conversing, the first-year students were also waking up from their shallow sleep, and soon after, everyone in the shared room woke up.

“Alright. Then I'll leave for the morning bath. What about you guys?”

I decided to join Hashimoto and enjoy the bath.

“Oh, is Ayanokōji-senpai going too!?”

“That's the plan—”

“Yanagi, Kobayashi, Kozumi, let's go too!”

“Huh? No, we. .”

“Just come! Ayanokōji-senpai is calling for us!”

No, I'm not calling for anyone at all.

I would appreciate it if you didn't say anything that could be misunderstood as power harassment.

RoyalMTLs

107



2

After we finished bathing, Kiryūin’s group, at Hashimoto's command, gathered all the remaining members, including the girls.

Then, during breakfast, we exchanged ideas about today's exchange meeting.

That being said, more than half of the conversation was from Hashimoto, and the rest were little bits from the other students.

“I don't really understand, but the boys’ unusual excitement.. it's creepy.”

Morishita, who was whispering next to me, spewed venom.

“Really? I thought it was kind of cute.”

Hiyori's remark seemed to neutralize it.

Having heard the conflicting comment of calling it cute, Morishita stared at the first-year boys again.

Regardless of whether they were cute or not, it was true that they were unusually excited. They were mostly shrinking in front of their senpais when they gathered as a group yesterday, but that had completely disappeared.

Rather, they were making incomprehensible gestures with their hands and even bursting into laughter.

“Is it cute?”

“I think it's cute.”

“I'm sorry, but it's still creepy. Shiina Hiyori is strange.”

“Is that so?”

Watching such an exchange nearby, I felt that Hiyori had changed a lot since we met.

She used to be a student who didn't show her heart and was less emotional.

No, rather than saying that her personality had changed from the bottom up, it might’ve been more accurate to say that she started to reveal her true self.

“Ayanokōji-kun, is something wrong?”

Because I was unreservedly observing her, Hiyori noticed my gaze.

“It's nothing. Don't worry about it.”

“Is that so?” She tilted her head slightly but showed a smile without suspecting anything.

“Ayanokōji-senpai! Can I join you in the bath again tonight!?”

“Huh? Oh, I don't mind at all.”

While feeling a strange pressure, given that it wasn’t a bother, I agreed.

Then, just with that, the first-year students bubbled up again.

“In less than a day, you've tamed the first-year students so well. What kind of magic did you use?”

Kiryūin, who had finished her meal early, leaned on the table and muttered with interest.

“Honestly, I'm also confused. I haven't done anything special.”

“Do you intend to hide it from me too?”

It seemed that she thought I was keeping a secret, but in reality, I didn't understand.

“Do you not get why your kōhais respect you?”

Hashimoto, who had been eavesdropping on our conversation, chimed in.

“I might not understand it myself, but there's a part of me that admires you—or rather, fears you.”

“Fear?”

Fear was the feeling of terror towards someone with overwhelming power.

Though, I don't remember using any form of intimidation like Ryūen or Hōsen..

“I was surprised too. You're really a man among men.. It's not surprising that the first-years would act this way once they found out about ‘that.’”

“Huh? I don't quite understand, but it sounds very interesting. What is

‘that’?”

“Sorry, but it's a secret between men. I can't tell you about it.”

“Hmm, a secret between men. That's not so bad.”

For some reason, Kiryūin seemed satisfied with that explanation and stood up from her chair.

As she was about to pick up her empty tray, Hashimoto stopped her.

“We'll clean up. You don't have to worry about it, Senpai.”

“I appreciate the thought, but I can clean up after myself. Let's meet again at the next exchange meeting.”

With that, she picked up her tray and walked towards the return counter.

“Whether it's easy or hard to deal with, she's a difficult senpai to understand.”

Hashimoto voiced his thoughts on the departing Kiryūin.

In terms of choosing the right person to match his description, he was right.

RoyalMTLs

109



3

“Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun.”

After finishing my meal and passing through the lobby, I found Sakayanagi sitting alone on a sofa.

“Good morning. You look a bit sleepy.”

She seemed to be a bit out of it, so I probed her. She nodded without denying it.

“Yes. It seems I'm not good at sharing a room, so I couldn't sleep well. I decided to take a short break after I had a light meal.”

Even if she wasn't exactly dozing off, closing her eyes might’ve had some effect. “I see. There's no guarantee that you'll be able to relax even if you return to your shared room.”

“Usually, I get eight hours of sleep a day. It seems I'll struggle for a few days.” Considering her personality, it was possible that she slept exactly eight hours. “Did you get along with your group members?”

“I don't think there's a need to get used to them, but I'm in charge of Class A.

Without me doing anything, they approach me, so I’m not having trouble getting into conversations with them.”

It seemed she wasn't having any problems in that regard, so that was good.

“How about you? Are you having any problems with sharing a room with unfamiliar people?”

“Well, I’m having a good time.”

“Ayanokōji-kun, you're in the same group as Hashimoto-kun and Morishita-san. How is Hashimoto-kun doing?”

“He's acting as usual, but he seemed to be scared of something.”

“Speaking of him, there's a strange rumor going around. Something about him betraying the class. I'd appreciate it if you could warn him to be careful.”

“I don't think a warning would help.”

“Hehe.”

Sakayanagi laughed a little, but she didn't seem as confident or relaxed as usual. “Are you getting along with your group?”

“This isn't a special exam, just an exchange meeting, so I'm not doing anything special.”

RoyalMTLs



“That's a bit different from the information I got. Hashimoto said you'd aim to win in any way.”

“You're not usually one to take things at face value, Ayanokōji-kun. It's probably just one of the excuses he used to have you scout me.”

Hashimoto's statement might have been a bit exaggerated, but it wasn't completely off the mark.

“Certainly, right after Masumi-san left, there was unexpected damage. You know that too, Ayanokōji-kun. But, I won't dwell on it for long.”

Sakayanagi answered with such composure.

“If there's a reason why I didn't do anything at this exchange meeting, it might be because I'm focusing on identifying someone who can become my new hands and feet.”

Indeed, Kamuro had been a significant presence as an assistant until recently.

It was certain that her absence would make it difficult to move.

“The person I keep close to me must be someone I can trust as much as possible.”

“What about Kitō?”

“His loyalty is unmatched in the class, but naturally, I’m reluctant to involve someone of the opposite sex. Yet, even among the girls, no suitable candidate has emerged.”

The only girls in Class A that I interacted with were Yamamura and Morishita. Both of them had their strengths, but they weren't suitable for taking care of Sakayanagi.

"Have you decided on a successor?"

"Not yet. So I'm expecting to be on my own for a while. I am prepared to accept this as a consequence of my own misjudgment."

It seemed more like she wasn't seriously looking for a replacement, rather than that she couldn't find one.

It might've been an exaggeration to call it a punishment for losing Kamuro, but she seemed to be choosing to live a life of inconvenience for a while.

That was also Sakayanagi's choice, but there was another problem that needed to be resolved.

Suddenly, I felt a presence behind me and turned around to see Kitō

approaching with a scary (as usual?) look on his face.

"Good morning."

". .There doesn't seem to be any problems."

Ignoring my greeting, Kitō spoke those words to Sakayanagi.

"There is no problem at all. Thank you for your concern."

Watching their exchange, I understood that Kitō had approached Sakayanagi out of concern for her.

At a time when she was unstable after losing Kamuro, not only would it be reasonable to be sensitive to contact from Hashimoto, but from foreign existences outside the class as well.

“Don't take it the wrong way, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“I understand. It's probably best to be suspicious right now.”

“Good morning!”

As I was confronting Sakayanagi and Kitō, Amasawa slid into the gap between us.

“Good morning, Amasawa-san. You seem to be in good spirits this morning.”

“Being energetic is one of my strengths, you know.”

Kitō stepped back from Sakayanagi a bit, but kept his mouth shut so as not to interrupt the conversation.

“I thought I'd give you a little encouragement before the second day of the exchange meeting starts. It seems like Ayanokōji-senpai has been winning all along, but.. you lost three times on the first day, Arisu-senpai. I'm worried that you might be in a pinch already.”

“Unfortunately, I am not in command this time. I have left it all to the third-year.” “Hmm? So if you lose, it can't be helped? I was hoping for a little bit of interaction with other years this time, as it's a valuable opportunity.”

“There's no need to set limitations within constraints. If you wish to challenge me, I am always ready to accept, so please rest assured.”

Ignoring the exchange meeting, Sakayanagi conveyed that she was ready to take on any challenge at any time.

However, upon hearing this, Amasawa laughed it off instead of getting excited.

“You're bluffing. I've heard that you lost in the previous special exam and ended up at the bottom.”

She seemed to have thoroughly collected information about the second-year students and confronted Sakayanagi without hesitation.

And then, the moment Amasawa tried to touch Sakayanagi as if to tease her, Kitō grabbed her wrist mercilessly, demonstrating his role as a shield.

“What are you doing, Kitō-senpai? Isn't this something you should do to Ryūen-senpai or someone?”

She portrayed herself as a weak woman, but Kitō didn’t loosen his grip.

“Whether it's Ryūen or anyone else, I'll act if necessary. Of course, I won't choose the means to do so. Be prepared for that.”

Kitō made such a statement against Amasawa, who was smiling but showing hostility.

“You're like a knight protecting a princess, but it's interesting. I don't mind even if you're violent against a girl.. Maybe I went too far with my joke.”

Amasawa apologized, indicating that she had no real intention of doing anything. As soon as Kitō loosened his grip, she backed away.

“I'll play with you again next time. Please be ready to give it your all, Arisu-senpai!”

Amasawa hopped away, turning around and waving her hand several times.

“The calm atmosphere has been ruined.”

“Maybe so.”

After a little bit of that exchange, I decided to leave.

I didn't want to draw unnecessary attention to Sakayanagi by hanging around too much.



Chapter 5:

The Watcher, The Watched

THE SECOND DAY of the exchange meeting began at 9 a.m.

Today and tomorrow, given that students had to complete seven games each day, those who were ordered to participate in as many games as possible by the leader would have a slightly busier time.

However, what they had to do was no different from the previous day.

When the time came, they followed the delivered instructions, met up with the opposing group, and played the game.

On the other hand, those who didn’t participate were free to do whatever they wanted during their free time.

Students with a high chance of winning should probably just go through the experiential learning and make sure to collect the stamps to receive the reward.

The sixth game was 'Sculpture Experience.'

It was a full-fledged activity where you could use professional tools to carve a stone, which was obviously different from what you would do in a school art class. It was truly an exciting experiential learning activity.

For me, who was determined to participate in all the games, I didn't have much time to have an experience on my own. So, there were still many things left to learn that I hadn’t experienced yet.

If I could, I would’ve liked to stay there for a week or two, not just these three days.

I was lost in thought as I looked at the uncarved stones and tools prepared for the students.

However, the two groups that had gathered were not interested in the raw stones of the works—that were full of charm—but were busy chatting about this and that.

For ordinary students, this experiential learning is just a part of their school life... Well, it was easier for us to do it if it was a bit more relaxed, right?

If a specific person continued to participate in the game consecutively, it would seem to stand out a bit, but it didn't attract attention at all.

This was because experiential learning was always taking place here and there, and the school didn't disclose information as to who the participants of each group were.

Since there were no students who were eager to gather information, no one cared whether I won or lost.

RoyalMTLs

Even if I participated in all 19 games, the only one who would know this fact would probably be Nagumo's group, who never missed a chance to scout individual performances.

"It seems that your group had a good start with five consecutive wins yesterday, Ayanokōji-kun."

Kushida said while she approached me. She was assigned to the first opposing group of the day.

“It’s just that the first-year students are doing their best. You also have four wins, so it seems you're doing well too.”

I found out that the only game they lost was against Nagumo’s group, who were among the top contenders for first place.

“We decided not to worry about winning or losing. But that's because we decided to do our best and enjoy ourselves. But everyone just wanted to take it easy and kept asking me for favors. This is my sixth consecutive participation.”

After saying that, she revealed her true feelings without breaking her smile.

“It's really stupid. Experiential learning is so lame. I wish this training camp would end soon.”

“What you say and what you do are completely opposite.”

It was impressive that she could spit venom without moving her facial muscles much.

“I just do it because I don't want to lose out if I don't put on a good face.

Honestly, I don’t think we need to take this exchange meeting seriously. There are people's eyes everywhere, in the shared room, in the large bath, at meals, and I don't have time to relax.”

She seemingly wanted to be sent home as soon as possible, not needing any rewards or anything.

It appeared that she felt extreme stress from having to act like a good girl in an environment that was smaller than school.

“Don't let the stress build up and explode.”

“I think I'm okay for now. Lately, I've been able to let off steam by dealing with those two.”

It went without saying that ‘those two’ referred to Horikita and Ibuki.

“It seems you lost to that Horikita group.”

“Since sincerity is their only merit, isn't it because they’re working on various things with a straight face? Yesterday, Katsuragi-kun seemed to be immersed in practicing glasswork because he couldn't do it well, and he lined up many times.”

When it came to making things in experiential learning, many people couldn’t participate at once due to the number of instructors, equipment, and other RoyalMTLs

problems. If it overlapped with the game time of the exchange meeting, they could hardly use the free participation slots, and a waiting line was inevitably formed.

“Nagumo is determined to win, and his members are serious, so he won't hold back.”

“Do you think they will win as expected?”

“If we don't take action, there's a high chance of that happening.”

When I answered, Kushida asked back with a curious look.

“But, even if you say 'take action,' all we can do is practice and hope that the game we can perform well in is chosen, right? Maybe the leader can choose the right person, but.. ”

“There are various other ways to increase your winning percentage to become a first-place candidate. For example, you could buy off the opposing group and have them give us the win. If you ask with a certain amount of money and sincerity, there should be plenty of room for negotiation, right?”

Of course, efficiency was another matter.

It was just one example of a way to increase the chance of winning.

Kushida imagined a scene where she was approached by an opponent for consultation.

“Indeed, if they give me 10,000 points, I have less reason to refuse, and I would be happy to give them the win. But if I keep doing that, won't I be in the red?” Of course, it depended on how much you negotiated with them. If you gave 10,000 points to five opponents, it would be 50,000 points, but you could also use a bribe to the leader to settle it for 20,000 or 30,000 points.

However, the reason such a strategy was unlikely to spread was that there was little incentive in this exchange meeting.

Even if the Kiryūin group could win 16 or 17 games in a row by repeatedly buying off their opponents, groups like Nagumo, who were determined to win first place, would naturally reject being bought off, and we would have to clash head-on. As a result, if they ended up in second or third place, they may not even be able to recover the money they used for the bribery.

“So that's why no one does it. It's not profitable.”

The only one who wanted the title of victor regardless of profit and loss was probably Nagumo.

“Is there a way to do it without spending money?”

“It requires effort and isn't flashy, but there's also a method that involves sealing off some experiential learning activities and not letting your rivals practice.

Popular activities, as you said, form a line.”

Surrounding the students of the rival group and repeatedly delaying them was also effective.

RoyalMTLs

“It sounds like something Ryūen-kun would happily use.”

“Yeah, but the reason there's no such movement happening at the moment is because it causes the same problems as bribing does.”

“So it's not worth it, and the risk doesn’t match the reward, right?”

“That's right.”

An instructor in overalls appeared and instructed the students to gather.

“I'm rooting for your group, by the way. I'd be happy if you could let Horikita-san taste defeat.”

Even though they were now on friendly terms, she still wanted Horikita and Ibuki to lose.

That was probably why the relationship between the three of them was miraculously balanced.

“Does that mean you're going to give us the win in this game?”

“I wonder about that.”

She had a cute smile on her face, but she didn't seem to be going easy on us.

Still, the result of the game with Kushida's group was a 3-2 victory for our group. Thanks to my passion for artistic activities, which other students didn't have, I was able to win.

After that, the games of the exchange meeting continued solemnly without any flashy movements, both in the morning and in the afternoon.

[Trump]

(TL NOTE: Trump refers to the card game category.) In the seventh game since the first day, it was the first battle where luck played a big part. As a result, the whole group, including me, suffered a spectacular defeat and recorded our first loss. This meant that I could only afford to lose one more game. However, among the rather modest exchange meeting, the card games brought quite a bit of excitement, and many students were enjoying it much more than the six games we’d played so far.

[Chalk Art]

Drawing pictures on a reasonably sized blackboard with chalk. The fact that we weren't drawing original works, but copying made it surprisingly easy to tackle.

Chalk was a bit different from colored pencils and crayons, which we usually used to decorate with color.

While I struggled with the unique texture, it was also a moment when I touched a new world of art.

As a result of competing for the quality of the copies, I was able to win in the individual competition, and as a group, we were able to

win 3-2.

[Miniature Golf]

RoyalMTLs

117



From the indoor exchange meeting in the morning, we went outside on a small golf course for experience.

Before the start, there were many male volunteers, and taking all that into consideration, the leader's choice led to a slightly unusual situation where all the participants were male. Furthermore, everyone was inexperienced in this game.

Whether this level playing field worked against us or not, the game was just as exciting as the trump card, if not more. Although I won in the individual competition, the other four lost by a small margin, resulting in our second group loss. **[Patchwork]**

It was a word you might not hear often. Patchwork was a type of handicraft where small pieces of cloth were connected to make a large sheet. How much could be completed within the time limit, and the design, etc., were evaluated. The opponent who appeared here was the Tatebayashi group, which had a dispute on the first day due to Kōenji's selfish behavior. Their record so far was one win and nine losses.

All five participants were girls and experienced sewers, a formidable enemy.

Moreover, the misfortune of colliding with Inogashira, who excelled among the experienced sewers, resulted in my second individual loss. The group also suffered its third loss.

[Archery]

The 11th game, where we wanted to avoid consecutive losses, was another outdoor sport.

Even if you hadn't done it before, you could probably imagine the rules. It's a competition using a type of archery called recurve, where we aimed at a target one-on-one. Normally in recurve archery, you shoot an arrow at a target 70 meters away, but in this experiential learning, it was set at 20 meters. Each person was given six arrows, and the total points were competed for. The center of the target was ten points and the outermost part was one point.

Morishita, who volunteered to participate, entered the game but was unable to handle it well and couldn't hit the target even once, a slight accident, but both the group and I were successful in avoiding consecutive losses.

[Glasswork]

The last match of the second day was glasswork. This facility had a large workshop prepared, and the items made could be taken home, making it a popular experiential learning activity among the students. The opponent didn't care much about winning and had a low win rate, and each person made what they wanted to make, so I was able to win in the judging for the individual competition in terms of completion and speed.



On the other hand, in the group competition, Hiyori showed her skill once again and contributed to the victory.

At the end of the second day, the halfway point of the competition, the total group results of the exchange meeting were twelve games, nine wins, and three losses.

RoyalMTLs

119



1

It was just before 6 p.m., a time to relax after the exchange meeting.

The rest area inside the building was a bit crowded.

This was because a free drink corner had been placed so the tired students could relax. There were several types of tea and juice, and there was a row of small paper cups, stacked upside down.

"Your group seems to be doing quite well."

Sanada said as I ran into him. We stopped by the rest area at almost the same time. Kiryūin's group was tied for sixth place with nine wins and three losses.

Depending on tomorrow's results, it was possible to aim for the podium.

"I have reliable allies helping."

I distinctly recognized how good at detailed work Hiyori was.

Her ability to handle things like *oshibana* and glasswork was far higher than that of an average student, which required not only technical skills but also aesthetic sense.

This was something I would never have noticed if I hadn't spent time with her in experiential learning.

“How are the students of Class A? Are they cooperating well?”

He asked hesitantly, seemingly concerned about his classmates.

“Hashimoto hasn't participated in any activities yet. He's in more of a support role. Yamamura is participating in the matches, and her honesty is helpful.”

However, Yamamura had seemed listless lately, but I didn't mention that.

When I talked positively about them, Sanada listened with joy as if it were about himself.

“Then there's Morishita. . Well, cooperative. . no, creative, I guess.”

“Creative. That might be true.”

Morishita, in contrast to Hiyori, was not dexterous with her hands, but rather clumsy.

I think she's seriously trying, but she's not producing results. There might be something artistic about her ability to create bizarre things.

Even her attempt at archery was terrible.

While talking, the two of us stood in a short line, and I took a paper cup and poured tea into it. Sanada seemed to have chosen hot coffee.

“I see. Honestly, I'm glad that the three of them are in the same group as you this time.”

RoyalMTLs

There might be some elements of courtesy in his words, but something about Sanada's statement bothered me.

“Why do you think so? There should be many others who are more approachable.”

Even if we limited it to Horikita's class, Yōsuke and Kushida would be much more capable.

“Well, it's largely because of how Sakayanagi-san sees it. Even I can tell that she treats you in a special way. After the last exam, Kitō-kun has been on edge, but I think he's still able to keep his self-control in check because you’re by Hashimoto-kun's side.”

For Hashimoto, it had been a series of unexpected good luck since the day he came to my room.

“Are all three of them blending well into the group? I think Hashimoto-kun will be fine, but I don't think Morishita-san and Yamamura-san will.”

“I wonder. I'm honestly leaving the girls to the other girls.. Are you worried?”

Does he specifically have concerns about the two of them, or is he just worried about his classmates?

Both have distinct personalities, so it wouldn't be surprising.

“Actually, I've been watching over Morishita-san quite a bit since our first-year.” “If Miya heard that, she might cry.”

“Eh, what? No, not at all. I only have eyes for Miya-san!”

Sanada, who was usually calm, hastily corrected himself.

His reaction strongly conveyed his desire to not be misunderstood.

“Part of it is because we sat near each other in our first-year. . She's the type to say everything she thinks and doesn't shy away from anything, so she's had her fair share of small troubles.”

Indeed, she had recently made several remarks that had taken Hashimoto aback. “She seems to be an outsider in the class.”

“Yes.. It's a bad way to put it, but she is perceived that way.”

It wasn’t like Ichinose's class, where everyone was friendly. There were people you liked and people you didn't. It was normal to show it in your everyday attitude.

“I'm not familiar with the situation, but Morishita doesn't care, does she?”

If Morishita enjoyed being alone, it wasn’t for others to judge.

That was probably why Sanada said he had been watching over her.

“Yes, well I've never seen her seem to care. .”



“I don't think you need to worry so much. But I understand what you want to say, Sanada. I'll keep an eye on her for the upcoming day and a half we're in the group.” “..Yes. Thank you.”

Sanada took a sip of the hot coffee he had poured into his cup, lightly cooling it with a gentle blow.

He seemed to finally be able to relax.

“Sanada-senpai!”

While we were resting shoulder to shoulder, a girl from class 1-B, Miya, spotted Sanada and ran over.

Realizing that I was talking to Sanada, she hastily bowed.

“I'll be in the way, so I'll go back to my room. See you later, Sanada.”

“Yes, see you later.”

They haven't been together for long, but they seem to be getting along very well. They could always be together in the brass band club, and they must’ve been having a lot of fun together as students.

It’d be wise to leave quickly before causing any unnecessary trouble.

RoyalMTLs

2

After dinner, most students were relaxing in their rooms or baths.

Tokitō quietly left the shared room upon receiving a phone call from Ishizaki.

Hōsen Kazuomi, the most problematic first-year student, was in Tokitō’s group. However, Tokitō didn't see Hōsen's existence as a problem and even criticized his arrogant attitude.

He wasn’t particularly exceptional in fighting, intelligence, or talking.

The only reason Tokitō could stand without fear was because of his rebellious spirit that he maintained under Ryūen's control. It was undoubtedly thanks to that two-year experience.

The area where the experiential classes gathered, their destination, was already deserted and quiet.

The place where Ishizaki called him was in front of the pottery class.

When he peered in through the window in the hallway, he saw a line of student-made works.

The pottery and other items made here, like the glasswork experience, could be shipped to your home after they were fired if you wished, this includes his work in the 'painting' activity that Tokitō participated in during this morning's game.

(TL NOTE: In order for clay to dry and harden, it has to be exposed to high temperatures, typically within a kiln. This process is called "firing.")

". .You call someone out, yet you're not here."

He was about to take out his phone from his jersey pocket in irritation. That was when it happened.

"Hey, sorry to keep you waiting."

"What do you want, Ishizaki?"

Tokitō, irritated by the leisurely approaching Ishizaki, called out to him, but Ishizaki walked up without answering his question.

"Don't you know what I want?"

"How would I know.. You didn't write anything specific."

The message he received only suggested urgency, saying 'Come quickly.'

“Well, I guess you wouldn't know. To be honest, I don't even know what I want.” It was strange that Ishizaki, who had called him, didn't know about it.

“You don't know? I don't understand at all—”

Just as he was about to voice his dissatisfaction, Tokitō felt a strong pressure on his back.

RoyalMTLs



And immediately after, he realized that he had been forcefully pushed against the wall.

“Hey. What the hell do you think you're doing?”

A devil whispered in his ear with a laugh.

“Ryūen.. !? What do you mean? What.. what are you doing!”

Surprised, but managing to keep his shock to a minimum, he turned his gaze behind him.

“I thought you needed more discipline, so I made a surprise appearance.”

Held down forcefully, Tokitō couldn't escape.

Even if he could momentarily break free from his restraint, he knew that Ishizaki, who was watching nearby, would come to help.

“I don't.. understand.. ”

His arm was tightened to the limit and the pain crept up to his back.

“Do you really not understand?”

There was one thing he actually remembered, but he couldn't say it and played dumb.

“I didn't do anything. .”

“Really? I've got a report from my underlings about you.”

“W-what? W-what is that!? What are you talking about!?”

He insisted that he didn't understand, but his heart was palpitating in his chest from his anxiety.

He hoped that what he had sensed had nothing to do with him, but that hope was shattered immediately after.

“Since coming to the training camp, I've received four reports that you've been trying to get along with Sakayanagi.”

When the name Sakayanagi came up, Tokitō gave up on playing dumb.

“I just happened to meet her, and we just chatted. I don't understand what's wrong with that.. !”

“That’s possible, but unfortunately, I don’t believe it.”

Considering how frequently they spoke—people who weren't even in the same group—it was hard to pretend it was just a coincidence.

“And you don't know what's wrong? That's a funny story.”

“Ugh...”

Tokitō averted his gaze, having his pretense seen through.

Ryūen pursued him, forcing eye contact as he brought his face closer.

“She's on the decline now. She'll fall and be done by the next end-of-year exam. That's why I told you not to carelessly intervene, didn't I?”

Ryūen had particularly warned Kondō and Jima, who were in the same group as Sakayanagi when they were announced on the bus. There was no way Tokitō hadn't heard the warning in the silent bus.

RoyalMTLs





“So does a casual conversation.. require an intervention or something?”

“It doesn’t. And I told you this before too, right? Either ignore Sakayanagi or, if possible, inflict psychological damage and corner her thoroughly. Did you interpret that as some sort of light-hearted chat, Ishizaki?”

“Absolutely not!”

“That's right, isn't it? You, someone smarter than Ishizaki, should have understood.”

In reality, Tokitō did the exact opposite.

Reports had come in that he was often seen caring for and supporting Sakayanagi, not just having casual conversations.

“You even told Isoyama, who saw you talking, to keep quiet, didn't you?

You should’ve known whose order he’d follow, mine or yours.”

Ishizaki, who was listening nearby, aggressively nodded several times.

“Learn your lesson, Tokitō. It'll make things easier for you. Even Ryūen-san will forgive you.”

If he pledged obedience here, he would at least be released from constraint.

But Tokitō bit his lip hard and glared at Ryūen while trying to shake him off.

“I... I just...”

“Just what?”

With no point in hiding anything anymore, and feeling foolish for trying, Tokitō spat out his agitated words.

“I just wanted to comfort Sakayanagi, who was sad about her friend being expelled…!”

“Huh. You want to fuck Sakayanagi that bad?”

(TL NOTE : (楽) While not inherently sexual in any way, Ryūen purposely interpreted ‘comfort’ as a double entendre. The word ‘Fuck’ is not a mistranslation. See (犯る .))

“No, that's not it! It's not like that!”

“Is that so? It sounds like that to me.”

Ryūen, laughing, continued his words.

“Should I set up a stage for you to assault her then? Even that composed woman will be torn apart physically and mentally if you fuck her.”

At such a devilish whisper, Tokitō's anger shot through the roof in an instant. With a sudden increase in strength, he broke free from Ryūen's restraint.

“Don't mess with me!”

Driven by his enraged emotions, he tried to grab Ryūen with both hands, but his laughing figure disappeared from his sight. He

received a kick flying up from below, gritted his teeth, and was restrained again.

RoyalMTLs

126



“Hehehe, don't take it seriously. But if you're up for it, I could let you take on the role to corner Sakayanagi.”

“. .I won't obey you.. I'll never accept this.. !”

He refused to yield to the threat and seemed to have expressed his intention to continue his treatment of Sakayanagi.

Recognizing that his spirit and determination were genuine, Ryūen didn’t stop his harsh treatment.

“Then shall I make you understand with your body?”

“Don't mess with me, you can't—”

Before Tokitō could finish speaking, Ryūen clenched his left fist and rammed it into Tokitō's abdomen without hesitation.

“Ugh...!”

With an agonizing yelp from the unfamiliar intense pain, Tokitō's knees buckled.

However, Ryūen's grip on him didn’t allow him to rest on the ground.

“There are no school surveillance cameras here. Right, Ishizaki?”

“Yes! I've confirmed that there are none in this area!”

“To think you'd obey such a guy.. !”

Tokitō condemned, irritated by Ishizaki's attitude.

“I understand what you want to say, Tokitō. I've been rampaging with full control of the class, but I once gave up that position. You must have felt good then, right?” “Yeah.. I felt like I'd driven out the naked king..!”

(TL NOTE: (裸の王) From The Emperor's New Clothes, refers to someone in a position of power being in denial or unaware of their own flaws or mistakes, while others are too afraid to point them out.) At Tokitō's merciless comment, Ishizaki put his hand to his forehead, as if saying ‘Oh dear.’

If you said something disrespectful, you'd be purged. That was the norm, and it was ingrained in his body.

However, Ryūen opened his eyes in amusement rather than inflicting any more physical pain.

“That's too bad. After all, I'm back in my former position and doing whatever I want. It must be frustrating.”

He looked at himself objectively, without a need to think about how he was perceived by the people below him.

That being said, Ryūen didn't change his attitude.

“Do you hate me?”

“I hate you... to death...”

“Then don't hold back. Show me you can take me down by force. I won't run or hide. But if you raise your fist, I'll corner you no matter what. The only way out is expulsion. Be prepared for that.”

Everyone, not just Tokitō, understood well that Ryūen wasn’t afraid of defeat. That was why they would only rise in revolt if they were absolutely determined to overthrow him.

“Got it? This is my advice. If you understand, don't ever help Sakayanagi again.” Despite the pain in his restrained arm, he gently told him that he could still turn back.

“What if. . I disobey.. your order. .?”

Ryūen pleasantly smiled at Tokitō's question, which didn't need to be asked.

“I'll crush you. Simple as that.”

The same would happen even if he didn't raise his fist.

He’d relentlessly attack those who didn’t obey.

“...!”

Despite being threatened, Tokitō continued to glare at Ryūen without losing his rebellious spirit.

“That's good, Tokitō. I find that part of you interesting. So let's see how long you can keep that look in your eyes.”

While looking down at his aching arm, in this inescapable situation, he made up his mind immediately.

“You can rest assured knowing that I won't let Ishizaki lay a hand on you.”

Ryūen, who gave Tokitō the time to catch his breath and the right to strike first, took a step back and widened his arms.

“I'll do it.. I won't lose. . to someone like you.. ”

He reassured himself and rubbed his fists together.

There was a significant gap in their combat abilities.

But he was prepared to go all out and punch Ryūen in the face at least once.

If he was prepared for the backlash, he should be able to do it.

Just as he was about to make up his mind, an unexpected person appeared.

“I came looking for *Paisen*. I sent him on an errand, but he didn't come back, and what do I find here?”

(TL NOTE: (パイセン) Paisen, a disrespectful/slang way of saying senpai, derived from switching sen and pai.)

The one who appeared on the scene, hand on his neck, was Hōsen from Class 1-D.

He had a long-standing relationship with Ryūen since middle school.

“What's going on, Tokitō-paisen?”



“. .It's nothing.. ”

Although they were in the same group, Tokitō couldn't cry to his first-year kōhai. But there was no way nothing was going on when he was confronting Ryūen with his fist clenched. He had pride as a senpai who couldn't cry to his kōhai in the first-year, but this was also a problem within the class. He didn’t want to cause any trouble to his group because of this.

“Get lost. You're in the way.”

Ryūen tried to shoo him away with a light wave of his hand, saying it would spoil the mood.

“If there's nothing going on, go buy us first-years some drinks right away.”

Hōsen, for his part, ignored Ryūen and spoke to Tokitō in a strong tone.

“Huh? Drinks? What on earth.. !”

Tokitō, who had been given the right to strike first, was dumbfounded and missed his opportunity. Ryūen's arm reached out again. He pressed his left forearm against his throat and slammed him against the wall.

“Ugh...!?”

Tokitō let out a scream of agony, unable to fully voice his pain.

“Back off, Hōsen. I'm not dealing with you right now.”

“I don't care about that. I'm talking to Tokitō-paisen here. You're the outsider, so back off. Or do you want to die?”

“. .Ha! You came all this way to look for him? Don't make me fall asleep.”

Ryūen suspected that someone was behind Hōsen.

“No, Hōsen has nothing to do with it.. I just told Ishizaki that I was called to this place.”

“Huh? Hey Ishizaki, what kind of message did you send?”

“Huh!? It-it was just a normal one! I just told him to hurry to the experiential classroom area, that's all!”

Ishizaki's careless mistake of not taking into account the potential risks in telling people where to go when they’re vacating the dormitory.

Seeing Ryūen smirk slightly through his nose, Ishizaki realized he had made a mistake.

“Sorry, Ryūen-san! Hey, Hōsen, you go over there!”

Ishizaki tried to make amends by grabbing Hōsen's thick right arm, but he was easily shaken off.

“Don't touch me. I'll kill you.”

“Uh...!”

Ishizaki flinched at Hōsen's intense intimidation, which was completely different from the feared Ryūen's.

Instead of leaving, Hōsen started walking towards Ryūen and Tokitō.



“It seems he wants to play. Albert, you handle this guy.”

Without making a sound, Albert appeared in front of Hōsen, blocking his way. “As always, you can't do anything without relying on your underlings.”

“Fighting isn't just about charging in alone like an idiot.”

Hōsen yawned, then immediately spat phlegm on the floor.

“I've always wanted to fight you, Albert. It might be more fun than playing table tennis.”

In the chaotic situation that was unbefitting of a training camp, Ryūen shifted his gaze from Hōsen and looked directly at Tokitō.

“Now that the nuisance is gone, let's continue the fight—”

“Excuse me, but could you let go of your hand, Ryūen-senpai?”

“Huh?”

The person who spoke up to stop Ryūen, who was about to impose further punishment, was Utomiya Riku from Class 1-C.

“What? Utomiya, you came too?”

“W-What's going on?”

The only one who was disturbed was Ishizaki.

“Huh? Oh right, you were listening to Tokitō-senpai too.”

“I came to see if you were going to raise your hand against Senpai.”

“Where are your eyes? There's no way I'm going to raise my hand.”

Despite looking at Hōsen with contempt, Utomiya walked towards Tokitō

and Ryūen.

Ishizaki tried to stop him, but he was pulled in by Hōsen's long arm, which was holding the sleeve of his jersey.

With no one to stop him, Utomiya fearlessly closed the distance and grabbed the upper arm of Ryūen, who was still holding down Tokitō.

“Tokitō-senpai is a member of my group. If he gets injured here, it could have an effect tomorrow. No matter how much it's an in-class issue, I can't overlook it.”

Without needing an explanation, Utomiya intervened to mediate the situation, sensing trouble from the tense atmosphere.

“I don't care. Don't join in the barking at this shitty exchange meeting.”

“. .The problem is the guy who's using his position to threaten others at this shitty exchange meeting. .”

Far from backing down, Utomiya increased his anger and spoke out against Ryūen. “What? Then why don't you try stopping me?”

“Are you okay with that? You'll be embarrassed in front of your friends as a senpai.”



Having given up on using polite language, Utomiya quickly prepared for a fight. “Hey, hey, hey, hey! Don't start with Ryūen on your own!”

Hōsen, opposing the development, yelled loudly throughout the corridor.

“Shut up, Hōsen. I don't need you. Don't cause unnecessary trouble.”

“Huh? What's with you? Do you know who you're talking to?”

“Even if I talk to a big gorilla, words won't get through.”

It seemed that Utomiya had come to support Tokitō, but he treated Hōsen the same way as Ryūen.

“Fine, then. I'll start with you before Albert-paisen.”

“How many times do I have to tell you? I'll take you on anytime.”

Seeing the first-years start to quarrel, Ryūen couldn't help but burst out laughing at the unfamiliar sight.

“Hehehe. This school’s getting quite noisy. I thought it was full of boring, serious people when I entered, but now, quite a few hot-blooded ones are showing their faces. I'm more than welcoming of it.”

With the addition of Hōsen and Utomiya, Ryūen released his hold on Tokitō.

He took his gaze off Tokitō, who was sitting down and coughing roughly.

“I'll take your revenge match right here, Hōsen. I'll take on you first-years all at once while I'm at it.”

Ryūen, who no longer cared about Tokitō in this situation, said.

“Sounds good. This camp is getting fun. First, disappear!”

Hōsen's powerful fist was caught by Albert's hand, and Albert's lips were tightly closed.

“Oh, you can endure it! That's how it should be!”

The situation was beginning to look like it wouldn't settle down unless it turned violent, but Hōsen's loud voice brought the situation to an abrupt end.

“What's going on? What are you guys doing?”

Several boys and girls, led by the third-years, began to appear in the experiential classroom area after hearing the commotion.

“Tsk. It was getting interesting.”

“Damn it.”

Hōsen, ignorant of being the one who raised their voice, clicked his tongue just like Ryūen.

“This isn’t a fight, is it?”

“No, it's not. We were just having a light-hearted conversation.”

Utomiya immediately went in front of the third-years and covered everything up with that claim.

Seeing how bad the situation had gotten, Ryūen and Hōsen, while glaring at each other, naturally turned their backs and kept their distance.



“Let's go, Albert, and you too, Ishizaki. I'll teach you lots later.”

“Y-Yes! Thank you!!”

The three of them ignored the two first-year students and Tokitō who were glaring at them, and left the scene.

As he was leaving, Albert looked at Hōsen's large back and muttered.

“His fighting ability may be equal to or greater than Ayanokoji. He's a tremendous freshman.”

The weight of the punch he received was as intense as Ayanokōji's, as the numbness in his hand had told him.

It was a telling statement, implying that it wasn’t a good idea to fight him.

However, Ryūen couldn't help but laugh at Albert's remark.

“Don't make me laugh. If it's just simple power, he might be able to compete with him, but if you compare their overall strength, there's no comparison. The source of Ayanokōji's strength is not so simple.”

After opening his fist and looking at his palm, Albert recalled the incident on the rooftop and agreed.

His heart remembered. He was an opponent who transcended the ordinary standards of weight.

“But Tokitō, he seemed to be quite into Sakayanagi.. Don't we need to do something? Like Hashimoto’s betrayal. .”

Ryūen had already anticipated Ishizaki's anxiety without him having to put it into words.

“Tokitō is not that stupid. We should leave it at that. We've already nailed him enough.”

“. .Yes. If you say so, Ryūen-san.”

“We'll focus on Class A. The most troublesome one right now is Kitō, not Sakayanagi. He could go berserk at any moment.”

“It feels like a war.”

“War, huh? Indeed, anything could happen from here on out.”

The end-of-year exams that will start soon.

Ryūen, who understood that turmoil would occur, began to prepare for what was to come.

RoyalMTLs

132



3

At the time, I had no way of knowing that there was a war going on between Ryūen, Tokitō, and Hōsen. After the bath, I was sitting on the sofa in the lobby, leisurely looking at the ceiling.

It was right next to the seat where Sakayanagi was sitting this morning.

The investigation Hashimoto requested—I made contact this morning and was personally satisfied with the results, but I hadn't reported anything back, so he was probably still expecting me to produce results. Even though I didn't feel like it, I thought I should at least do something that looked like it, so I came here.

“Ah~! Ayanokōji-kun! Hey, can you listen to my story~!?”

Satō, who was about to return to her shared room, changed her course when she saw me and approached with a frustrated look.

“What happened?”

“It's the exchange meeting— *the exchange meeting*. I was seriously aiming for the top, so.. ”

She didn't try to hide her disappointment, and her shoulders slumped dramatically.

“I wanted to buy something, and I tried my best in my own way. Ugh.”

Satō's group had finished 12 matches in two days, garnering seven wins and five losses.

They were doing well enough, but they were in a tough spot if they wanted to finish in third place.

“If you keep up the good work, there's a pretty good chance you'll finish in the top ten, isn't there?”

They could get 5000 points just by achieving that placement. Not a bad amount.

“Yeah, that's definitely the goal. But what worries me is that the group's motivation has dropped quite a bit because of today's results.. ”

If they were aiming for a high ranking, it was natural to feel down.

The difference between the top and bottom was extreme in this exchange meeting.

The losing groups had 11 or 12 losses in 12 games, and they just couldn't win. As a result, the wins were concentrated in groups like the Nagumo group, who were taking it seriously.

The difference between the third-place group and Satō's group was three wins. Quite a significant amount.

“The last game for today—I regret it. .”

RoyalMTLs

133

“Which was the last group you were up against?”

I asked because I didn't know which group Satō's group was fighting against.

Satō showed a slightly regretful face, but told me.

“—It was Minamikawa-senpai's group.”

She was from Class 3-C. I remember Onodera being in Minamikawa's group. It was a well-known fact that Satō and Onodera, who had been at odds to begin with, were not on good terms. If they felt they had misspoken, it seemed reasonable to assume that was the cause behind their discord.

Both Satō and Onodera were typical female students as far as I could tell.

From an outsider's perspective, it wouldn't be strange for them to get along, but that wasn’t how human relationships work.

Is she still not fond of Onodera? It would be easy to ask, but it wasn’t something I should ask.

“You have no choice but to carry that regret into tomorrow. There's still a chance depending on how hard you try.”

“...Yeah.”

After changing the topic and talking for a while, Satō was called by her group and left.

After that, without gaining anything significant, I returned to my shared room. “There's no one here.”

The room was empty except for a slightly disheveled futon.

When I turned on my phone, I found a message from Hashimoto that had arrived about ten minutes ago.

[I'm going to the girls' room, so let's meet up there.]

He was quite carefree for someone who requested an investigation.

Well, going to the opposite sex's room to play might be one of the staples of a training camp.

After restoring the trampled futon, I decided to head to the girls' room.

About five minutes after reading Hashimoto's message, I arrived at the girls'

shared room.

The same building, the same layout, the same furniture, and decorations.

It was a matter of course, but there really was no difference from the shared room the boys were using.

The only difference was the presence of the opposite sex.

Even though it's neither more nor less than our shared room, why does it look so different?

Whether you perceived this as a good or bad space was up to each individual.

RoyalMTLs

134



From the first-year students to Kiryūin in the third-year, all the girls were present.

All the first-year boys looked tense but somewhat happy.

Yamamura looked a bit down, her expression darker than usual. She had no role in this exchange meeting, and I knew the least about how she was spending her time in the group.

“Hey, you came.”

“You called me.”

The boys seemed to be having more fun than I thought.

But the girls' energy was lower than I thought it’d be. In other words, they didn't seem to be having fun.

Those two pieces of information entered my brain in an instant.

Hashimoto probably brought the boys to the girls' room to play, somewhat forcibly.

“We're a bit stuck. Do you have anything to liven things up? The room's atmosphere is a bit heavy, isn't it? How about a one-liner to dispel that?”

“I don't have such a gag, but how about this for a bit of fun?”

I took out a certain case that I had stuffed in my jersey pocket and showed it to him. “Oh, that's nice. You're quite thoughtful.”

Since the game list for experiential learning also included cards, there were plenty of them prepared and they could be obtained immediately.

Hashimoto seemed to welcome this, reaching out his hand and asking to borrow it.

When he took it, he opened the case and took out a deck of cards.

“Playing cards is the most classic of classics, isn't it, Ayanokōji?”

Kiryūin, who had been sitting and looking at her phone, spoke to me without getting up.

“I was once told by a blonde senpai that playing cards is a staple of training camps.”

“Huh? Could it be Nagumo?”

She sat up, leaning back in her chair, and asked with interest.

When I nodded in confirmation, Kiryūin laughed a little as if she found the fact amusing.

“That man also does such cliché things.”

“Besides, today was the first time our group lost in a card game, so I’m also reflecting on it.”

“Playing cards, huh?”

Morishita, who had been looking out the window near Kiryūin, muttered as if she had noticed something.

RoyalMTLs

Then, while sitting in seiza, she approached by kicking the tatami mats with both hands.

(TL NOTE: (正座) Seiza, where one sits on their heels with legs folded underneath the thighs and the buttocks resting on the heels, maintaining an upright, straight back.)

“Let's do that. *That*. The game where the person who has the Joker at the end loses.” “You seem very excited.. Do you like playing cards?”

“I can't say whether I like it or not. I've never done it before.”

“You've never done it? There really are fossil-like people who still exist?”

Hashimoto was surprised, his eyes wide.

“There were no people worth playing cards with.”

Does that mean she didn't have any friends that she could do this with until now? “Wait a minute. That's strange. Didn't you give yourself a five for being good at cards?”

Indeed, Morishita had given herself the highest rating, a five, for playing cards. “I thought I would excel even if I was inexperienced, given my talent. After all, it was not a confirmation of whether I was good at it or not, but a one-to-five evaluation of whether I had confidence, right? So, it's a five.”

She answered confidently, puffing out her chest. She certainly seemed sure of herself.

“But you didn't seem to be called for today's game.”

Only Kiryūin, the leader, knew the answer to why she wasn't chosen.

“That's right. Why didn't you choose me?”

“Isn't it suspicious to say you're confident in playing cards? That's why I left you out.”

It seemed she made that judgment based on the rating list. Her impression was correct.

“Well, never mind that. Let's play cards anyway. Please distribute them quickly, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka.”

I can tell that she really wants to play, so I don’t feel bad for bringing it. But not everyone can play at once, so what to do?

“How about this? Four players per game. A game for boys only and a game for girls only. Then a mixed game.”

Hashimoto, noticing my indecision, suggested a way to arrange the players.

“That's not a bad idea. Let's go with that.”

Morishita was already eager, showing no signs of refusal. I thought the quiet Tsubaki might not have wanted to play, but it seemed that the other first-year students, Tsubaki included, were surprisingly enthusiastic.

“How about you come over, Yamamura?”

I called out to Yamamura, who was sitting alone in the distance, but she shook her head from side to side.

“Um... I'll... watch.”

“Are you sure?”

Yamamura, who seemed to have no intention of participating, nodded slightly in refusal.

“There's no need to include someone who says they don't want to play.

Come on, let's get started.”

Under the pressure of the energetic Morishita, the girls' card game match immediately began.

“This exchange meeting is a good exchange meeting.”

(TL NOTE: The above is intentional. That is just the way she speaks.)

“That's a cheap evaluation. Are you satisfied just because you can play cards?” Hashimoto, sitting cross-legged, muttered, resting his elbow on his knee.

“I'm satisfied, but please don't look at my cards from behind.”

“I won't reveal your hand.”

“I don't know when Hashimoto Masayoshi might betray us.”

While saying that, she hid her hand with her body.

Hashimoto’s smiling bitterly, but he really is a traitor..

“But it’s starting to become clear now.”

Morishita was having her first experience, but she wasn’t just enjoying it, she was also doing her own analysis.

“There are several strategies in this game.”

Saying that, Morishita held only one card in one of her hands so that it stood out conspicuously.

“Please go ahead, Shiina Hiyori. Don't hesitate to draw any card you like.”

“Somehow.. I'm a little curious about this one card.”

“Is that so? This is the advanced strategy I came up with.”

By the way, Hashimoto couldn't see it anymore, but from where I was sitting, I could clearly see Morishita's hand.

Apparently, the isolated card seemed to be the Joker.

Because it was so suspicious, there was no way it’d be the Joker—that seemed to be the aim.

From a strategic point of view, it might not be a bad move.

RoyalMTLs

Although it couldn't be proven that the likelihood itself increased, it seemed to have a big enough psychological effect to make her want to draw that one card, to make her want to try it.

“What should I do…?”

Hiyori, who was suspicious, tried to escape to the four cards on Morishita’s right hand, but her fingertips stopped.

She seemed to be bothered by the one card in her left hand.

“Please choose as you like.”

Morishita's lack of emotions, combined with her personality, made for a perfect distraction.

After a long thought, Hiyori was mesmerized and ended up drawing the one card on her left hand.

She pulled it towards her, turned it over, and was disappointed to find out that the card she had picked was a joker.

RoyalMTLs

138





Everyone must've realized who had drawn the Joker from her obvious reaction.

"You still have a lot to learn if you show it on your face."

After that, the game continued in silence for a few rounds.

The first one out was the first-year student Eikura, followed by Hatsukawa.

Morishita, who had successfully passed the joker early on, ended up losing to the two first-year students in the subsequent card matching, and it came down to the final showdown with Hiyori.

And then it led to a scenario where Hiyori held two cards and Morishita held the last one.

"Please go ahead, Morishita-san."

She smoothly held out two cards in the same way.

Morishita, staring intently, grabbed the trump card on the right side from our perspective with her fingertips.

But she didn't immediately pull it. She asked Hiyori a question.

"Is *this* it?"

"...What?"

"I thought it might not be the Joker."

“I can't answer that.”

“I think it's the Joker.”

“I see. . then you might want to avoid it. Do you want to switch to the opposite card?”

“Is that okay? You'll lose, you know?”

“But I don't actually know which one the Joker is.”

“You're naive, Shiina Hiyori. The mystery is all solved.”

Morishita let go of the card she was holding, grabbed the one on the left, and pulled it out with force.

The card Morishita showed us was… a five of hearts.

“I win.”

“I lost.”

Hiyori seemed to be enjoying, even if she lost. However, she did look disappointed.

On the other hand, Morishita seemed to have been driven by a desire to win at all costs.

After that, they played a boys-only game, followed by a mixed game with both boys and girls.

“Let's move on to the next game! The next game!”

Morishita still wanted to play, but I voiced a concern that had been on my mind for a while.

“Isn't it about time for Yamamura to join in?”

RoyalMTLs

"...No, I'm… fine..."

She had been watching us the whole time, but her gaze didn't seem to fall on the game.

She looked distracted and not at all energetic.

I had hoped that playing cards would cheer her up, but maybe that was too much to ask.

"Yamamura-san, won't you join us? It's fun."

At that moment, Hiyori approached and invited her.

"But..."

"Come on, please join us."

Unable to refuse Hiyori's gentle demeanor, Yamamura reluctantly joined in.

But as soon as the game started, unexpected troubles arose.

"Um, it's my turn.. "

"Oops, sorry, Yamashita-senpai. Please, go ahead and draw."

Yamamura, who was about to be skipped by the student next to her, hastily offered her cards.

They got her name wrong, yet she didn't even bother trying to correct it.

Even though we were all sitting in a circle, the student drawing from Yamamura's hand skipped her.

Maybe she had been avoiding the card game because she feared this would happen.

A single mistake could be overlooked, but when it happened repeatedly, it was noticeable even to me, watching from the sidelines.

Was Yamamura's presence really that faint?

I had known about her tailing skills for a while, but it was usually impossible to overlook her when watching with the naked eye.

However, it was unclear whether this was because I was consciously trying to be aware of Yamamura, or because others were not paying attention to her.

I decided to ask someone the next time I had the chance.

RoyalMTLs



4

On the way back from the girls' room.

When I looked at my phone, I realized that it was already quite late, with only about 20 minutes until lights-out.

“Man, that was fun! But why do girls' rooms smell so good?”

“Right, right. . And wasn't Tsubaki-san cute?”

“Really? Are you a fan of Tsubaki?”

The first-year students couldn't hide (or didn't want to hide) their excitement about their first visit to a girl’s room.

“It looks like they had fun.”

Seeing the excited kōhais, Hashimoto seemed satisfied that it was worth bringing them along.

But the next moment, the smile disappeared from Hashimoto's face, replaced by a stern expression.

“Sorry, but could you guys go back first? Ayanokōji, could you stay with me a little longer?”

When he instructed everyone but me, they all obediently agreed and went back to their shared room.

“What's wrong?”

“You'll just go to sleep when you return to your room, right? I haven't heard anything about Sakayanagi.”

“If you were expecting to learn something, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there's nothing.”

“But you did meet Sakayanagi today, didn't you?”

Indeed, I had encountered Sakayanagi in the morning.

Whether he had obtained information from somewhere or was simply trying to fish for it with a lie, I didn't need to probe.

Either way, my answer was already decided.

“I did put some pressure on her, but it’s Sakayanagi. Honestly, I couldn't get much out of her. You know she's a tough opponent, right?”

Regardless of what I said, Hashimoto would likely be suspicious, so I continued speaking calmly.

“Besides, I didn't have time to have a leisurely conversation.”

I incorporated a subtle excuse into my words to avoid delving too deeply into the matter.

“. .Well, it's fine. Either way, the outcome won't change in the future.”

That outcome, needless to say, was something Hashimoto would communicate, not me.

RoyalMTLs

“Sakayanagi and Ryūen dropped out of the winning lineup on the second day. It's like a very anticlimactic end to a very anticlimactic tournament..”

Sakayanagi's group had five wins and seven losses in twelve matches.

Ryūen's group had three wins and nine losses in twelve matches.

Unless there was a major shakeup in the following day’s seven matches, their chances of ranking high were hopeless.

“Well, I guess they gave up on the exchange meeting. Those two didn't show up at any of the experiential learning sessions. They probably didn't intend to receive any rewards from the start, right?”

“That seems to be the case, but you don't look too happy about it.”

“Well, of course. It's unsettling. It's weird that those two dropped out so abruptly.”

Hashimoto was naturally suspicious.

Both groups disappeared from the top ranks without ever making a comeback.

I could understand why Hashimoto would be cautious just based on the results. But that was probably an unnecessary worry.

Ryūen valued private points, but as announced beforehand, the private points available at this camp were special. They were limited to shopping.

Of course, it was good to have them, but it wasn’t unreasonable for Ryūen not to prioritize them.

Rather, being able to move freely for three days might’ve been more advantageous from an information standpoint.

It would be better to keep an eye on Sakayanagi's situation for now.

On the other hand, Sakayanagi, who lost in the survival and elimination special exam, should use this exchange meeting to cool down for the future.

Spending a leisurely time in nature and letting her wounds heal was one of the best courses of action.

That was why Hashimoto should be composed, but in reality, he wasn’t.

He was trying to keep calm, but he couldn't hide his impatience.

“I thought Sakayanagi, being smart, would have me investigated every now and then.. ”

Even in the relaxed exchange meeting, she might’ve been aiming to expel him—Hashimoto must have had such a sense of danger.

“It's not like Toyohashi and the other first-years have already been won over by Sakayanagi, right?”

He didn't verbally confirm it, but the first thing Hashimoto did was to get along with the kōhais, presumably to prevent that from happening.

RoyalMTLs

143

[redacted]

“Could it be that Sakayanagi had set up a spy even before we formed the group?”

“Don't you have a better understanding of the relationships within the first-years, Hashimoto?”

Long before the exchange meeting, kōhais had been working as Sakayanagi’s legs since shortly after entering school. That was still true.

“Yeah.. probably not. . Basically, Sakayanagi didn't make direct negotiations. I was basically the one who interacted with the promising first-years.

But indirectly—”

He was desperately trying to maintain his smile, but he was pushing himself too hard.

“It isn’t easy to expel someone specific except in special exams.”

I tried to calm him down a bit, but while my words reached him, he couldn't fully digest them.

“I know, I know, but.. it's Sakayanagi. I can't deny the possibility that she might do something I can't imagine.”

After saying that, he stopped, perhaps realizing that he was stuck in a difficult predicament.

“Let's stop. I should forget about Sakayanagi for now.”

“That's better.”

Hashimoto took a deep breath, filling his cheeks with air, and forcefully exhaled to regulate his breathing.

“Alright, I'll stop by the lobby toilet before I go back. You can go back and sleep first.”

“It's almost lights out, don't be too late.”

“Yeah.”

Did he find it difficult to use the bathroom in the shared room, or did he have another purpose in mind?

Either way, Hashimoto went into the lobby toilet, which was devoid of people.



Chapter 6:

A Quiet Resolution

TODAY WAS THE third day living with other years.

By tomorrow afternoon, we'd probably be on the bus back to school.

The exchange meeting was nearing its end, and a battle with Nagumo’s group was looming, but Horikita and Ibuki were still showing up early in the morning.

“You, do the match with us blindfolded today.”

“You're demanding right off the bat, and it's an unreasonable request at that.” “I have to kick you at least once, or I'll be frustrated.”

Such an unreasonable proposal was obviously unacceptable. If the opponent was inexperienced in martial arts, it would be a different story, but against Horikita and Ibuki, even I would struggle if I were blindfolded.

Especially since I was focusing on defense, it would just be taking on unnecessary risk.

“Blindfolding him won't help with the training, so rejected.”

“Well said, Horikita.”

“But if you insist, let's do it after the special training.”

“That's not it, Horikita.”

I corrected Horikita in less than a second.

“I can understand your feelings, Ayanokōji-kun. But first, we should prioritize defeating Amasawa-san, right?”

“...Well, yeah.”

Even though I was helping quite devotedly, it was quite a thing to say.

In any case, it seemed that they were determined to succeed in their revenge against Amasawa no matter what.

“Then let's start right away—”

Just as I was about to speak, Ibuki stopped me.

“Toilet.”

“Haven't you finished yet?”

“I thought I was fine. But when it gets cold, I have to go a little, so wait for me.” “Really..”

Although Horikita was exasperated, it was cruel to tell her to hold it in.

If by any chance, she moved around a lot and it were to leak, it would be a big problem.

While seeing off Ibuki who went back to the toilet, Horikita started talking.



“There's something I realized today.”

“What’d you realize?”

“The reason you set the revenge match against Amasawa-san on the morning of the fourth day as a condition. It could’ve been to increase the amount of special training sessions as much as possible. However, if you wanted to make time, you didn’t need to limit the sessions to early mornings; you could’ve also done them discretely at any time. The main reason you chose the last day was to manage the risk of injury, wasn't it? If I get injured in a selfish fight before the exchange meeting is settled, it would be unacceptable to those who were seriously participating.”

Horikita's group was a candidate for first place, unlike Ibuki's group, which lost the chance to win on the second day. As someone who stood on top of the leaderboard, It seemed she was able to notice that.

“With your skills, you can handle these sessions without injuring me, right?”

“What if I get injured?”

“. .Is that even a possibility?”

“No, it isn't.”

As soon as I replied, she showed a slightly irritated expression.

“If a normal person said that, they would definitely get a frown in return, so be careful. Maybe I should have you fight blindfolded later?”

“Please don't. I don’t think you’d need to hold back against me. I wouldn't say such a thing to anyone else.”

“Is that something I should be happy about. .?”

“You should be. It's special treatment.”

“That's not a good kind of special treatment.”

Recently, I was having more and more casual conversations with Horikita.

There must’ve been other people in the world, past and future, who were having similar exchanges as us, getting angry and laughing at each other.

“This is completely unrelated, but who comes to mind when you think of a student with a small presence?”

When I asked that, Horikita thought for a moment and then gave her answer.

“You, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“...Me?”

“At least when you first entered school, you were one of the less noticeable ones in the class.”

“I see. Indeed.”

Among the 40 students at the time of admission, if you were to rank us in terms of visibility, it would’ve been overwhelmingly faster to find me if you were counting from the bottom up.

“Recently, you've been gaining more presence, so it doesn't apply now.”

RoyalMTLs

Indeed, compared to the beginning, I think I had changed a lot.

The surrounding environment had changed more than anything else.

“I wonder what factors determine how noticeable or inconspicuous someone is.” “Hmm, is that so? If you want to be unnoticed or don't want to stand out, I think you naturally become inconspicuous. You probably won't speak much either.” All of these characteristics fit Yamamura.

Each one may not have been a big deal, but when combined, they’d make a big impact.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I was just wondering about something.”

“Really? Oh right, about the matter you asked me to look into—”

When Horikita brought up the topic of special training, I had asked her to do something.

Horikita was now reporting the results.

“. .That's about all I noticed.. Will it be of any use?”

“Yes, it will be very useful. Thanks for looking into it. You can consider the request fulfilled.”

Horikita, who had faithfully complied, didn’t seem to understand the meaning from, but she didn't try to inquire deeply about my reasoning.

“And by the way, that Ibuki sure is slow.”

“Indeed. I wonder what she's doing.”

If she had just gone to the bathroom in the lobby and returned, it wouldn't have taken this long.

“Did she go back to her room and fall asleep?”

“I'd like to think not. . but with Ibuki-san, you never know.”

“What about her phone?”

“She said it would be a nuisance and left it in her room.”

“I see. I hate to say this to you, Horikita, but if Ibuki doesn't come back, we'll have to cancel today.”

“It can't be helped. The condition was that Ibuki-san would fight with us.”

The special training from yesterday was just a drop in the bucket, but there was nothing we could do.

It might be best to propose to postpone it. Hopefully, there will be another opportunity to go out together to a place with lax supervision, like a training camp or a deserted island.

Horikita and I were looking in the direction of the building, waiting for Ibuki to appear.

“There's an opening!!”



With that voice from behind, a presence rapidly approached. When we moved away from the spot, Ibuki's foot was extended where we had been standing just a moment ago.

She was clearly intending to kick me by surprise.

“Damn! I missed! I even took the long way back!”

“It's fine to be frustrated, but don't announce your attack. You're doing the same thing as Ishizaki.”

“Ugh.. !? I don't want to hear that.. ! But I just instinctively shouted!”

Shouting by instinct wasn’t excusable.

Unless you were certain it would defeat your opponent, announcing your attack would only serve as a disadvantage, especially against an opponent with high odds of winning.

“Ishizaki-kun? Have you had a dispute with Ishizaki-kun too?”

“I just witnessed a similar scenario. I wasn’t involved.”

I thought I could deceive her by saying something appropriate, but it seemed to be a rash judgment.

“You had a dispute with Ryūen-kun on the rooftop, didn't you? It was that time, right?”

I looked at Ibuki. Her frustrated expression had changed to a malicious grin.

“Hmph, I don't remember you telling me to keep my mouth shut. Even if you did, I’m free to talk about it.”

“I don't mind, but this makes a lot of sense now.”

This may have been the reason why she asked me to help her to take revenge on Amasawa.

“I pretended not to know in front of others, but this might be a good opportunity. Do you admit that you had a big fight with Ryūen-kun and his group?”

“I can't deny it in this situation.”

“I see. But for me, it finally makes sense. I didn't doubt Ibuki-san's story, but it wouldn't be strange if there were exaggerations or mistakes mixed in.”

“Huh?” She tilted her head and kicked up the dirt towards Horikita's knees.

“Don't act like a child.”

While scolding her like a teacher, Horikita continued as if she had been waiting for this opportunity.

“Do you have anything else you're keeping from me? Like other people you've had disputes with?”

“None.”

“Really…? I still have a few things I'm suspicious about, like the Yagami-kun incident.”

RoyalMTLs

“Yagami? Why is Yagami coming up now? I don't use violence against my kōhais. I'd like to exclude the Hōsen incident though.”

“Who's Yagami? Was there someone like that?”

“. .Fine. We don't have much time, so can we start the special training?”

Unable to explain everything to Ibuki, Horikita cut the conversation short.

She began to distance herself from me.

“Basically, the rules are the same as yesterday. The important thing is to understand how the two of you will move, not my movements.”

If they had faced each other many times in the past, they would’ve inevitably ingrained each other's patterns in their minds.

The teamwork that was honed here would undoubtedly be higher than in the previous fight with Amasawa.

RoyalMTLs

149

1

After finishing their morning training, the two were out of breath for a while, but they couldn't sit there forever.

“It's getting brighter. Should we head back soon?”

“You say that so casually. How can your body not be tired after all that action?”

“Are you a cyborg or something?”

I had to correct their misunderstanding.

“I'm tired too. I just don't show it on my face.”

“You say that, but you're not even breathing heavily. It's not convincing at all.” Despite her complaints, Horikita stood up, brushing off the sand.

“We do need to go back soon.”

Seeing this, Ibuki also stood up immediately, even giving a high jump.

She seemed to be competing, but her efforts were not reciprocated.

“By the way, Ibuki-san, what are you planning to do today?”

“What do you mean?”

“The exchange meeting game. Is your group planning to fight to the end?”

Ibuki's group was already at a hopeless two wins and ten losses.

“Oh, that? I don't know. I haven't participated even once.”

“Then your stamp card must be blank.”

Ibuki snorted and crossed her arms. She probably wanted the reward, but she seemed more likely to skip the troublesome work than gain a mere 1000 points.

“I'm free, so I might as well go with you, Horikita.”

“. .Why would you do that?”

“I might get to see you lose at the exchange meeting or something.”

Ibuki's motivation was clear, or rather, she never wavered.

Just like Kushida, did she really want to see Horikita lose that much?

“Eh? Are you actually going to stick around?”

“Of course.”

“Even if you were sure to lose, would you obey the third-years if they tell you to participate?”

“I won't obey. I'll just have someone else do it.”

I wouldn't be surprised if Ibuki pushed that role onto a first-year.

Each group had its own circumstances, so Horikita had no right to dismiss Ibuki’s thoughts.

“Whatever. . do as you like, but why not go with Ayanokōji-kun? You might get to see him lose too.”

RoyalMTLs

“Didn't he lose twice yesterday?”

My information was undoubtedly shared within Nagumo’s group.

“Speaking of which, Nagumo-senpai was really happy. He sarcastically said it was a disappointing end to a winning streak, losing at cards, of all things. Did you lose another game after that?”

She didn't seem to know much. Perhaps Nagumo didn't share my individual results with the entire group, but only with a select few students?

“I was completely beaten by Inogashira in ‘Patchwork.’”

“Normally, a comeback like that would never happen. I just wanted to witness where you could be defeated, regardless of the game.”

“So you're no different from Ibuki.”

At that retort, she seemed a little disgruntled, but eventually laughed and nodded.

In other words, she couldn't help but want to see someone she disliked lose.

“He doesn't seem to mind losing, does he? He might even lose on purpose.”

“I don't know about ‘on purpose,’ but he does seem to regret it. At least, judging by his current state, those two defeats were genuine. Right, Red Panda-kun?” “Are you still going with that joke..”

I wish she wouldn't arbitrarily nickname me ‘Red Panda.’

“Well, I guess I'll go with Horikita. I'd like to keep an eye on Amasawa too.”

“I see, that might not be a bad idea. If she's even slightly aware of you, it might put pressure on her for tomorrow.”

Horikita had found merit in Ibuki accompanying her.

“Can you hurry up and get back? It's getting cold.”

Naturally, a body that had warmed up from exercise would cool down if it remained still for too long.

“Just don't get in the way.”

“I can't promise that.”

She couldn't help but sense Ibuki's eagerness to interfere.



In about 15 minutes, the opponents for the third day’s first exchange meeting would be announced.

The game was 'shogi.'

The participants Kiryūin chose were me, Morishita, Hashimoto, Hiyori, and Tsubaki.

Despite this, the group was about to face this match one member short.

“Where the hell did Morishita go? It's her turn next.. ”

“The call doesn’t seem to be connecting.”

Hiyori, holding her phone to her ear, informed me that she couldn't reach her. “When was the last time you saw Morishita?”

“The last time I saw her was at breakfast. She left with you, right?”

Since we finished eating at the same time, I remembered leaving the dining hall at the same time.

It was over 30 minutes ago, but she said she was going for a walk.

Could she still be on her walk, or did she get lost?

Normally, she wouldn't lose her way, but if she had forced herself to go into the mountain path, it would be a different story.

Given Morishita's personality, it wasn't impossible.

“She was saying that she was absolutely confident in shogi.. ”

“She said she had trained with online matches.”

“That's honestly suspicious.. ”

Kiryūin had chosen her based on that statement and confidence.

She must’ve wanted to redeem her disgrace in archery.

“If Morishita is out, we'll have to find a substitute. We still have a little time, so I'll go look outside. Hashimoto, can you check inside?”

“Okay. I'll contact you if I find her.”

I eagerly set out to search and found Morishita in just a few seconds. She didn't seem lost.

Before calling out to her, I sent a message to Hashimoto that I had found Morishita.

After that, I approached her.

“It's almost time for the exchange meeting.”

Despite my call, Morishita didn't respond.

She was just quietly touching a tree.

She isn't asleep while standing up, so what’s she doing?

“Morishita?”



“Could you please be quiet? I was listening to the voice of the forest.”

Morishita quietly murmured.

“...Huh?”

However, I couldn't process her words in my head and inadvertently asked her again.

“The voice of the forest? What is that?”

“Don't you understand? The forest is alive. If you touch a large tree like this, close your eyes, calm your mind, and listen, then you might understand what I'm saying.”

RoyalMTLs

153





"...I see?"

So far, I hadn't been able to understand what Morishita was saying at all.

It might be a good idea to try doing it.

I stood next to Morishita and pressed my hand against the tree in the same manner.

Then, I closed my eyes.

All I had to do was calm my mind and listen.

"Do you hear it? The voice of the forest."

"No..."

"Then maybe you're still distracted by something."

Distractions. Unfortunately, I was emptying my emotions.

There was no way such a thing could be mixed in..

As I thought so, I couldn't hear anything at all. There was no way I could.

"Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth."

But Morishita still insisted.

"Does that make any sense?"

“Well, when I had a cold before, I was instructed to breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth at the otolaryngologist's office.”

“Isn't that how you use a nebulizer…?”

In a way, I was forcibly filled with distractions.

Anyway, I couldn't hear the voice of the forest.

“What are you doing?”

When I opened my eyes and looked at Morishita, she was pointing her cell phone camera at me.

“I was recording Ayanokōji Kiyotaka being fooled by my lies in high definition.”

“Hey...”

“There's no way you can hear the voice of the forest. You've watched too many dramas and movies.”

“You're the one who started it. You seemed to be practicing it.”

“Don't be shy. I'll keep it a secret that you were trying to listen to the voice of the forest.”

I wished she wouldn't record me and leave evidence like that.

“But I didn't know that the aspiration machine in the hospital is called a nebulizer. I've learned some useless knowledge. Thank you.”

The fact that she called it useless knowledge meant that she wasn't really grateful.

“Ayanokōji Kiyotaka, you're an interesting person.”

I wonder if I was the only one who thought Morishita was overwhelmingly more interesting.

RoyalMTLs

155



“By the way, do you need something from me?”

“I came to look for you because you didn't show up when it was time to gather.”

“Now that you mention it, I feel like I might’ve been at fault.”

Upon giving a statement that seemed somewhat like an apology, Morishita stepped away from the tree.

She started walking towards the building where Kiryūin was waiting.

“Can I ask you something?”

I turned my gaze towards Morishita, silently urging her to speak.

“What do you think about Hashimoto Masayoshi?”

“That's a pretty loaded question.”

“I thought I needed to ask. I've been looking for an opportunity several times, but I couldn't find the right time.”

“Did you think I would come looking for you because you were with the trees?” “I did think you would come looking for me on your own.”

She had a strange personality, but she was a strategist.

“What do you think of him as a fellow Class A student?”

“I thought you'd ask. Of course, I think we should unite as a class and exclude him.”

She decisively called Hashimoto a nuisance.

“What if I were on Hashimoto's side? Wouldn't that be a slip of the tongue?”

“I thought if I lied, I would only be lied to in return. So I thought being honest was the best choice here.”

She understood negotiation well.

If she had hinted at supporting Hashimoto with just some poor excuse and got caught, she wouldn’t be able to earn my trust.

Her judgment was quick and sharp, and she didn't mince her words.

Among the students I had seen within the second-years, she was quite exceptional in this area.

Indeed, you couldn't understand such a personality unless you met and talked face-to-face.

“I intend to respond to your honesty, but frankly, since I’m from another class, I don’t think it’s a problem that has anything to do with me. Whether Sakayanagi tries to exclude Hashimoto in the future, or Hashimoto tries to exclude Sakayanagi, they can do as they please.”

“So you're saying you have no intention of siding with Hashimoto Masayoshi?”

“None.”

I nodded without hesitation, strongly appealing that this was the truth.



She might’ve doubted it, but in fact, I was speaking the truth. It wasn’t a lie.

“Of course, as a member of the same group now, I will maintain an appropriate distance and a cooperative relationship.”

“Is that so? I feel a little relieved.”

It might’ve been closer to saying I was anti-Hashimoto rather than aligning with Sakayanagi’s faction.

“I just want to ask for reference, but would it be a problem if I sided with Hashimoto?”

“It would be, yes. I think Sakayanagi Arisu would win nine out of ten times, but if Ayanokōji Kiyotaka were to side with Hashimoto Masayoshi, that might be in jeopardy.”

Apparently, Morishita seemed to value my existence more than I had imagined.

“Is it strange? That I highly value you, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka.”

“I didn't feel that way when we first talked.”

Of course, I understood that I was being watched, but not to this extent.

“Usually, there’s a difference between expectation and reality. It’s typically disappointing, so I had lowered the hurdle, but looking at the reactions and gazes around me, it doesn't seem to be the case.”

It seemed to be more of a gut feeling than something she had directly seen or heard. An evaluation based on her high intelligence and senses.

A female version of Kōenji—it would be rude to call Morishita that, but in terms of archetype, they might be a little similar. Like subtracting the eccentricity and adding more reasoning..

No, no matter how I expressed it, it wasn't right to compare her to Kōenji.

"Then, is there a possibility that you will side with Sakayanagi Arisu?"

"None. Rather, she's not someone I should interfere with."

Originally, Hashimoto was a much weaker opponent for Sakayanagi. It wasn't a situation where I should lend a hand.

"But..."

"But?"

"I do think that both Hashimoto and Sakayanagi should fight without holding back. It's best to decide the winner after they both exert all they're able to.

That's just my opinion though."

Hashimoto was still charging ahead alone without the leisure to observe his surroundings. And since his betrayal dragged Kamuro along with it, Sakayanagi might be hindered from exerting her full capabilities.

If I could eliminate the problems they each had, I would like to do so before the match.

RoyalMTLs

157



“I understand your thoughts well, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka. Thank you.”

Perhaps having cleared something in her mind, Morishita slightly smiled and bowed her head.

“I hope this problem will be resolved as soon as possible. If the infighting continues for half a year, or even a whole year, it will only be a detriment for Class A.” “That's true.”

If that was the problem, Morishita's fears were unfounded.

The problem between Sakayanagi and Hashimoto was already set to end soon. Morishita started walking away from under the tree.

“Well, let's get going. Don't play in the forest forever. You're such a child.”

“You're the one who was playing.. ”

I was just a victim who got dragged into this.

To add, Morishita was as good at shogi as she boasted.

Her skills, honed through daily online matches, were not just for show.

RoyalMTLs

158



3

At times like this, I wonder if we'll face Nagumo's group in the final 19th match. That's what you might think, but things don't always go as planned.

In the 17th match, with two personal defeats, we clashed with the still-undefeated Nagumo group.

Following a game of table tennis, the upcoming game was 'archery,' making it the second 'archery' match in the exchange meeting.

In this case, doesn't it work in our favor that the game isn't solely based on craftsmanship or luck? Archery, a skill-based activity, provided an interesting opportunity for others to shine.

Nagumo was present as their leader, but he didn't speak up.

This time, Nagumo and I had a personal bet, but few knew about it.

Even the first-year students who had been ordered to gather information might not know the details.

"So, why are you here, Morishita?"

"Of course, I'm here to do archery. I came to fight."

Her results yesterday were disastrous, but she was still trying to participate without being discouraged?

Looking at Kiryūin, she gave a sincere nod. It seemed she had accepted Morishita's participation.

"That's how it is. You can think of it as being on the winning ship, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka."

"Let's hope it's not a sinking ship."

The instructor started speaking again, explaining safety procedures to students who had never handled archery before and for those who

had, he repeatedly emphasized the importance of learning the correct shooting form.

Unlike the original rules, the format was to switch teams after shooting six arrows instead of taking turns one after the other.

Hashimoto, who had seen the five opponents, approached and whispered in my ear.

“Katsuragi apparently practiced quite a bit yesterday, and he scored a maximum of 36 points. There's a chance you could lose if you face him.”

I was impressed by his thorough research as I reflected on myself.

Yesterday, my scores were 2, 2, 4, 6, 6, 9, for a total of 30 points.

I understood his concern, but to put it bluntly, I probably wouldn't lose to Katsuragi.

The problem was elsewhere. Soon, the match-ups were announced.

RoyalMTLs

First Match: Horikita Suzune vs Yanagi Yasuhisa Second Match: Hirata Yōsuke vs Hashimoto Masayoshi Third Match: Amasawa Ichika vs Ayanokōji Kiyotaka Fourth Match: Kanzaki Ryūji vs Shintoku Tarō

Fifth Match: Katsuragi Kōhei vs Morishita Ai In the 16 matches so far, I had always fought as the third player.

“Nagumo had skillfully arranged for our opponents to match our fixed positions in the lineup.”

“Nice to meet you, Senpai.”

“Your opponent is a first-year girl. You're lucky.”

Hashimoto, who apparently didn't have information about Amasawa, answered optimistically.

While everyone watched, Nagumo’s group, who were up first, started aiming at the target all at once.

You could tell by their calm demeanor and relaxed expressions.

Amasawa had finished practicing archery yesterday and seemed to have gained solid experience.

Without hesitation, the smoothly released arrows pierced the yellow nine-point area.

She obtained a score of 9 points, 9 points, 10 points, 9 points, 10 points, 10

points, for a total of 57 points.

The accuracy was so high that not only the participating students but also the instructors were surprised.

“No way.. ”

Katsuragi, who came in second, had scored a substantial 37 points, but it was incomparable.

In order for us to win, we needed to score 10 points with every shot.

With everyone still shaken, it was time for Kiryūin’s group, who were on the defensive, to take our turn.

In the silent gallery, I fired the first arrow before anyone else got a chance.

It pierced the yellow eight-point area.

While the other students were still fumbling with their preparation, I shifted to fire my second arrow and waited for permission.

This left us with only one point of leeway, but that didn't matter.

Immediately upon my first shot, I corrected my trajectory, which was slightly off.

The second arrow pierced the yellow ten-point center.

RoyalMTLs



If this had been a 70-meter distance, it might have been impossible due to factors like wind, but at 20 meters, there were no drawbacks.

As the instructor collected the arrows, I shot without a moment's delay.

I repeated the same motion like a machine.

The same motion, the same position—I just needed to maximize the repeatability.

Without worrying about how many points the others had, I just kept shooting the remaining four arrows straight into the center.

The score was 58 to 57. I took the victory into my own hands.

I received a strong applause from Amasawa, with whom I had a close match.

“You're amazing, Senpai. It's frustrating, but I lost, didn't I?”

“The rules helped me in many ways. The target was close, but if it had been the regular rules where we had to take turns, it wouldn't have been strange for the game to go either way.”

Once Amasawa had a fixed score of 57, she couldn't make any other moves.

She had no choice but to surrender to my results.

“I was trying to put pressure on you, but it didn't work, did it?”

I had blocked out all the surrounding noise, so I didn't know.

“You hadn’t practiced archery other than yesterday's game, right?”

“I watched some tutorial videos in the middle of the night.”

Not just archery, but everything I experienced at the camp.

“It's amazing that you can produce results like that. Nagumo-senpai might get angry.”

Even though she lost, Amasawa scored 57 points, so Nagumo probably couldn't blame her.

Ibuki, who had been watching from afar, blatantly looked away in boredom.

Horikita won against Yanagi, Amasawa lost but scored an overwhelmingly high score, and then I won against Amasawa. It must not have been interesting at all. “It wasn't risky at all. You were so consistent..”

After watching Amasawa return to report to her group, Hashimoto expressed his admiration.

“But she was strong after all.”

The archery match between Nagumo’s group and Kiryūin’s group ended with one loss and four wins.

“Indeed. They were worthy opponents, the top contenders, but it was a close game.” Morishita, who had given it her all, showed a satisfied look on her face.

By the way, the only one who scored a total of six points and suffered a big loss in this game was Morishita.

RoyalMTLs

161



4

After that, the round-robin tournament ended, and the 19 total games came to a close.

Kiryūin’s group’s final record was fifteen wins and four losses within the 19

games. My personal record was seventeen wins and two losses.

Our final ranking was fourth place. It could be described as a great success.

And Nagumo’s group, which had been commended as the top contender from the beginning, came in first with eighteen wins and one loss.

The one defeat was due to a card game that was picked in the final match, and they were unlucky the whole time. They were defeated by a group that had only won three times so far, which was a fitting end to the game.

In the empty rest area, Nagumo and I were alone.

“Allowing me to lose up to two times was what caused your defeat, wasn't it?” “Indeed, I'd like to say so, but since you were the only one who participated in more than twelve games and had two or fewer losses, it would be absurd to complain about that.”

Nagumo could get detailed information from each group’s leader at any point, so it wasn’t strange that he seemed to know the individual results from all of the matches. Contrary to his appearance, he was very observant.

“Your most skillful player, Amasawa, had a great performance though. She hits her targets quite gracefully.”

“Don't flatter me. You were purposely going third, weren't you? It was obvious that you were setting it up so that I could be somewhat satisfied when I faced you.”

“I wish you would sincerely accept the intentions of a kōhai who’s trying to praise you, Senpai.”

“Then do it better. It sounds like you're just provoking me.”

I see. . Maybe I should’ve used a more natural and skillful way of speaking.

“I managed to win against Amasawa in the individual match, but in terms of the group match, we were completely defeated. Everyone in our group was giving it their all, but it was clear that everyone in your group was playing the game skillfully.”

His group members thoroughly gained experience over the three days, directly leading to their victory.

“When I decide to win, I strive towards it without mercy. It's only natural.

Well, we both got played by the card games, didn't we?”

“Indeed.”

RoyalMTLs

162

He showed up at an exchange meeting that he didn’t have to come to, and even used his own money to make our personal match happen. Regardless of his victory or defeat, I couldn't imagine that it was satisfying for Nagumo.

“What do you think would’ve happened if you and I had been competing based on group performance from the start?”

“Knowing the conclusion, I don't think I could’ve won even if I had been in charge.”

I honestly admitted defeat.

“Is that so? Couldn't you, with your ability to manipulate things behind the scenes, have proceeded in a more solid and reliable manner?”

However, the man in front of me didn't believe in my defeatist statement any more than I did.

“Your group won fifteen times without your interference, so you're doing great, but wasn't there a way to win the other matches? Or were you just not willing to take me seriously?”

“That's irrelevant. Even if I tried to pick up a win by buying my opponent’s defeat, if you were serious, you’d buy it back. You could’ve also tried preventing it in advance. You have control over all the third-years, so you should be good at that kind of thing.”

If I tried to influence things, Nagumo would naturally sense it and try to influence things as well.

I couldn't win even if I stood on my head in a battle of financial power.

“Even if we were able to buy out three wins, we would’ve been stuck in the 17th game of archery anyway.”

“It doesn't sound like you're serious about that either.”

“Well… if I was told to win at all costs, I might’ve manipulated Horikita and Yōsuke to miss the target so that I could win.”

They were students who took it seriously, but depending on the reason, I might’ve been able to get them on my side.

Even if Nagumo had made a contract to ensure that they’d do their best, he couldn't corner them if he was betrayed at that point because there was no guarantee that they’d always hit the target.

“I guess so.”

“But if you could foresee that, you would’ve switched the assigned members.”

It was only natural that he’d select students who weren’t affected by my negotiations.

“So what would you do on top of that—no, this is just unnecessary talk that doesn't mean anything anymore.”

Feeling empty, Nagumo ended the conversation himself.

Looking at reality, this was just an exchange meeting.

It was nothing more than experiential learning that we didn’t have to stress about, something that the school also acknowledged.

It wasn’t something to invest a lot of money in or something that required a lot of negotiation.

This conversation was just a fantasy, something that never came to fruition.

“I enjoyed the experiential learning, seriously. If a fair fight couldn't be realized, I thought it would be polite to reveal the truth as it is.”

Nagumo had always wanted to know my strength.

So, in some form or another, he must’ve been able to see my true self without any of my clumsiness since his group members, such as Takahashi, were glued to all the games.

He must’ve recorded and checked the matches.

“That's right. The game of archery was especially impressive. I could tell that your hands are unnecessarily dexterous.”

“I don't know if you were satisfied with this approach.”

“Satisfied? There's no way I could be.”

Nagumo tilted his head in disbelief and laughed.

“But you've become quite talkative and more outspoken.”

“I was blessed with a good senpai that allowed me to learn a lot.”

Nagumo took out his phone and flicked the screen with his fingertips.

“I have no intention of belittling your victory. I've transferred the money.

Check it.”

“I trust you on that. But is it okay? Those funds could be used to save some of the third-year students.”

“How long do you think I've been reigning at the top of Class A? I have several million yen just in my personal pocket. What's the problem with paying from part of that?”

As he put away his phone, Nagumo took a glance outside.

“Do you remember what I told you when I came here? About going to college.”

“Of course.”

“I was quite serious about inviting you. We can't have flashy battles at university like we do in ANHS, but on the other hand, we can do more things side by side, right?”

“Maybe.”

“If you want, come to the same university. I'll make your boring personality a little better.”

“I'll keep that in mind.”

Saying that, Nagumo gently patted my right shoulder as he passed by.

“See you.”

“Can I ask you to pass on a message for me, Nagumo-senpai, since you’re graduating?”

“Huh? A message? To Horikita-senpai?”

“That wouldn't be bad, but no.”

RoyalMTLs





RoyalMTLs

When Nagumo stopped, I showed him the message for a certain person.

Having heard it, Nagumo, who still didn't fully believe it, listened to the end without making fun of it.

“That's a strange message.”

“I hope you can convey that. After that, the decision is up to the other party.” “I certainly heard it, but is this your farewell gift to me? If you kept quiet, who knows what the outcome would’ve been. There are people who wouldn't be happy about me graduating from Class A as it is.”

“At the very least, I think you’ve left enough achievements and qualifications to graduate from Class A.”

That was the reason I entrusted Nagumo with the message.

“I'll go a step ahead and start the second phase at Horikita-senpai's place.”

‘Feel free to join if you feel like it.’ Those last words contained a message from such a senpai.

RoyalMTLs

Chapter 7:

A Settled Night

IT WAS PAST 11 p.m., after the lights-out time.

In the shared room, it seemed that everyone was still awake, spending time talking quietly or looking at their phones. At the beginning of the camp, the unfamiliar members made the atmosphere uncomfortable, but now I didn't care what that atmosphere had turned into.

While occasionally participating in conversations with Hashimoto, Oda, and kōhais, nodding in agreement now and then, my phone vibrated as I was watching a patchwork video.

[Are you still awake?]

A message from Hiyori was displayed at the top of the screen.

[I'm awake. All the boys are still awake, so don't worry.]

I told Hiyori to make it easier for her to continue sending messages.

[Thank you. Actually, I just noticed that Yamamura-san is missing.]

Yamamura is missing? It was basically forbidden to leave the room after lights-out.

[You mean outside the room? What about her phone?]

[It seems to be left in the room. I was contemplating whether to go and look for her now. . I was wondering if I could ask for your help, Ayanokōji-kun.]

Hiyori probably wasn’t good at this kind of thing, to say the least. Especially if she couldn't act stealthily, a patrolling teacher would easily spot her.

It could be said that it was the right decision to ask for help here.

The camp was almost over, but it seemed better not to leave Yamamura alone. She had a particularly gloomy expression during yesterday's card game.

A possible reason why came to mind. *I should go and look for her right away. [I understand. I'll go and check on her, so Hiyori, please wait in your room.*

We need a way to confirm if Yamamura comes back.]

When I told her that it would be more useful for her to stay in the room without leaving, a reply came back with a cute animal stamp saying 'Thank you.'

“I'm going out for a bit.”

“Eh? Hey, it's past lights-out, you know? If they find you, you’ll get in trouble.”

“I'm going looking for something. I'll try to come back without being noticed, if possible. If something happens, you guys can get mad at me.”

RoyalMTLs

When I gave my answer, Hashimoto and the others didn't try hard to make me stay. Instead, they seemed quite happy and saw me off cheerfully.

The corridor was, of course, dark and silent since the lights were off.

Now. . where should I start looking?

Wandering aimlessly wouldn't be efficient.

There were two possible reasons why Yamamura, who wasn’t the type to break basic rules, left the shared room: either she was called out by someone, or she left the room voluntarily. However, in this case, the possibility of the former was quite low since she left her phone behind.

I proceeded with the assumption that she left voluntarily.

The next thing to consider was why it had to be after they turned the lights off. In contrast to the night’s silent environment, countless distracting thoughts flooded my mind.

There might’ve been times when you’d want to run away from the surroundings after all that

But at that time, it wouldn’t be strange to subconsciously seek a place where you could feel at ease.

The conclusion reached by the line of thought belonging to a student named Miki Yamamura—if I were to derive that…

I quietly showed my face in the lobby.

Immediately after, I felt someone’s presence and hid in the shadows.

It seemed that a patrolling teacher was walking around with a flashlight.

The visibility was poor, but it was easy to see where the light was shining.

He thoroughly illuminated the surroundings, but he didn't seem to be actively seeking a rule-breaking student who had left the shared room.

He was just doing it as part of his job as if he was doing it out of obligation.

Therefore, it was very easy to get past him, and his presence disappeared from the lobby as soon as I waited a little. It seemed he went to check the dining hall. Considering the route he took, he must’ve gone to either the shared rooms or the experiential classrooms afterward.

There was a brief pause. I headed straight to the vending machine without hesitation.

I had a hunch that the odds were high, and I was able to confirm my guess immediately.

There wasn't a girl sitting alone, instead, she was leaning against the vending machine, looking down.

RoyalMTLs



The hallway was chilly, so she might’ve been trying to keep warm, but that might be reading too much into it. I thought she would’ve noticed me eventually, but she didn't seem to be aware of my presence at all.

There was no change in expression, no sighs, as if nothing triggered a memory.

She just stared at a single point on the floor, not moving at all.

“The teachers probably don't even think there's a student here.”

I couldn't just keep watching her, so I decided to call out to her.

“Ah… Eh!?”

Yamamura, startled, turned her face towards me.

Her eyes were filled with fear, but as soon as she realized it was me, that fear dissipated.

“Wh-wh-wh-why are you here. .?”

“They'll get mad if they find you. I came to take you back before that happens.”

“I was confident that… I wouldn't be found… but if you found me, I can't use that excuse, can I…?”

Yamamura could certainly avoid the teachers' surveillance and even return to the shared room.

“. .How did you… notice I was gone?”

“There's no special reason. Hiyori just noticed you were gone, and she told me about it. She was worried.”

“I'm sorry… I just really wanted to be alone...”

“You can’t be alone in a shared room unless you lock yourself in the bathroom.”

She nodded slightly, indicating that I understood.

“Can I… stay here a little longer. .?”

“Do you have to be next to the vending machine?”

“Yes. When I listen to the sound of the vending machine, the unnecessary voices in my mind disappear. .”

This behavior seemed to be a standard way for Yamamura to protect herself.

“Then I guess this is the only place. So? Did the unnecessary voices disappear?”

“Wh-why are you asking that.. ?”

“If they don't disappear and I take you back, you might run away again.

Besides, I hate to say it, but it didn't look like it was working.”

“Usually, they stop immediately and it's resolved… usually.. ”

In other words, it was different now. From Yamamura's downcast expression, I could tell something serious was going on.

“If you have something bothering you, you should try expressing it.”

RoyalMTLs

“...No. I'm fine.”

“Really? I've been watching you here for about five minutes, and I didn't get that impression at all.”

“F-five minutes!? Really. .!?”

“Sorry, I lied. It was about 30 seconds.”

The fact that she didn't doubt even an arbitrary number of minutes suggested that she wasn't aware of her surroundings.

“Do you not like talking about your troubles with others?”

“It's not about liking or disliking, I just… don't have that kind of experience. .”

Even without discussing it much, it wasn’t hard to imagine Yamamura's life.

She probably spent a lot of time alone from a young age and spent more time with her mouth shut rather than open.

Even though our circumstances and situations were very different, I could tell that we had similar experiences.

“I'm not good at talking either. If there's a small problem, I tend to keep it to myself or try to solve it on my own. So I rarely have the opportunity to consult with someone about my troubles.”

“You too, Ayanokōji-kun? But to me… you seem normal. You seem to have a lot of friends. And Shiina-san too. She's bright and cute… I'm jealous.. ”

If you only look at the present, it probably wasn’t unreasonable to feel that way. However, everyone has had a less mature side in their past, different from who they are now.

“Can you picture how I was during the earlier part of last year?”

She probably wasn't helping Sakayanagi at the time, so she wouldn't know.

“. .Now that you mention it… I don't know anything.”

“Right? So you could only be sure that I wasn't a student who left an impression on many people. Fortunately, I was pulled along by my

lively classmates and was able to build some relationships, but that wasn’t something I arranged myself.”

“But why have you become like this now?”

“I wasn’t close with those around me, but at least in these last two years, I've started to try to close the distance, little by little. I think that's had an impact. I’ve started being able to express what I’ve wanted to say around that time.”

Yamamura still couldn't understand it.

“I'm… probably scared. Of voicing my thoughts. And of those thoughts spreading unintentionally. I'm scared of being known.. ”

Yamamura's style until now had been the opposite.

Picking up other people's thoughts in secret and passing them on to a third party. It wasn’t unreasonable to feel a strong resistance when transitioning from being the one who knows to being the one known.

“I won't force you. You should judge for yourself.”

Without making her too conscious, I slowly sat down in front of the vending machine, leaving some distance.

I could feel the slight vibration of the vending machine and the sound of the fan through my back.

Yamamura wasn’t the only one who feared loneliness.

Whether it was Yōsuke, Kei, Ryūen, Sakayanagi, or any other student, human nature was the same.

Unable to bear loneliness, they couldn't live alone.

That was why those who stood by you without asking anything in return were important.

Even though I didn't feel it applied to me, I understood that it was an answer.

The contradiction it contained.

No, that fact doesn't matter now.

The Yamamura in front of me wasn’t foolish.

She wasn’t seeking loneliness, nor did she think loneliness was right.

If there was someone who could offer a proper helping hand, she wouldn't make a mistake.

“. .Can I talk to you?”

Yamamura, who sensed no hostility, began to voice what she had been holding back.

“Since the last special exam ended, I've had one question in my mind.. ”

It was about the details of what happened in Class A during the survival and elimination special exam.

In a situation where defeat was certain and a dropout had to be chosen, Sakayanagi chose to draw lots. No matter how she decided, there would be pros and cons.

Since everyone didn’t have the same abilities, there would always be those who were dissatisfied, whether you directly named them or played rock-paper-scissors.

To Sakayanagi, who saw all students other than herself, as equals, the lottery was probably the most equitable decision.

However, she must’ve realized that it was a mistake.

Even if she was disliked by those around her, she should’ve kept the person that was most convenient for her.

If Kamuro had stayed, Sakayanagi's weakness wouldn’t have been exposed.

RoyalMTLs

[redacted]

But Sakayanagi wasn't the only one who was hurt.

Yamamura was standing on a side of the scales that separated the final two choices in the lottery, life and death.

“When I hesitated to draw a lot, Sakayanagi-san said she would stop the lottery. If you didn't have the courage to draw a lot, it was the same as abstaining.. ”

If she refused to draw for a long time, it was certainly a choice she could make. But Yamamura felt that it was too quick a judgment to call it a careful consideration.

“Did Sakayanagi value Kamuro and try to cut you off?”

Yamamura quietly nodded. It wasn’t just a guess, but Yamamura's conviction.

“I strongly felt that Sakayanagi-san wanted me to withdraw at that moment.”

And she continued.

“I understand that it can't be helped. At least, when comparing me and Kamuro-san, the value was clear. I didn't wish to have special treatment. I didn't even want to be greedy and wish to be considered a friend. But.. I was shocked to know that my existence was something that could be discarded in an instant.. even though she used me, saying I was a valuable person.. ”

Sakayanagi had found Yamamura, who had always been alone, and highly valued her ability. However, when she weighed her against Kamuro, she realized that the difference between the two was so great that it wasn't even a contest.

In the end, she knew Kamuro would be chosen, but she thought she would hesitate.

Yamamura's small wish, one that she belittled herself for, was mercilessly denied. “Sakayanagi may have indeed seen a difference between you and Kamuro, but whether she thinks you’re irrelevant or not, isn't that a separate issue?”

“. .I want to believe that, but.. ”

She probably hadn't had any contact with Sakayanagi since that day.

So she must’ve been questioning herself this whole time.

“I've been thinking about talking to Sakayanagi-san during this camp, but I couldn't muster the courage. I couldn't call out to her. .”

Although she had spotted her several times, it seemed she had never managed to speak to her. It must’ve been a considerable hurdle for Yamamura, who usually waited to be spoken to.

“More people were clinging to her than I thought. In the middle of it all, Tokitō-kun got into trouble. . It looked like a difficult time.”

RoyalMTLs

173

Yamamura expressed her thoughts, revealing Tokitō’s attempt to extend a helping hand to a dispirited Sakayanagi.

However, being witnessed led him to be summoned to an experiential classroom and interrogated.

“As a result, Tokitō-kun was.. forcibly restrained and threatened by Ryūen-kun and his group.”

It was probably an appropriate decision on Ryūen’s side, who was tense in preparation for the end-of-year exams.

If the opponent they were going to fight in the future was unexpectedly weak, they would either leave them alone or weaken them further. Although some parts were too radical to ignore.

He seems to have established a strong sense of alertness, intending to approach the next end-of-grade exam thoroughly prepared.

For Ryūen, who was confirmed to compete with Sakayanagi in the end-of-year exam, it was natural to think that he didn’t want to stimulate and revive her.

He seemed desperate to take advantage of the situation where she’d been tripped up by an unexpected defeat.

In other words, it was proof that Sakayanagi was an opponent who couldn’t be underestimated and lacked weaknesses.

Tokitō’s purge in the flow of things was expected to come to a fast end.

However, Tokitō’s groupmates, Hōsen and Utomiya, joined in, and there was a risk of a brawl. It seemed that the situation was resolved when the number of students who heard the commotion suddenly increased all at once, and they dispersed.

RoyalMTLs

174







“But I'm impressed. You watched the whole thing and no one noticed?”

“That's all I’m able to do.. ”

Yamamura was perfectly suited to gather information, utilizing her lack of presence.

Sakayanagi's skill in promptly recognizing and utilizing that ability was once again impressive.

This time, Yamamura was able to witness the scene because she herself was concerned about Sakayanagi.

Indeed, Sakayanagi was now on a downward slope.

“What do you want to do?”

“Huh...?”

“As a classmate and as someone who’s likely to be abandoned by Sakayanagi, what do you want me to do?”

“I, um...”

“I want to hear your feelings.”

“I have. . two wishes. One is.. I want to know what she thought of me then, and what she thinks of me now. “

“And the other one?”

"... I think... Sakayanagi-san doesn't suit losing.. I don't want to see her struggle in the end-of-year exam. . I hope she wins."

There were no personal calculations, no wanting her to win just because she was a Class A student, just a genuine concern for a student.

"Is that so…? I see."

Sakayanagi might need a little push. And soon.

"Why don't you try telling her? No one has the right to condemn your actions."

"What if. . what if. . she doesn't even want to listen to me. .?"

"In that case, let's say, I'll get stuck in between some vending machines and talk it over."

When I told her that, Yamamura looked at the vending machine a little shyly and nodded.



1

It was just before 1 a.m. on the fourth day of the training camp.

Long past lights-out, Nagumo was quietly walking down the hallway alone.

He knew he'd get a little warning if he was found, but there was no clear penalty.

Of course, this wasn’t the case if he resisted, such as not returning to his room after being found.

Considering the risks, it had already been demonstrated using other students the day before.

Above all, he’d investigated that the teachers' patrols would end at midnight.

Therefore, Nagumo was hardly worried about being found.

The lights in the lobby were kept to a minimum, and only the sound of the compressors of the lined-up vending machines annoyingly reached his ears at such a time. He passed through the lobby and moved on to the cafeteria area, where no one was supposed to be.

He couldn't feel anyone's presence, but his intuition was working.

She's right in front of me, he thought.

“You came as promised.”

From the back of the darkened cafeteria, such a cute voice reached him.

“I've never refused a woman's call before,” he spoke into the darkness.

“Yawn, what a cheesy line. Honestly, I hate your type.”

“Relax. I'm not into women like you either.”

Nagumo, who snorted in amusement, stepped into the cafeteria with his hands still in his pockets.

“So, there was no need to threaten me. That might’ve been an unnecessary move.” As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, a female student emerged.

“Amasawa, did you really want to be alone with me that much?”

“Opportunities to be alone with a former student council president don't come around often, do they?”

“I want to confirm something. What would you have done if I hadn't come?”

“I would’ve beaten up your precious Asahina-senpai, Nagumo-senpai.”

Many would’ve laughed off Amasawa's response as a joke, seeing her smiling face.

And Nagumo did the same, but his eyes weren't laughing. He was convinced that the first-year student in front of him would’ve carried out her threat.



“Did you show your skills in archery with Ayanokōji to make your threats more effective?”

“Well, yeah. If I don't show that I'm capable, people might dismiss a woman's threats.”

“Okay, let's get to the point. So, why did you threaten me to call me out?”

“There's a problem that only you can solve, Nagumo-senpai. That's what I want to talk about.”

“You had plenty of chances to talk during the exchange meeting.”

While responding, Nagumo internally braced himself.

He sensed that the girl in front of him was not just any girl—her presence was faint.

A student with a strange presence, similar to Ayanokōji.

And the owner of unusual abilities, one that he had glimpsed during the archery match.

That was more than enough to put him on guard.

“By the way, I'm thinking of seriously injuring you, Nagumo-senpai.”

“Seriously injuring me? That's quite sudden.”

Amasawa, who was trying to enjoy Nagumo's surprise at the unexpected proposal, laughed in disbelief.

“Is it too unrealistic? Or do you think you can't lose to a girl?”

“I wonder. Maybe it's both.”

“Will you run away?”

In this situation, Amasawa used her words to corner Nagumo, to make sure he wouldn't escape.

A measure to prevent the former student council president from running away like a scared rabbit.

But Nagumo's demeanor was confident, showing no signs of worry.

“Can I at least hear the reason?”

“The reason? Hmm, let's just say it's a personal vendetta.”

“Personal vendetta, huh?”

“Yes, a personal vendetta. Now, if we take too long, the teachers might find us, and it would be embarrassing if the fact that you were beaten by a girl got out, so can we start?”

“Just to confirm, do you really think you can beat me?”

“Haha, I've been waiting for you to say that. Let's give it a try.”

“It's easy to say, but there’s nothing in it for me. It would be a problem if I retaliated against a girl who came at me out of personal vendetta.”

“It's pointless to resist anyway, you can just let me beat you up. That way, you'll lose your pride, but you won't get penalized by the school. I recommend it.”

“Aren't you afraid of being expelled?”



“Of course not. If I get expelled, I have nothing to lose.”

“So, persuasion is impossible?”

“Yes, I have no 'value.' In other words, I'm invincible.”

Nagumo slowly pulled his hands out of his pockets.

If he had been holding his phone, Amasawa would’ve immediately jumped on him to prevent him from calling for help.

“I didn't bring my phone.”

“Oh...”

Amasawa had slightly licked her own lips.

“Did you get cautious because of the recording? Go ahead and answer without holding back. State the reasons behind this so-called personal vendetta.”

“You teamed up with Ayanokōji-senpai and expelled Yagami Takuya, right?

It's payback.”

Nagumo had been considering various things, but he was completely surprised by the unexpected.

“Yagami? Don't tell me, you were Yagami's girlfriend?”

“That's not it, but we were like siblings who had surpassed that kind of relationship.”

“Then aren’t you targeting the wrong person? I wasn't the one who led that.”

“I know that. I told you, this is just a personal vendetta. Unfortunately, even if I stand on my head, I can't beat Ayanokōji-senpai, and I thought about beating up Karuizawa-senpai and expelling her, but that's a bit scary.”

“Scary? Of getting revenge from Ayanokōji? I don’t think he cares about what happens to Karuizawa.”

“Ayanokōji-senpai has his own goals. I don't want to interfere with that.”

By expelling Karuizawa, it would interfere with Ayanokōji's plan.

As someone who knew the circumstances, Amasawa thought she couldn't do such a thing.

“People like Nagumo-senpai are well-suited for stories where the character ultimately faces their downfall at the conclusion.”

“It suits me, huh?”

Usually, Nagumo would’ve been displeased and angry if such words were said to him.

But now, emptiness welled up before such emotions.

Thinking it was a waste to spend any more time, Amasawa stepped forward.

“Last year and the year before, the one always causing a stir at this school was Horikita Manabu.”

But something unexpected began, and she stopped.

“This year it's Ayanokōji. I'm sure it'll be the same next year after I'm gone. I was indeed enrolled at this school for three years. I also served as student council RoyalMTLs

president. Even if I attracted attention within my year, it didn't resonate at all with the upper or lower years. There's nothing more empty than that.”

That was why he desperately continued fighting.

“I realized it just before graduation. It's not Horikita-senpai or Ayanokōji that’s to blame. It's me who couldn't reach that realm.”

That was why he couldn't get angry when told that downfall suited him.

If only Nagumo was more capable.

The names Horikita, Nagumo, and Ayanokōji would’ve been treated as equals. Realizing this, there would be no need to seek clarity in challenges or establish a hierarchy; they would’ve been on par.

“But… that's not the case. I wouldn't have been satisfied with that situation either.” If the three of them were lined up, he’d still want to rank them and be number one.

“That's why I won't quit this game. Next year I'll do it again with Horikita-senpai. And someday I'll have a real match with Ayanokōji and settle it.”

A part of him could be honest because he was talking to Amasawa, who had nothing to do with him.

Although he didn't vocalize it, Nagumo was grateful for this situation.

“Before you put anything into action, I have a gift for you.”

Amasawa, who wasn’t at all interested before, was intrigued by Nagumo laying everything bare.

So she stopped and listened to the end.

“A gift? I'm the type to throw away presents from men I'm not interested in without opening them.”

“I see. Then it might end with you throwing it away without opening it.

After all, it's just a message from Ayanokōji.”

“. .Ayanokōji-senpai.. ?”

Her body stiffened involuntarily at the sound of his name.

“If it's a lie to save yourself, it will only widen the wound.”

“Believe my words or not, it's up to you. The message from Ayanokōji is

'You still have value. Don't waste it.'“

The reason Amasawa approached Nagumo at the exchange meeting was all for this moment of vengeance.

Ayanokōji noticed something suspicious about Amasawa from the first day.

Pretending not to know the rules of the exchange event, despite having obtained all the information in advance from Tsukishiro. The emergence of a contradiction due to the lie, fabricated to prevent Nagumo from realizing the true reason for approaching him.

RoyalMTLs

The moment she heard that message, Amasawa completely lost her will to fight. “Is this just a coincidence? The message seems to have foreseen even the fact that you would despairingly declare yourself someone without 'value.'“

The fact that Amasawa was targeting Nagumo and that she would take drastic actions because she had nothing to lose.

What he’d been told at the time of their parting actually happened right in front of Nagumo.

He's a guy I don't like. Nagumo cursed in his heart.

Yet, Nagumo felt a slight sense of satisfaction.

Now, it would be a waste to seriously fight Ayanokōji.

“I'm tired, so I'm going back first. You should return to your room before you catch a cold.”

Nagumo left the dining hall, leaving Amasawa standing still.

RoyalMTLs

181



Chapter 8:

The Courage to Step Forward

IT WAS SUNDAY, the fourth day of the training camp. Today was the day to say goodbye to the familiar campsite. We had to leave the accommodation at 10

o'clock.

The fight with Amasawa was set before breakfast, at 7 o'clock.

Before 6 o'clock, after waking up, I came to the still dimly lit lobby.

I had some time to spare until Horikita and Ibuki showed up from their shared room, and considering the risk of waking up the sleeping students, I decided to use my phone to kill time.

The lobby was chilly and cold, perhaps because the heating had just turned on. “It seems everything is fine.”

In the silent corridor, I muttered to myself while looking at my phone screen.

The only message left from Nagumo, which had arrived in the middle of the night, was 'I won't say thank you.'

If Amasawa had committed a crime, the rest of the camp would’ve been a big mess.

After a while, as I watched the sunrise through the window, I heard footsteps.

“It's still quite early in the morning after all, isn't it?”

The one who approached me with a sleepy voice was Tsubaki from the same group. The probability that it was a coincidence was pretty high, but…

“For the past two days, I heard from Hashimoto-senpai that you’ve been getting up early in the morning.”

Especially since going out in the morning was something I didn’t need to hide, even if someone were to ask, the impact would be negligible.

Even if Tsubaki noticed the special training, the probability of the information reaching Amasawa wasn’t that high.

“So, you came looking for me?”

“Not so much looking for you, but I just thought I'd check if you were here.”

Tsubaki, who didn't change her attitude towards anyone, looked at me with a slightly suspicious look.

“But if you were here, that would change things quite a bit.”

“I don't think there's any reason for you to come see me anymore. The special exam given only to first-year students has been canceled.”

The student who expelled me would be given 20 million private points.

That was the hidden special exam known only to a few, as Tsukishiro was involved.

“I wasn't interested in the prize money from the start, but I'm disappointed.

I'm lamenting the loss of the right to expel you in a dignified manner.”

“That's dangerous talk. I don't remember you ever resenting me.”

I looked back on my school life, but of course, there was nothing to worry about. “Don't you think there are more things you don't realize? People unknowingly incur resentment, you know?”

I could somewhat understand what Tsubaki was trying to say. It was true that there were both people who knew they’d be resented and still chose actions that led to resentment, and those who didn’t think they would be resented but ended up being resented anyway.

“I can’t tell if you're joking or serious.”

“Someone might come here, so why don't we take a walk?”

“It's still dark outside.”

It was getting a bit brighter, but it was still hard to see and it was quite cold.

“It's not inconvenient for you, right?”

“Well, okay.”

Anyway, I was planning to go outside to accompany Horikita and Ibuki for their final special training.

The two of us left the lobby and started walking outside in the cold.

“I thought it would be snowing quite a bit in the mountains of Tochigi, but it's not as much as I thought.”

“February has a drastic temperature difference. Maybe it's because we've had a few warm days recently.”

In reality, it wasn’t completely snow-free, and there was a bit of snow left on the side of the road. The water droplets on the cars, presumably belonging to the staff here, were slightly frozen and covered with a thin film.

“Do you like snow, Senpai?”

“I don't particularly like or dislike it. I just think I enjoy the scenery when it snows. Do you like snow, Tsubaki?”

“. .I guess I do. At least more than you, Senpai.”

She squatted down on the side of the road, picked up a bit of the remaining snow with her fingertips, and stood up.

She placed snow on her palm and showed it to me.

“Can you look at this?”

When she asked, I stared at the snow on her palm.

Because it was a small amount, it melted and disappeared quickly due to the warmth of her hand.

“Being in this school feels like being cut off from the outside world, doesn't it? Who do you want to see first when you graduate next

year, Senpai?”

“You ask strange questions.”

“Maybe.”

For me, the only people I knew beyond their faces in the outside world were my father and his associates.

I didn’t have any one-sided feelings of wanting to see any of them.

“Probably just my family.”

So I chose a safe answer that wouldn't surprise anyone.

“Family. . Anyone else?”

“Not really. I don't have any close friends, so that's about it.”

“I see. . Then, can I ask you one more strange question?”

Tsubaki kept asking questions that seemed to have meaning and yet didn't.

“Imagine if you had a brother, and you didn't know about his existence because your parents hid it from you for years. But one day, you were told he was actually family, would you be able to love him as a family member? Of course, assuming there is a genuine blood connection.”

“That's a difficult question.”

As far as I knew, I didn't have any siblings.

But, this was a hypothetical situation where they’d be hidden, so in reality, it was possible.

If that man had a son other than me. . I wonder how I would feel when I met him. I was interested in the thought for the first time, but that didn't mean I felt any unexpected emotions.

“I might not feel anything. Of course, I think it would greatly depend on the other person's personality and situation.”

If we were raised completely separately, it would be difficult to suddenly accept and interact with him as a family member.

“I see. I think I would probably feel the same way as you. But, if I knew that the other person had special circumstances and a sad past, I would want to grow closer. I would like to know more about my sister, who I had been separated from.” She’d asked me about a brother, but Tsubaki used a sister as an example. It wasn’t unreasonable to imagine that she was just comparing it to the same gender, but the way she expressed her emotions sounded like it was based on her own experience.

“I am confused. Ayanokōji-senpai, from this school—”

(TL NOTE: This sentence appears to be intentionally vague and fragmented.)

RoyalMTLs

184

Just as she was about to continue, Tsubaki's gaze shifted to the building behind us.

The promised time was approaching, so Horikita and Ibuki appeared.

And for some reason, Kushida was also there.

“We've been interrupted.. Let's talk again later.”

Tsubaki seemed to have no intention of letting the other students hear her story, and she returned to the building, shivering from the cold.

She gently nodded to Horikita and the others as they passed by, but she didn't say anything.

“That was Tsubaki-san, right? What were you talking about at this hour?”

“She said she woke up early. The training camp is over today, so we were just chatting. Though, why is Kushida here?”

“Ibuki-san here carelessly leaked about her rematch with Amasawa-san.

Carelessly.”

She emphasized the word 'carelessly' twice, expressing how foolish it was.

“It's not my fault! It's Kushida's fault for tricking me into it!”

“That's what you call being defiant.”

“Shut up! It doesn't matter if there's one or two more spectators!”

“So that's it. I heard that you're going to fight with Amasawa-san, and I got interested.”

“If both of you agree, I have nothing to say, but who are you cheering for?”

My personal interest lies there.

“For me, it's like a win-win situation no matter who loses.”

She had a dispute with Amasawa during the cultural festival.

In other words, no matter who won or lost, it would be a satisfying match for Kushida.

Kushida looked back at Tsubaki, who had already disappeared from our sight. “About Tsubaki-san earlier, was it about love? I've been thinking for a while, but Ayanokōji-kun, you're surprisingly popular, aren't you?”

“Is that so?”

Tsubaki's goal was completely different, but it seemed Kushida had assumed such. In sync with that, Horikita also started talking.

“But you're aware of it, right? You're dating Karuizawa-san after all.”

“On the contrary, let me ask you in return, are you confident that you’re popular?”

“Why me? I'm not popular.”

“At least Sudō has shown some interest, hasn't he?”

“Really? Horikita? Haha, you'd make a good match with that idiot.”

RoyalMTLs

“Stop calling Sudō-kun an idiot. He's become several times smarter than you now.” “But I can knock him down with my kick!”

I didn’t understand how the basis of comparison turned into combat ability, but if he really tried, Sudō would probably be stronger.

“Well, but—”

After looking at me from top to bottom, Ibuki spat out forcefully.

“How this guy’s so popular—I just don't understand at allllllllllllllllllllllll.”

It was the first time I had seen someone hold such a prolonged ‘l’ sound in their words.

“You feel the same way as well, don't you, Kushida?”

“Eh?”

“Not 'eh?' I'm asking, you don't understand Ayanokōji's appeal either, do you?” “..Well, it's not that he doesn't have any appeal, right? If you look around, you can see that there are no other decent men, right? Compared to such riffraffs, he might look better.”

It seemed like a compliment, but it probably wasn’t.

“I think they're the same to me. .!”

“Then, if you had to date either Ryūen-kun or Ayanokōji-kun, who would you choose, Ibuki-san?”

At Kushida's question, Ibuki fell silent for a while, maintaining a puzzled expression.

Eventually, she broke the silence and came to a conclusion.

“I can't choose between curry-flavored shit and shit-flavored curry.”

Horikita and Kushida quickly distanced themselves from Ibuki to avoid getting involved.

No one wanted to hear such a topic out loud.

If I ran away, she’d probably chase after me, so I had no choice but to become a human shield.

“What kind of comparison is that?”

I decided to retort for the time being.

“What do you mean, ‘what kind’? It is what it is.”

I didn't mind any analogy, but that comparison hurt a bit.

And I wondered whether I was the former or the latter.

No, I don't want to be either.

But… I deliberately thought about it.

If I had to eat one of them, I would choose the latter.

Even if the taste was improved, it would be extremely dangerous to ingest a large amount of E. coli. On the other hand, the latter would cause great damage to RoyalMTLs



your taste and smell buds, but it’s still fundamentally curry. In other words, the adverse effects on the human body would be greatly limited.

However, if your brain were to determine that it was dangerous solely from your sense of smell, you may suffer unexpected health risks..

“What's wrong, Ayanokōji? You're spacing out.”

“It's nothing.. ”

I thought too deeply and felt a little unwell, so I decided to forget about it.

1

Since the rematch was right after the special training, we finished after some warm-ups.

“We've done what we can. Now let’s see how far you’ll get in the real match.”

Without taking too much time, I called out to the two of them as their breathing calmed down.

“Yes, thank you. Thanks to you, our chances have increased.”

Horikita, who bowed her head politely, urged Ibuki to thank me as well.

Whether she had no intention of following suit, Ibuki turned away and snorted.

“I won't say thank you. I think my way of thanking you is to kick you someday.”

“If that's your idea of gratitude, I don't want it in the future.”

“Really. .”

“Well, I'll go back first, so do your best.”

“Eh? Aren't you going to watch, Ayanokōji-kun? I thought we were going to watch together.”

Kushida, who had been watching from a distance, seemed to think we’d be together the whole time.

“If it's revealed that I'm involved in this matter, it will only harm Horikita and Ibuki.”

If I made Amasawa suspicious, the surprise attack wouldn’t work.

To increase the odds of winning by even one percent, it was better not to be present.

“I see. Then I'll make sure to watch it all. I even brought my phone as well.”

She probably thought that it’d be a great opportunity to take photos if anything embarrassing were to occur.

Since Kushida declared that she’d be the witness, I decided to leave that role to her. Besides, I had one more thing to do this morning.

Just before 7 o'clock, naturally, there were hardly any students using the park. That was why the student I had called here was sitting on a bench, waiting for me to arrive.

“It's cold, isn't it? You didn't have to come earlier than the promised time.”

“Don't worry about it. It’s not often that you call out to me, Ayanokōji-kun. I enjoyed waiting.”

“Can I sit next to you?”

“I've kept it open for that purpose.”

Sakayanagi, who was smiling, welcomed me as usual.

“I'll get straight to the point. I've got Yamamura waiting in the dog park nearby.”

“Eh? The dog park? Yamamura-san? What do you mean?”

“Didn't you expect Yamamura's name to come up?”

“She was in the same exchange meeting group as you, wasn't she? Did she do something problematic?”

Pretending not to know, Sakayanagi made up a reason.

“You knew about it. That Yamamura and I were in the same group.”

“That's a surprise. Naturally, I had already figured out which group each student in the class was assigned to when we got on the bus. I was just observing this time, so I didn't interfere with the exchange meeting.”

Of course, I already knew that Sakayanagi had figured out where all of her classmates were assigned.

So, once I told her what I was about to say, Sakayanagi wouldn't be able to escape. “On the second day of the camp, when we talked in the lobby, do you remember what you said? 'Hashimoto-kun and Morishita-san are in the same group. How is Hashimoto-kun doing?' That's what you said. It's impossible for you to overlook Class A’s group assignments, as you seem to pride yourself on. Yet, you didn't even mention Yamamura's name, did you?”

This proved that Sakayanagi was subconsciously avoiding talking about Yamamura.

“That's—”

No matter what excuse she made, she couldn't twist the conclusion that she

'avoided' it.

". .Yes, that's right. I admit that I didn't mention Yamamura-san's name at that time. But it's none of your business, is it, Ayanokōji-kun?"

"Indeed, it's none of my business. I'm probably meddling in others' affairs by doing this."

But I continued. Sakayanagi knew everything, so I didn't beat around the bush. "You lost Kamuro. And at the same time, you were entrusted with her feelings. But that doesn't mean everything is back to normal. You haven't even finished choosing who to keep by your side, have you?"

Beside me, a white breath escaped from Sakayanagi's lips.

"Indeed, I haven't decided yet, but are you suggesting that I should appoint Yamamura-san?"



"That's not what I meant. People have their own strengths and weaknesses."

It was hard to imagine Yamamura boldly supporting Sakayanagi.

"The survival and elimination special exam—there are some people that still seem to be trapped in that exam."

". .Are you talking about me and Yamamura-san?"

"That's right. Yamamura is suffering and can't move forward, even though her situation is very different from yours."

The two who had yet to complete the survival and elimination special exam.

If Sakayanagi was the light of Class A, Yamamura was the shadow.

It was safe to say they had an inseparable relationship that couldn't be cut off. “If you're still bothered by that, you should resolve it.”

“. .What you’re saying is strange, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Strange?”

“I thought you were just going to stand on the sidelines from now on. Isn't your unnecessary intervention excessive?”

“That's right. I also thought until a little while ago that I should just stand on the sidelines from here on.”

Sakayanagi no longer needed any further assistance.

It was enough to wait for her to stand up on her own.

However, the situation had changed significantly since before the special exam that led Hashimoto to betray them.

That was why I was doing what I thought needed to be done now.

“I don't particularly want you to have anything to do with Yamamura. I don't have any such hopes at all. Whether you want to get closer or more distant, or even cut ties, is up to you. But if you're going to talk, now is the only time.”

Neither parties would benefit from postponing the issue.

“Wouldn't it be smartest to leave everything behind at this training camp?”

“...But...”

Sakayanagi's frustrating resistance.

I wasn’t one to talk, but she was just as bad at friendships.

She didn’t know what to do because she had no prior experience.

“As I said earlier, I have Yamamura waiting in the dog park. She's been waiting for you in the cold for over 20 minutes now.”

“If that's the case, aren't you being a bit mean, Ayanokōji-kun? The time you promised to meet me was 7 o'clock. We haven't even been talking for ten minutes yet. Doesn't that mean she's been waiting since before that?”

From Yamamura's perspective, waiting for an unnecessarily long time would make the experience quite tough.

RoyalMTLs

190

From Sakayanagi's perspective, she would be overwhelmed by guilt for making Yamamura wait.

“This is also part of my strategy.” I told her.

She was quick to notice these kinds of things. It was indeed Sakayanagi.

“I guess there's no choice. I can't let her catch a cold because of me. Let's go pick her up for now.”

Sakayanagi, who couldn’t admit her weakness straight away, stood up for an appropriate reason.

That was fine.

If she spoke one-on-one with Yamamura, they'd be able to talk honestly.

"It's a bit of a distance, but even you can walk there in about five minutes.

Go ahead."

I also stood up and told her so.

However… Sakayanagi didn't step forward.

"What's wrong?"

My question was met with no response, and a brief silence ensued.

During that time, Sakayanagi tried to start walking, but she didn't move forward at all.

"...My... leg..."

Her leg? Could it be hurting? I thought for a moment, but..

"My leg.. I can't move it.. I wonder why."

It was immediately clear that it was not a physical problem, but a mental one. Even though she acted bravely through her words, as she's typically like, her body didn't seem to agree.

It seems that the change in her heart, the change that Kamuro brought to light, was also evident here.

"Don't feel like you can show this side to anyone else?"

". .Yes, that's right.. "

I grabbed Sakayanagi's left hand as she stood bewildered, unable to walk.

Having waited for me before the set time, her fingertips were very cold.

“Then, just for now, I'll be your legs. That should make it easy for you to walk.” “...I'm sorry.”

“It's okay. It's my own meddling that started this.”

After that, we moved forward slowly without exchanging words.

RoyalMTLs

191



RoyalMTLs

192

Eventually, the dog park came into view.

Seeing Yamamura standing in the shadow of the big tree in the distance, Sakayanagi raised her hand slowly to make her presence known, despite her confusion. When I gently pushed Sakayanagi's back, she started walking on her own, albeit with a cane.

From there on, it wasn’t my place to interfere.

Sakayanagi and Yamamura would have to talk and find their own solutions.

Expecting a bright future, I turned away and left.

Thus, the three-night, four-day exchange meeting came to an end.

RoyalMTLs

193

Epilogue:

Who is the Challenger?

WITH THE END OF the exchange meeting, an event that brought changes in relationships, our usual school life resumed.

Recently, it had become customary for me to meet up with Kei in my room or lobby every morning and go to school together, but today

was different. I left on my own this time, about 20 minutes earlier than usual.

I got off the elevator, arrived at the lobby, and went outside.

It was unusually cold today, perhaps because of the strong wind.

Soon, February would be over.

Next month would be busier than ever.

First, I had to deal with the issue concerning Karuizawa Kei.

Nothing special was needed for this.

I just needed to proceed with the process as originally planned.

Next, the issue concerning Ichinose Honami.

The leader of a class that was struggling to compete with the other three, with nothing special among the four classes.

My prediction was correct—Class D was in decline as the end of the second-year approached.

However. . unlike Kei's problem, some adjustments might’ve been needed.

I could decide after the end-of-year exam results came out.

No matter how much Ichinose grew, there would be no major changes.

I thought I just needed to proceed with the plan as I originally intended.

But…

One problem arose that wasn’t in the plan.

That forced me to, in turn, make changes.

There would be some negative effects as a result, but not all changes would be bad. As soon as I started walking to school, I stopped.

“You're early.”

In my field of vision, I spotted the person I was meeting up with.

There was still some time until the scheduled appointment, but they were already waiting.

They didn't notice me and occasionally breathed out white clouds as if they were cold, but they soon noticed my gaze.

“Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun.”

As I approached, a morning greeting came flying.

“Good morning. Sorry for calling you out so early.”

RoyalMTLs



“It's okay. So, what do you want to talk to me about? Something hard to say over the phone?”

As classmates, we knew each other's contact information. Normally, we could communicate using our phones.

She questioned why I didn't do that.

“In a way, maybe.”

Horikita lined up next to me and soon started walking by my side.

“In a way? That's a scary way to put it.”

“There's nothing to be wary of.”

“Really?”

She looked at me with doubt in her eyes, but there was no prickliness like when we first met.

It was a natural friendship, with a tenderness that could be described as such.

“I often talk to you about special exams and class-related matters, but sometimes I want to talk about things that have nothing to do with that.”

“Huh? Sorry, I don't understand. What do you mean?”

I regretted that my words were clumsier than I’d imagined.

I had thought of a more casual way to say it, but I decided against it because it might bother her depending on how she took it.

“I wanted to have a meaningless conversation with you, unrelated to our interests. Does that make sense to you?”

“...I see?”

She seemed to be in thought for a moment, but apparently, she didn't understand.

“We’ve been classmates for a while. It's not like we'll have the opportunity to talk forever.”

“Forever is an exaggeration. Sure, that's true, but we still have over a year until graduation, right? We don't have to arrange meetings like this, I can chat anytime.”

“What if I were to be expelled at the end-of-year exam?”

“That's a jump. I don't think you'll be expelled. But seeing how easily you get common sense questions wrong, maybe there's a possibility.. ”

After giving a serious answer, she laughed a little, finding her own words amusing.

“Are you really worried that you might be expelled? Is that why you wanted to talk so early in the morning.. ?”

“The last special exam has become a bit of a trauma for me.”

“Then why don't you try to remember more common sense questions?

You're good at studying.”

She retorted, expressing that I was aware of my weak points.

RoyalMTLs

“So, can you memorize game and anime terms as effectively as studying for other subjects?”

“Huh…? I wonder. When Onizuka tried pushing me to play a game before, they were talking about DP. . something, DEF something, cooldown something, but my brain refused to remember those words and their meanings.. ”

“It's a similar feeling. I just can't seem to want to remember it.”

I wanted to absorb as much information as I could, but I also had such preferences.

“Don't worry. From a class perspective, your existence is essential. Even if you struggle with common sense questions, I'll always back you up. In other words, you won't be expelled.”

Horikita made that clear.

“That's reassuring.”

I tapped Horikita’s shoulder with a gentle chop from my left hand. She was taking this conversation seriously.

“Do you really worry about your own expulsion? It doesn't seem like it.

What's the real issue?”

“Actually, I'm not worried about myself, but about the possibility of your expulsion.”

“In reality, that seems more likely.”

She showed a slightly annoyed expression, but it didn't seem serious, and she quickly returned to normal.

Compared to when she first entered, Horikita's emotions had become much more varied.

“The last special exam resulted in only Kamuro’s expulsion. However, next time, there might be more.”

“. .You're expecting new dropouts.”

“Yeah. At least one from our year. Depending on the exam content and its developments, we could lose several people.”

“...That many?”

“It's better to think that way. The school has said it before—second-year students are progressing through school life with few to no dropouts.”

“So they're going to force an exam to increase the number of dropouts?

That's.. a bit extreme. Our year didn't have that many weak spots. It should’ve been a good thing.”

If you looked at it positively, it was true.

But sometimes, a sieve was needed.

“It depends on how it looks from the outside. For example, the government is also involved in the school’s operation. If the goal is to drop ten people a year, and we second-year students do not meet that standard, then it would be nice if RoyalMTLs



they simply saw us as exceptional, but it's unknown how much the people at the top are aware of and acknowledge the finer details of those numbers.”

“To comply with the government's policy, they'll make the rules more strict?” “Last year, because there were no dropouts, it was forcibly changed from zero to one expulsion. I wouldn't be surprised if several people will get expelled in the upcoming end-of-year exam.”

The third-year’s advice from winter break—that might not have been just for the survival and elimination special exam. But in reality, the third-years probably didn't know about the second-year students’ future.

“Aren’t you overthinking. .?”

“Of course, it's just speculation. I just feel that way based on what I can see right now. I can't provide any concrete evidence.”

“In that case, I guess so. I'd like you to work hard too.”

She requested cooperation half-seriously, half-jokingly.

My answer to that was already decided.

“If there's a situation at the end of the school year where I can help, I intend to cooperate as much as possible.”

“That's a rather unusual answer for you. Between the special training and now, you've been a bit too cooperative lately. Even with the Amasawa-san situation, you didn't look displeased even once.”

“I’ve left many things to others so far. I have to lend a hand at least a little.”

“That's a noble reason, but.. it's still not like you to become so cooperative.”

“I wonder. There might be a catch.”

“I'd rather not have that, if possible.”

At that point in the conversation, Horikita and I made eye contact.

We probably both thought of the same thing simultaneously.

“Haha, you invited me to chat, but in the end, we're talking about the exam.”

“Right. There's no point in calling you here if it's like this. Alright, let's end the discussion about the exam.”

With that, I put an end to this topic.

“I heard about the results from Kushida, it seems you fought well, but you lost.” “She's really strong, isn't she? Even if we fought two against one, we still couldn't win in the end.”

However, I heard that Amasawa, after being hit a few times, was able to analyze them.

“You should be able to have a better fight next time.”

“Two against one?”

“Do you dislike it?”

RoyalMTLs



“Well, yes. Ibuki-san said she wouldn't team up with me again.”

“It's fine. She forgets things quickly.”

Horikita laughed at my exaggeration.

“By the way, it looked like Amasawa-san noticed your influence right after the fight started. But she seemed very happy. What's your relationship with her?”

“She's my ex-girlfriend.”

“Are you serious? Or was that a joke?”

“It was a bad joke.”

“If that's the case, it wasn’t funny at all.”

A harsh response came back.

“Someday, I want to hear the truth from your own mouth, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“I'll think about it. But don't expect—”

“I'm not.”

Horikita narrowed her eyes and smiled in response.

At that moment, Horikita, who was changing colors, showed a smile.

I guess I was also learning a lot from Horikita.

This relationship between us would end soon.

Horikita would have some tough experiences in the future.

But there is no need to keep worrying.

Her growth and the support of her classmates should guide her.

RoyalMTLs

1

Rewinding time a little from my commute to school with Horikita and the exchange meeting.

It was when Hashimoto came to my room asking for help shortly before the exchange meeting began.

Why did Hashimoto commit this seemingly reckless act of betrayal?

Why did he take the risk at that time?

The circumstances were explained in detail by the person himself.

". .Before I tell you what's next, there's something I really need to confirm with you."

Hashimoto must've had an extraordinary determination to make such a decision.

What he wanted to confirm.

It was how much information I had at the moment.

That was an important factor that this man couldn't miss.

"I've been tempted to betray Ryūen since before the previous special exam.

Not just temporarily teaming up, but moving classes based on that premise."

It was obvious, but there was no merit for Hashimoto, who was in Class A, to move to Ryūen's class.

Except for cases like Katsuragi who lost his place, if you were to look at it from a while ago, Class A should've established a more stable position than its current status.

"Of course, I didn't take such an invitation seriously at first. However, right after that, I heard from Ryūen that if I didn't move classes, I'd definitely regret it at the end of the school year."

"Regret? Is it because Ryūen himself is confident that he'll win?"

"It seems that even you don't know about the content of the bet that Ryūen and Sakayanagi agreed on."

“A bet, huh? I don't know if it applies, but I've heard a little about the exchange in the last deserted island exam. Unfortunately, I don't know the details.”

After I told him what I knew, Hashimoto rubbed his fingers together and made a sound, as if to prove that this was what he wanted to confirm in advance.

“I'm glad. Then there was a reason for me to come here.”

Accepting that the key points of the story matched, Hashimoto slightly raised the corners of his mouth and smiled.

Afterward, Hashimoto detailed the bet that the two made.

“When I first heard about it, I thought it was a joke, but it turns out it's serious.”

RoyalMTLs

[redacted]

“I see. So you had a reason to betray them during the survival and elimination special exam.”

It was clear that it wasn't a spur-of-the-moment idea at that point.

“It's not unreasonable to doubt the bet itself, right? No matter how you look at it, Sakayanagi is at a disadvantage.”

“That's true. However, Sakayanagi wouldn't choose to reject the bet just because of the disadvantage.”

She was the type who, like Ryūen, believed in her ultimate victory without a doubt.

RoyalMTLs

200





"Do you think Sakayanagi simply conceded or were there certain conditions set?" Hashimoto, unable to suppress his overflowing emotions, leaned forward and asked.

"Both are possible, but the details of the bet will eventually come to light.

Considering that, it must be the latter. She must've allowed Ryūen to accumulate private points."

"Nice. That's fast. Yes, if that's the case, there's plenty of room to maneuver."

"Who else knows about this bet besides you and the parties involved?"

"Unless Ryūen was lying, no one. You're the fourth. Well, both would hate to lose the bet by having it leaked."

That speculation was probably correct. It would be preferable to make it public after everything had been confirmed.

The only one Ryūen leaked it to was Hashimoto, but that must've been a considerable risk.

If it was around the time the deserted island exam ended, about half a year had passed since then.

"It took a while. . for this day to come."

Having kept the secret hidden, Hashimoto had been worrying alone.

“Whether Sakayanagi wins or Ryūen wins, honestly, I couldn't make a judgment.. No, I was kinda thinking that Sakayanagi might win.”

As if he had momentarily lied, Hashimoto immediately corrected himself.

“But even then, it's like 55 to 45. Seriously, it's not decisive, is it?”

I agreed.

Unless it was a nine to one chance or at worst a seven to three chance, you couldn't tell which way a match would go.

“So I've been looking for a decisive factor, and what I thought that would be was—” Slowly, Hashimoto's gaze turned to me.

“Me?”

“If you were to follow Sakayanagi, I would’ve been ready to die with my current class without hesitation. That's why I advised Sakayanagi. . to recruit you as an ally.”

And Sakayanagi refused.

So he decided to betray them. .?

While it seemed to make sense, it was still unclear at its core.

I understood that the outcome of the confrontation between Sakayanagi and Ryūen was unpredictable.

I understood that he thought Sakayanagi could win if I joined.

But that didn't change the fact that it was too reckless.

“I will make Ryūen win. No matter what the content of the end-of-year special exam is, I will thoroughly assist them. If I miss this opportunity, I will most likely be the one to disappear.”

Of course, Sakayanagi would be on high alert against Hashimoto and wouldn’t share any information.

But if there was a confirmed traitor within the class, it would inevitably be a handicap.

If the class’s accumulated exam scores were to determine the outcome, it would be a tough situation if Hashimoto intentionally scored zero.

“If Sakayanagi had followed my instructions, whether that would be before or after I betrayed her in the previous special exam, I was planning to betray Ryūen and join her at the end of the year.”

He spoke with a lot of determination, but I wasn’t sure how much of what he was saying was true.

Right now, the only thing I could be sure of was that everything he said was ambiguous.

“It's fine if you want to make Ryūen win, but did you propose the same thing to him as you did to Sakayanagi?”

“You mean about recruiting you? Yes, of course. The answer was the same as Sakayanagi's, but there was a condition. If we could defeat Sakayanagi in the end-of-year exam, he would recruit the both of us to his class.”

Ryūen said that?

Considering the past, Ryūen was the same as Sakayanagi.

It was clear that he wasn’t the kind of person who would try to win by recruiting me.

And it would take a whopping 40 million to recruit two students from different classes.

Did Ryūen's shallow lie fool Hashimoto?

No—that probably wasn’t it.

Hashimoto wasn't telling the whole truth.

If I were Hashimoto, I’d make sure to have a safety net in place for my reckless betrayal. I wouldn't decide to betray solely based on the possibility that Ayanokōji Kiyotaka might move to the class I had in mind.

It’d be strange if the reward for betraying Sakayanagi wasn't enormous.

The contract to transfer 20 million private points—

That would make sense.

If he helped defeat Sakayanagi in the end-of-year exam and took the credit, he’d gain that privilege from Ryūen.

That would make the challenge worth it, even at the cost of betrayal.

RoyalMTLs



Even if Ryūen couldn’t immediately prepare that large sum, he could collect the private points that come into the class every month, and it would be enough to pay by graduation.

In the end, it didn't really matter to Hashimoto which class won or where I was. As long as he had the privilege to be part of Class A, that would be Hashimoto's victory.

Everything was for himself.

It was the answer he chose based on the patterns he had mentally simulated.

By betraying the class in the survival and elimination special exam, Hashimoto confirmed Sakayanagi's true intentions.

If she decided to accept me there, things would be simple. If she collected private points from each of her classmates, there was a high possibility that she could easily reach 20 million points. If I accepted the class change, Hashimoto would've chosen to fight alongside me and Sakayanagi as the two main players.

If he was rejected, he could make a secret agreement with Ryūen and get 20

million private points. However, though the latter had an advantage in terms of graduating from Class A, he couldn't avoid risking expulsion due to his betrayal.

Not only would Sakayanagi become an enemy, but he would also be at risk of being targeted by a third party.

The reason he approached me and told me the details of the betrayal was all for himself.

"What do you want from me?"

When I asked, Hashimoto smiled nervously.

2

With the end of the exchange camp, time was slowly but surely passing.

Sakayanagi was quietly spending time while waiting for someone to come, sitting on the sofa in the career counseling room.

Next to her stood her homeroom teacher, Mashima, with his arms crossed in confusion.

“What are you planning to talk about? And with whom?”

Mashima, who had been brought here without being told anything, sent a quizzical glance.

Even though he didn’t understand the situation, he definitely sensed something unusual.

“You seem restless, Mashima-sensei. Don't worry, you'll understand soon.”

“But...”

More than ten minutes had passed since the two of them entered the room.

“. .Here he comes.”

Sakayanagi sensed it immediately after.

The moment a hand was placed on the door, she knew that man would appear. “You're five minutes late, Ryūen-kun.”

“The star of the show always makes a late entrance.”

The one who opened the door to the counseling room was Ryūen Kakeru.

And behind him was the figure of his homeroom teacher, Sakagami.

“What's going on here, Mashima-sensei?”

“Well. . I'm also trying to gauge the situation.”

The two teachers who ran into each other couldn't understand the situation and looked at each other, puzzled.

Ryūen sat down in front of the sofa where Sakayanagi was sitting, spreading his legs wide.

An odd situation was created—two students were sitting and the teachers were standing.

“Even if you were to deceive Hashimoto-kun, you made him do something quite bold.”

When Sakayanagi asked, Ryūen immediately responded.

“He must be feeling insecure under you, can't blame him.”

“That would be fine. But he must’ve been tempted by a cunning villain’s sweet words. He believes lies to be true and truth to be lies. He might be another victim.”

The exchange of words between the two began, leaving the teachers behind.

“You seem energetic for someone who's sunk so low.”

“I indeed felt emotions I had never experienced before, but if you thought that was the end, it’s too early.”

“Heh, Ayanokōji did something unnecessary too.”

Ryūen naturally grasped that Ayanokōji had approached Sakayanagi at the exchange meeting.

After the meeting, Sakayanagi had returned to her usual self.

No complex reasoning was needed to connect the dots.

“As you say, I was saved by him… by Ayanokōji-kun.”

Taking Sakayanagi's gaze head-on, Ryūen felt it on his skin.

A change in her gaze, which until now had only looked down on others.

Sakayanagi also felt it.

The man before her had a conviction that had grown even larger than when they first met.

“So you were also saved by Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Huh, don't make me laugh. We'll never get along. I don't remember being saved by Ayanokōji. Rather, what I got was hatred. Hatred for revenge.”

His trampled strength and pride.

He had been defeated miserably in the ring where he had absolute confidence.

“I see. Hatred—so that's what drove you here.”

“Are you any different?”

In response to Ryūen's counter-question, Sakayanagi inadvertently smiled.

“What's so funny?”

“I'm sorry. If my smile seemed rude, I apologize. I was simply happy that you’ve come to recognize Ayanokōji-kun's strength in the process of getting here.”

Unlike her fury towards Hashimoto, which was not based on personal experience, the Ryūen before her had directly experienced the cause of his emotions.

She thought he was qualified.

No, Sakayanagi immediately revised her thoughts. It wasn’t just that.

She felt a change in her emotional switch within her, starting with the incident involving Kamuro and Yamamura.

“Are you saying you had your eye on him earlier?”

It was a well-known fact that Sakayanagi had been paying attention to Ayanokōji from the start.

But Ryūen didn't know where their first contact was, so he tried to find out.

“Yes. You unfortunately only learned of his existence at this school.

However, unlike you, I’ve been following him with my own eyes since childhood.”

At such a triumphant attitude, Ryūen stopped moving.

RoyalMTLs

". .Quite an interesting statement, isn't it? You know about his childhood?"

"I know it well. I consider him as something like a childhood friend."

Upon hearing that statement, Mashima also remembered the story Sakayanagi had told him before.

And there was nothing ruder than interrupting the two of them.

"I lost to Ayanokōji. I thought it was okay to lose as many times as I wanted as long as I won in the end, but that man mercilessly crushed that indomitable spirit. I was so drained."

But over a year later, he was trying to return to that stage.

"Although our motives are different, it seems that our final goals are the same, Ryūen-kun. I have been wishing to fight him since long before you. We only have one year left in our school life. I need to get rid of any obstacles before then."

"I completely agree. I'll defeat you quickly and take my revenge on him."

Sakayanagi, who had always looked at others with cold eyes, certainly felt her heart warming up.

Not towards Ryūen. She was thinking of Ayanokōji, who was waiting ahead.

Ryūen felt the same way. His emotions were surging to defeat Ayanokōji, who was waiting beyond Sakayanagi.

"Your revenge will not be fulfilled. You will stumble just before it."

“You're probably planning for a showdown on the throne, but that scheme will fail.”

Unable to remain silent in the face of the escalating exchange, Mashima intervened.

“You seem to be moving the conversation along on your own, but could you explain the situation?”

“I apologize.”

In response to the slightly indignant Mashima, Sakayanagi apologized softly and started speaking.

“It would be better not to waste any more time. Shall we get to the point?”

“Yeah, that's right.”

Sakayanagi lined up the two teachers and turned them towards her.

In front of Sakayanagi, who stood up on her cane, Ryūen also stood up and turned around, facing the teachers.

“We’re about to make a big bet. Normally, we would make some kind of verbal promise for ordinary matters, or if we couldn't trust each other, we would make a contract. This time, however, because of the nature of its content, we decided it would be safer to have the teachers in charge of both classes present.”

From the course of the conversation they had heard, both Mashima and Sakagami felt tense.

“What are you planning to decide among yourselves?”

Sakayanagi announced the details of the bet.

“For the end-of-year exam, the loser will leave this school—that's what it’s about.” “The loser will leave..? What are you talking about? The content and rules of the exam haven't been announced yet. We don't even know if there's a way to expel students within the exam yet.”

Confused, he answered sternly, explaining that there was no guarantee of a method to expel the opponent.

“Mashima-sensei, what are you misunderstanding? The content and rules are irrelevant. We are only betting on the outcome of the end-of-year special exam. As a result, the loser will voluntarily drop out. That's all there is to it.”

“You teachers were made witnesses to this exchange just to ensure certainty.

Even if Sakayanagi cries and screams, proceed with the expulsion process according to the contract. Of course, if by any chance I lose, the same applies to me.” Both parties accepted the dangerous condition—accepting expulsion—upon defeat, cutting off 100% of their retreat.

Due to its coercive power, the school’s cooperation was essential for the bet’s smooth execution.

Mashima, who had taken in the situation, tried to speak, but the words didn't immediately come out.

“Do you really intend to make such a bet? You have a Protection Point—”

Compared to Mashima, the calmer Sakagami voiced his doubts.

“A Protection Point is meaningless if we’re voluntarily withdrawing. For fairness, it’s been decided that we’d request additional private points to fill the difference that the Protection Point makes, but the amount is kept to a minimum. If we take away his money, his class will really have nothing left.”

“It’s like counting your chickens before they hatch. If you lose, there's no need to calculate money.”

Mashima understood that this wasn’t a joke. The contract was serious.

He straightened his posture and made a stern expression.

“Are both of you really okay with this? If we agree, we will have to enforce the expulsion forcibly based on the end-of-year results. Both of you are in important positions; you two play the leader role in your classes. Major disruption is inevitable.”

“Yes. It will be virtually impossible to repair the defeated class, and it will be impossible to avoid dropping out of the four-way battle before advancing to the third-year.”

As she said these words, Sakayanagi thought of Ayanokōji again.

The competition between the four classes that Ayanokōji idealized had become impossible when the bet with Ryūen was decided. Even if Ayanokōji transferred and steered towards balancing the forces, considering Ichinose’s declining class, there wouldn’t be enough players.

“Please don't hope for a draw to invalidate the bet, okay?”

“I won't recognize a draw. If that happens, we can decide by lottery, just like how you abandoned Kamuro.”

“That's also fun. Let's look forward to it.”

Both parties cut off their method of retreat. Though, since the beginning, they didn’t anticipate a draw occurring.

It could only be victory or defeat.

A relationship similar to the two sides of the same coin.

The bet was officially established when Sakayanagi and Ryūen acknowledged it, and both homeroom teachers understood it.

The loser would disappear.

The end-of-year special exam, with stakes set on expulsion and no escape…

was about to begin.

RoyalMTLs

209

Author’s Postscript

Somehow, I was able to release this in four months. I'm Kinugasa with a hernia.

Thank you all for your support this year as well. A year really goes by quickly, and before I know it, one of my children will be starting elementary school this spring.

I believe that playing with all their might every day at kindergarten or daycare is a child’s social role, but the fact that they are about to jump into a society that includes studying. . As a parent, I'm half excited and half worried.

Well, let's put my story aside for now and talk a little about 'Classroom of the Elite.' Following the previous time, the story has entered the third term of the second-year. After the hard-hitting development during the previous volume, I provided something slightly more relaxed this time. And next time, it will finally be the last special exam of the second-year, the end-of-year special exam. Those who have already finished reading the main story will understand, but I am planning a story that will greatly affect the main characters up to this point. And currently, the third season of the 'Classroom of the Elite' TV anime is airing. I would be happy if you could check that out as well!

Finally.. As I wrote at the beginning, about the condition of my herniated neck.

These days, there's nothing I can do about it, and my work pace has slowed down considerably. The pain is so severe that I hate sitting in a chair. When I was healthy, if the ratio of work time was six and rest time was four, I made it nine for work and one for rest to somehow cover the slowdown. But there's no way I can keep this ratio forever, and I think my body is at its limit.. So I'm considering taking a little time off to completely rest in the future and focusing on recovery. In that case, the release of the next volume may be delayed. I intend to work harder than ever when I recover, so I would appreciate your understanding. 'Classroom of the Elite' is of course the first priority, but I have many other things I want to do besides that.

Well then, everyone, hoping for the quickest possible reunion—see you again!

RoyalMTLs

Shiina Hiyori’s Short Story:

Memories I Don't Want to Forget

MORISHITA-SAN, HOLDING A card in her left hand, swiftly extended her arm. Four cards were held in her right hand.

“Please go ahead, Shiina Hiyori. Feel free to draw any card you like.”

In this game, the person left holding the Joker at the end loses.

So.. does that mean the single card in her left hand is suspicious?

“Somehow.. I'm a little curious about this one card.”

“Is that so? This is the advanced strategy I came up with.”

But would she make it that obvious that she’s holding the joker?

“What should I do…?”

Instinctively, I felt I should choose one from the four, but Morishita-san's composure was palpable. *Was she trying to make it seem like a one-in-four chance by isolating a safe card instead of making me draw the Joker from a one-in-five chance?*

No, perhaps that was exactly her plan, and that was the Joker?

—I had no idea.

As I was seriously contemplating, I happened to glance over at Ayanokōji-kun, who was sitting behind Morishita-san. His eyes were focused on Morishita-san's cards.

And then, at that moment…

Even though there was nothing apparent in his expression..

I strangely felt like I could read Ayanokōji-kun's thoughts.

‘The isolated card Morishita-san was holding was the Joker.’

I felt like he was looking at it that way.

“Please choose as you like.”

That was why I felt a bit guilty and couldn't choose from the four. I just pulled out the isolated card.

RoyalMTLs

211



RoyalMTLs

212

When I turned it over. . that card was indeed the Joker.

I was a bit shocked, but more than that, I felt relieved.

I felt validated that what I sensed from Ayanokōji-kun wasn’t wrong.

I continued to enjoy the game after that.

School life, where I could spend precious time with friends I couldn't have imagined when I first enrolled.

Spending precious time with the person I cared about.

Memories I wanted to remember forever.

I couldn't help but wish that this school life would continue for even one more day.

RoyalMTLs

213

Sae Chabashira’s Short Story:

The Student in Front of Me

AFTER SCHOOL, the one-on-one meeting with Kōenji Rokusuke ended, and the career counseling room fell silent.

“Phew.. Kōenji is such a troublesome student.”

The conversation wasn't making sense, and the sections that the teacher was supposed to fill in were a mess.

I sighed, staring at the tablet screen that I wanted to look away from.

His career aspiration was to be a free person, he didn't need human relationships, his only concerns were about improving his own body, and so on.

“If I submit this, who knows what the higher-ups will say.”

But I couldn't just rewrite it and lie.

My only option would be to submit it with some minor modifications to the wording.

“If only Kōenji was the only oddball, it would be easier for me. .”

The last one left was Ayanokōji, who could be equally as troublesome as Kōenji. Honestly, I couldn't imagine what kind of one-on-one meeting it would be.

As I was adjusting Kōenji's profile, there was a knock on the career counseling room’s door.

“Excuse me.”

With that serious tone, Ayanokōji entered the room.

“You're finally here. Have a seat.”

I switched from Kōenji's profile to Ayanokōji's, displaying a blank list.

I wondered how much of this would be filled in during the upcoming meeting.

“You seem busy.”

“As a homeroom teacher, I can't help but be busy during this time. But I feel a little better knowing that the two-person interviews will be over today. It was a good decision to leave the two oddballs for last.”

First, I instructed Ayanokōji to sit down, facing each other.

“Two oddballs, you say?”

“What, are you shocked to be treated on the same level as Kōenji?”

Their personalities were completely different, but there was no doubt that they were both oddballs.

“I'd be lying if I said I didn't think anything of it.”

RoyalMTLs

“Do you think Kōenji is more of an oddball? Well, I can understand why you'd think that, but to me, there's not much difference. You're quite the oddball yourself.”

One thing was for certain, he didn't want to be compared to Kōenji.

“Well, I don't have many opportunities to talk with each student. Before we talk about your future plans, let's talk about your school life. If there's anything you want the school to improve, I'd like to hear it.”

“I don't have anything in particular. As an individual, I'm satisfied.”

“I see. Do you have any trouble in your relationships with friends, or anything you want to consult about?”

“I don't.”

He was definitely an oddball. Unlike Kōenji, he was concise and efficient, but like Kōenji, he lacked substance.

“Most students give one or two opinions, or at least show some sign of thinking, even if they don't have any. I don't think you're holding back.. ”

I tried to draw out as much as I could as a teacher, but Ayanokōji's responses didn't waver.

“I actually don't have any complaints.”

“Well, if that's the case, it's fine. . but you really don't have anything?”

“There's nothing. I'm satisfied with my school life and there's no particular trouble.”





"I see. . Well, that's very good."

"Chabashira-sensei, you've changed quite a bit too."

My hand, which had been typing on the tablet, stopped.

I felt as if Ayanokōji was interviewing me, which was strange.

"I don't think I've changed. But I might've become more honest than before."

The student in front of me is a whole generation younger than me. Yet, why does he sometimes seem like someone who's lived as long or even longer than me?

It took courage for me to accept this feeling.

If someone was in trouble, I would lend a hand, and if someone was wrong, I'd correct them.

A teacher's gaze upon the children in the class must always be equal.

But...

Ayanokōji would casually cross that boundary.

There were times when I felt like I wanted him to know my weaknesses.

Though, this was originally the feeling that we wanted students to have toward their teachers.

“. . Anyway. If there's anything you're concerned about in your school life, don't hesitate to tell me.”

I cleared my throat to dispel unnecessary thoughts.

The person in front of me now was an important student.

Nothing more, nothing less.

“I'd like to know whether you're hoping to go on to higher education or get a job. If you've made up your mind, please tell me.”

I decided to move the conversation forward to distract myself from that strange feeling.

RoyalMTLs

217

Ai Morishita’s Short Story:

Please Listen in My Stead

THE EXCHANGE MEETING was already on its third day.

I was keeping my eye on Ayanokōji Kiyotaka to track Hashimoto Masayoshi's movements, and by chance, we happened to be in the same group.

Yet, I was having trouble because I couldn't get any information.

I wondered if those two had connected.

Have they decided to team up, or is it just me needlessly worrying?

I wanted to know.

Not to protect Sakayanagi Arisu, nor to protect Class A.

I did it for myself.

And to satisfy the approaching needs for esteem.

Surely, detectives who came across murder scenes must’ve been fighting such impulses every day.

“It's almost time for the exchange meeting.”

I heard a voice from behind.

“Morishita?”

When I didn't respond, my name was called.

But I ignored it and tried to pick up the voice from the part of the tree where I had placed my hand.







“Could you please be quiet? I was listening to the voice of the forest.”

I shook off the disturbance from behind and focused my attention.

“. .Huh? The voice of the forest? What is that?”

How noisy.

It seemed he fell into the trap I set, but he was a bit of a nuisance right now.

“Don't you understand? The forest is alive.”

I continued to give a simple explanation.

“If you touch a large tree like this, close your eyes, calm your mind, and listen, then you might understand what I'm saying.”

“...I see?”

It seems he didn't get it.

Well, that was fine. It seemed I'd successfully lured him out.

Ayanokōji Kiyotaka was a very interesting existence.

No matter how close I got, I couldn't see his true nature as a human being.

The line between how much was serious and how much was a joke wasn’t clear. I wanted to know. I wanted to know more about him. I couldn't help but want to know.

Let's have him listen to the voice of the forest instead of me.

RoyalMTLs

220

[redacted]

RoyalMTL's Afterword

Hey there everyone, Cast here again. I'll jump straight into it by saying that this volume definitely turned out well. There were some points in the story that didn't sit right with me like the fact that Horikita and Ibuki's fight with Ichika was done off screen, or the lack of detail surrounding Kiyo and Nagumo's match.

Nevertheless, this was still a very good volume all around and I want to give a massive thank you to my team for helping produce the best quality translation that we could under the circumstances for this volume. As some of you may have noticed, the digital version of the Japanese release for Volume 11 came out about a week later than usual. This did throw some holes into our schedule for the translation but luckily, we were still able to complete it in a timely manner for you all.

Once again, thank you so much to the author, Shogo Kinugasa, for writing this series. Everyone, please consider buying one of the official copies for Classroom of the Elite so that we may be able to support the author even more.

In his postscript, Kinugasa seems to be dealing with some health issues so let's all hope for his speedy recovery.

Hope you guys enjoyed this volume and thank you for your continuous support!

Keep checking in on our website to be updated on Classroom of the Elite translations and consider joining our discord events and early

access!

-Cast (Translator)

https://royalmtls.com/

https://discord.com/invite/royalmtls

Also follow us on Twitter for updates and potential leaks.

https://twitter.com/royalmtls

RoyalMTLs

221



Credits

Yasaseru – Japanese Reader

“They didn't let me cook enough on the TL Notes.. but what's more important is how Kinugasa ruined Ichika & Arisu's characters even more. .”

D3nj4l – Japanese Reader

DoSomething – Editor

“Huh? Ichika v.s. Hori/Ibuki happened? When? Where? Who even is Ichika?”

SuperSkillz – Editor

“What did I get hyped up for… I'm about to start endless yapping if I continue ranting”

Unknown – Editor

“I can feel Kinu cooking something big”

Spoopykay – Editor

“Shit better be fire next volume or this fr turning into lobotomy kaisen.”

Meyobos – Editor

“JJK manga is popping off hard rn Yuta is the GOAT, also shout out to my fellow TL team members.”

RoyalMTLs

222

[redacted]

Kall_tho – Editor

“Hail the glorious king Ayanokoji… ‘Put Chabs back in the bunny suit’ -

Meyobos”

Budos – Editor

“Please be kind to each other. RIP Hana Kimura 5/23/2020.”

Reito – Editor

“After reading Hiyori SS, I think that bookworm might even be more relevant than I had originally considered her to be.”

Ash – Editor

SnOrT NeSqUiK™ - EPUB Maker

“Brug #3”

ZF - Illustrator

“ʍɥɐʇ ıs ɓoıuɓ ou ıu ʎ2ʌ11¿”

Reversi – Illustrator

“Ichika Goddess… Akira Toriyama R.I.P.”

RoyalMTLs

223