
CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR 3
1
SYOUGO KINUGASA
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ART BY

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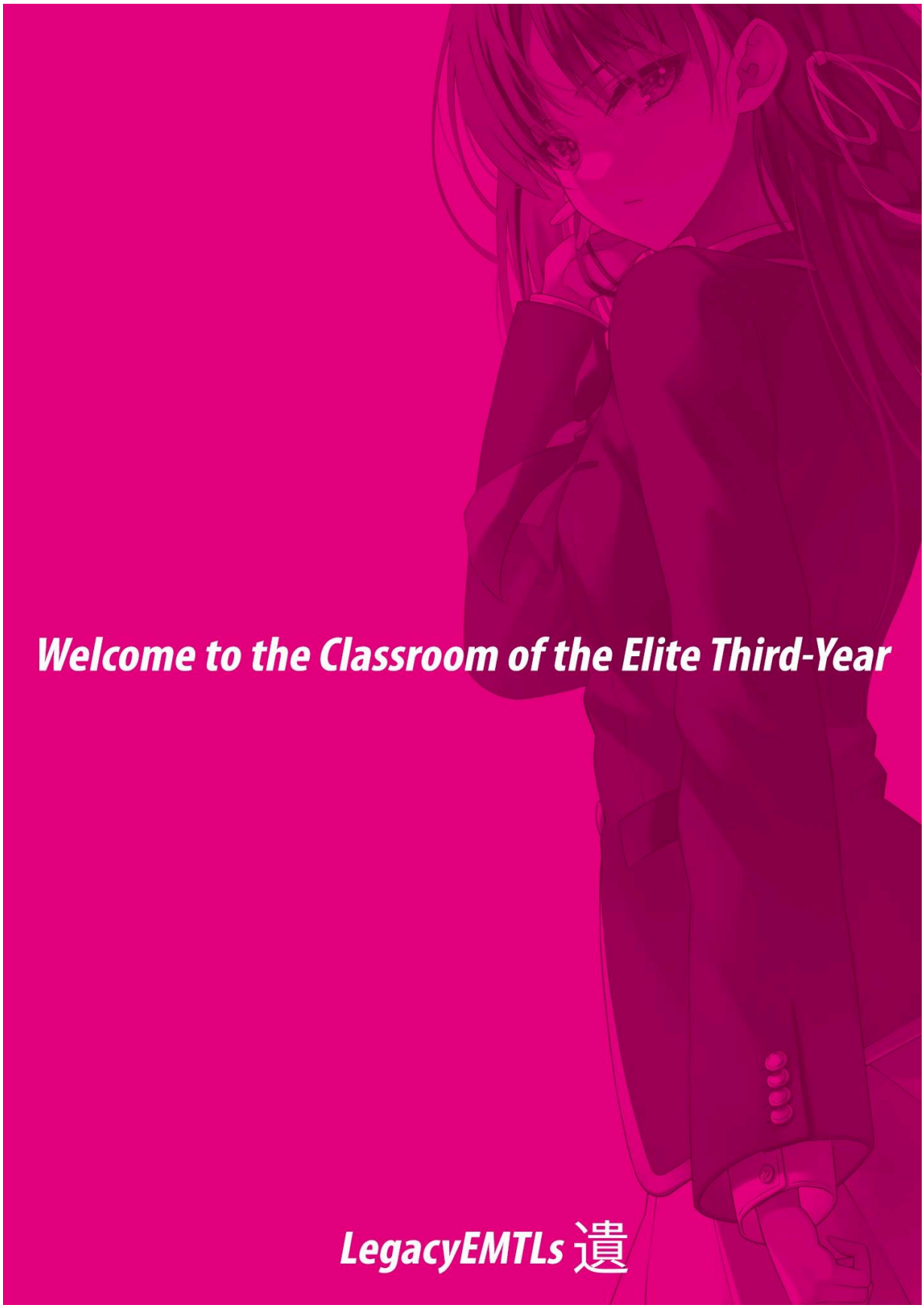
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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR3
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1
遺


"You don't look surprised...
Did you already know? About
Ayanokouji's transfer that is."
"I found out a little while ago."
"Morishita, you also seem to know that
Ichinose knew about it earlier, didn't you?"
"I know what I knew. Those who didn't
know should keep this in mind, Okay?
Quite an interesting expression, I'd say."


After standing next to Shiraishi, Nishikawa greeted us again.
Shiraishi Asuka
"Once again, let's get along today, Ayanokouji-kun. Oh, and you too, Yoshi"
"Come on, am I just an afterthought?"
Nishikawa Ryouko
遺


Hand in hand
遺


Welcome to the Classroom of the Elite Third-Year
LegacyEMTLs 遺

Synopsis

After overcoming their second year's 'end-of-year special exam,' Horikita and the former first-year Class D had finally ascended to the third-year Class A. However, their greatest key figure—Kiyotaka Ayanokouji—had transferred to another class.

The students within Horikita's class found themselves engulfed in confusion and turmoil… yet one cruel truth stood before them.

Unless the Horikita-led Class 3-A were to defeat "Kiyotaka Ayanokouji," they would not be able to graduate from Class A.

As Ryuuen's Class B continues to grow and new connections form between Ayanokouji's Class C and Ichinose's Class D, the first special exam in their third year is announced: the "*Comprehensive Academic Ability Exam: Full-Class and Small-Group Battles*"!

Only one class can graduate as Class A. Which class will rise to the top?

The long-awaited "Third Year Arc" begins!

Prologue:
The End of Everyday Life

WHILE SUPPRESSING A faint feeling of excitement, I headed to school a little earlier than usual.

Then, climbing the stairs that I hadn't yet grown used to, I reached the floor where the third-year classrooms were located.

Before long, I was looking at a nameplate, in which the name 'Class 3-A' was embedded—my classroom.

I stopped and stared intently at the neatly polished plaque.

"I've finally made it here…"

Although the reality still feels somewhat distant, I know the situation before me isn't a dream.

From Class 1-D to Class 3-A.

There's been many fun and happy moments, but I must not forget the painful experiences.

The journey here was by no means smooth.

Yamauchi-kun, Sakura-san, and Maezono-san.

What exists here now is built upon the sacrifices of those who had to leave our class.

I must not forget that.

Come to think of it, when I entered the school, I didn't have any clear goals.

I was here simply to follow after my older brother.

However, my brother continued to keep his distance and coldly pushed me away.

Despite this, as I continued my school life, I came to realize my brother's true feelings.

I was made to learn that it wasn't sufficient to just chase after him, denying my own potential.

Now, I'm a member of the student council, and I even read a congratulatory speech at the entrance ceremony.

I'm walking an unbelievable path.

I must not forget that, behind me on this path, Ayanokouji-kun's presence has been significant.

If he hadn't been in the same class, I certainly wouldn't be who I am now.

I would've been more immature and clumsy, and I wouldn't have been able to close the distance with anyone.

Though his inscrutable demeanor sometimes troubles me, that is part of his charm.

Anyway, since that day, I truly decided to set my sights on graduating from Class A.

Not just for my brother or for myself—

But to share the joy with everyone in the class, starting with Ayanokouji-kun.

This is what this place, Class A, is about.

A place I could never have reached alone.

—I must not be complacent.

Now, the path to the summit has only just been cleared.

There is still one more year of school life left.

Ryuuen-kun's class is quickly catching up right behind us.

Even though they're a bit far away, I can't underestimate Ichinose-san's class or the former Sakayanagi-san's class either.

They'll try to overtake us by any means necessary in the future.

Conversely, we must fight to escape and prevent them from catching up.

I took a deep breath and turned away from the nameplate.

For now, the celebration ends here.

I decided to tighten my resolve anew.

With that thought in mind, I opened the classroom door.

Inside the classroom. A large monitor, serving as a blackboard, displayed the pre-assigned seats.

"My seat is—"

Second row from the corridor side, fourth from the front.

That was my seat on the first day in Class 3-A.

And next to that seat, first row, fourth seat, was Ayanokouji-kun's name.

"To think I'd be next to him again, huh…?"

Although our seating arrangement had been quite different, we also sat next to each other two years ago.

Even if there were to be a seating change soon, I don't dislike such coincidences.

Feeling a sense of amusement at the overlap in this arrangement, I sat down in my seat. It was still early for school, so Ayanokouji-kun hadn't shown up yet.

I wanted to share my thoughts on this seating with him as soon as possible.

I gazed out at the scenery.

The view looked slightly different from both my first and second years.

One more year.

In just one more year, my time at this school will come to an end.

At that time—with this class, with these companions—I want to graduate from Class A.

I wouldn't let it end as just a dream.

No matter what, I have to make it happen.

Chapter 1:
Confusion

AFTER THE END of the opening ceremony in the gymnasium, the new third-year students returned to the classroom.

A few minutes later, the bell for the second period was about to ring.

"…It's strange."

Horikita tilted her head, looking down the hallway several times.

"What's up? You worried about something?"

Sudou, who had taken the seat diagonally behind her, asked with a hint of concern.

"I haven't seen Ayanokouji-kun since the opening ceremony ended. It's already time for class, and he's still not here."

Just like usual, everyone was present in the classroom—except Ayanokouji.

Even though there were no classes after this today, this was a time when his presence was mandatory. The school would check for unexcused tardies. Horikita understood from past experiences that a single absence wouldn't result in a significant deduction of class points, but it was the first day for Class 3-A. And unlike Sudou and Ike who had histories of being late, an absence from Ayanokouji, who preferred not to stand out, was troubling.

"Come to think of it, yeah. Though, I'm pretty sure he looked normal when we left the gym?"

Sudou muttered, glancing up as he recalled the memory that occurred less than thirty minutes ago.

"Right?"

Horikita had exchanged a few words with Ayanokouji that morning when they became desk neighbors, and nothing unusual had happened then.

"Maybe he's got a stomachache and is holed up in the bathroom?"

"Well, it's not impossible."

Despite feeling a bit uncomfortable with the indelicate suggestion, it was still a plausible explanation to consider.

Still, something didn't sit right with her, and Sudou, as if remembering something, crossed his arms and gave a deep nod.

"Maybe he's pretending to be sick."

After speaking, Sudou let out a wry smile, imagining something unexpected.

"Feigning sickness? Why would you think that?"

When Horikita questioned him about his unexpected reasoning, Sudou lowered his voice by about two notches and started whispering.

"He and Karuizawa recently broke up, right? It must be pretty awkward to face each other."

"That's no reason to feign sickness—and he was normal this morning."

"Maybe when he actually came to school, it hit him like a body blow[1]? For me too, you know, when I experienced heartbreak, it really took a toll on me mentally."

He looked into Horikita's eyes, but then, feeling somewhat embarrassed, he averted his gaze.

Sudou, who had confessed to Horikita during last year's school trip, was speaking from personal experience. Horikita also thought back to Sudou's feelings at that time. Indeed, there was a certain awkwardness.

"…Is that how it is?"

Although she didn't consider herself superior in matters of love, the unavoidable reality was that there were people who dumped others and those who got dumped themselves.

For Horikita, who still lacked knowledge and experience in love, it was somewhat difficult to comprehend.

Sudou, seeing Horikita's complex expression, hurriedly scratched his head.

"Hey, I'm fine now. But, you know, Ayanokouji might also have a surprisingly delicate side to him. Being in a relationship with someone from within the same class and then breaking up with them can be quite troublesome, you know? Look, even Karuizawa seemed to be blatantly avoiding Ayanokouji since this morning."

Before spring break and up till the end of the third term, Horikita recalled the two having a closeness that only intimate lovers could have, a sense of distance that made it difficult for a third party to approach.

However, this morning in the classroom, neither of them took even a single step to close the distance between each other.

It wasn't just physically, but emotionally as well.

She reconsidered, realizing that it might indeed be true that human relationships became somewhat complicated when romance was involved.

"I understand what you're saying, but weren't both of them prepared for that when they started dating?"

She had no intention whatsoever of meddling in the affairs between girls and guys, but as a matter of fact, not everyone could part amicably. She muttered that they must've been aware of the risks.

"That's not true. No one starts dating with the assumption that they'll break up, right? I hear stories from my kouhai about how they started dating, leading up to their breakup. Now, they're struggling because they can't figure out the right distance to keep between them, you know?"

Horikita, trying not to be noticed, stole glances at Karuizawa, who was sitting in a seat near the back by the window. With a somewhat listless appearance, she was gazing out the window.

"I'd hope for them to manage at least this little bit of risk…"

Even if that were true, it was a separate issue. Being uncomfortable and thus absent or late was not something to condone.

"But… still, I don't think there's a very high likelihood either way."

Whether it was stomach pain or the shock of being dumped, *Ayanokouji's demeanor remained the same as usual*, she once again concluded. While it was entirely possible that he simply had a poker face and was skillfully hiding behind it, she could hardly imagine him being the type of person to do such a thing.

"Well, it's just a possibility. Cut him some slack if he's a bit late."

"Once is okay. But if it happens repeatedly, as a class, we can't just ignore it. Alright. Whatever the case, we'll understand when the time comes."

Horikita decided that, no matter the truth, it was unlikely for Ayanokouji to disappear from school without notice.

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[1]: In this context, a "body blow," also known as a "body shot," refers to the boxing term when punching an opponent in the torso.

Part 1

SOON, THE CHIME RANG.

The first thing Horikita noticed was their homeroom teacher's, Chabashira's, panicked and unusual demeanor.

After scanning the classroom, Chabashira's complexion quickly turned pale.

The abnormal change in Chabashira's demeanor caused concern among the students around her. Her eyes clearly lacked focus.

For several seconds, she said nothing, simply standing in front of the podium, looking over the classroom.

No, she wasn't looking—her gaze was unfocused.

Her eyes were lifeless, in some ways hollow.

Even the most insensitive person in the class would've likely had the same impression.

Initially intending to ask about the absent Ayanokouji, considering the atmosphere, Horikita judged that it wasn't at all a subject that would be appropriate to bring up, and she figured that checking on Chabashira's condition should undoubtedly be the top priority.

"Sensei, are you alright?"

But before Horikita could act, Hirata had already checked on Chabashira.

However, Chabashira did not respond to his voice.

It seemed Hirata's voice did not reach her.

The students, who had been relatively quiet, began to grow anxious at this abnormality.

"Um… Sensei?"

From the front seat, close to Chabashira, Kikuchi called out tentatively.

It was a call that came from point blank range.

But Chabashira did not respond, remaining motionless.

Kikuchi, trying to get noticed, stood up and waved their hand in front of her.

Finally, it seemed Kikuchi's actions caught her attention, and Chabashira glanced at them.

However, her gaze quickly shifted, now directed toward Horikita.

At least, that was what Horikita felt. Though, their eyes didn't actually meet.

It was just a vague look in Horikita's direction.

She concluded that Hirata's and the other students' voices weren't reaching her.

If that was the case, she might've been unwell.

There were no signs of anything going amiss until they headed for the opening ceremony, so they couldn't just leave it be. It might've been a medical emergency.

As Horikita pulled out her chair to stand and head toward the podium—

"I'm fine."

Had Chabashira been hearing the students all along, or had she only just now registered their voices?

Though lacking vigor, Chabashira murmured that short line.

"You say that, but you clearly seem unwell."

Though relieved to get a response, Hirata wanted confirmation.

"…That is… no, really, I'm fine. Just…"

Trying to continue, Chabashira leaned on the podium.

Her gaze turned toward Horikita again, but it wasn't really focused on her—it was fixed on the only empty seat beside her, Ayanokouji's seat. "Did something happen to Ayanokouji-kun?"

On the way back from the gym, if Ayanokouji had suffered a major injury or developed some kind of illness, Chabashira's change in demeanor would've made sense.

Was there something wrong? Such speculation seemed to have hit the mark somewhat.

Horikita's inquiry must've reached Chabashira for sure.

Yet, the lack of response and the ensuing silence suggested the seriousness of the matter.

"Is it an injury? Or an illness?"

Impatiently, Horikita asked the question, and Chabashira shook her head slightly from side to side.

This gesture indicated that their assumption was wrong.

If it isn't an injury or illness, then for now, it isn't an emergency.

But then, why's Chabashira showing such a gloomy expression?

"No, no, what is it? Something happened to Ayanokouji, right? Please tell us."

Despite reading the room, Ike, frustrated by Chabashira's vague demeanor, pressed for a quicker explanation.

Chabashira glanced at Ike before turning to look over the entire class.

Her expression remained grave, giving no sign of reassurance.

"…Honestly…"

Chabashira began to speak softly, but then she closed her eyes, and her mouth once came to a close.

However, she couldn't remain silent forever and raised her head.

"There's something I need to tell all of you. This morning—no, just a little while ago—a certain student used their Private Points to exercise a certain right… or so it seems."

Though her words were hesitant and unclear, Chabashira told the class the truth.

"Huh? I don't really understand. What did they do with their Private Points?"

A certain student.

Used their Private Points to exercise a certain right.

Even as she tried to explain the situation, the details were so vague that it left everyone confused.

Is it a troublesome matter another class caused, something she can't elaborate on?

Speculations continued to grow in the students' minds.

"The student who's absent from the classroom right now… Ayanokouji. He's the one who exercised that right."

Chabashira spoke gravely, but her lack of clarity made the students tilt their heads.

What kind of right had Ayanokouji exercised?

"…Class… transfer."

Just as someone was about to ask another question, Chabashira uttered what seemed to be the crux of the matter.

Ayanokouji had transferred classes.

Indeed, Chabashira had mentioned a class transfer, but such a thing seemed impossible.

If he were to transfer from Class A, it would inevitably mean going to a lower class.

But that was a problem in itself.

"Um, Chabashira-sensei. If this is a joke, it isn't funny, and shouldn't you consider our feelings when we're listening so seriously?"

If it was as simple as just transferring classes as soon as you thought of doing so, no one would have a hard time with it.

However, a student would need to prepare twenty million Private Points to transfer to another class—a well-known fact and an unrealistic tale.

That was why some students began to take it as a joke.

"I also agree with Horikita-san's opinion. More importantly, are you really okay?"

Chabashira continued to make statements that not only lacked a sense of credibility, but the claims were bordering on contradictory.

Perhaps she was ill, or…

"Could it be that some special exam has started?"

Almost simultaneously with Horikita, Sudou crossed his arms and calmly expressed his thoughts.

Yes, from Chabashira's behavior and claims, it seemed more realistic to think that some strange exam had begun.

"I understand that what I'm saying is hard to grasp. However… it's the truth."

"Even if you say it's the truth—"

"Take out your phone and display the class OAA." Chabashira, refusing to admit it was a lie, gave instructions with her eyes lowered.

"I think you're taking this joke too far…"

However, a trace of unease crossed her mind.

By now, Horikita had begun to feel a slight sense of foreboding.

Many classmates, though skeptical, followed the instructions and turned on their phones.

They displayed the Class 3-A list.

Of course, it was supposed to list all thirty-seven students' OAA.

No, if it isn't listed, it must be a lie.

However…

Thinking she might've missed it, Horikita repeatedly swiped her screen up and down.

But Ayanokouji's name was nowhere to be found.

It was as if he had never been in the class, vanishing from the list.

Such an update to the OAA—she had seen this scenario a few times before.

It was the same when Katsuragi Kouhei transferred and when someone dropped out.

"Just now, it seems that Ayanokouji's data has been moved."

"What… What are you talking about, Sensei? That can't… that can't be right."

Horikita's voice unconsciously trembled.

"Ayanokouji has been transferred from this class to Class C as of today."

Chabashira clarified the situation's previously ambiguous details.

Ayanokouji had been absent since the opening ceremony because he had left this class.

"…Huh?"

She understood the words, Chabashira's explanation, but immediately after, Horikita's body showed signs that she didn't understand.

"What are you talking about…? Something like Ayanokouji-kun transferring to Class C…"

"That's not funny, Sensei. It's not April Fool's Day."

Many of the students still weren't even half convinced. They doubted it, assuming it was a lie.

"I also… don't like such jokes."

Thump, thump, thump—

"I think there's something off about Chabashira-sensei today."

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump—

Please stop—

Horikita muttered in her mind.

Why is my heartbeat so fast, so loud?

In truth, she had understood why by this point, but she didn't want to.

Disturbed by Chabashira's bad joke, her mind was thrown into disarray.

"I feel the same way—it's unbelievable. But… this is undoubtedly the truth."

Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump—

"That can't be right. It must be some mistake."

As Horikita responded, she loaded the OAA list for Class 3-C.

If it's true that he's transferred, it'd be strange if Ayanokouji's name isn't displayed here.

But there's no way that could happen.

Yet, as she looked at the displayed OAA list—

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka's name had been added.

The moment she saw it, she became utterly confused, and Horikita's thoughts came to a halt.

"T-This is a lie, right, Sensei? That Ayanokouji-kun has transferred to Class C…"

Matsushita, who was clearly flustered, raised her voice in a way that was unlike her; some students couldn't hide their surprise at this unusual behavior.

"It's true… It's not a mistake."

Chabashira kept glancing back at the tablet.

If that was the case, it wouldn't be strange if there had been a notification from the school. It made her want to go against the flow of time and stop it.

Horikita's understanding of the situation hadn't caught up.

Ayanokouji had transferred classes.

No matter how many times she thought about it, it was incomprehensible.

It can't be possible.

Horikita and the others had finally, with a great amount of effort and time, climbed up from Class D.

And at last, they had reached Class A.

From that moment forth, for one year, everyone would unite to maintain that position.

Yet, there was no benefit to transferring to Class C.




@Satoshi

"B-But what about the Private Points? Twenty million is a huge amount, even for him—"

"We don't know the details yet. However, since the school has officially approved it, he definitely prepared that amount."

"What? If that's true, then Ayanokouji… Eh, why?"

"No, it doesn't make sense, right? We finally managed to make it to Class A, right? And on our first day as Class A, he moves to the falling Class C—to the class that lost Sakayanagi?"

"What the hell is Ayanokouji thinking…? I can't understand it at all. Did you hear anything beforehand, Akito?"

"No, not a word… We've been a bit distant lately. If even Horikita and the others don't know, then probably no one does."

As it turned out, even the students within the group Ayanokouji was close to, such as Yukimura and Miyake, were not informed about this transfer.

"Or is *that* what this is about? Because he was dumped by Karuizawa and felt too embarrassed to stay in the class?"

"No, that can't be it, right? Even if he was embarrassed, he wouldn't have the funds to transfer."

"Maybe he begged people and ended up borrowing…? No, that's unlikely."

"Could he have betrayed us?"

"But then again, he didn't go to a higher class, he went to a lower one, right? It's just not normal… It's not like he's jumping on the winning horse, especially since Sakayanagi is gone. And it's not like Katsuragi's case where he no longer had a place to fit in and got pushed out, right?"

Shinohara muttered her doubts, to which Hondou responded with a similar suspicion.

There were things they couldn't even imagine.

Or rather, at least most students wouldn't even imagine it—

That Ayanokouji alone could influence the outcome of the class battles with his abilities.

There was a chance that Ayanokouji might've wanted to take it easy.

However, it could've been argued that staying in this class and doing nothing would be a far safer bet than transferring to a class that sank with Sakayanagi's departure.

"I don't know. It's weird to voluntarily go down to a lower class, but there might be Private Points involved. Not just the transfer funds, but getting paid for living expenses for the next year in return—"

"That’s even weirder. That would mean he’s being brought in as a replacement for Sakayanagi, or rather, someone worth paying a huge sum to guarantee Class C’s victory. But why Ayanokouji? Sure, he’s been making some noticeable moves lately, but…"

Upon hearing that, Horikita gasped.

Even if she didn't understand Ayanokouji's intentions, she couldn't discard the idea that the former Sakayanagi class had acted to acquire Ayanokouji. Rather, it might've been the most logical choice they could take to turn things around.

But that raised the question: *Would Ayanokouji really agree to such a proposal?*

"That's a possibility."

Kushida calmly murmured her comment amidst everyone's disturbance and confusion.

"But, you know—"

"Well, even if it's true… it doesn't feel like something to make such a big fuss about, right? It's not like Horikita or Hirata left."

"Kanji… Ayanokouji being gone isn't such a simple issue."

"You're saying that it's not that simple? Even if Ayanokouji-kun leaves, it's not even that big of a—"

Some students didn't see the reality of this transfer as much of an issue.

Kushida looked at them with a dismayed gaze.

"Ike-kun, Shinohara-san, sorry, but Ayanokouji-kun is much more important than you two think."

"Important, you say…"

"Just because it hasn’t come to light doesn’t mean he hasn’t contributed to the class in countless unseen ways. Right, Horikita-san?"

Kushida, remaining calm amidst the chaos, passed the question to Horikita, who nodded in agreement.

"Yes… Setting aside Ayanokouji-kun’s intentions, there’s no denying he’s the ideal recruit for Class C’s comeback. If he truly were someone we could afford to lose, Chabashira-sensei wouldn't be like this."

Rather than listening to her students, Chabashira remained in a state of shock.

Shinohara and Hondou exchanged glances as they watched her remain frozen in place.

"For real? Is it actually true?"

"Like Horikita said, Ayanokouji's presence is significant. If he weren't in our class, we most likely wouldn't be in Class A now. Of course, that's not the only reason we made it to Class A, but still… the hole he leaves is bigger than imagined—but still, why…"

Neither the teacher nor the students knew the answer.

If a student existed who understood everything in this situation—

Naturally, not only Horikita but many students' gazes turned to Karuizawa, who hadn't spoken a word.

Karuizawa, as a girlfriend, had spent more time with him than anyone else; she might know—

Everyone probably harbored such thoughts.

"Karuizawa-san, did he tell you anything?"

"…I don't know. I really don't know anything. It's not that I'm hiding anything; I truly don't know."

Without looking their way, Karuizawa answered indifferently. To Horikita, Karuizawa's clouded expression didn't seem to stem only from Ayanokouji's transfer, but also from Karuizawa believing that it was due to her, as his girlfriend, initiating the breakup.

No, that's not the issue now. Horikita dismissed such thoughts from her mind.

If Ayanokouji had truly transferred classes, that was the last of their concerns.

"Can this transfer be canceled if it's some kind of mistake?"

"If it's an illegal transfer, there's a possibility it could be canceled… However, in that case, the person who committed the fraud would face severe punishment. The arrows would also point at Ayanokouji."

An illegal transfer initiated by Ayanokouji.

It was an unthinkable possibility.

"But the possibility that it's a fraud is low. Since the school has officially accepted it…"

"Still, we don't know, do we? He might have some unexpected reasons that may come to light later, like him being threatened."

Otherwise, Horikita couldn't explain it.

A transfer to another class without any warning—there's just no way.

"No, that's…"

"Horikita-san."

Hirata's calm voice reached the flustered Horikita.

"I think we should start by accepting reality."

"Reality… what do you mean by that?"

"Just what it sounds like. He, Ayanokouji-kun, has transferred classes. This is an undeniable fact. The school has already accepted it, and his absence here is proof."

"But that's… that's not proof. He might just be sick, or it could be some sort of a mistake…"

"As Sensei explained, Ayanokouji-kun's transfer has been confirmed on the OAA. No matter how much we don't want to believe it, we have to start by accepting that."

Horikita was at a loss for words as Hirata continued speaking calmly.

Kushida, observing this, showed some slight interest.

"You seem quite calm, Hirata-kun. Whether it's a transfer or expulsion, a student may have disappeared from our class, and yet you're not disturbed."

Hirata had always been distressed whenever there was a risk of expulsion.

And after someone would leave, he was more concerned about the departed student than anyone else.

"Transfer and expulsion are different. Especially if it's his own decision. Besides, panicking won't help. No matter how much we fuss, Ayanokouji-kun won't come back."

"Isn't that wrong? Horikita-san hasn't given up on the possibility of it being a mistake yet. Shouldn't you be supporting her, like the Hirata-kun we know?"

While a few students in the class remained calm, Hirata was the most composed.

His careful observation of the class's reaction was uncharacteristic.

"So, what are you trying to say, Kushida?"

Sudou stood up, pulling his chair back.

He suspected that Kushida was stirring up trouble in the class again.

"Merely discussing this during our homeroom period without any clear information won't lead us to any conclusion. Right, Chabashira-sensei?"

With a signaling tilt of her head, Kushida glanced toward the hallway.

The other classes had apparently finished their homerooms, as the hallway was getting noisy.

"…Y-Yes, that's right."

The classroom was highly soundproof, so a normal speaking volume wouldn't carry to the hallway.

However, if someone were to approach the wall and get close to the door, it was possible to catch some voices.

Students with bad intentions might've been eavesdropping outside.

Sudou nodded appreciatively and sat back down.

"Let's end the homeroom period here. However, I ask that you don't take action against Ayanokouji for the sake of blaming or criticizing him. Currently, he hasn't done anything against the rules."

Just like the students, she had many doubts. However, as a teacher, she had to instruct them to refrain from any problematic behavior. As an adult, she mustn't forget to give warnings where necessary.

"I agree with Chabashira-sensei. Not only from a rules perspective, but also because approaching him in large numbers without understanding the situation can easily lead to trouble. I'll check on things first, so please stay calm until then."

"That's right. Avoid unnecessary contact with Ayanokouji, and make sure not to get into trouble with other classes. If anything happens, make sure to go through me or the school, okay?"

As a teacher, Chabashira thought that staying silent with the students any longer wouldn't help. She steeled herself, placing her hands firmly on the podium.

Chapter 2:
Confirmation

FORMAL CLASSES WOULD start the next day, and by 11:30, the first day of the new school year was coming to an end.

No, perhaps it would be better to say it had ended before I realized it.

The absurd news that Ayanokouji-kun had transferred— *I couldn't believe it at first, and I still don't believe it now.*

It just can't be.

It just can't be...

I kept repeating the same thing in my mind like a spell.

However…

However… this was neither a misunderstanding nor a dream.

This reality really is happening in real time…

I wanted to see him.

I didn't want to see him.

Honestly, I did feel a bit scared about seeing him.

That was a lie. I was very scared.

I was so scared, I couldn't help it.

While continuing the conflict in my mind, I looked at my hands—at both of my palms.

They were trembling.

Just imagining it made my body tremble.

I wanted to stop thinking about it, to reject it entirely.

But… But still—I must confirm Ayanokouji-kun's true intentions.

I couldn't just give up.

After all, I had yet to hear him speak about his true objectives from his own lips.

It wouldn't be too late to make all the decisions after receiving that confirmation.

He might've been burdened with something he couldn't tell us about.

...Let's confirm it.

With only those feelings to rely on, I stood up.

"…Horikita-san."

As if waiting for me to move, Hirata-kun, who had approached at some point, spoke.

Sudou-kun and others were also looking this way.

"Sorry, but can we talk later? I'm going to meet him now."

I don't have the luxury to be distracted by unnecessary chatter right now.

I left without even taking my bag, and with just my phone in hand, I headed to the hallway.

A fair amount of time had passed since the chime signaling the end of the school day rang.

When I stepped into the hallway, many students had already started to leave.

Immediately, I sensed something unusual from the atmosphere of the other classes' students around me.

I didn't know whether there had been an announcement from each class's teachers, but at least, everyone in our year already knew about Ayanokouji-kun's class transfer.

The curious glances directed at me attested to that.

Of course, those glances might've held various implications and speculations regarding my class's situation.

The theory that he was sent as a spy to the other class.

The theory that he was exiled from the class.

The theory that he betrayed us.

Those might've just been part of the countless baseless rumors and mere speculations flying around.

But that didn't matter now.

Before worrying about others' thoughts, I didn't even understand the thoughts of my own class, or those belonging to Ayanokouji-kun himself.

Without any regard for manners, I forcefully opened the door to Sakayanagi-san's former class.

If he's still here—

That was what I was thinking, but…

While searching for him, I unconsciously counted the desks.

Although Sakayanagi-san was supposed to have withdrawn voluntarily, the number of seats hadn't decreased.

However, more importantly, only a few male and female students remained in the classroom, and Ayanokouji-kun wasn't among them.

"Tsukasaki-kun."

I approached Tsukasaki-kun, who happened to be nearest.

"Do you need something?"

"You know why I'm here, right? Where is Ayanokouji-kun?"

"He left the classroom a few minutes ago. He probably went to Keyaki Mall."

"I see, thank you."

Then there was no more need for me to stay here.

As I returned to the hallway, I immediately noticed some students smirking.

It was clear to them that we were in the midst of trouble, which was unpleasant.

While walking quickly down the hallway, I tried to contact Ayanokouji-kun on my phone.

The phone rang, but no matter how long I waited, there was no sign of him answering.

Either he didn't notice, or he noticed and chose not to answer.

"Horikita-san."

It was Matsushita-san who called out to me as I was heading toward the stairwell.

"Sorry, but I'm in a hurry."

"I know. You're going to see Ayanokouji-kun, right? Let me come with you."

Matsushita-san lined up beside me, matching my pace without stopping.

"Why would you come?"

"…I want to know the reason behind Ayanokouji-kun's transfer. Just to confirm once more, this isn't part of your strategy, Horikita-san, right?"

"Unfortunately, I have no such plan. Even if transferring him to Ryuuen-kun's class would make strategic sense, there's hardly any point in dropping him to Class C. Now that Sakayanagi-san has left, there's no meaning in joining that class."

"…Right. So, Ayanokouji-kun decided to transfer without telling anyone."

"I don't know. Whether someone asked him to, or he was threatened—"

Or perhaps his heart was swayed by a large amount of funds…

Such thoughts crossed my mind, and my brain quickly understood that they were nearly impossible.

At least, he wasn't the kind of person to be swayed by funds, and it was unlikely that someone of his caliber would decide to transfer just because he was threatened.

It was an unpleasant reality I didn't want to consider.

That meant that, indeed, this transfer was a decision Ayanokouji-kun made on his own.

The worst-case scenario floated to the surface of my mind.

"Right now… I don't want to talk based on mere speculation. Not until I hear it directly from him. So, it would be better if you wait—"

"I'd like to, but I also want to hear the explanation directly from Ayanokouji-kun. He must have some sort of objective that'll convince us… I want to hear it."

Yes, that's exactly it.

I, too, wanted an answer that would have me convinced.

He didn't talk about much with me, or rather, to anyone around him.

That was why he was sometimes misunderstood as incompetent, and some even resented him.

But the truth was different.

Even if he found it troublesome, he cared about the class and lent a hand when we were in need.

That was why I was certain that he must've had some objective he hadn't told us about.

He must've sensed some anomaly or danger in Sakayanagi-san's former class, which only seemed to be sinking.

Or perhaps… he might've received some huge threat.

That's why he went in alone, without telling his allies.

Such… behaviors, like those belonging to a hero in a movie.

Of course, all this speculation contained much of my wishful thinking, but…

But that wasn't the only thing that mattered.

I would've wanted him to consult with us.

Whatever reason he had for deciding the transfer—

Leaving the class without saying anything… that's just… that's just…

"Ayanokouji-kun… Why…"

...Am I really that unreliable?

"…Such foolishness… " *...Yes, that's right.*

Even as I internally asked myself that question, I couldn't help but let out a bitter smile.

To him, I still must've seemed like a child.

I didn't possess the qualifications to stand beside him.

There was no way he'd rely on me.

"…Horikita-san, are you okay?"

"I'm… fine."

Matsushita-san looked at me, worried; I wondered if my almost voiceless response reached her.

"More importantly, it's about Ayanokouji-kun."

The class transfer had already been officially decided.

However, there was still a good chance that this wasn't his intention.

If that was the case, I absolutely had to save him.

It wasn't just me. The whole class had to come together and scrape up Private Points for his sake.

Part 1

I CAME TO Keyaki Mall based on what I heard from Tsukasaki-kun.

Then, following what I heard after asking a random student, I reached the cafe.

If the information's correct, Ayanokouji-kun should be here…

What kind of look does he have now?

What kind of expression does he have now?

And what's he thinking?

While suppressing our impatient feelings, we arrived at the location.

In the back of the cafe, in one corner, I saw Ayanokouji-kun and… students from Class C, Hashimoto-kun and Morishita-san, and Ichinose-san from Class D.

"There he is…"

"Yes… "

He seemed to be conversing with those around him indifferently, just as usual.

"It's as if he isn't thinking much of the transfer at all…"

It was an event that had happened just about an hour ago.

It was as if he had already put it behind him…

"Anyway, let's talk… We need to talk to start things off. Everything begins from there."

I shouldn't make any conclusions at this stage yet.

I must not conclude anything.

I forced myself to suppress my emotions and continued walking, though, my steps felt heavy.

When I decided to call out to Ayanokouji-kun after closing enough distance between us, Hashimoto-kun, who had noticed us, quickly stood up.

"Hey, Horikita. We're in the middle of a strategy meeting right now, but do you need something?"

I was well aware that I would be treated as an unwanted guest here.

But right now, I only wanted to talk to Ayanokouji-kun.

"I want you to let me have a conversation with Ayanokouji-kun."

"If you want to talk to our leader candidate, you'll have to go through me first."

"…Leader candidate… That's quite a sudden thing to say."

"It's not sudden. I've been waiting for this moment all along. Right, Ayanokouji?"

Hashimoto-kun laughed and sought Ayanokouji-kun's agreement.

I wanted him to outright reject such an absurd notion.

But I couldn't directly meet Ayanokouji-kun's eyes as he looked my way.

I wasn't confident in facing the words he would utter next…

"I won't deny it. With Sakayanagi around, that chance was nonexistent anyway."

I didn't want to hear such words.

Ignoring it, I continued.

"What do you mean by this? Doing such a thing, transferring classes, really?"

"It'd be bad if you just start talking on your own."

"Sorry, but I need you to be quiet right now, Hashimoto-kun. As the class leader, I have to grasp the current situation."

"I see, as the class leader, huh? Well, it's certainly natural since a classmate suddenly left, but that makes it all the more reason why I can't let you check. It's convenient for us if you guys are troubled."

Hashimoto-kun smiled slyly; his reasoning was sound.

Indeed, driving me away, who had barged in by myself, was undoubtedly better for Class C.

"Don't glare at me like that. By the way, why's Matsushita here at this crucial moment?"

Hashimoto-kun asked, concerned about the strange combination.

Despite his constant vigilant nature, he still had a habit of poking into troublesome places.

It'd be better if he wasn't concerned with who was present, but he pretended to care and stirred things up.

How should I answer to satisfy him?

When I was about to think it over, Matsushita-san lined up beside me.

"I'm just accompanying her. I'm only here to convey to my class what I've seen and heard as a normal classmate rather than a leader. It seems

Horikita-san is quite absorbed with Ayanokouji-kun, but honestly, it's not a big problem for us."

As if deliberately taking on the thankless role, Matsushita-san answered.

I took her words graciously and gently nodded.

"I see. Indeed, it must look like a strange transfer to everyone but a few students. There's no reason for Ayanokouji to drop to a lower class, and above all, questions like, 'why would a student like Ayanokouji…?' is going around."

Indeed, there shouldn't be that many people like me and Sudou-kun yet—people who knew even a fraction of Ayanokouji Kiyotaka's true abilities.

Matsushita-san here should be no exception…

Ayanokouji-kun, having looked at us once, shifted his gaze back to Hashimoto-kun, who was about to sit down again.

"What Matsushita just mentioned about being an accompaniment must be a pretext."

"…A pretext? But Horikita seemed convinced, didn't she?"

"It's a misunderstanding. To Horikita, Matsushita might seem like just another classmate. But in reality, she's quite a schemer. It seems she values my abilities as much as Horikita does, or maybe even beyond that."

At Ayanokouji-kun's words, I looked at Matsushita-san.

She appeared calm, but I could see a slight disturbance.

Her understanding of Ayanokouji-kun's abilities was deeper than I thought, and she even knew about it earlier than I had imagined…?

That was how I took Ayanokouji-kun's tone to mean…

"Matsushita must've thought that she couldn't leave this matter to Horikita. That's why she came to see me with her own eyes, to verify the reasons for the transfer, my true intentions. Just by looking at the OAA or observing her in everyday life, Matsushita might look like a mere honor student, but in actuality, she's one of the sharpest minds in Horikita's class. Usually, she doesn't put forth all her effort and works behind the scenes. In fact, in this situation, it's better to see that Matsushita can analyze the situation more calmly than Horikita."

"Oh no, Ayanokouji-kun, you really seem to be overestimating me."

Matsushita-san tried to deny it, but Ayanokouji-kun relentlessly showered her with his words.

"That's not the case. There have been several instances where you've skillfully arranged things from behind the scenes when I needed help. Even when Maezono was expelled, it was because you lent a hand. I'm actually giving you a fair evaluation."

Ayanokouji-kun answered, and looking at Matsushita-san again, she no longer seemed capable of completely hiding her disturbance. This was the cooperative relationship between Ayanokouji-kun and Matsushita-san, which had likely been happening without my knowledge.

It was casually exposed in front of the other classes' students.

To make it clear that he was no longer an ally…

No, for him, he might not even consider this as exposing us.

Ichinose-san, who had been listening to the conversation with keen interest, rested her chin on her hands and smiled.

"I didn't know she was such a reliable person. I still have much to learn about the students here. From now on, I'll have to pay close attention to Matsushita-san."

It felt as if the ground was shaking beneath me, and I was about to lose my sense of balance.

It was a thought I would never have had before—

The feeling that this situation had completely turned into the opponent's ground suddenly attacked both me and Matsushita-san.

"There's no point in exploring the reasons for the transfer. I haven't told anyone about this, not Horikita, not Matsushita—not anyone in the class. I'm sure you can tell; neither Hashimoto, Morishita, nor Ichinose are surprised by my transfer. You understand what I mean by this difference?"

"That's… maybe just something you only mentioned to them after meeting up at the cafe…"

"Then go back to Class C or catch someone from the class and ask. They should tell you when they knew about the transfer."

I lost the voice I should've uttered with.

I couldn't immediately think of the words to say.

"It's scary when a student leaves the class, huh, Horikita? Our class also had Katsuragi leave, and some information flowed to Ryuuen, but even then, Katsuragi was an outsider… No, Sakayanagi made him an outsider, so he hardly had any kind of insider knowledge. However, Ayanokouji isn't

like that, right? He was at the core of your class, so it seems likely that digging into things will reveal a lot about Matsushita and others."

Hashimoto-kun, seemingly amused, lightly knocked on the table.

"So Horikita, it's about time you stated your business here. We're busy discussing things."

"There's nothing specific… I just… Like I said, I just want to talk with Ayanokouji-kun. Preferably, just the three of us."

"As you can see, I'm currently having a discussion with Hashimoto and the others. Let's talk right here."

"…It's hard to talk about things here. If you're busy, it's fine to talk at night, or tomorrow, or the day after—"

"Sorry, but I'm booked for a while after this."

No matter how much I was rejected, I had to keep acting tough.

There were many students in the cafe, including my classmates.

If I carelessly lost my composure here, it would affect Class A's future direction.

"Then, let me talk here… I came to hear your true intentions. I'm sure you understand why, right?"

"You really want to know the reason for the class transfer?"

"Yes. What were you thinking doing something like that…?"

Was I the reason?

Or was there something that changed your heart?

It was a voice that couldn't be heard.

I desperately tried to keep my heart's inner screams from becoming reality.

"Sorry, but I don't feel like answering. The only thing I can make clear is that the fact I moved from Class A to Class C is real—it isn't a dream or an illusion."

He averted his gaze from me.

He said he'd listen, but it was almost like being turned away at the door.

"Unfortunately, there's nothing more to say."

"You're okay with not answering anything? Ayanokouji-kun, you'll be treated as a traitor, you know?"

Matsushita-san persisted, speaking those words.

"Isn't that more or less the case already?"

He didn't care how others viewed him.

He wasn't even thinking about whether he had the resolve to go through with it.

"…I see."

Persisting any further here wouldn't yield any results.

It was clear that it would only expose my miserable self.

No… I had known from the start that it would turn out this way.

If he was worried about being seen, he simply would've taken the steps to have this meeting in the dorms or later in the day.

I understood this, but I just couldn't restrain myself.

"Let's go, Matsushita-san. He's become my enemy, I understand that well. It's clear that there's no need to be discreet going forward."

I turned my back on him and started walking again.

But I didn't think I felt any clear emotions from what remained here.

Only a feeling like that of a headache or a dizziness—an indescribable nausea—continued to cling to me.

Chapter 3:
The Commencement of a One-Year Period

REWINDING A SHORT period of time, it was back to the moment immediately following the opening ceremony.

Upon exiting the gymnasium, rather than returning to Class A, I headed straight to the staff room. However, with a faculty meeting in session, I changed my direction and headed toward the chairman's office to submit my notice. The chairman did seem a bit surprised, but perhaps that man had already informed him—he decided against asking any further questions. Afterward, the various arrangements swiftly proceeded; which included the verification of the twenty million points and their source.

Having heard about this right before the homeroom period started, I was sure that it'd take some time for Mashima-sensei to understand that this was in fact real.

With a hint of bewilderment still remaining on his face, Mashima-sensei, the homeroom teacher, cleared his throat and looked at me.

"For what it's worth, I think I should introduce myself here. What do you think?"

Of course, it wasn't my first time at this school.

From the time I'd spent in this school up until now, even though we might have been in different classes, I remembered everyone's names and faces.

And all the Class C students were aware of me.

However, I still had to go through the formalities.

"The opening ceremony just ended, but I, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, have transferred to this class using twenty million Private Points. I can't replace Sakayanagi, who voluntarily withdrew, but if there's still a will to fight among everyone here, I'm confident that I can help overcome the class's greatly deteriorated situation."

I kept it brief, but I firmly conveyed what was necessary.

Reflecting on my past failure during my self-introduction as a first-year student, I chose my words carefully.

I think it was a passing mark, but I wonder if my intentions were properly conveyed to the students here.

As everyone silently watched, one student broke the silence and clapped.

"Glad to have ya, Ayanokouji."

It was the biggest investor in my transfer to Class C—Hashimoto Masayoshi.

Starting from there, a few others began to clap sporadically.

However, I could see that not everybody was welcoming.

The looks directed at me weren't all warm.

Rather, the majority of their gazes were cold, and many of them weren't truly welcoming.

Of course, I didn't expect everyone to accept me from the beginning.

Rather, it would speak poorly of the class's quality if that were the case..

It would be like them introducing themselves as a feeble gathering of a class—one that, upon losing Sakayanagi, had now lost all of its ability to judge situations, leaving everything to a helper[1] that shouldn't be so easily trusted.

They had to be cautious, skeptical, and willing to seek results rapidly and aggressively.

But Mashima-sensei, unaware that the students were thinking of the situation to such an extent, picked up on the awkward atmosphere and resumed homeroom.

"Well then, as for Ayanokouji's seat… Let’s see here…"

Still unable to fully hide the hint of bewilderment on his face, Mashima-sensei looked around the classroom.

Currently, there were thirty-six students in the class, excluding me.

In terms of the seating arrangement alone, securing enough space for four seats wouldn't be a problem.

It might be ideal to assign my seat to one of the four less populated rows, but—

Perhaps this timing could be used to change around the seating arrangement?

Before Mashima-sensei could decide, a female student sitting by the window in the very back raised her hand swiftly enough for it to make a noise.

"For now, I believe the seat in front of me would be suitable."

Either surprised by the statement or by the student who made it, Mashima-sensei showed unmistakable confusion.

"In front of Morishita's…?"

Yes, it was the eccentric Morishita Ai who spoke.

"Yes. I will explain the reasons. First, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka is like a transfer student, meaning he is new to the class and unfamiliar with it. Placing him in the center of the class right away would make him shrink back like a loner. And giving him the most coveted spot at the back by the window, my position, would be too much of a privilege. Moreover, since he's an unexpected foreign element from an opposing class, who was an enemy until recently, proper surveillance is necessary. Considering all these factors, I think it's best for him to sit in front of me. If anyone has objections, please speak up now."

None of the students objected to Morishita's proposal, which was biased and something she decided entirely on her own.

Well, wherever my seat ends up, it probably won't be a big issue.

As the homeroom teacher, if the students agreed on a location without objections, Mashima-sensei probably wouldn't outright reject it.

There was only one issue remaining—

What's left is whether the student sitting in front of Morishita would accept this proposal…

"If Sugio is fine with it—"

As Mashima-sensei tried to get confirmation with Sugio Hiroshi, who was currently sitting there—

"Of course, it's fine. Change it right away— No, rather, I'd be happy if you could please change it."

He eagerly accepted the chance to move his seat.

Rather, he had an expression that made it seem like he was more than happy that he could move.

"Alright. Then, let's have Sugio move over to the back of the empty row."

"Yes!"

Sugio responded eagerly, quickly gathered his belongings, and stood up from his seat.

Having received the consent of the student who needed to be moved first, Mashima-sensei immediately brought in a new chair and desk.

"Then, Ayanokouji, please take your seat. We'll proceed with homeroom."

"Understood."

I took my spot in front of Morishita like she'd proposed.

As soon as I sat down, Morishita called out to me from behind.

"It'll be a pleasure going forward, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka."

"Yes, likewise."

Although Class C as a whole was still somewhat unsettled, it was considerably quieter compared to the Horikita class that I was familiar with. Even though they were told in advance about the transfer, many students must not have thought that it would actually happen.

As expected, the students' fundamental qualities here appeared to be generally quite high.

It was a relief to have an environment that was easy to navigate at this point, as it reduced the amount of trouble involved.

With the OAA, I already had a grasp on all of the students' faces, names, and basic abilities.

However, like myself, there were often aspects to each student's abilities that weren't visible through school evaluations alone.

Discovering these in my new school life going forward would be one of my top priorities.

With only one more year of school life, there was no time for leisure.

Having said that, saying something like, 'There's no time, open up to me right away,' wasn't something you could just go and approach people with.

A middle ground, a balance, was required.

"What are you thinking about, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka?"

Behind me, I could hear Morishita whispering.

"About what's to come."

"Wondering if you can make a hundred friends?"

I didn't know why she suddenly asked that question in a rhythmic tone.

Indeed, getting to know classmates involved making friends to some extent.

"It's not about that…"

Since, in essence, it was off the mark, I denied it.

"You're not thinking about wanting to eat *onigiri* with a hundred people? [2]"

"I'm not thinking about that… or rather, I don't understand what you mean by '*onigiri* with a hundred people.'"

And why's she continuing with her rhythmic tone?

"Please turn this way."

Following her instruction, I turned around, and I was met with Morishita's cold stare.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka is surprisingly stupid, huh?"

"That's quite the thing to say."

I thought her unrealistic idea of making a hundred friends and eating *onigiri* together was more absurd.

"You don't even know this joke—no, it's not even a joke—it's a classic reference. Are you sane?"

"Nobody can probably understand that joke."

As I responded, she took a deep, deep sigh.

"Rather than calling you stupid, it might be more accurate to say you're ignorant, or maybe you're out of touch with the world."

She seemed to be getting disappointed all on her own, but I had no idea why.

Can you make a hundred friends?

Do you want to eat onigiri with a hundred people?

I tried to think about it calmly for a moment, but I still couldn't understand the meaning.

"Enough. Make sure to face forward and listen earnestly to what the homeroom teacher says."

It was you, Morishita, who turned me around, though…

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[1]: The kanji used for "helper" here, 助っ人, can also be translated to a "foreign player," which is an outsider that's hired to strengthen a team.

[2]: Morishita's lines about a hundred friends and eating *onigiri* are references to the song "一年生になったら" (lit. "When I Become a First Year").

Part 1

AFTER RECEIVING AN explanation from Mashima-sensei regarding the schedule and classes from tomorrow onward, the school day would come to an end.

For third-year students, the way we'd use our time would likely change significantly compared to the previous two years.

Being one of the turning points in life, third years had to decide on their future paths by around summer and start taking action alongside everyday school life. Though, it was irrelevant for those who had already decided on their path, or for a few students like me, whose paths were already set even without requiring any intervention.

"If there are no particular questions, then this homeroom period is…"

Mashima-sensei began to conclude the class. Since the others weren't informed about my transfer to Class 3-C until the last minute, there was a possibility that Class 3-A students, including Horikita, might swarm in.

However, I wouldn't panic and run away.

After all, I was bound to be confronted somewhere in the future.

Still, such a commotion here could lead to some unexpected issues.

It'd be safer to change locations before that happened.

Besides, I had a meeting with a certain student afterward.

As the homeroom period was declared over, I was about to stand up. However, having pulled his chair out prematurely, it was Hashimoto who stood up.

"Kay. So, how about we all throw a welcome party for Ayanokouji at Keyaki Mall and make it flashy?"

That was his proposal to his classmates.

However, immediately after, the classroom was enveloped in a tense atmosphere.

I quietly and discreetly lowered my hips, which had begun to rise, back onto the chair.

Mashima-sensei, who was about to leave the classroom, also stopped and turned back to check his students' reactions.

For a few seconds, no one said anything during that silent time.

It was Yoshida who broke the silence.

"Sorry, but I'm against it."

He stated his refusal flatly, with minimal emotion.

"C'mon now, why would you say that?"

Hashimoto, who had his spirits dashed, slumped his shoulders in an overexaggerated way.

"Think about how Ayanokouji would feel, being left out and ignored right away by his new buddies."

Being left out—is that going to be the case?

For now, I tried to think about how that would feel.

…Well, at least it wouldn't feel good… I think.

It was bothersome not because I wasn't welcomed, but because the classroom atmosphere soured over a topic involving me, and it felt complicated watching as a bystander.

Since I hadn't expected a proposal for a welcome party without having built any relationships, there was nothing to do but watch after such a statement had been made.

Because of my position, I couldn't just say 'please do it' or 'I refuse.'

Personally, it would've been best if things had continued as usual…

Hashimoto's actions were out of consideration for me, so I couldn't blame him.

"It's not that we're rejecting Ayanokouji. It's because we're prepared to welcome him that we all contributed Private Points to support the class transfer. But you understand that it's not easy to genuinely welcome him, right? Now that we've fallen to Class C, we can't afford to fail any special exams from now on. First, it's necessary for us to see results that prove he's a valuable ally. If that happens, we'll acknowledge Ayanokouji as a comrade and welcome him without you having to say anything, Hashimoto."

Having stated the reason for refusing the welcome party, Yoshida stood up from his seat.

"I agree too. He hasn't done anything yet, and there's even a possibility that he's a spy, so I don't feel like putting on a forced smile and having a welcome party."

Following that, Machida also expressed his opinion, and one after another, the Class C students began to leave.

"Seriously… this is tough."

After scratching his head, Hashimoto turned towards me and made a slight gesture of apology, but I gestured back that I wasn't bothered.

One by one, the students left, and soon, only a few remained in the classroom.

Although it was partly because we'd been enemies up until now, I hadn't actively interacted with this class's students. Among those who remained were Hashimoto, Morishita, Yamamura, and Sanada—members with whom I'd started to form some connections through events.

Conversely, it meant that almost nobody else was left.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, you're spectacularly unpopular. It's like you're leftover merchandise."

"It's natural that they can't welcome me wholeheartedly."

"True, but if the transfer student had been someone like Ichinose Honami, Kushida Kikyou, or Hirata Yousuke, would the same thing have happened?"

"That's—"

I imagined what'd happen if the students she listed were the ones in my position.

Even a brief thought brought a clear scene to mind.

"Even if it wouldn't be everyone, they would've been surrounded by smiles, welcoming the newcomer."

"…Well… maybe."

"It's not 'maybe,' it's true. Being too reserved in your assessment is a bit stingy, isn't it?"

She relentlessly shattered even the slightest possibility of a future where that wouldn't happen.

"In other words, the fact that you are unpopular is undeniably true, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka."

A harsh accusation. I couldn't deny it even if I wanted to.

"You should start by accepting that reality."

"That seems like a good idea…"

Somehow, I might've felt a bit sentimental.

As Morishita's remarks continued to echo in my ears, Yamamura and Sanada also left with looks of apology.

After seeing them off, Hashimoto approached and tapped me on the right shoulder.

"Sorry, Ayanokouji. Our numbers might've decreased a bit, but let's have a welcome party."

"Who's attending?"

"For now, it's just me."

That was hardly 'a bit,' but I saw no reason to refuse.

If even one person welcomes me, I'll start by accepting their welcome.

"Ah, right. You'll come, right, Morishita? It's boring without girls."

Trying to invite a second person, Hashimoto called out to Morishita, who was still there.

Morishita responded immediately…

"No, I refuse."

She declined without a moment's delay.

"Come on, don't refuse. You're on our side, right?"

"Please stop. I don't want to be associated with a traitor and someone unpopular. I have plans to go on an adventure after school, so excuse me. *Taking off*."

She quickly grabbed her bag, stood up, and left the classroom at a brisk pace.

Now, only a few students, both male and female, remained in the classroom.

The girl sitting next to me had been looking our way, but she stood up when her eyes met Hashimoto's.

It seemed inevitable that the welcome party would be between just the two of us.

"By the way, what exactly does she mean by 'adventure'?"

"Don't worry about it, man. You should only listen to about half, no, maybe one-fifth of what Morishita says. Taking her seriously is just a waste of time."

While expressing his astonishment, he gently pushed my back and started walking.

"This depressing atmosphere isn't good for the body. Let's move, shall we?"

Being led by Hashimoto, I left the classroom.

Part 2

HASHIMOTO AND I left Class C together and headed to the hallway.

Considering that we were the first ones to leave school, it seemed that other classes were still listening to their homeroom teachers.

"Looks like we can leave without drawing attention at the end of our first school day after the transfer."

"It's only a matter of time."

The transferring topic wouldn't only be brought up by students from Horikita's class, where I'd been a part of.

Students from Ichinose's class and Ryuuen's class were also included.

As time passed, we'd attract more attention, and students driven by curiosity would start approaching.

"If you don't want to go through any of the hassle, maybe we should just go to karaoke… but a small room with just two guys is a bit awkward."

"I agree. Let's pass on that."

Hashimoto seemed serious about having the welcome party, and we continued together to the exit, escaping the gazes directed at us.

"Man, your boldness is something else… I never imagined you'd plan to transfer to our class. And to think you used my money for it."

"How many times have you complained about that? You seem really displeased."

The conversation about the transfer was still fresh for Hashimoto, but he brought it up every chance he got.

"Well, of course, I'd have my thoughts about it. Money is a precious insurance for me."

Hashimoto had obtained a large sum of money by moving in all sorts of directions and even betraying Sakayanagi.

It wouldn't be surprising if he felt a great deal of frustration if he had to spit out most of that money.

"If you could go back to before you had to decide on my transfer, would you want to cancel it, Hashimoto?"

"That's… honestly, it would be a lie to say I wouldn't hesitate."

"Right. There might've been a future where you could've saved twenty million private points on your own."

Hashimoto chuckled softly at these words and nodded without denying it.

Saving that amount on his own would be a difficult endeavor, but achieving it would almost guarantee graduating from Class A.

That was why it took courage and resolve to give up that dream.

"To graduate from Class A, you have to take the appropriate risks."

"Tell me about it. In these past two years, I've crossed many dangerous bridges on my own, participating in the conflict between Sakayanagi and Katsuragi, pairing up Ryuuen and Katsuragi on the deserted island, and most recently, taking a stand against Sakayanagi. I've been stacking up indescribable efforts and continuously producing results."

Hashimoto talked about his own proactive actions as if they were someone else's business.

Indeed, those moves certainly had risks.

"Then you should think positively. Your efforts to take on those risks have borne fruit, and you've successfully pulled me into your class. That's undoubtedly an accomplishment."

"Well, yeah."

Still, it's understandable that Hashimoto couldn't purely rejoice or be optimistic.

No matter how much Hashimoto valued me, his current class was Class C.

Since he decided to go through with a transfer in the first place, he would've had a higher chance of victory if he simply went to Horikita's class himself.

Or he could transfer to Ryuuen's class with me.

Either of those options would've been easier to understand.

Of course, it was precisely because I could see through that thought process that I presented Hashimoto with two choices.

To either give up his fortune and accept me, or to give up on accepting me altogether.

If he refused, no cooperative relationship would emerge between us until graduation.

If he ended up having to deal with his own class antagonizing him, on top of bearing an adversary-like relationship with me for a year, there would be nothing guaranteeing his safety. Even Ryuen could bare his fangs at any moment..

He weighed which choice would increase his chances of winning.

"It's fine to trust you on that, right, Ayanokouji? That from here on, you'll seriously aim for Class A. I plan to make you stand out even if you don't want to, okay?"

Hashimoto voiced his wishful thinking.

He must've thought he had every right to make such a claim.

Indeed, Hashimoto's contributions significantly lowered the hurdle for the transfer.

But that didn't mean I could easily fulfill his wishes.

"I told you when we talked about the transfer. I won't guarantee anything when making decisions. You just have to decide whether you believe in me or not."

Whether I intend to rise to Class A.

Even if I was willing to strive toward that premise, I never shared how we'd get to Class A, let alone strategies or even the prospects.

That was why when it came down to making decisions regarding his plan of action, Hashimoto wasn't able to come up with an immediate reply, and still had lingering doubts.

Hashimoto, who antagonized Sakayanagi, and who ultimately contributed to her voluntary withdrawal.

Not all Class C students knew everything, but there were certainly those who were wary and disliked Hashimoto. It was by no means a comfortable class. If trouble were to come, he was the first in position to be discarded.

Remaining in that class and inviting me, who had no guarantee of being useful, was a big risk.

"That's right… Ah, I know that well."

Despite harboring many uncertainties, Hashimoto ultimately decided to accept me.

Instead of the ideal of using twenty million Private Points right before graduation to guarantee Class A, he chose another ideal: teaming up with me to become Class A and graduate on his own.

No, he concluded that it wasn't an ideal but a reality.

"Sure, I accepted the conditions. But if you have plans for the future, you could share a little with me. That's what being comrades is about."

Even when I spoke as if I was pushing him away, Hashimoto valiantly continued.

"What to do… I'm worried about being betrayed like Sakayanagi."

"Hey, stop with the bad jokes, Ayanokouji. I'm all in on you, literally penniless. What's the point of betraying now!"

Hashimoto, perhaps flustered, gestured and insisted on his innocence as he moved in front of me.

"Still, knowing you, Hashimoto, aren't you scheming something, not even a little here or there?"

"No, no, no, definitely not. It's fine for others to doubt me, but please, spare me from your suspicions."

Of course, I wasn't really concerned about whether Hashimoto would betray us in the future.

Keeping a bit of tension was probably just right for Hashimoto.

"Well, I might've said too much. Without your cooperation, transferring to Class C wouldn't have been easy. Let's properly discuss the strategy, no, the future plans."

"Really, you should've been straightforward from the beginning."

I took out my phone and confirmed that I'd received a reply.

It might be better to take Hashimoto to the upcoming meeting.

"I'm heading to Keyaki Mall now."

"It's not that you're asking for a welcome party, but rather, you're sharing your plans there, right?"

When I nodded in affirmation, Hashimoto nodded back, satisfied.

"By the way… what about you, Morishita?"

I turned around and called out to Morishita, who must've been watching us from the shadows.

The girl who should've left the classroom earlier showed herself from behind.

"You're doing it, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. You don't have a popular presence, but you seem sensitive to the presence of people."

Perhaps it was a pun using the same kanji for '人気[1]' ('popularity' and 'human presence').

This time, I felt I understood the meaning, unlike the previous joke about having a hundred friends.

"So you were interested after all. What happened to the adventure you mentioned?"

"The truth that is now revealed—*this is the adventure*. The sudden appearance of the embodiment of unpopularity, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, and the embodiment of betrayal, Hashimoto Masayoshi. If interacting with these two isn't an adventure, what is?"

"Like I said, I'm… Ah, never mind. It's a waste of time to correct you."

"It seems you finally admit that you are a traitor."

"Yeah, yeah. Is it okay for you to be in contact with such a traitor? You just rejected the welcome party."

"It's not like I'm attending the party. It's only natural as a classmate to discuss the future of Class C early on. You'll probably meet Ichinose Honami after this, right?"

Morishita smirked as she touched on the topic of our plans after this.

"Ichinose? Why is her name coming up here?"

"Hehe, so the traitor isn't trusted after all. It seems you're not informed about even the most basic of knowledge regarding future plans."

Hashimoto's smile stiffened slightly as if provoked.

"Don't tell me you've already talked to Morishita?"

'*I'm cooperating the most, but you intend on just pushing me to the side?*' It was clear he was thinking along the lines of such a question.

"For this transfer, Class C's unanimous consent was a must. There were things I couldn't entrust to you and your problematic issues. Unlike you, who trusts me, Morishita has strong doubts, so it was necessary to provide her with appropriate information."

"Well, I sort of get what you're saying… but it's hard to accept that I lost to Morishita. Well, if I can hear about it later, I can accept it."

Hashimoto sighed. Believing that standing and talking any further was a waste, he took the lead and started walking.

I started walking a bit later, and Morishita lined up beside me.

"What are you planning?"

"What do you mean?"

"You already know the plan, and there was no need for you to be here today."

From the fact that she'd been secretly following us, it seemed she'd been considering joining from the start.

"As for you, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, that might be true. However, Ichinose Honami is different. I can't judge whether the good-natured Class D will be of any use until I see it with my own eyes. At least, if she remains the leader I know, I have low expectations."

There was some degree of trust in Ichinose's abilities, but it wasn't enough for them to entirely rely upon her.

Her strength also encompassed her weakness.

Morishita thought about it; if expressed in simple terms, Ichinose was an unreliable leader.

So, there was a reason to attend and verify whether it made sense to collaborate.

"Then, observe sharply like a great detective. There are no restrictions."

"That goes without saying."

Afterward, the three of us headed to the cafe, the prearranged meeting location with Ichinose

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[1]: Some kanji can be read in different ways; in this case, "人気" can both mean "popularity" (pronounced as *ninki*) or "human presence" (pronounced *hitoke*). And yes, the parenthesis here is actually in the raw.

Part 3

AT THE CAFE counter, we ordered our drinks. Since I had no personal funds due to the transfer, I borrowed twenty thousand Private Points from Hashimoto, promising to repay it after the May deposit, so payment wasn't an issue. While waiting for the coffee, I received the receipt and idly looked at a poster advertising a part-time job recruitment opening at the cafe.

Not just at the cafe, similar notices were posted at various stores.

Since students of our school met the age requirements but are prohibited from working, they couldn't work. Nor would it be appropriate for teachers to take part-time jobs. Perhaps these posters were calls for job changes directed at people already working within Keyaki Mall.

While I was thinking about such meaningless things, time passed, and our ordered items were ready. Hashimoto secured a spacious seat in the back, so I picked up Hashimoto's drink and moved to that seat.

After waiting for a few minutes, Ichinose appeared, waving gently to signal her arrival. After a brief exchange with the staff at the counter, she approached with a cup in hand.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Ayanokouji-kun. And you're with Hashimoto-kun and Morishita-san too."

Ichinose politely greeted Morishita as well. On the other hand, Morishita, with a slight nod, remained silent, making it clear that they had little daily interaction.

"Is it okay for these two to be here?"

"Of course, there's no problem at all."

Listening to our brief exchange, Hashimoto smirked.

"You don't look surprised… Did you already know? About Ayanokouji's transfer, that is."

If Ichinose was caught off guard, having just learned about the transfer from the school that morning, her surprise would've been obvious. However, Ichinose showed no such signs, nor did she seem like she was about to question my change in class. It wasn't surprising that Hashimoto reached such a conclusion.

"I found out a little while ago."

"Morishita, you also seem to know that Ichinose knew about it earlier, didn't you?"

"I know what I knew. Those who didn't know should keep this in mind, okay? Quite an interesting expression, I'd say."

"What's that? Are you trying to dodge the question with some nonsense?"

"Not at all. Of course, I knew. The only one here who wasn't informed was—"

Slowly, she pointed her index finger right in front of Hashimoto's eyes.

He lightly brushed it off with his hand and glared back.

"So it's just me, huh? Makes me tear up at the strong sense of trust you guys have for each other."

"It's just between us here. I haven't told any other classmates."

"It's the same for my class. Everyone else was surprised, so they clearly didn't know."

Even with this reassurance, it was hard for him to digest.

"Thanks for the consolation. Though, from here on out, I'll be digging in deep—including why Ichinose was informed about the transfer."

Aside from how she was seemingly involved in the plan, Hashimoto had other reasons for why he was directing his glare toward Ichinose.

"But why Ichinose? Don't tell me you broke up with Karuizawa to date Ichinose… and that's what led to you telling her?"

Whether he perceived us as being close or if it was mere conjecture, Hashimoto didn't hesitate to ask.

"That's quite a bold question. However, I do sort of understand how you feel."

Both of them alternated their gazes between me and Ichinose.

"We wouldn't discuss the transfer just for that reason."

"She isn't even in the class you transferred to, so why does Ichinose get to know? There has to be a convincing reason, right?"

"Of course. It's because for the next year, as Class C aims for Class A, Ichinose and her class's cooperation is essential. Without her cooperation, my transfer to Class C wouldn't have happened."

"That's quite a grand claim… but what kind of cooperation are you talking about?"

"The alliance with Ichinose Honami's class… So you were serious."

Morishita muttered first, and I nodded in response.

"Huh?"

Naturally, Hashimoto was taken aback by the sudden mention of an alliance.

Regarding what was coming up next, it was something I would need to explain step by step.

"Indeed, I'm serious. In fact, Ichinose and I have formed a complete alliance. Not just some short-term cooperation plan based on the circumstances, but rather a plan to fight together through most of our third year."

I simply conveyed the core of the strategy Hashimoto wanted to know.

However, Hashimoto wasn't convinced by just that. If anything, the confused look on his face only grew stronger.

"That's impossible, right? Only one class can graduate from Class A, regardless of how hard people try. A complete alliance is impossible."

He might've taken my words as a joke or a ridiculous claim. This was still within expectations, so there was no need to get flustered or firmly reject it.

"That's not necessarily true. Indeed, an alliance can't be formed unconditionally, but the fact that the classes have neatly split into upper and lower halves, paired with the fact that Ichinose and I aren't aiming to win alone, is significant. If we add the condition 'until the four classes are competing equally,' maintaining the alliance isn't difficult."

If we explained it calmly, our sincerity would come across.

"No… wait. That's still impossible. Even if the lower classes were to join hands, the school decides what exams come and who's matched against whom. If our next battle is against Ichinose's class, it'd go to hell with any alliances at that point. At most, we could have a gentleman's agreement to avoid expulsions. Neither can afford to lose, so cooperation is—"

If it were an alliance based solely on who wins and loses, there might be contradictions.

However, the word 'alliance' meant more than just that.

Before I could add anything, Ichinose nodded and explained.

"Of course, the combination of matches is often uncontrollable. That's been proven over the past two years, and I think it's only natural for the school to make it so."

The school had our classes competing in a balanced way, at times designating our opponent for us, and at times allowing us to choose it ourselves.

That was the rule for the special exams we repeated throughout our school life.

"So, anticipating that, we've already made detailed arrangements. In case my class and Ayanokouji-kun's class end up competing one-on-one, we've agreed to 'concede victory to the class that is even one point behind in Class Points.' There are actually more detailed arrangements, but what I want to say is, if the winning and losing classes are predetermined with this condition, there will be no disputes."

Morishita listened to Ichinose's explanation and sighed softly.

"Are you serious? I mean, the arrangement is easy to understand, but what I want to point out is that there's no point in an alliance where victories are conceded. Conceding victory to the class with even one less point? Hey, that means that the other party is losing a valuable opportunity to gain Class Points. It's like throwing away a part of the limited number of special exams available each year."

"You're talking as if all the special exams are set up for Hashimoto-kun and the rest of your class to have an advantage."

"We have been maintaining Class A all this time."

"Until a little while ago, that is. Now that Sakayanagi-san has lost and voluntarily withdrawn, hasn't the class's strength significantly weakened?"

"That's why we poached Ayanokouji."

"The alliance formed with Ichinose's class is also one of the reasons for my transfer."

"…So the alliance is a foregone conclusion, huh?"

As Ichinose and I nodded almost simultaneously, Hashimoto exaggeratedly shook his head.

"Even if forming an alliance is the condition… First of all, there's no guarantee that the class that received a concession will concede victory the following time. If we clash in the next special exam—"

In the current situation, the slightly superior Class C would have to accept defeat.

"Over these two years, Ichinose has been building her credibility. That's the key to forming the alliance."

Hashimoto widened his eyes, seemingly at a loss for words.

It seemed he didn't want to follow a conversation that was beyond his understanding.

"You, Hashimoto Masayoshi, who always betrays, can't possibly imagine it, can you?"

"That's harsh… But then, do you understand what they're saying?"

"I've always thought it's ridiculous."

"That's typical of Ayanokouji. Morishita, you agree with me, right?"

"I don't agree, though."

"Just agree with me… Anyway, I get that Ichinose is far more trustworthy than someone like me, but that's not the issue. Betrayal—that risk is still scary, right?"

"Let's hypothesize. Suppose in the next special exam, we face Ichinose's class, which is currently Class D, and we concede victory to them. Do you think Ichinose would betray us and break the alliance's promise afterward?"

I told him to visualize the situation, and Hashimoto crossed his arms and looked at Ichinose.

He slightly averted his eyes, letting his imagination do the work inside his head.

After a moment of silence, he faced Ichinose, who was looking straight at him.

"Well… I guess she's not entirely untrustworthy…"

"I'm glad to hear you say that, even if you're half-doubtful."

Ichinose smiled happily, narrowing her eyes, and Hashimoto awkwardly looked away, scratching his cheek.

"Men are simple creatures. Truly foolish beings."

Hearing Morishita's exasperated words, Hashimoto snapped back to attention and resumed his rebuttal, but perhaps having already lost interest in the topic, he placed both hands over his drink and started mumbling to himself.

"But, you know what? That's just the beginning of our third year. What happens when we've been fighting for a few months and the situation gets tense? Even if Ichinose's trustworthy, the people in her class might tempt her to betray us. And the same could happen to us. When it comes down to the wire, it's not about trust anymore."

"Of course, if the time comes, the alliance will be dissolved. Just like what you're worried about, Hashimoto-kun, we can't keep the alliance for the whole year. But there's no benefit in unilaterally cutting ties at an awkward time before that moment arrives. It's exactly because we're in a situation where there's truly no next time that I want to maintain the cooperative relationship with Ayanokouji-kun until the last possible moment."

Holding back from betraying has more benefits than doing so.

Just as we'd evaluated Ichinose's credibility from the past, Ichinose was currently assessing my abilities in real-time. A delicate balance had been established.

"…You really think highly of Ayanokouji."

"Yes. Just like you, Hashimoto-kun."

Ichinose looked straight at Hashimoto and answered without hesitation.

"I see… Well, I understand what you're trying to say, Ichinose. Indeed, there might not be any benefits for you to betray us. But there's no guarantee that we won't betray you, right? Or maybe you've got that covered too, like with a contract or something? If that's the case, then—"

Hashimoto asked, and Ichinose smiled and denied it.

"There's no contract. We've just exchanged promises verbally."

"That's just too soft, no matter how you look at it."

"No, that's enough for me. Just like Ayanokouji-kun trusts me, I trust him too."

Ichinose answered without hesitation, and Hashimoto, seemingly far from understanding, had his head in his hands again.

"I don't understand, not for me."

"People who assume betrayal as a given wouldn't understand, would they? However, I don't understand either."

Morishita, who had been mocking Hashimoto all along, seemed dissatisfied with the contract between me and Ichinose.

"Let's set aside the issue of trust for now. Does this alliance really mean anything significant? I'm not saying it's completely ineffective, but do you really think it's enough to compete in the battle for Class A?"

Morishita was skeptical of the argument, which she saw as very unrealistic.

"Yeah, I agree. Before we even get to matters of trust, can this alliance really be the key? After all, it's just about giving way to each other when we clash. I can't see how that alone would catch us up to Horikita's or Ryuuen's class."

For Hashimoto, it seemed like something that would reduce rather than increase the chances of gaining Class Points.

It was clear that he viewed the alliance this way.

"Forming an alliance isn't just about yielding to each other and not fighting. If we become complete allies, the amount of information we can gather from daily interactions simply doubles. This is effective not only during academic and physical exams but also in various other situations."

One person is better than none, two are better than one, and three are better than two. It would become possible to gather people who are skilled and support those who aren't, motivating us and creating synergy. In class-wide exams like the deserted island exams conducted during the past two years, there would be opportunities for us to cooperate.

"And when classes join hands, it means we can coordinate Private Points as needed. If you need a large amount of funds, we can accommodate that. This could also help in special exams."

Of course, there was no guarantee that all of that would be necessary.

Such a thing might only occur two or three times out of ten.

But having the option to achieve what a single class couldn't was a weapon.

"I understand that it's better to borrow strength that you usually can't… but, the fact that we formed an alliance will come to light soon, right? What if the top two classes join hands because we are? All the benefits just mentioned would be blown away."

"That's not a concern for now. The top two classes are not in a position to yield to each other. Allowing Class Points to move around without both parties benefiting would only bring disadvantages. Besides, setting Horikita aside, Ryuuen isn't reliable. They don't have a relationship where he'd unconditionally concede the victory first or lend Private Points when demanded. And Horikita isn't likely to take a conceding stance either."

Even if they were allowed some flexibility, with Ryuuen, a little would never be enough. Moreover, involving Ryuuen, someone who preferred flashy maneuvers, would bring him significant disadvantages.

"…Well, that's true. But that's exactly why we have contracts. If there's a contract, like when Ryuuen and Katsuragi teamed up, they would be forced to follow the rules."

"Of course, if they bring up a contract and involve the school, that's also possible, and it would be a welcome development for us."

"Them forming an alliance would help us?"

"Yeah. If the top classes were to join hands, they'd naturally start suffocating each other. If they bind themselves with terms, like yielding victories to each other, they'd have to bear the loss when they need to win."

And with the binding conditions, it could never be nullified.

"A tightly bound contract can sometimes be a fatal blow."

Morishita muttered to herself, holding a cup.

"On the other hand, we don't have unnecessary bindings like a contract. It's not about whether we betray each other, but about being able to adjust our strategy flexibly and opportunistically. If a gap in Class Points arises, we can provide substantial support to the other party until the gap is closed."

The contract that normally would've been put in place.

The wide range of strategic options that came from not having one.

"This is unexpected. Not having a contract actually works to our advantage, huh? I hadn't considered that perspective… but in the end, this alliance will be terminated and we'll be competing normally, right?"

"Ichinose also mentioned that. If Class C and Class D rise to stand alongside Horikita's and Ryuuen's classes, our cooperative relationship will naturally dissolve."

This was, of course, made with approval from Ichinose's side.

Ichinose nodded in response so that Hashimoto and Morishita could understand that point clearly.

"I'm somewhat convinced. But because of that, I have more questions. Let me ask something more probing—why did you decide to cooperate with Ayanokouji? Morishita and I are certainly planning to set Ayanokouji up in a high position, but most of our classmates aren't convinced. If Ayanokouji's branded as someone unsuitable to be a leader, such an alliance won't mean anything, and it might even end up hindering you. Are you managing those risks properly?"

Hashimoto deliberately directed his question not at me but at Ichinose.

He believed he could fully expose Ichinose with his insight, but it wasn't that simple. His opponent had clearly changed and grown since before.

"Having fallen into Class D, our backs are against the wall. You understand that, right?"

"Yeah, of course. That's why a soft approach like this alliance will only make you advance by half a step at a time instead of full steps. In fact, I'm even feeling so anxious just hearing this proposal that I'm almost panicking."

"Using your expression, a certain half step is better than an uncertain full step. We've been walking for two years without moving forward, having only fallen behind. Our situation is different from that of your class, Hashimoto-kun. That's why we could accept it from the start."

After seeing her positive attitude, Hashimoto gave a single nod.

"Then I'll change the question. What if Ayanokouji can't become the leader? Or even if he becomes the leader, but the condition for the class to accept him is to avoid working with Class D? Would you simply withdraw from the cooperative relationship then?"

What Hashimoto feared was a half-hearted cooperation network.

Or he feared that Ichinose's class might become dependent and start to collapse.

"I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but honestly, I feel like you're a burden. Between our class and yours, it's clear who holds the reins. If you say that we're forming an alliance, I'd want something in return to be on equal footing."

"What kind of return are you looking for?"

Instead of outright refusing, Ichinose first sought to draw out a proposal from Hashimoto.

"You're a shameless man. What do you intend to make Ichinose Honami do?"

"Don't jump to conclusions on what it's about."

"But, what about if she said yes regardless?"

"That's… no, I’m saying that's not what I mean."

"That pause just now spoke volumes."

Hashimoto, with a strong motion, waved his hands at Morishita, telling her to stop interrupting the conversation.

"There must be something, like paying Private Points or something like that—"

"Sorry, Hashimoto, but the alliance I want to reap benefits from is based on equality, not subordination. Establishing a disadvantaged hierarchy would actually be more of a drawback."

When opinions diverged, it was natural for Class C to use their superior position and pressure others to comply. That was something we wanted to avoid.

"There's one thing I want you to be reassured about: if Ayanokouji-kun —no, if anyone from Class C—opposes it, I'm prepared to accept that."

"I see? So you'd be willing to discard the alliance proposal then?"

"Yes, but I don't think there's any need to worry about that."

"And why's that?"

"Because it's Ayanokouji-kun's proposal."

Her straightforward gaze pierced through Hashimoto.

"That's what I believe, so I don't think this discussion will fall apart."

"…I see."

"Sorry, but let's stop this discussion for now."

"Why's that?"

I deliberately directed my gaze in a certain direction, and Hashimoto and Morishita followed suit. There, Horikita and Matsushita appeared, still not fully comprehending the situation.

"Ah, that figures. I'll handle it."

"Make sure to keep the alliance under wraps. It's impossible for those two right now to predict that we might be forming one. There's no need to tell them at this stage."

"I get it. There's no need to spill it so early."

Hashimoto's interpretation and my intentions probably didn't align.

"Honestly, it would be fine to reveal the alliance today or tomorrow."

"Oh? Is that so?"

"The alliance doesn't need to be kept secret indefinitely; it's more effective when we make it known. However, right now, Horikita and the others have already taken significant damage just by the fact that I've transferred classes. Mentioning the alliance to confuse them now would be too wasteful. It's better for them to learn about it once the wound of the transfer has healed a bit. That will hurt them more deeply."

"…Right. You're not planning to show any mercy."

This was merely lip service aimed toward Hashimoto, Morishita, and Ichinose.

Those who would be relieved and simultaneously intimidated by Horikita's Class’s downfall would find this acceptable.

However, my goal wasn't to bring down Horikita.

I had to lead her to growth.

Adding to the transfer, throwing an unexpected threat like an alliance at her would significantly weigh on her psyche.

Of course, Horikita's psyche might be even more deeply wounded afterward.

But there was no need to worry.

Two years had passed. Horikita was able to build her relationships with her classmates during this time.

I trusted that they would help her recover through this time.

Part 4

AFTER HEARING WHAT I had to say without sugarcoating anything, Horikita and Matsushita quietly turned back. Later, Ichinose also rejoined her friends and waved goodbye to the three of us. Watching her leave, Hashimoto took a deep breath.

"Their reaction… It must have been quite a shock."

"I see. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka deliberately transferred this very day, waiting until after the opening ceremony, to maximize the disturbance in Class A?"

"If the transfer had been completed the day before, I risked the school notifying them or the homeroom teacher leaking it to them. Therefore, doing it when there was essentially no delay was best. In terms of time, the difference was less than an hour. However, I was in the same classroom as them before the ceremony and attended it as well. Horikita and the others must've unconsciously felt that it was the beginning of their usual journey with their classmates for the last year."

That faint hope, that expectation, was flawlessly utilized. I was just waiting for the right timing.

"Did you calculate that far? That's ruthless. Even though I'm on the side that benefits, it was hard to look directly at their faces when they were almost crying. In that respect, you don't seem to have any sympathy or hesitation, Ayanokouji."

"There shouldn't be any. And there can't be any. I came to Class C to ensure that in this final year, I could bring it to a position where it could claim Class A. Using the transfer at the most effective moment is a perfectly natural strategy."

If I were someone who still harbored lingering attachments, there was no way Class C would've accepted me.

Someone like that couldn't be entrusted with class leadership.

"It's really reassuring to have you as an ally."

The current difference in Class Points was significant.

Even if we were to force expulsions, it wasn't a tactic that could be employed frequently or repeatedly.

To increase our chances of winning, even wasting the slightest opportunity wouldn't be allowed.

"I'm still somewhat skeptical about the alliance, but I'm convinced for now."

"I agree. However, the problems are piling up, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. If it becomes known that you tried to form alliances or proceeded with matters on your own without being recognized as a leader by most of the class, the backlash from within Class C will only intensify."

"I'm aware of that. Sooner or later, there will be students who voice their opinions against me."

Even if they were unsatisfied, the class had no choice but to silently observe.

To pull me out of Class A, they all contributed their private points.

It was what's commonly known as the sunk cost fallacy.

People couldn't accept that the cost they've invested in would result in a loss so easily.

Therefore, while they'd criticize me, they'd also give me some leeway, hoping for a result that matches their efforts.

This seemingly reckless alliance strategy was set up from the start in a way that left no choice but to compromise by first observing.

Hashimoto, who invested the most Private Points in me, was a good example of this.

"Then, first and foremost, you have to gain the class's approval, fast."

"If a special exam can do that, things would be quicker."

Morishita, who stood up from her chair, glanced briefly at Hashimoto after his response.

"I wonder about that."

"What do you mean?"

"Can you unconditionally entrust an unknown student to create a strategy for the special exam?"

"That's—"

"This time, if you weren't the one mainly involved in bringing Ayanokouji Kiyotaka to the class, you would be the prime candidate for opposing such a plan. If not, refute my claim perfectly with just one, singular word."

"One word is impossible…"

"Hmph."

Seeing that Hashimoto didn't have a perfect rebuttal, Morishita left her seat.

"It's tiring dealing with her."

"Was Morishita like that before I started talking to her?"

"She hasn't changed. But sure, she wasn't someone who actively involved herself with others. In that sense, you've gotta be somewhat of an exception to her."

I felt a mix of emotions, unsure whether I should be genuinely pleased.

Part 5

WHEN HASHIMOTO AND I returned to the dorm lobby, a student who saw us stood up.

Sensing that he was about to approach, Hashimoto stepped forward, but I stopped him.

"Return ahead of me."

"Okay. You can take your time if there's a lot to talk about."

Sensing that the person had no ill intent, Hashimoto smiled and pressed the elevator button.

The student waited for Hashimoto to board the elevator and then spoke calmly.

"Would you mind changing the location a bit? It seems like people might gather here."

"I'm fine with it as long as you don’t mind. Shall we go to my room, Yousuke?"

"Outside might be better."

To accommodate his wish, Yousuke and I left the lobby and tried to move away from the dorm.

However, being alone with just Hirata wasn't so easy.

It was evening, and everyone was returning home. It was inevitable that we ran into several students from Horikita’s class.

"Hirata… Ayanokouji."

Taken aback, Sudou muttered our names.

Beside him were Ike and, in an unusual combination, Keisei and Akito.

"I just met Suzune and heard a bit of the situation... Rather than transferring to Class C for some strategy, you seriously did it on your own free will?"

It was unclear whether Horikita had yet to return to the dorm or had already gone back earlier.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Why did you do it?"

Sudou, showing a pained expression, tried to approach me when Yousuke intervened.

"Sudou-kun. If we keep talking here, more and more people will gather."

"That's… right, sorry."

"If you have something to say, I'm willing to listen. Let's change the location for now."

I agreed with Yousuke and responded to Sudou. Afterward, we ended up going around to the back of the dormitory.

Not only Sudou, but the other three also followed without a hint of hesitation.

Soon after moving to a blind spot from the dormitory entrance, Sudou, unable to hold back any longer, spoke up again.

"Why the hell did you do that, Ayanokouji? Why did you transfer classes? There's no need to go down to Class C after finally moving up to Class A, right?"

"Haha, was it because of Karuizawa after all?"

It wasn't meant to be a joke, but that slipped out of Ike's mouth.

"Hey Ike…!"

"Come on. I can't think of any other reason. It must be embarrassing to be dumped."

"That might be one of the reasons."

"See! I knew—ack!?"

Ike, clapping his hands in joy, was hit with Sudou's angry slap on the back.

"That's definitely a lie, that's for sure."

"Ouch… He admitted it himself, so assuming it's a lie is what's really questionable here if you ask me…"

While rubbing his sore back, Ike glared at Sudou and furrowed his brows.

"So, what's the real reason?"

Akito asked with a tone that showed he held back some of his anger.

Answering that question was simple, but there were plenty of reasons why it couldn't be done.

"A reason? I don't see any meaning in answering that."

"There is meaning. Do you know how we feel right now? I was just with Haruka, and she was feeling really down. She kept repeating over and over

that it might've been her fault—that maybe her attempt to reconcile so conveniently became a burden for you, Kiyotaka."

Come to think of it, I had a chance to talk with Hasebe before the end-of-year special exam.

Indeed, it wouldn't be surprising to think the remarks exchanged then had influenced me to transfer.

"She's been troubled even before today's events. Kiyotaka, you've helped her, and she hasn't even been able to properly express her gratitude."

Keisei nodded to Akito's plea.

"I was once saved by you too, Ayanokouji-kun. If it weren't for you, I probably wouldn't have stayed at this school."

Yousuke seemed to have similar thoughts.

Yousuke, who feared people getting hurt, had been wounded by his three classmates' expulsions. It was undeniable that without my support, he would've fallen.

"That's why I respected your strength and found you a reliable classmate. But during the unanimous special exam and the end-of-year special exam, there were things I couldn't digest, no, couldn't accept. Of course, I won't deny that it would've been better if I had more strength, but I also came to distrust you a bit."

At the end of our spring break, even at the victory celebration Horikita planned, Yousuke showed a hint of those nuanced feelings.

Since then, it'd been slightly on my mind that he wasn't calling me by my first name, and considering that he'd been maintaining that stance today as well, it might've meant he unconsciously wanted to keep a distance between us. Similarly, I'd also been intentionally distinguishing between using his first and last name due to the changes in our relationship.

"It's not just Sudou-kun and the others here. Everyone in the class is very worried and confused."

Everyone present wanted to know the reason.

That was because they wanted to extract some sort of statement where I admitted there were unavoidable circumstances for the transfer.

"Worry and confusion, huh? Well, that's right. I transferred classes without telling anyone to get that reaction."

"…What do you mean?"

Perhaps his brain refused to comprehend for a moment. Keisei adjusted his glasses and asked to hear it again.

"Just take it at face value. I didn't say anything because I wanted to trouble the class. And my reason that you wanted to hear is simple. Class C was in trouble without Sakayanagi. So, I chose to help by transferring in exchange for Private Points."

A contrived act.

And for selfish reasons.

I emphasized that the transfer was solely for my own benefit. Even if there were some lies mixed in, it was the undeniable truth.

"Wha… Are you serious…?"

Those were Sudou's words, but Akito and Keisei probably felt the same.

They showed similar reactions to my cold words.

However, Yousuke was almost unfazed.

"Hey, I've been wondering since this morning, but why would that happen?"

In the tense atmosphere, Ike tilted his neck and brought his hands to the back of his head.

"I get that it's a pinch without Sakayanagi, but why pay a huge sum of twenty million to poach Ayanokouji? It doesn't make any sense. I can see that it's to weaken Class A, but normally, there would be plenty of other students they'd want, right?"

That was a question that seemed obvious given the situation. Excluding Yousuke and Sudou, no one there could truly understand why I was the one being bought.

"I also thought so at first too. That's why I was concerned that there might've been something behind the transfer. You really aren't willing to tell us the full story?"

Keisei, while agreeing with Ike, wanted to know whether there were any hidden circumstances behind the transfer.

"There's nothing more to say. What I just said is everything there is. It's difficult to prove at this point whether Class C had a good reason to go through such lengths to acquire me. Though, I believe it's only a matter of time."

"No matter how you look at it—"

Just as Ike was about to interject, Sudou stepped up to him and grabbed his shoulder.

"It's a big problem, Kanji."

"What is…?"

"It's Ayanokouji's transfer. You don't get it, do you…?"

"Then do you understand, Ken?"

"Ayanokouji is—no, I don't understand everything either…"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Even so, Ayanokouji's an important presence for the class!"

As Sudou raised his voice in anger, Yousuke approached and spoke to calm him down.

Then he quietly turned towards me.

"What I wanted to confirm today was solely why you left the class. If it were for the sake of the class, I thought you wouldn't want to cause any misunderstandings for any of us, including me."

"You can rest assured. It's purely, 100%, a transfer solely for my own benefit."

"…It seems so."

Perhaps, I was only saying that on the surface, and it was different in actuality. However, at the moment at least, Hirata didn't seem to be able to consider it that way.

He was someone who was much more sensitive than others when it came to trouble within the class.

When he learned of my transfer, he probably wasn't too disturbed.

My presence had both advantages and disadvantages. If I were gone, my disappearance could simply result in class management becoming more stable.

"Looks like it, and you're okay with that, Hirata? Just letting Ayanokouji transfer?"

"Regardless of whether it's good or bad, it's Ayanokouji-kun's choice. Besides, the school procedures are already completed without any mishaps, so if we were to call him back to our class, we would need the same amount of Private Points. It's not an amount we can prepare immediately."

"If you regret leaving the class, Ayanokouji, then I'll contribute all the money I have on hand. Right, guys?!"

Sudou tried to rally all the boys present, including Ike, but Akito and Keisei didn't immediately nod.

Given my indifferent attitude and the fact that I had made it clear I left on my own accord, they probably didn't think it was possible to call me back, nor were they inclined to do so.

"Kiyotaka[1] left the class on his own free will. We have to respect that."

"But…"

Turning away from the persistent Sudou, Hirata faced me.

"Is there anything you need to tell the class?"

"Nothing."

"I see… Sorry for taking your time."

Obediently, Hirata accepted everything and left the scene.

Although he probably wasn't calm on the inside, exerting pointless effort here wouldn't improve the situation.

Instead, he needed to focus on navigating the situation without causing problems among his classmates.

"Suzune was relying on you. What kind of face do you plan to make from tomorrow onward…"

"Hey Ken, now that we know Ayanokouji left on his own, let's go back too."

Sudou bit his lower lip in frustration and was pushed by Ike to leave.

"We're still friends even if you left the class. If you ever encounter any problems, feel free to consult us."

Akito also gave a response and returned to the dormitory with Keisei.

I watched my former classmates leave and decided to return to the dormitory a bit later.

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[1]: For some reason, Hirata addresses him as "Kiyotaka" here rather than "Ayanokouji-kun"—that isn't a translation mistake. We don't know why. It could be another mistake on Kinu's part; that wouldn't be the only mistake he may have made in this volume.

Chapter 4:
An Onlooker's Perspective

(Regarding the chapter title: 'An Onlooker's Perspective')[1]

THE MORNING AFTER the opening ceremony, I managed to have a quiet commute to school from the dorm without encountering any former classmates.

This was because I left for school over thirty minutes earlier than usual.

It wasn't because I didn't want to attract attention, and it wasn't just a whim either.

First, I needed to understand Class C in detail. That meant getting to know its internal situation, not just through OAA evaluations, but also by observing and listening to the students directly, finding more in-depth information.

For that, I had to move actively, not just sit and wait.

In the morning, who arrives at school the earliest and who arrives the latest?

Talkative students, quiet students, those who can read the room, and those who can't.

Observing such behaviors was the first step in getting to know them.

I arrived at Class 3-C and slowly opened the door to the classroom, which I expected to be empty.

However…

I suddenly encountered a situation that spoiled my start.

I thought I was the first to arrive at the classroom, but I wasn't the first one there after all.

Next to my seat, a female student was using her tablet.

When the door opened, she turned around with a slightly startled look.

I hadn't intended to open the door so loudly, but perhaps she hadn't expected another student to arrive so early.

However, her expression quickly softened.

"Good morning."

After a pause, I greeted the person I was seated next to, Shiraishi, who'd arrived first.

"Good morning to you, too."

She replied politely.

OAA: Shiraishi Asuka
Academic Ability B+ (76)
Physical Ability D (34)
Adaptability C+ (57)
Social Contribution C– (44)
Overall Ability C (54)

Shiraishi had above-average academic ability, but her physical ability was low, and she wasn't the type to actively socialize with others, and she also wasn't known for getting particularly friendly with other classes. This was the limited information I knew about Shiraishi from the past two years using the OAA.

From here, I began to memorize her appearance and characteristics anew.

Firstly, the beauty mark under her left eye, her beautiful long blonde hair, and her headband were noticeable. She had a calm aura, giving her the impression of a quiet student who wasn't one to cause a commotion.

In fact, during the past two years, from the brief encounters I had with her, I never felt that Shiraishi had a flashy personality. Although it was somewhat different from what I'd planned, this could still be the result I sought.

I didn't know when the seat changes would take place, but it was unlikely to be anytime soon.

If so, befriending a desk neighbor was the classic approach to school life.

It was just like how it started with a conversation with Horikita two years ago. I would walk the same path now, based on my past two years' experience. The question was how to start the conversation…

I didn't know anything about Shiraishi's personality, hobbies, or preferences from the data I had.

So, I needed to feel my way through from scratch. As I approached my seat, I realized that Shiraishi had been studying in the classroom this

morning, holding a pen and working on something akin to an assignment on her tablet. I waited a moment before speaking.




@Satoshi

We'd passed each other several times over the past two years, but this was the first time I tried to initiate a conversation.

"I didn't expect someone to be here already. You're rather early."

"…Yes, I woke up unusually early today. But you're early too, Ayanokouji-kun."

For now, a polite response followed our greetings.

She hesitated a bit with her words, perhaps because she wasn't used to me.

Or maybe she didn't want to talk, but given the situation with just the two of us here, she reluctantly replied.

I still couldn't read that much into it.

"Since I've switched classes, it's like I'm a transfer student from a different school. Rather than being welcomed, I thought it'd be better to be the one doing the welcoming."

I decided to mix in some truths, planning to keep talking to Shiraishi until she blatantly showed disinterest.

Remaining silent in a classroom with just the two of us could be a problem.

"It's an interesting coincidence—two people who are early risers sitting next to each other in such a large, empty classroom."

"Maybe."

A coincidence. An unintended, slightly amusing overlap.

At least, Shiraishi didn't seem to be uncomfortable.

Now, how should I continue the conversation?

When it came to such situations… I found it harder to speak than I thought.

Various ideas came to mind, but I wasn't confident whether it was really okay to break the ice with them.

If it were Hirata Yousuke in this situation, he'd develop the conversation smoothly without making the other person wait, and he'd do so naturally without even planning it.

"Why did you decide to transfer to this class, Ayanokouji-kun?"

In my hesitation, Shiraishi posed a very natural question.

She continued, expressing her desire to know more.

"I can't believe you'd choose to drop to a lower class after finally making it to Class A."

"That might be true under normal circumstances."

"If it's not normal, then… why did you decide to transfer?"

As she asked that question, Shiraishi's eyes were direct and beautifully colored.

She seemed very keen on knowing the true reason.

"Hashimoto and the others should've explained it to you. I came to this class as reinforcement."

"Of course, I understand that. But that's to save us. No one has explained how this would benefit you, Ayanokouji-kun. I've heard rumors that you received a large number of Private Points behind the scenes or that you'll receive them in the future."

Shiraishi asked this difficult question without a hint of hesitation.

Perhaps the empty environment influenced her.

The answer to her question was simple.

To bring balance to the four classes.

For that, it was necessary to elevate Class C and Class D to catch up to the higher ranks.

To execute what would be impossible as an outsider, from within.

However, since the alliance talks hadn't been brought to light, that wasn't something I wanted to disclose yet.

"To put it bluntly, except for a few people, we're still skeptical about what kind of impact you can have on the class, and whether you can turn the situation around if you do have an impact."

"That's only natural."

"The discussion about whether you're necessary has also begun, Ayanokouji-kun."

"It's too late to start now. Couldn't you have opposed and refused my transfer?"

"That's a harsh opinion. The class was in chaos over Sakayanagi-san's expulsion during spring break."

One of the conditions for my transfer was receiving the entirety of Class C's consent.

With Sakayanagi gone and the class weakened both in terms of power and morale, the class was desperate for a quick recovery plan. Regardless of

whether *Ayanokouji Kiyotaka* was capable or not, the proposal to pull someone from Class A and supplement the numbers wasn't a bad one. Hashimoto paid most of it, but the individual expenses weren't cheap.

It was natural to expect a performance that was worth the price.

"Indeed, only a few students would willingly drop from Class A to C."

"I thought it was similar to Katsuragi-kun's case, but he lost his place in this class. He probably also wanted revenge against Sakayanagi-san."

"Then you aren't considering the possibility that I had a conflict with Class A?"

Instead of giving the expected answer, I decided to throw a question in return.

"I don't think that's the case. Class A was relying on you, and I figured that you blended in well."

It may have appeared to be a string of mere flattery, but it was a fine line that also seemed to reflect her sincerity.

No, it would be better to take it as her being sincere and proceed with the conversation.

"I don't remember showing such an attitude to other classes."

"From the outside, you can see quite a lot. Plus, in the special exams at the end of our first and second years, you were entrusted with important roles. That wouldn't be possible without the class having both trust and confidence in you."

"I see. So, Shiraishi, how do you perceive my transfer?"

"As I just mentioned, I have a high regard for you, Ayanokouji-kun, so I honestly have high expectations. Besides, Hashimoto-kun and Morishita-san, the students who worked hard for your transfer, seem to regard you even more highly than I do… and—"

"And?"

Shiraishi's words, which carried implications, were interrupted by a male student who arrived in class right after.

"H-Hey, Shiraishi. Good morning."

"Good morning, Yoshida-kun."

Although their seats were spread apart, Yoshida called out to Shiraishi as soon as he entered the classroom.

Then, after giving me a sharp look, he put his bag on his desk and approached us.

"What's up, Ayanokouji? You're quite early this morning, huh?"

"Not really. I intended to be the first one here, but Shiraishi arrived earlier."

"In that case, come as soon as the gates open starting tomorrow. Being the first to arrive at school is one way to set an example. Continue until everyone in the class acknowledges you."

"I see."

The school allowed entry at 7:15 in the morning—quite early.

That's quite a harsh suggestion, but it might actually be a good idea to do that for a while.

"Isn't that a bit much?"

Right when I was about to agree with him, Shiraishi gently responded to Yoshida.

"That said, what exactly do you mean by everyone acknowledging him?"

"Well, um, I hadn't thought that far…"

Confused by the unexpected counterattack, Yoshida couldn't hide his bewilderment.

"In that case, if you felt like it, Yoshida-kun, couldn't you alone just continue refusing to acknowledge him, so it would never end up being the entire class?"

"No, I wouldn't do that!"

"If it's a misunderstanding, shouldn't you retract your previous claim first?"

"Okay, I understand. I'll retract what I just said, so forget it."

Flustered, Yoshida strained his voice as he spoke with Shiraishi.

"I'm glad. I thought you'd understand."

"Well… maybe I did say a bit too much."

"That's right. Yoshida, you're popular in the class, so why don't you help Ayanokouji-kun get along with our other classmates?"

"Huh? Eh? Me, help Ayanokouji?"

"Isn't that okay?"

"It's not okay, don't make light of me!"

Yoshida was popular in the class. I noted those words in my mind, but whether they were true or just flattery was unclear at the moment.

"Is that so? Then, if I may be so bold, may I volunteer? I might not be able to connect with the boys, but I think I can with the girls. Some time soon, perhaps during a day off, I'll introduce you to some friends, so could you join us?"

As the saying goes, the early bird catches the worm—that might just be true.

It seemed there was no reason to refuse Shiraishi's offer.

"I'll take you up on that offer."

"Wait a minute! I guess I have no choice but to help you out too."

Despite saying that he didn't want to be made light of earlier, Yoshida retracted his previous statement as he leaned forward.

"Is that okay, Yoshida-kun?"

"Well, I did feel a bit bad for refusing the welcome party. It must've taken a lot of courage to transfer to a class that was an enemy until recently. Since it is a new class, you need some support, right? So, when should we do it? I'm free anytime."

Yoshida asked while directing a smile at me, or rather, towards Shiraishi.

"Alright. I'll contact you when it's decided."

"Okay! Don't get sick until then, Ayanokouji."

Overwhelmed by the intense energy, I simply nodded for now.

Soon after, Class C students began to appear in the classroom one after another, and Yoshida hurried back to his seat.

"Yoshida-kun's quite simple, isn't he?"

Shiraishi muttered, briefly glancing at Yoshida.

Then, she turned back to me.

"He likes me."

"So it seems."

It was clear that he had some affection for her, but it was rare for the recipient to state it with such certainty.

"That's why he couldn't stand me going out with other boys on days off, or maybe he was hoping for some progress with me. Even if the day comes when Yoshida-kun and I are the only humans left on Earth, I still wouldn't choose him."

She was aware of her attractiveness to the opposite sex, but she didn't seem to enjoy it.

Is it simply because she isn't interested in someone she doesn't like, or is it taken for granted?

"Next time, please be sure to tell me the reason why you transferred."

Shiraishi smiled as she looked away, signaling that she hadn't forgotten.

A kind neighbor—but maybe that wasn't all there was to my analysis regarding Shiraishi.

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[1]: The title, "傍目八目," is a Japanese saying that means "outsiders have a better grasp of the situation than the people involved."

Part 1

IT WAS THE first Saturday since I transferred classes.

Regardless of whether I changed classes or year, my routine remained basically the same.

After finishing breakfast, I was thinking of going to the gym when I noticed a message on my phone.

[Would you like to go to the gym together today?]

It was an invitation from Ichinose, who was also my gym buddy.

I was planning on going to the gym even if I hadn't received her message, so I sent a confirmation message, and it was immediately read.

After several exchanges, we decided to meet at the gym and started getting ready.

Students were gathering by the entrance of Keyaki Mall, waiting for it to be open, and although I didn't join them, I tried to kill time from a distance when Housen Kazuomi, a student from Class 2-D I don't usually interact with, approached me.

Due to his imposing physique and appearance, the nearby first years started to distance themselves as if they were fleeing.

Last year, interactions with the first years started right at the beginning of our second year.

On the other hand, there hadn't been any chances to get to know the new first-year students this year yet, so no one knew anyone's face or name.

It wouldn't be strange if someone with remarkable talent had enrolled—

While I was thinking about that, Housen came close to me.

He was indeed one of the students who'd caught a lot of attention last spring.

"Hey Ayanokouji-paisen[1]. I've been hearing some flashy rumors lately about a stupid senpai who voluntarily transferred to Class C amidst its fall. What's the deal?"

He eagerly asked the question, but his eyes weren't smiling.

He didn't seem very interested in the topic itself.

"Well, who knows what the intention is?"

When I deliberately responded as if it were someone else's business, Housen smiled a bit and came even closer.

"Hah, well, I guess it doesn't matter."

Clearly, that wasn’t the reason why he was here, and Housen continued speaking.

"It's just that my skills have been getting dull lately, and it's bothering me. I'm looking for someone to be my punching bag. Got any ideas?"

He swung his large arm around, saying something suggestive.

"Sorry, but I'm not interested in fighting."

"What's the deal, you're no fun."

"If that's what you're looking for, you should ask Ryuuen."

I thought I’d provided some excellent information, but Housen gave an exaggerated sigh and expressed his dissatisfaction.

"That guy is a chicken who won't fight one-on-one."

"Then you should fight multiple people at once. It'd be exciting."

"Once, maybe, but it's too much trouble when it's hectic all the time."

If Housen went after Ryuuen, he'd likely win on the spot. However, at any point in time, Ryuuen would retaliate using whatever underhanded method necessary. Housen seemed to have predicted as much.

During the deserted island exam, they’d directly clashed. However, since then, there hadn't been any incidents that required school intervention.

No one would willingly go after Ryuuen at this school, except perhaps the uninformed first-year students. In a sense, he’d established an effective defense mechanism.

"By the way, does it look like you can move up to Class C?"

Since it was pointless to keep talking about such menacing topics, I casually asked about the second years' situation.

Housen and the other second-year students had spent the year without any class changes.

However, all classes, including Class D, were still in a good position to win.

"Who knows? As long as I get money, that's all I care about. I've thrown that responsibility to Nanase."

"Nanase? I didn't think you were the type to delegate tasks to others. Though, that's a good decision. Nanase seems more capable of being a solid leader than you, Housen."

"You said it. So, you wanted to fight me after all, huh? Then—"

Housen tried to steer the conversation back to violence.

"Ayanokouji."

As I faced the aggressive Housen, a slightly tense Chabashira-sensei appeared. At the sight of the teacher, Housen quietly clicked his tongue and walked away as if he'd been interrupted.

"See you later, Paisen. I'll have fun with some interesting first years for a while, and after that, you'll be my sparring partner."

"I'm not interested."

I figured I'd at least reply, so I did so in a voice too low to be heard.

The moment I finished replying to the departing Housen from over my shoulder, Chabashira-sensei pulled my arm.

"Come with me for a moment."

Without allowing any room for objection, Chabashira-sensei led me to a corner.

"What is it?"

"…I wanted to talk to you. As your homeroom teacher… no, as your former homeroom teacher, I thought it might be inappropriate to carelessly make contact, but I couldn't help wanting to check something."

Chabashira-sensei expressed her pent-up feelings.

Her expression lacked vigor, and she must've been in deep thought this week.

"So you've been following me from the dormitory."

"…You noticed?"

"Well, it was quite obvious."

Her tailing skills were on par with Morishita's, and to put it nicely, they weren't good.

"There was no guarantee I'd be leaving the dorm. How early were you waiting for me, exactly?"

It was still quite chilly in the mornings, despite it getting warmer by the day.

It was cold enough to catch a cold, but she didn't seem to mind.

"That doesn't matter. What I want to hear about is the class transfer… the transfer matter. What were you thinking when you decided to transfer without telling anyone…?"

"The transfer matter, huh? Honestly, I've been asked the same question so many times this week that I've grown tired of it, regardless of gender or year."

However, it was the first time a teacher like Chabashira-sensei had confronted me. From a teacher's perspective, it would be impossible to react to every single student's actions and transfers.

"Explain what's going on."

"It's difficult to explain when you ask like that. There shouldn't be any problem with a student exercising their rightful option to transfer classes."

I had no obligation to explain the circumstances.

Chabashira-sensei, fully aware of this, wouldn't back down at such words.

"Isn't there something inconvenient… something that forced you to transfer?"

"And what would that be?"

"That's…"

When questioned back, Chabashira-sensei choked on her words, unable to articulate them clearly.

"I forgot to mention earlier, but the issue I mentioned about dealing with Hoshinomiya-sensei has been resolved, so you can rest assured. I don't think she will cause any more trouble for the teachers or the school."

"You…!"

She almost blurted something out impulsively, showing her true feelings.

Though, perhaps she couldn't hold back after all. She grabbed my shoulders and started opening her mouth.

"Is it really because of me? Because I was troubled with Chie's problem… Did you sacrifice yourself to solve it?"

"I thought you might think that way, Chabashira-sensei. But don't worry. I had intended to transfer classes even before Hoshinomiya-sensei's issue came up."

She looked into my eyes, trying to ascertain whether it was the truth.

However, she couldn't dispel the concern that I was covering things up with a lie.

Still, she should've understood that I had no hesitation and not a trace of regret.

"It doesn't seem like you're simply being considerate…"

"Yes. I had narrowed it down to either Class C or Class D early on. It wasn't because I had complaints about the teacher or the class."

"What's the reason then? Why do something so meaningless…?"

"Whether it's meaningless or not depends on how you see things. You know I'm not obsessed with graduating from Class A, right?"

"Yes…"

"This transfer is entirely for my own sake. I judged that it'd be difficult to accomplish what I need to do in this school while remaining in your class. However, I will not disclose what that task is here."

With this much said, she could understand that the transfer was intentional.

However, I wouldn't provide excessive details.

Chabashira-sensei might unexpectedly share this conversation with Horikita and others.

"It’s about time for me to head to the gym, so I'll be excusing myself."

As a teacher, she probably couldn't probe any further.

She nodded quietly, trying hard to control her expression.

"Understood. I see… sorry for taking your time."

I left Chabashira-sensei standing there and headed to the gym on the second floor.

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[1]: For those who don't remember, "paisen" is Housen's informal way of saying the honorific, "senpai."

Part 2

IT WAS PAST noon, and Keyaki Mall was overflowing with students at lunchtime.

After parting ways with Ayanokouji in front of the gym, Ichinose, who descended to the first floor alone via the escalator, had plans to have lunch with classmates at 12:30.

"Ichinose-se~npai!"

On her way to the destination, Ichinose was called out by Amasawa Ichika from Class 2-A.

Although there weren't any deep connections between them, they occasionally chatted and were on friendly terms.

Amasawa approached with an innocent smile, and Ichinose responded in kind.

"Did you go to the gym today?"

Amasawa looked up at the gym on the second floor and asked Ichinose without much of a greeting.

"Yeah, just for about an hour though."

"Maybe I should join too~ Lately, my body feels so sluggish."

"Really? If you're interested, why not try it out or come for a visit? We can go together if you want."

"But I tend to spend a lot of money, so the monthly expense is kind of painful."

"There are programs that can help keep the costs down, you know?"

"Really? Oh, by the way, Ayanokouji-senpai goes to the gym too, right?"

Amasawa suddenly mentioned Ayanokouji's name with sparkling eyes.

"Yeah, Ayanokouji-kun seemed interested too. When I invited him, he joined."

"I see. Maybe I'll give it some proper thought then."

Ichinose kept smiling as she looked at Amasawa's face.

"Hm? Does Ayanokouji-kun's presence matter for you to join?"

"It does matter. I like Ayanokouji-senpai a lot."

Having said so, Amasawa showed a cute expression and made a heart shape with her fingers.

"Eh?"

Ichinose widened her eyes at the unexpected confession from her kouhai.

"Oh, I mean I like him as a senpai, not that there are any romantic feelings~"

"I see."

However, Ichinose continued to face Amasawa with a smile, without changing her expression.

But why did Amasawa suddenly bring up Ayanokouji's name and make such suggestive remarks?

This was a topic that rarely came up in their relationship up until that point, so Ichinose was puzzled.

Amasawa sharpened her gaze in response to the slight change in emotion Ichinose showed.

"I was just kidding~ Actually, I really do love him in that way."

She stopped using roundabout expressions and said it outright.

"Could you perhaps want me to help you with something…?"

A confession of love for a senpai.

If that was what Amasawa wanted help with from Ichinose, it'd make sense.

Ichinose thought as much, but Amasawa immediately shook her head to deny it.

"I definitely don't have the courage to confess, but I do feel a bit jealous when I see Ichinose-senpai getting along so well with Ayanokouji-senpai. Maybe there's something going on between you two…?"

"Me? I'm not in that kind of relationship with Ayanokouji-kun."

Ichinose calmly denied it, but Amasawa grew more suspicious.

"Really? Senpai, you're so cute, I really thought that I wouldn't stand a chance if you were my rival."

"It's true, so don't worry."

Despite Amasawa's exaggerated crying face, Ichinose responded seriously.

"You're not… lying, are you? Ichinose-senpai, you wouldn't lie to me, right?"

"Of course, I wouldn't lie. Though, if that's the case, going to the gym might be a good idea. It could be your chance to get closer to Ayanokouji-kun."

Ichinose had been maintaining her mature front throughout. However, on the inside, as Amasawa kept bringing up romantic topics involving Ayanokouji, she sensed a different image from her than before.

She was clearly feeling around the circumstances and probing into them.

Keeping up the act, Amasawa nodded happily and moved closer to Ichinose.

"Ichinose-senpai, are you perhaps getting a bit carried away lately?"

Up until now, Amasawa had been playing the part of a good girl with Ichinose, but just then, she quietly spoke in a more venomous manner.

A normal person might've been shocked or taken aback by Amasawa's sudden change.

However, Ichinose didn't show any change in her demeanor.

"If it seemed that way, I'm sorry. I didn't intend that at all…"

It was unlikely that Ichinose could've anticipated such a question beforehand, but if Ichinose really hadn't, she appeared too calm—that was how Amasawa analyzed the situation.

"I'm pretty sharp, you know. I thought it'd be tactless to ask directly, but Ichinose-senpai, there's something between you and Ayanokouji-senpai, isn't there?"

"Something? There's really nothing… You really seem to worry about this stuff when it comes to Ayanokouji-kun, don't you?"

"I told you, I love Senpai. That's why I can understand certain things. Aren't you getting a bit too carried away, Ichinose-senpai?"

"Carried away?"

Leaving Ichinose's response aside, Amasawa continued the conversation alone.

"After all… you've slept with Ayanokouji-senpai, right?"

'I wouldn't lie'—right after securing such a statement from Ichinose, Amasawa threw in the bomb she'd prepared.

Amasawa naturally didn't know whether there was any physical relationship with Ayanokouji, but she always kept an eye on his surroundings. From Ichinose's dejected state after the end-of-year special exam to her recovery today, and the close distance and smile she showed

Ayanokouji at the cafe after the opening ceremony—there was no doubt that there was a catalyst for her recovery, and it was certain that Ayanokouji was involved. From that perspective, it wouldn't be surprising if there were certain things that they couldn't share with others.

She didn't care about the truth of this question. She just wanted to see Ichinose's agitation.

"Does that have anything to do with me getting carried away?"

"Huh…? You're not denying it? I'm genuinely surprised."

"It was you who asked me not to lie, Amasawa-san."

From early on, Ichinose had already realized that Amasawa was speaking with ill intent, but as a senpai and—albeit presumptuously—as a friend, she tried to maneuver without hurting her.

"I see. Hmm, that's certainly true."

Keeping up a smile until the very end and being kind was easy, but even if the true intention of the claim wasn't clear, she decided it was better to face it head-on without running away.

"So, you admit that you slept with him?"

Without voicing her answer, Ichinose smiled back as a response.

"So, you were lying to me even though you guys are dating."

"I'm not dating Ayanokouji-kun."

"Eh? But isn't that contradictory? You mean to say you slept with him even though you're not in that kind of relationship?"

"Ayanokouji-kun and I are bound by a strong bond. That's all there is to it, I suppose."

"S-Strong bond… pfft, kihahaha."

Amasawa narrowed her eyes with an overtly clear laugh.

"Ichinose-senpai, you're really getting carried away. You should face reality a bit more."

"What do you mean by reality?"

"Ayanokouji-senpai has enjoyed your attractive body, right? But thinking that you gained a bond through that is naive, or rather, too optimistic. Once he enjoys it enough, he'll get bored. Then, like Karuizawa-senpai, you'll be discarded along with that bond, thrown away like trash once your usefulness ends."

If you get too close to Ayanokouji, you'll end up regretting it—that was the message Amasawa wanted to convey through all her provocative

statements thus far.

"Do you have a favorite food, Amasawa-san? Something special you don't usually eat."

"Eh? A favorite food?"

Amasawa answered with a laugh as if the topic had suddenly changed.

"Maybe cake."

She answered seriously with a few ideas in mind.

"And if you eat that cake, you'd want to eat it again, right?"

"That's true."

"But if you could eat cake every day, anytime you want… yeah, even if it's your favorite food, you'd get tired of it, right?"

"Of course, I'd probably get sick of even seeing it for a while."

Their opinions matched, and they nodded at each other.

"That's why you shouldn't eat too much. Since it's your favorite food, you should only eat it on special occasions. Until then, you need to resist the urge. It's because you can't eat it despite it being right in front of you that the desire to eat it grows stronger. Once you've had a taste, then…?"

Nothing had changed. She still had on the same gentle smile directed towards her kouhai.

But beneath that smile, Amasawa felt she'd caught a glimpse of Ichinose's true nature.

"You're saying you're that special cake, but you're dangerously full of yourself. Do you really think it'll go that smoothly? The person in question is Ayanokouji-senpai, after all. If you're thinking he's some ordinary guy, then your thinking is even sweeter than cake."

"You seem to know a lot about Ayanokouji-kun."

"Yeah, well, probably even more than you Ichinose-senpai, yeah? He's the type to keep a lot of secrets, you know?"

For the first time since their conversation started, Ichinose looked away from Amasawa and surveyed her surroundings.

Then, she returned her unchanged gaze to Amasawa.

"There are no more secrets between me and Ayanokouji-kun."

She expressed a straightforward attitude that showed her unquestioning trust in Ayanokouji.

Seeing this, Amasawa couldn't hold back her laughter and held her stomach with both hands.

"Ahahaha, that's a funny joke, Ichinose-senpai. To think that sleeping with Ayanokouji-senpai makes you feel like you know everything, that's just adorable~ I might fall for you."

"Just like how people can't learn everything just from having a physical relationship, Amasawa-san, you also have some other kind of connection with Ayanokouji-kun, right? But isn't that just making you feel like you know him, rather than you actually knowing him?"

"Um, excuse me? At least within this school, I understand Ayanokouji-senpai the most—"

"Ayanokouji-kun told me everything, much more than what you think."

Under Amasawa's doubtful gaze, Ichinose continued without a hint of hesitation.

"Like matters, for example, about the White Room."

"Huh?"

Amasawa, who had been gleefully smiling from a supposedly superior position until now, momentarily stiffened.

However, she quickly relaxed and resumed her composure.

"Don't joke around, Ichinose-senpai. Ayanokouji-senpai would never talk about that to an outsider."

"Maybe so."

Unless put in a dire situation, Amasawa's heartbeat wouldn't falter.

However, it was a different story if a word that absolutely couldn't have been said on a whim were to come up.

"Hold on. Did Ayanokouji-senpai really talk to you about the White Room, Ichinose-senpai?"

That seemed impossible.

Even if it wasn't forbidden, discussing the White Room with unrelated students while seeking a normal school life was 100% unlikely, Amasawa was convinced of that.

"It seems we have a common secret now, Amasawa-san."

"No, wait. How much did Senpai tell you?"

Unbeknownst to herself, Amasawa's smile had faded.

Even in the face of a flustered Amasawa, Ichinose didn't change her demeanor much.

"I can't tell you that. It might be the same as you, or even more."

"That can't be. But… Ayanokouji-senpai… would he really...?"

Inside, Ichinose was smiling.

She only knew the term 'White Room' from overhearing it during the deserted island exam during her second year. Ayanokouji had denied knowing about it, and even now, he hadn't told Ichinose anything regarding the truth. However, from Amasawa's attitude suggesting that she knew something about Ayanokouji that others didn't, she deduced that there was a possible connection to the White Room. If Amasawa was unrelated to the term White Room, then that in itself was an advantage for Ichinose, proving she knew Ayanokouji better; thus, the truth didn't matter either way.

Directly translated as "white room[1]," it could be the name of a high-level cram school or something akin to a nickname, she had imagined, but this interaction revealed that Amasawa likely originated from there.

Ichinose felt a warm feeling enveloping her as she learned something new about Ayanokouji.

"I have to meet up with some friends soon, so I'm going to go now. Oh, and if you have any requests regarding the gym, feel free to ask anytime, I'll be waiting."

With that, Ichinose started walking.

"…Shoot. I'm the one getting carried away here."

After a while, Amasawa pinched her own cheek with a wry smile.

She'd only intended to tease Ichinose, but it resulted in the opposite effect.

Realizing she'd been the one countered and teased instead, she started mumbling to herself.

"I'm getting goosebumps. Ayanokouji-senpai has his hands full with more than just an ordinary busty senpai."

Amasawa started to walk, but she stopped almost immediately.

"Ayanokouji-senpai is a boy too after all, maybe after getting a taste, he's now been made to wait before getting the next one, and ended up obeying Busty-senpai because of it…? Or not. There's no way that'd be the case here."

Still, she revised her view of Ichinose, whom she hadn't thought highly of at all until then.

It was undoubtedly Ayanokouji who changed Ichinose.

But the change was due to Ichinose's own strength.

"It's going to be an interesting fight for all the third-year senpai. Well, I need to get serious about that side of things too, to make Ayanokouji-senpai happy."

The reason she remained at this school.

To not let that go to waste, and for the sake of her goal, Amasawa began walking again.

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[1]: Atsuomi's "White Room" is written in *katakana*, ホワイトルーム (pronounced, *howaito ruumu*, borrowed from lit. "white room"), which is the Japanese writing system that transliterates English and other foreign languages into Japanese syllables. Here, Ichinoseis translating the loaned words into their actual Japanese term (白い部屋).

Chapter 5:
Convolution

A WEEK HAD passed since our third year began.

I was sitting alone before the morning homeroom period began, listening to the voices around me.

With one person missing, the scenery had changed.

Yet, that sad change was beginning to be adapted into everyday life as if nothing had happened.

Ayanokouji-kun's name had slowly been getting used less often by students who had a shallow relationship with him. All due to the passage of time. It was a good example of how time resolved sadness, anger, and hardships.

Though reluctantly, I was being forced to understand that fact.

They were trying to alter their two years with Ayanokouji-kun as if it had never happened.

Yamauchi-kun, Sakura-san, and Maezono-san too.

Nobody mentioned the students who disappeared from the class anymore.

But those of us who were close to him, myself included, hadn't reached that point yet.

Rather, it was the opposite for us.

We keenly felt the cruelty and mercilessness of time.

The realization that he was gone grew stronger day by day.

Matsushita-san started to smile and talk less, while Sudou-kun started to get irritated over trivial matters like he used to a long time ago.

I wondered how I was affected.

Now, I couldn't even look at myself objectively.

I was desperately trying to maintain Class A's image by acting calmly.

No, I didn't even know how effective that was.

While fighting the anxiety that made it difficult to distinguish between what was real and what wasn't, I still continued my days, focusing on my studies and desperately clinging to my desk.

It felt heavy and suffocating. My heart was in pain.

It felt like I had lost an important part of my body.

Why did this happen?

Was this class not good enough?

Was this place not comfortable for Ayanokouji-kun?

I didn't know.

No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't seem to find the answer.

Certainly, compared to other class leaders, I was still inexperienced. That was why I thought he'd kindly stay by my side, watching over me while sighing to himself.

Was he simply sick of acting like a babysitter?

If I had been more reliable, could he have stayed without transferring?

And my words that hadn't reached him—

'I won't ask you to help me with everything, but I want you to keep watching over me…'

Looking back now, maybe it was good that those feelings at the celebration party didn't reach him.

It was a wish that would never come true.

Or maybe…

If those feelings had reached him, would he have stayed…?

"…"

I barely managed to suppress a sigh that almost naturally escaped my mouth, making sure no one could hear it.

It was an unbearable reality.

I never had my feet firmly set on the ground.

Losing my sense of balance, only time continued to pass relentlessly.

Eventually, the chime for the morning homeroom period rang.

Chabashira-sensei arrived in class. Maybe she'd moved on from the transfer issue, or maybe she was trying not to think about it, and had returned to being a normal teacher—it was unimaginable when compared to how she was during the first day of school.

In the not-too-distant future, Sudou-kun and the others would start looking towards the future as well.

Then what about me?

Will the day come when I'll get used to it, too?

It was hard to imagine.

What am I doing here, in this place?

What should I do from now on?

Previously, when I couldn't even imagine Ayanokouji-kun leaving the class, I thought I had the strength to move forward and keep fighting..

In this place without Ayanokouji-kun, for another year…

I—

"Did you hear me? Horikita."

"—Eh?"

Before I knew it, Chabashira-sensei had spoken, looking this way.

Some of the students around were also glancing in my direction.

"I will now announce the special exam, so don't zone out and make sure to listen carefully."

"Sorry, yes. It's okay, I'm listening."

That was a lie. I hadn't heard anything.

I hadn't even realized that someone was speaking.

I need to focus on what the teacher says…

No matter how much I suffered and stopped in my tracks, the world around me wouldn't wait.

What our teacher had just mentioned was… a special exam.

My third year's first special exam had arrived before I could even sort out my feelings.

I shook my head from side to side and stared at the monitor.

Special Exam Overview

'Comprehensive Academic Ability Exam: Full-Class and Small-Group Battles'

A written exam composed of random questions from 21 topics across 7 subjects (100 questions total, scored out of 100 points).

Competition between classes will be separated into two categories: Full-Class Battles and Small-Group Battles.

Full-Class Battle

All class members will be required to participate in the written exam.

The class with the highest total score wins, and that victory will count as two wins.
If the scores are tied, each class shares one win, and it'll be treated as a draw.
If there's a difference in the number of students within the classes, the points equal to the lowest-scoring student will be used for the missing students in that class.
On the day of the exam, students who are absent or leave midway due to illness will be treated the same as explained above.

Small-Group Battles
Each class will choose five representatives to participate.
Each class will assign their representatives a number from first to fifth, and they will compete individually for scores.
The student with the higher score wins, and their class will be awarded one victory.
If scores are tied, it is considered a draw, and no victory will be awarded for that particular individual battle.

Small-Group Battle Exclusive Rules
Penalties can be assigned to any student in the opposing class.
Each class starts with 100 penalty points.
Each penalty point deducts one point from the student's exam score.
There is no limit on the number of students the penalty points can be assigned to (up to 100 penalty points can be attributed to each student).
(Additional penalty points can be purchased until the day before the exam at a cost of 50,000 Private Points each.)
The designations of penalty points must be reported to the homeroom teacher by the day before the exam takes place.
Only the penalty points assigned to students participating in the small-group battles will be disclosed.
※ *Penalty points will not affect the full-class battle scores or subsequent OAA evaluations.*

Victory Conditions

The class with the most victories will win, competing for the two wins from the full-class battle and five wins from the small-group battles.
If the score is tied, such as having three wins, three losses, and one draw, the rewards will be evenly split.

Rewards
The winning class receives 100 Class Points (50 each in case of a draw).
A class that achieves a complete victory, seven wins, will receive an additional 50 Class Points.
A class that suffers a complete defeat, seven losses, will have 50 Class Points deducted.

From what I could decipher, it was a conventional written exam.

Essentially, it required pure academic ability.

However, the special rules added could significantly alter the outcome.

"This time, it's been decided that we'll compete against Class 3-D, and the exam will be held in two weeks. There won't be a lot of time to prepare, but since it's the same for everyone, please refrain from complaining."

Class 3-D.

That was the class Ichinose-san belonged to.

Thinking about things this way wasn't good at all—

Even though I understood that, I felt relieved that I didn't have to fight Ayanokouji-kun.

Normally, I would've regretted the fact that we didn't get to face Ryuuen-kun's class since they weren't good at academic battles.

But now, I only judged how good or bad the situation was based on whether Ayanokouji-kun was our opponent.

But surely, I wasn't the only one.

At least, Matsushita-san and Sudou-kun seemed relieved to me.

While engulfed in self-loathing, I looked at the monitor's rules again without a change in my expression.

Ichinose-san's class had many students who were well-balanced and excellent academically.

Moreover, the fact that their class had a full roster of forty students was also troublesome.

The more the number of students in the opposing class differed, the more advantages and disadvantages arose before the match even started. Although it seemed that points were guaranteed for the missing students, having the same score as the lowest scorer in the class was still a significant handicap.

With his departure… our class was already down to thirty-six people.

That meant having to fight while essentially being forcibly burdened with five students who were equivalent to the lowest scorer in the class.

"This is just a guideline, but the predicted scores based on OAA evaluations are as follows. It would be wise to use this as a reference to gauge how much your class can score."

After our teacher explained that, the monitor switched to a new screen.

OAA Academic Ability
A rating: 76~85 points
B rating: 66~75 points
C rating: 56~65 points
D rating: 51~55 points
E rating: 45~50 points

Seems like the written exam is quite difficult, and it's nearly impossible to score full marks. That's the impression it gives.

"Looks like it's going to be a tough fight…"

Sudou-kun, sitting nearby, muttered to himself with a stern expression.

Yes, this battle would undoubtedly be a tough one for us.

If we clashed head-on, the chances of winning were just shy of fifty percent.

We'd managed to somewhat improve on our academics. However, looking back at the results of the previous written exams, although we narrowly won against Ichinose's class in an academic exam once, we're still at a slight disadvantage overall, considering the handicap from our difference in numbers. With two weeks remaining until the exam, they'd be studying just as hard, and there was no guarantee that we'd be able to close the gap efficiently.

Though… because it wasn't a normal exam, there were also different opportunities for victory.

If it was a simple battle based solely on total points, we would've had to compete with even lower odds.

But this time, a special rule for small-group battles had been set.

Even if we were to lose the full-class battle, being able to turn it around with four wins in small-group battles was significant.

Since both classes had about the same number of students who had around an A in terms of academic ability in the OAA, if we could pit the top five students against each other, we could compete on equal footing.

Of course, we couldn't overturn the disadvantageous situation itself. If they were to win the full-class battle, they could secure victory by winning two small-group battles, whereas we'd have to win four. If we came to a draw on the full-class battle, three wins would suffice, but there was a very low possibility that we'd tie in total points, so it was better not to consider it.

"Four wins…"

Setting aside whether it was realistic, even if all five students participating in Ichinose-san's class's small-group battles were to score eighty-five points, which was among the higher boundary for students with an A in the OAA, we still had a good chance of winning as long as the penalty points were accurately used.

Just by distributing twenty penalty points to each of the five students participating, we could drop their score to sixty-five.

However, the same can be said for our opponent as well.

If we were to simply send out our most capable students and have them receive a large number of penalty points, we wouldn't be able to avoid a significant drop in scores, and the outcome wouldn't be reversed.

And if we were to send out students with B's or C's in the OAA, they might not be able to score enough to win.

That shallow line of thought was something that all four classes could think of and come to understand.

And the likely conclusion was… to purchase additional penalty points.

To increase the odds of victory, a straightforward strategy was to buy up points to use penalties.

Simply put, it was the only way to guarantee closing the gap with the opponent.

But the problem was the price…

The only issue was that it required fifty thousand private points just to take away one point.

Of course, I understood that it was still one point.

However…

I had to be careful; spending Private Points wouldn't guarantee any certain benefits after all. If we were to expect a specific student to participate and target them with a lot of penalty points, it would be unbearable if that student didn't show up in the small-group battles.

Above all, the damage from pouring tens of thousands or even hundreds of thousands of Private Points into a special exam and losing is… something I don't even want to think about.

"…Ugh…"

I placed my hands together and closed my eyes.

The special exam this time obviously required us to focus on our studies, but it also depended on who was sent into the small-group battles and whether we could assign penalty points to the right opponents.

There were no other strategies.

However, I couldn't see us winning with such a simple approach without doing anything else.

I don't understand…

If only you were here…

If you were here, you'd definitely come up with a surefire way to win.

I closed my eyes.

The image of his back that floated to my mind made it hard for me to breathe again.

"Suzune."

Is it okay to confront Ichinose-san's class head-on?

Can we win…?

Since our academic abilities are nearly equal, should we proceed as is?

Is it possible to probe whether our opponent will buy penalty points?

Or should we resort to underhanded tactics like Ryuuen-kun to manage somehow?

Who will our opponent send out…?

Ichinose-san won't participate in the small-group battles, will she?

Or will she surprise us by boldly participating?

Alongside my doubts, Ayanokouji-kun's image lingered in the corner of my mind.

How would he fight?

How would he view this special exam?

I was no longer allowed to even ask.

"Suzune."

Should I buy several penalty points to reduce the risk and apply them to all their top students?

Sometimes, a painful sacrifice is needed to get out of a dire situation, and you'll just have to endure through that pain…

"Suzune!"

"!?"

I was startled by the sensation of something touching my shoulder and looked in its direction.

It was Sudou-kun's large hand.

"Are you okay?"

"…There's no problem. I was just thinking about how to fight in the exam."

"That's true, but… you're still worried about Ayanokouji, aren't you?"

"That's—"

"It's impossible not to worry, but don't keep it all to yourself."

"Yes, I'll try."

I couldn't show Sudou-kun any more of my pathetic side.

Therefore, at least in this situation, I had to act bravely.

I thought I was managing it, but it seemed it wasn't enough.

"How we use the penalty points is important… Focusing on targeting students likely to score high and getting it wrong is scary."

Before I knew it, Hirata-kun had taken the lead in discussing this with our classmates.

I had no idea what they'd been talking about before.

"It just started."

"…Thank you."

Sudou-kun understood that I'd been preoccupied with my thoughts.

I had to pull myself together to avoid causing any more worry.

Responding to Hirata-kun's remark, Yukimura-kun raised his hand while still seated.

"I think it's better not to rely solely on the OAA evaluations for the small-group battles. After all, our academic abilities score only represents the average among all our subjects. A student who's extremely weak in one subject but strong in others can still score high. And there are still a lot of things about our own class that even we don't know about, like who's good at what and to what extent. Not all past exams have revealed detailed results."

He suggested leveraging the detailed information only known within our class.

There were two weeks left until the exam.

I wonder if I can come up with a way to win…

Part 1

THE DAY THE special exam was announced, I had an ordinary afternoon, as usual.

During that time, after Mashima-sensei concluded homeroom and left the classroom, Hashimoto stood up.

"Alright. So, we're all good with leaving this special exam up to Ayanokouji, right?"

He asked everyone, assuming their consent rather than seeking permission.

No one said yes or no, and the classroom momentarily fell silent.

However, soon after, Shimazaki glared at Hashimoto without holding back his dissatisfaction.

"And why's that?"

"Why? I could ask you the same. This special exam is a good opportunity for a transfer like Ayanokouji to show his abilities. If we don't leave it to him now, then when? It makes you wonder why we recruited him in the first place."

Even though I wasn't welcomed, Hashimoto argued fiercely, thinking it was obvious.

"And what if we lose?"

"Lose? Don't be stupid, there's no way we'll lose. Right, Ayanokouji?"

Hashimoto looked at me with an expression full of expectation and pressure.

"I can't guarantee our victory or defeat, but if you entrust me with it, I intend to give it my all."

I took a complete turn from my confident speech after the opening ceremony, deliberately playing it safe with my words, which led me to receive my classmates' cold glares in return.

Hearing that the outcome was uncertain, naturally, they couldn't believe it.

"Ha… that's what he says, Hashimoto."

At such times, Sakayanagi probably would've already declared, 'We will win.'

The difference in our answers might've confused and disappointed some of them.

"Come on, be more decisive. It makes the rest of us worried. I'm starting to worry myself too."

Scratching his head, Hashimoto sighed and looked away.

"So, Shimazaki, what do you plan to do if we don't plan on leaving it to Ayanokouji?"

"Nothing special. We'll just fight like normal and win like normal."

"Normal? Then who will come up with the strategy?"

"We can discuss it as a class. Of course, I don't oppose Ayanokouji joining in."

"So you mean we don't need a leader?"

"That's not what I'm saying. Of course we need a leader. Someone has to steer the class when there's a dispute. But I just can't feel like entrusting him with this special exam. I'll be clear, from what I've heard, this exam is one we should naturally win. We've been leading in written exam scores for two years, and our opponent has always been the lowest-scoring class, right?"

Hashimoto grunted slightly, but he soon countered.

"If it were a simple written exam, yes, but this is a special exam. Can we really win by charging in without thinking?"

"I'm not saying that we won't be thinking. I'm saying we should discuss it as a class if necessary."

"The more people there are, the easier it is for information to leak."

"There won't be any idiots who'll leak it. I don't know about you, though."

"How nice of you to say."

Watching the argument between Hashimoto and Shimazaki, Sanada stood up to mediate.

"May I ask Ayanokouji-kun a question?"

"Of course."

"Looking at this special exam, I think the key point lies in who gets the penalty points. If we leave it to you, you'll be able to predict who the opponent will send out for the small-group battles and who we should select

to avoid being targeted… is it okay to assume that? If you can tell us that much, then I might consider entrusting this to you, Ayanokouji-kun."

Providing help to Hashimoto's case, Sanada followed up with a suggestion that could make those who were skeptical yield to letting me take the lead. Sanada looked at Shimazaki calmly.

"…I see. So it's not about judging Ayanokouji based on the outcome, but measuring his abilities through the process."

"Yes. I also feel like we have a high chance of winning this special exam. However, if there's anything that could turn the tables, it'll be the distribution of penalty points in the small-group battles. Discussing it as a group doesn't guarantee the best solution. Entrusting it solely to Ayanokouji-kun has its risks, but as Hashimoto-kun said, there will come a time when we must entrust him with something. Maybe this exam is a good opportunity to make a quick and conclusive decision."

It was a compromise that incorporated both Hashimoto's and Shimazaki's opinions.

"Indeed… not a bad idea. Ayanokouji, we can leave it to you, right?"

"If you entrust it to me, I'll do my best."

That was all I said, but Shimazaki immediately raised his voice.

"Alright! Then, since winning is a given, we'll focus on whether your guesses match up, okay?"

"Okay, okay. Let's go with that."

Hashimoto, having secured the plans, nodded in satisfaction and clapped his hands together, making a loud sound.

He must've thought that anything was possible as long as I was just given the chance.

"It's settled then. We'll handle the details from here. Just sit back and relax."

"We'll see about that. For now, I guess I'll just have to rack my brains over whom to assign these to."

In case the discussion dragged on, potentially resulting in them unexpectedly retracting their plans, Hashimoto urged everyone to disperse.

"So, Ayanokouji, make sure you have plenty of time after this."

Looks like I won't be able to go home right after school ends.

"Hashimoto Masayoshi seems quite bothered about his exclusion in the transfer talks."

He definitely looked quite determined not to let discussions proceed without him.

"Is it really okay to let someone who might betray us in on our strategy?"

Morishita whispered her doubts from right behind me.

"Your trust in Hashimoto is pretty thin, huh?"

"It couldn't possibly be thick, can it?"

Since our seats were one behind the other, it was convenient for having these small types of chats. Sensing Hashimoto approaching, Morishita cut the conversation short.

"Let's go, Ayanokouji. What about you, Morishita?"

"I might as well keep you company for the time being. I'm interested in seeing your skills."

"Whether it's the dorm, karaoke, or behind the school building, I'll join you."

Choosing a location for strategizing usually meant picking a place away from prying eyes.

However, I deliberately suggested holding the meeting at a café as per usual.

Part 2

WE ARRIVED AT the café without taking any detours.

"Please wait a moment. I'll take about an hour to decide what to drink."

"Don't take an hour, seriously don't take an hour."

Morishita grinned in response to Hashimoto's retort.

"Just kidding, but please wait a bit. I'll ask my stomach what it wants."

Was your stomach really the right place to ask?

In this case, I feel like you'd rather be asking the brain, but… well, never mind.

Behind us were a pair of first-year students, who seemed to be heading to the café as well. They started to line up, but then they stopped and started taking a step back to look at the menu, probably because of Morishita's indecisiveness.

"Decide before the line gets held up."

"Understood. Today, I think I'll have a matcha latte."

"Then, I'll order for all of us. Go ahead and find us a seat in the back."

Since we came to the café right after school, ninety percent of the seats were still empty.

It seemed we could choose almost any seat we wanted, so I decided to pick the same spot as last time. While Hashimoto waited at the counter for our three drinks, Morishita and I took our seats.

"Aren't you calling Yamamura Miki over as well? She was being self-deprecating, saying she's just like oxygen, lighter[1] than carbon dioxide—you just breathe it in and out as you please, and that's it."

"Yamamura wouldn't make such a harsh, self-deprecating comment."

That sounded like something only someone as eccentric as Morishita would say.

"Well, that was indeed my own original comment, but she's definitely feeling worried."

"I've already given Yamamura a heads-up. It's better for her to keep her distance from me for a while."

With my transfer, many students had been approaching me every day, and I’d become quite conspicuous. From baseless rumors to true information, things were flying around everywhere.

"Even for someone as inconspicuous as Yamamura Miki, that could certainly become an issue. You made that decision thinking that we don't need to deliberately lower her value as someone who barely stands out."

"Value, huh? Well, that's one way to look at it, but this is out of consideration for a friend."

"Oh? If you say so."

If I called, Yamamura would probably do her best to respond.

However, standing out might cause her undue stress and hurt her emotionally.

"So if Yamamura Miki wants to stand out, it's okay for her to do so?"

"Of course. She should feel free to reveal herself at her own pace."

"How kind—or should I say, you're quite composed."

Yamamura had gotten close to Sakayanagi, which slowly began to change her thoughts. If I were to force her into acting as a mere tool right away, it might've caused her to close off her heart, fast. If that were to happen, she wouldn't be able to function as the class's eyes and ears properly. Overworking and breaking her would be foolish.

Unlike Sakayanagi, who had been making stable and consistent use of Yamamura since the beginning, I wanted to start by first nurturing her mind so that she'd become a resource that could be more handily put to use.

It was unclear how Morishita viewed Yamamura, so it was safer not to discuss the matter.

"Rather, I could be asking you the same. Aren’t you going to get along with Yamamura?"

Since transferring to Class C, I’d never seen Morishita and Yamamura interact.

Yamamura had been sending her glances and seemed restless around Morishita, so it didn't seem like she was unwilling to interact with her.

"It's better not to get too involved with me. It would only end up dragging her into a wicked fate. A frail being like her would likely perish…"

"I don't understand what you're saying at all. Are you saying it's okay for me to get involved then?"

"You're fine, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. You seem like you can take a hit."

Her impression probably wasn't wrong, but it still felt somewhat unsettling.

"Hey, you two didn't start the discussion without me, did you?"

Hashimoto came back quickly, holding three cups in his hands.

"Don't worry. The discussion is already over."

"That's good. Then let's start from the beginning. First, let's confirm the details of the exam again."

It seemed he realized it was a lie, and he immediately prepared to start the discussion as soon as he sat down.

He took out his phone and displayed the rules of the special exam.

"I'll just listen, so please start without me."

Having said that, Morishita declared her role as a listener and inserted a straw into her matcha latte cup.

"Then, I'll start with what I thought. Honestly, I'm surprised the special exam's using a one-on-one format right from the start of our third year. We just faced each other off at the end of last school year."

Hashimoto shared his honest thoughts upon hearing the announcement.

Being in a new class, this kind of start wasn't bad.

"That's right. Moreover, the upper and lower classes are neatly divided. Seems to be a decision they made after considering the situation between us third years."

It was a great opportunity to close the gap between the classes at the top and the classes at the bottom, but it also inherently carried the risk of widening it.

"As for me, I'm just glad we don't have to start the alliance off unstable right from the get-go. The class would inevitably resist, and if that had happened, we would've had to prepare for an immediate loss. Just imagining it is scary."

I understood the feeling, but even if left alone, the time would come for this class to battle Ichinose's.

I had the opposite opinion; it would've been better if we'd clashed from the start. With superior academic abilities and having just transferred, deliberately losing to Ichinose would've left Horikita and Ryuuen with the impression that something was wrong. I would've been able to leave a larger impact on those two, so I felt like I lost out a bit.

Losing wasn’t just about losing; giving meaning to the defeat could also add value.

By doing so, it could’ve led to a productive defeat.

Shortly after the conversation started, the café began to get busier. The male and female first years who’d ordered earlier chose a seat next to ours with their iced coffee in hand.

"I don't care about the details of the exam."

Perhaps having quickly reached her limits for staying silent, Morishita grumbled as she bit her straw.

She’d bitten it several times, flattening the tip.

"Hey, why did you come here then?"

"I was worried about Ayanokouji Kiyotaka because of your reckless outburst earlier, Hashimoto Masayoshi. You made a bold statement in front of the whole class without permission, but was that really okay? Efficiently imposing penalty points on our opponents while neatly avoiding them on our classmates is the ideal tactic, sure, but it's not easy. Our opponents are also thinking the same thing and racking their brains."

Students with high academic abilities could score high, but they were likely targets for penalty points. Conversely, students with low academic abilities were less likely to be targeted for penalties, but you couldn’t expect them to score high.

"Don't worry, Morishita, it'll work out. Shimazaki also said that at least we have the advantage of our academic prowess. So, even if we get hit by some of their penalty points, we’ll still be far ahead. It's unavoidable if our guesses are a bit off. If we win the exam, we'll likely continue with Ayanokouji as our leader for the next one."

It was practically impossible to achieve a hundred percent accuracy while avoiding all of the penalty points.

Whether I tried to look at it head-on or tried to turn things around, there was no absolute answer when it came to reading the opponent in this exam.

No matter how much we analyze, our accuracy would remain between 1% and 99%.

Of course, unexpected developments like inside leaks could change the situation, but such naive scenarios were unlikely to occur now that we were in our third year.

"Even if our penalties completely miss, this victory will definitely bring something significant. Since there won't be any reason to deny you from the start, I think there's still a possibility that they'll entrust the next exam to you. However, even then, our opponent's participants in the small-group battles… ideally, you need to hit at least three of them to prove a point."

If I couldn't successfully hit anyone, I wouldn't be able to sway students like Shimazaki from being skeptical.

"Well, it would be absolute proof that you've accurately read our opponent's thoughts, so we can't ignore it."

Only five students could participate in the small-group battles. Initially, we had a baseline of a hundred penalty points, so there would be five people for us to give a significant twenty-point deduction to. There was a less than a one percent chance of randomly hitting three participants from our opponent's forty-student class.

That was why reading the opponent became a critical and valued aspect of the exam.

"Though, three seems tough. I think even two is enough."

Hashimoto speculated that even showing a bit of accuracy would change the class's impression.

He casually suggested getting two correctly, but even then, the probability was still less than ten percent. It wasn't something you could consider high.

"You're just leaving it to somebody else, so you sure must be feeling comfortable, aren't you? What I want to hear is your thoughts, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. In a situation where there are no clues, how are you going to predict which student the opponent will nominate?"

"I can't talk about that at this point yet. Saying anything careless here and having them taken at face value would be troublesome."

"My, my, you're already on the defensive. This doesn't bode well for the future."

"I won't deny it. That being said, if you have any other thoughts about the current situation, let me hear them."

When I asked Hashimoto, who automatically kept the conversation moving, he nodded willingly.

He was probably hoping that speaking up would bring about a good idea.

"Then, let's proceed with the premise that we'll hit two targets, alright? I think it's best to spread our targets widely, assigning ten people with ten penalty points each. It'll hurt if we narrow it down to just five students who might participate in the small-group battles and miss. Besides, with a ten-point advantage, our class would have a good chance of winning. There's only a handful of opponents that'd be hard to deal with in their class."

Just like Hashimoto said, in Ryuuen's class, there were unfortunately very few students with a B+ or higher in academic ability, like Kaneda, Hiyori, and Katsuragi. That description wouldn't even match six people.

"If you're not confident, that's the least you should do."

"You agree, then, Morishita."

"Well, it's the most basic of basics."

"Then, we also need to think about our defensive strategy, not just offense. Though, do you even have a grasp of the academic ranking in our class?"

"I think I have a good idea from the OAA and the past two years."

"Okay, but later, I'll tell you about my subjective view over the past two years, so use it as a reference."

"That would really help. I don't know the finer details of everyone’s strengths and weaknesses."

It was unclear whether it'd be useful in this special exam, but it should help save time later on.

"As for who to send from our class, I think we should select students with high academic abilities as the base, and then add some irregularities."

"Oh? So does this mean you're prepared to take on some of their penalty points, Morishita?"

"Playing it steady and choosing students with academic abilities in the low to middle range would significantly damage us if they were to end up seeing through that strategy. On the other hand, if we send students with high academic abilities and they're overlooked, it's a win for us."

Hashimoto, leaning on his elbows and seemingly convinced, apparently had different thoughts.

"I think we should distribute our participants among students with lower abilities. It's essential to note those with high academic abilities. If it were me, I'd target them even if there's a chance I'd miss the mark. No, actually, I

might even take the gamble and assign a lot of points to only their top performers."

Both parties' ideas for the special exam's small-group battles seemed to contradict each other.

Each idea had valid points.

However, in the end, there were only about three types of lineups to choose from.

We could either choose students with high abilities, low abilities, or a balance between them.

"Also, we should be concerned if the opponent decides to buy additional penalty points. It would be troublesome if they were to expand their targets to twenty or thirty of us in a strategy where they focus on quantity."

"Using Private Points like live ammunition, huh? It's risky, but Ryuuen might be prepared to make such a move."

If they were to successfully target all of the participating students in the small-group battles, they could significantly ease their handicap.

The ability to purchase additional penalty points was perhaps the most interesting element of this special exam.

Normally, it wasn't easy to bridge the academic differences, and Ryuuen's class would have almost no chance of winning.

However, in addition to the full-class battle giving two points and the small-group battles giving five points, there was also the penalty points rule.

If they were able to come out on top in predicting our representatives, they could bring things to an even state, and with them being able to purchase additional penalty points on top of that, they'd be able to control their chances of turning things around to some extent.

It was an exam we expected to win, but surprisingly, there were also opportunities for our opponents to utilize.

"If they assign a twenty-point penalty to all our top scorers… that would be really bad, huh?"

"Our odds of winning would drop significantly. However, to pull off such an absurd move, they'd have to use up their Private Points as if it were drinking water."

To reduce an extra twenty points, it would've cost an additional one million in Private Points. With twelve people in Class C with an evaluation

of B+ or higher, even after deducting the initial hundred points, the expenses would amount to seven million.

"Spending nearly ten million and still losing—that wouldn't be something to laugh about."

Yes, if they ended up winning, they'd be somewhat relieved, but they also had to consider the risks of losing.

The higher they rose their odds of winning on this exam, the more they'd face financial difficulties, affecting their odds of winning in the future.

"How will Ryuuen handle this? Can you read his moves?"

Hashimoto frequently looked forward to what I had to say.

My performance here would solidify my position within the class, so he was expecting an exceptional answer.

"Ryuuen's strategy—"

I showed a small gesture to suggest I was thinking before answering.

"I don't know a thing about it."

"…So you haven't thought of anything either."

"Too bad, it seems Ayanokouji Kiyotaka hasn't had a flash of insight yet."

"There's still time until the exam. All I have to do is come up with a winning strategy by then."

"He's saying it's better to take the long way around, huh? Well, Ayanokouji isn't a god, after all."

Hashimoto acted composed, though he clearly felt uneasy inside.

"Besides, I have no intention of participating in the small-group battles in this special exam."

"You're free to do as you like, but are you sure that's okay? You said yourself when we were talking about transferring that you need to demonstrate your abilities clearly to be recognized in our class, Ayanokouji. It's not that you're lacking confidence, right, rare A-in-Academic-Ability-san?"

"Do you think Ryuuen won't pay me any attention?"

"Well, it's obvious that Ryuuen has his eye on you…"

"And normally, people would assume you'd participate, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, and it would be standard for them to impose penalty points on you. If you foolishly show up, you'd be targeted. One or two penalty points would probably be manageable, but with thirty or forty of them, you've

basically got no chance of winning. Let's set aside whether they'd go that far just to secure a victory."

Even with a perfect score, forty penalty points would reduce it to sixty.

Even those that weren't on Kaneda, Hiyori, or Katsuragi's level would stand a good chance of winning.

"There's an eighty to ninety percent chance Ryuuen will impose multiple penalty points on me. There's no need for me to participate."

"I see. You're assuming Ryuuen will impose penalty points on you."

"Yes. Regardless of how he responds verbally, he'll almost certainly do that."

"Then it might be better not to push it. It would be a relief if Ryuuen misses his shot."

"It might be interesting to ask him what he thinks when he comes later."

"Huh? What do you mean, 'when he comes'?"

"Ryuuen."

As I spoke, Hashimoto hurriedly looked around.

"…He's isn't here, right?"

"Not yet. But there's been some movement in here, so it's only a matter of time."

As I directed my gaze to a corner of the café, Hashimoto and Morishita also looked that way.

Komiya and Yamawaki, who had been watching us, hurriedly averted their eyes, pretending it was coincidental, but it was probably too late.

"So they were keeping an eye on us. I wasn't worried about them because of our distance."

Hashimoto had only been wary of potential eavesdropping.

In that sense, though, it was already too late.

Two first-year students, a male and female duo, who had been sitting at the next table over finished their break at the café and stood up.

As I watched the two leave, Morishita tilted her head in confusion.

"Was there something about those first-year students?"

"Those two were also new students sent by Ryuuen."

"Ah…? Are you serious?"

"Yes. They tried to appear natural, but they placed their phones toward the edge of the table, closer to us, and laid them face down. They were

either recording an audio or a video. If they were to receive a call, the screen would light up, and that would risk us seeing it. Normally, regardless of gender, people would either keep their phones on them or at hand and regularly check them. But Takikura… that girl didn't touch her phone even when there was a pause in their conversation."

"Damn, he's already got first years in his grasp in such a short amount of time…"

"It's been just under a week since they started school. During that time, Ryuuen has been making contact with first years to expand his surveillance network."

Hashimoto was cautious, but naturally, it seemed the first years were off his radar.

"You're on top of things, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka."

"Even if it's just information based on their middle school records, their names and faces are available on the OAA. I made sure to look them up the day they were published."

"That might explain why those two seemed suspicious. However, that alone isn't definitive evidence that they were people Ryuuen Kakeru sent out as guns. Perhaps she just happened not to touch her phone, or maybe the placement was unintentional. I don't think we should completely dismiss those possibilities."

"That might be true, but it's better to be cautious. It's important to operate under the assumption that they're doing at least that much."

In actuality, there was indeed a reason that supported it, but it was better to touch on it after the special exam.

Hashimoto whistled and nodded with a proud smile.

"The possibility of them being spies is enough, Morishita. As expected of Ayanokouji."

"You can't just keep praising him. Rather, that would mean Ayanokouji Kiyotaka passed on some information."

"I've only passed on information that's safe to share. It's okay."

"So that's why you were talking like you weren't sure earlier. Yeah, that's it. That's a part of you I think highly of. You can't just carelessly speak your mind when the enemy is nearby."

Given the limited moves we could make in this exam, information was indeed a weapon.

It was essential to take action, gathering even the slightest hint or clue to win.

However, it was also necessary to understand that it wouldn’t necessarily increase the odds of winning.

Using unsuspecting first years wasn't a bad idea, but ultimately, the information accuracy was more important than the quantity. Sorting through a mountain of claims that mixed in truths and lies and only extracting the former was a daunting task. In fact, it was fair to say that it's extremely difficult.

Morishita took her lips off the straw of her half-finished matcha latte.

"It seems he really did come."

"Looks like it. Let's stop chatting for now. Our next opponents are much more troublesome than Horikita and the others."

Hashimoto, slightly tense, spoke with a smile that resembled a bitter grin.

Ryuuen, Ishizaki, and Albert approached.

A week had passed since the opening ceremony.

Students from other classes and even different years asked about my class transfer in detail, but Ryuuen's classmates, although they made eye contact, hadn’t mentioned the transfer at all until now. Rather, they seemed to have made an effort to deliberately avoid me.

It was clear that Ryuuen was giving instructions to his classmates.

"I don't think things will take a bad turn in a place like this… but it's a bit worrying without Kitou here."

Hashimoto looked at Morishita, seemingly feeling a bit anxious.

He was probably imagining a worst-case scenario, but it was safe to say that he didn't need to consider such a possibility.

"You don't have to tremble like a newborn fawn. When the time comes, I'll knock them down one by one. Believe it or not, I have a master's license in Ai-chan style martial arts."

"…I'm counting on you."

Hashimoto, while grateful for Morishita's pure lie, stood in front of us.

"Ayanokoujiii!"

Right after, a loud and deep voice echoed not just through the café but throughout Keyaki Mall.

It was Ishizaki who bursted out, unable to contain himself.

"Why the hell did you transfer to Class C!?"

It seemed that until now, he'd wanted to touch on this topic but hadn't.

Ishizaki opened the topic as if he were exploding with emotion.

"Shut up, Ishizaki. You're bothering the other students, calm down."

Hashimoto stepped in between us to prevent Ishizaki from reaching me.

"How can I calm down! I've always—!"

"Move."

Ryuuen caught up with Ishizaki, pushed his shoulder, and forcibly cleared the way.

Students sitting nearby, thinking that sparks might fly their way, began to hurriedly move their seats.

"You're ruining the café's pleasant atmosphere, Ryuuen. At least use basic manners, will you?"

"You're as desperate as ever. If Sakayanagi disappears, you immediately stick to Ayanokouji without a hint of hesitation. Can't you survive without clinging to the strong?"

"Working for the class isn't a bad thing, is it?"

"Hah, well, do as you like. More importantly—"

After turning his head around, Ryuuen pierced me with a sharp gaze.

"What's your intention in transferring to Class C?"

"There's no particular reason. Sakayanagi left, and Class C came to help me transfer."

I looked at Hashimoto, who gave an exaggerated nod as if to say that was exactly right.

"No way, man! You wouldn't just transfer to a lower class for that!"

"Be quiet for a bit."

"Y-Yes, sorry!"

Ishizaki, with Ryuuen grabbing him by the collar, hurriedly apologized.

"Does my transferring to Class C cause any inconvenience to you?"

"Kukuku. No? Far from it, I welcome this development. If you yourself lead the class, there could be no better stage for me to bring you down."

Ryuuen had been dissatisfied with fighting against me while I utilized Horikita as a puppet to act as my cover.

In that sense, he showed a welcoming stance on the matter.

"But Ryuuen, isn't it quite late for you to be greeting our new leader?"

"Leader? That's premature. It doesn't seem like this guy's been acknowledged yet."

Over the past week, he'd probably been prying into Class C's state.

Starting with the situation regarding Shimazaki and the others, it was probably clear to Ryuuen that I wasn't welcomed yet and that I wasn't able to act as their leader.

"My class expects results in the upcoming special exam. Please go easy on us."

"That's an impossible request. This is a good opportunity for us to fight you. I'll play every card I can without holding back."

Ryuuen turned his back to me and walked away.

"It's unnecessary to chat any further."

"Ayanokouji… why…? If you were going to C… Damn it…! Ah, well, what's done is done… Anyway, let's talk more next time."

Despite his frustration, Ishizaki accepted the situation and conveyed his message.

"Ah, make sure you meet Shiina soon. She was feeling pretty down, not as much as me though."

"I intend to."

I'd been deliberately avoiding the library until Ryuuen reached out.

I decided that I would show my face again once the special exam was over.

Albert also gave me a small wave and silently followed Ryuuen back.

"Hah, he's not all he makes himself out to be."

As if she herself had driven Ryuuen away, Morishita sucked up the matcha that was settled at the bottom of the cup like she'd just finished a hard day's work.

"The one who didn't say a word sure is talking a lot… Anyway, Ryuuen's definitely aiming for victory, and you can't afford to lose either, Ayanokouji. Take your time and think through the strategy carefully. I'll report to you as soon as I get new information."

Feeling restless, Hashimoto grabbed his cup without sitting back down and left the café.

"Hashimoto Masayoshi likes to move around on foot. Maybe it's because he's in the track and field club?"

No, that's probably unrelated… probably.

Besides, Hashimoto wasn't even part of the track and field club.

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[1]: In Japanese, the kanji for "light," 軽い, is an adjective that can both describe an object that's light and something—or in this case, someone—that isn't important.

Part 3

WHILE AYANOKOUJI AND Ryuuen's conversation unfolded in the bustling Keyaki Mall café,

Kushida had bought a café au lait to go from the same café and immediately left.

After Ayanokouji exposed her true nature during the unanimous vote special exam, classmates naturally started to avoid her. While many of the guys didn't care much, a notable number of girls started distancing themselves from Kushida, and her time spent alone dramatically increased.

It couldn't be helped, and Kushida, without being concerned about it, neatly accepted it.

In the first place, she didn't particularly like gathering with others.

She just wanted to stand out in the group and be someone superior.

Of course, she still interacted with other classes and other years who knew nothing of her true nature, though she started to do that less often.

It was because she was getting increasingly fatigued from continuing her act, as many around her already knew her true nature.

Ah, there goes Kushida pretending to be a good person again.

Facing classmates who looked at her with such emotions, her irritation inevitably grew.

Compared to her middle school days, she felt that she'd matured significantly, and she thought the same for those around her.

Yet, recently, she'd been unable to vent her frustrations.

If her days were to continue without an outlet, she couldn't bring herself to fake her smile anymore.

"Ugh, annoying."

As she was leaving, with no one within earshot who'd overhear, Kushida spotted a presence. Without holding back, she blurted out a curse.

It was Horikita, sitting on a bench with a gloomy expression, looking down.

It would've been easy to just walk past, but Kushida stopped in front of Horikita, and slowly, she lifted her face.

"Kushida-san…?"

"Why the questioning tone? I mean, I'm not going to ask what you're doing here. You're waiting to bump into Ayanokouji-kun by pretending it's a coincidence, aren't you?"

"That's not it."

"No, it's totally obvious. Besides, there's no coincidental component to it. You're just incredibly clingy, aren't you?"

Horikita, having been hit right on the mark and easily seen through, averted her gaze.

"…Could you please leave me alone?"

"I'd like to leave you alone, but I can't overlook such a gloomy face. If the class leader looks like that, it definitely affects morale."




@Satoshi

Kushida had her true nature exposed, and she didn't like Horikita—yet, she continued to remain in the same class because Horikita was necessary for her to graduate from Class A. If someone as important as her were to falter, it would lower the odds of success. Kushida certainly wouldn't welcome that.

"You're—"

Before Horikita could ask anything, Kushida diverted her gaze, alerted by someone approaching from behind.

Since they were positioned on the way back to the dorm, they saw Yui Ninomiya from Class 3-D who happened to pass by.

"Kushida-san, Horikita-san, goodbye~"

"Ah, goodbye Ninomiya-san. Let's hang out again soon~"

Kushida showed a smile, and she continued to smile until Ninomiya was out of earshot.

Horikita, being considerate, watched for a while.

"Are you okay, Kushida-san? With Ayanokouji-kun's transfer."

"Okay? How could I be okay? Without Ayanokouji-kun, this façade of a class wouldn't stand a chance. My chances of graduating from Class A feel completely doomed. Besides, Ayanokouji-kun knows my true nature, so it's like the information's already been leaked to the other classes. From here on out, if he deems it necessary, he won't hesitate to expose me."

Horikita remembered the moment she met Ayanokouji after school concluded on the day of the opening ceremony.

The exchanges that'd been happening behind the scenes between Ayanokouji and Matsushita, and what was achieved—

They were exposed without a hint of hesitation. Kushida's fears and predictions were partially correct.

"Why do you seem so calm then?"

"I have to pretend to be calm. I'm good at pretending to be a kind person, just like I'm good at pretending to be okay. Unlike someone I know."

Since their conversation was taking a while, Kushida decided to start on the café au lait she'd planned to drink after getting home. As it went down her throat, the sweetness started to spread through the air along with the aroma of her coffee.

"Ugh, so annoying. Can't you do something about your face? It's making an ugly person even uglier."

"I think I'm acting normally."

"If that's the case, this is pretty severe."

She sighed in exasperation and was about to walk away, but then, she remembered something.

"I don't mind you being a bit pathetic, but can you do something about Ibuki?"

"…Come to think of it, she's been contacting me quite persistently lately…"

"Because you aren't dealing with her, she comes to me asking for something to eat. I told her to eat a set meal of some wild plants, but she's still dissatisfied. She's become numb because she used to eat decent quality food for free."

Recently, Horikita had been cooking, and both Ibuki and Kushida had been joining her—a routine that lasted more than half the week until spring break ended. However, it suddenly stopped for a week.

"I'm not in the mood to do anything right now."

"I'm not asking you to cook. The special exam is starting, so hurry up and think of something. We can't lose to Ichinose's class—to the lowest-ranked class."

"You say that like it's nothing. Considering the difference in numbers, we're the ones at a disadvantage… aren't we?"

"So? Even in these circumstances, a class leader is supposed to win regardless."

Horikita thought that it was a harsh demand, but she was immediately made to understand that it was a reasonable expectation.

Taking the initiative to lead meant bearing that responsibility.

"That's right… I think so too."

Kushida forcibly returned to adorning a calm expression, putting her mask back on.

"Even though I know that, it still feels hopeless. Well, I'll be going now. You can wait here for Ayanokouji-kun to come back. But… I doubt he'll care."

She left those cold words behind and tightly gripped her cup as she walked away.

Horikita watched her back for a while, but she eventually got up as Kushida's figure disappeared into the distance.

The last words Kushida left behind were undeniably true.

"Ambushing him in a place like this—doing such a thing… there's no way he'd be happy about it…"

Even though she'd known it from the beginning, she'd been playing the part of a pitiful Horikita; a realization sparked by Kushida's words.

Still, she couldn't move forward.

Her desire to meet him was genuine.

She wanted to look him in the eye and speak with him.

"All I want now… is just that…"

Horikita apologized to Kushida and her classmates in her heart and decided to go home.

Part 4

I RETURNED TO my room and collapsed on the bed without even taking off my uniform.

My body felt heavy.

It wasn't that I was feeling physically unwell.

It was more like I had no motivation.

"I need to think of a strategy for the exam…"

While I spent time meaninglessly staring at the ceiling, my phone rang.

"Ayanokouji-kun…!?"

I reached out to see the caller ID.

Despite my faint hope, the name displayed was 'Ibuki Mio'.

As Kushida-san said, she'd approached me several times recently, even directly.

That said, all she did was parrot the same thing—'feed me.'

I really wasn't in the mood to cook, so I kept turning her down.

She must have been calling again today for the same reason.

Glancing at the convenience store bento on the table, I lay down on my bed again.

My phone kept ringing for a while, but it eventually stopped.

I didn't want to think about anything.

I didn't want to accept anything.

Time just flowed meaninglessly.

Even if today were to end and tomorrow came, Ayanokouji-kun still wouldn't return to the class.

My phone started vibrating again.

Is it Ibuki-san again?

But the short vibration didn't come from a call, it was from a message.

Holding a faint, faint hope, I picked up my phone.

[We should discuss what to do about the special exam.]

That message was from Hirata-kun.

Although I felt disappointed, I was pulled back to reality—if only just a little.

"So… I have to start thinking about it, even if I don't want to…"

Other classes were definitely already starting to prepare for the upcoming special exam.

Yet I…

Suddenly, the ceiling seemed distorted.

"…Am I crying?"

I gently wiped around my eyes with my index finger.

Unbelievably, my fingertip was wet.

"…Again, he made me cry…"

I sighed, not knowing how many times it'd been.

I couldn't control my own emotions.

I couldn't regain my composure.

"Why…?"

I said it out loud.

By saying it out loud, I reminded myself that this was my reality.

"I don't understand—is this really true?"

I felt sick.

I still didn't understand why this was happening.

No, I continued to reject it because I didn't want to understand.

The time I spent staring at the Class 3-A nameplate on the day I became a third year felt like an illusion.

I could no longer remember that exhilarating yet tense moment from that time.

I wish I could turn back time to the morning of the opening ceremony.

And before he could abandon the class, I would've grabbed his arm and held him back.

Please don't transfer—

"There's no point in thinking such things… It's pointless…"

How many times will I keep thinking about the same thing?

It was a waste of effort.

Even if God were to allow such a miracle, surely Ayanokouji-kun wouldn't stay.

If it’d been some absurd plan he concocted just recently, maybe, just maybe, I could've made him reconsider.

But that wasn't the case.

Ayanokouji-kun had decided to transfer long before that.

Since when…?

I didn't know.

Whether it was a week or a month prior, either way… going back to the morning of the opening ceremony would've been pointless.

Help me… Ayanokouji-kun…

Help—

Part 5

DURING THE TIME Horikita was talking to Kushida on the bench, Ryuuen had gathered Ishizaki, Albert, Katsuragi, and Ibuki and headed to the karaoke room.

It was one of the places his class commonly used for confidential meetings.

The seating arrangement naturally formed over repeated meetings.

While looking at the food menu, Ishizaki started muttering to himself.

"Hey Ibuki, they've added something called deep-fried pasta. Can I order it?"

He pointed to the food commonly known as 'fried pasta' as he asked his question.

"Why are you asking me? Just do what you want."

"My dad used to talk about it when he came back from hostess clubs. He said that deep-fried pasta's really delicious. I've always wanted to try it."

"I don't care about that story."

"Whether it's pasta or something else, I don't care what you eat, but we need to start with the discussion. This special exam won't be easy. No, I should say 'also' this time."

Katsuragi, sitting farthest away from him with his arms crossed, urged Ishizaki and the others to join in on the discussion first.

"It might seem obvious, but no matter how generously you look at things, this is the kind of exam Class B would struggle the most with."

"Well, there's nothing we can do about studying."

Ibuki responded in a resigned tone.

It was practically impossible for them to win in a battle of academic abilities.

That was undoubtedly the biggest challenge facing Ryuuen's class.

Despite reaching Class B through sheer ability and luck, they hadn't been able to find a way to win in their weakest subjects yet.

Moreover, this time, they were competing against the former Class A, known for their academic prowess.

"If our goal's to win, we’re bound for a tough battle."

"Why not just give up? Losing the opportunity to gain about a hundred class points isn't a big deal, right?"

"You giving up before we even start, Ibuki!?"

"Then are you going to study nonstop, twenty-four hours a day, until the exam starts? Even if you do, I doubt you'd be able to close the gap enough to even score well."

"Uh, that would be… well… a bit tough…"

"It's because you don't study regularly. You haven't done any of the assignments I gave you, have you?"

"I hate schoolwork enough, why do I have to do the homework you've made too, Katsuragi?"

"It was made for the class. In fact, students who are taking these seriously have already seen steady improvements in their academic abilities."

Katsuragi emphasized the assignments' results, but Ishizaki awkwardly averted his gaze.

"Studying just enough not to fail is all I can handle. If I cram any more, I'll burst."

Seeing Ishizaki's attitude, Katsuragi sighed and looked toward Ryuuen.

"Shouldn't you be giving stricter instructions? That might motivate Ishizaki and the others a bit."

"There's no cure for stupidity. Besides, there's no need to play on their turf. We never intended to fight fairly from the start."

Rather than adopting a losing strategy, Ryuuen immediately dismissed the idea.

"However, they're a formidable enemy. Even though Sakayanagi has left, Class C still has many students specialized in academics. It's not like they had a significant downgrade."

Ishizaki stood up and clenched his fist after listening without much interest until now.

"It's not actually a downgrade. With Ayanokouji in their class, they've powered up like crazy. Damn, why did he go to Class C… I don't get it. Do you understand why, Ibuki?"

"Don't ask me. You shouldn't even try to understand his thoughts."

Getting involved could lead to complications.

Ibuki learned this through experience, and now, she generally avoided it.

When the others asked her to go to the café to confront Ayanokouji, she instantly rejected them.

Thanks to that, she was mentally fine, and she felt relatively calm.

There were times when they had unexpected encounters, but that wasn't always the case.

"It really feels like a tough enemy just showed up…"

"If that weren't the case, it'd be a real problem. That's where my ultimate goal lies."

I need a formidable opponent—that was what he was trying to say.

Although Ishizaki felt like that was an unusual thing for Ryuuen to say, he quietly nodded without pressing any further.

"That's right. However, I still have some doubts. Of course, I don't deny that Ayanokouji has excellent qualities, such as his calmness and occasional sharpness, but there's something about him that's missing—or rather, I can't bring myself to completely hate him… I can't decide if he's someone who's able to surpass Sakayanagi."

"That's because you haven't seen how great Ayanokouji is directly, Katsuragi. He's incredible, right, Ibuki?"

"Stop bringing me into this. I get really annoyed just talking about him. I truly hate him."

"Who do you hate more, him or Horikita? You always seem to be complaining about her."

"That's… a tough choice. It's like choosing whether to lose your right eye or your left…"

"That's way too scary, what kind of comparison even is that…?"

While the two engaged in some trivial banter, Ryuuen glanced at the ceiling, unconcerned. Katsuragi turned his gaze to Ishizaki at that moment.

"How were Ayanokouji and Hashimoto after the transfer? What was the reason for the transfer?"

"It didn't seem like anything's changed. It felt like neither classes A nor C mattered to him. He mentioned getting help from C, but I'm not sure if that's true."

"Wasn't it just so he could be the leader and then do as he wishes?"

"Ibuki, now that Sakayanagi isn't here anymore, indeed, nobody's in their leader position, however… I thought Ayanokouji was the type to get things

done quietly without standing out much."

Katsuragi, aligning what he heard with his own impressions, questioned Ryuuen.

"What do you think?"

"I don't know. If he's going to come out in the open after transferring classes, the reason wouldn’t matter."

Ryuuen seemed to have organized his thoughts and turned his gaze back to Katsuragi.

"In this special exam, if we play it by the book, it's almost certain that we'll lose 99% of the time, regardless of Ayanokouji's presence. But it's not like there aren't any holes in the rules. The exam's designed in a way that gives us an advantage—as big as we want—as long as we have 'live ammo,' and that's not bad."

"That's true, but… are you planning to pour in all the Private Points you've saved up?"

"They must've spent a lot on pulling Ayanokouji. Moreover, since they have the upper hand academically, they'll come at us without making many investments and try to win. They're a good target."

For their class, it was a situation that couldn't turn into an expense-driven exchange. Class C, with no money to spare, could only fight with their pure academic ability and the penalty points given to them.

"I understand what you're saying, but the gap between our academic abilities isn't something we can just easily bridge using a few additional penalty points. It would barely become fair even if we distribute penalties to dozens in their class. It's not a very efficient plan. You can't even be sure you'll hit all five of their participants, can you?"

"Are you against it then?"

"Not exactly. I'm saying don't do it if you're going in half-baked. To have a high chance of winning… Even though this is just a hypothetical, we'd want to take away an additional three hundred points. That would require about 15 million private points."

"Man, does it really cost 15 million to win?!"

"Even then, there's no absolute guarantee. If we were to use our four hundred penalty points on their entire class, we'd only be able to take away ten points per person. However, they could narrow down who to use their initial hundred points on, using their points on five people within our class

and trying to take away twenty points each. If they're able to get an accurate reading of who our participants are, we'd be starting off the small-group battle with ten points less per participant compared to their class. Of course, there's a low possibility of that happening, but if we assume the worst, something like that's possible."

Spending a large sum of money might not even bring an equal start.

Misevaluation could result in their Private Points vanishing into thin air.

Katsuragi felt concerned and continued his explanation.

"To increase our odds of winning even further, we'd have to throw in another ten or twenty million Private Points. Alternatively, we could narrow down who their participants will be and aim to take away about twenty points each. But it's hard to say that it'd even increase our chances."

"That's practically the same as going bankrupt."

"Yes, but if you're aiming to win despite the huge amount of money and risk, I have no reason to stop you. It won't be a 'complete victory,' but losing absolutely cannot be allowed."

It was no small obstacle. Ibuki, who'd been listening half-heartedly, raised her face.

"Listening to all of this, I think it might be better to just give up on this exam."

In response to Ryuuen, who seemed ready to compete, Ibuki challenged him.

"Hey, Ibuki, are you really going to argue with Ryuuen-san?"

"What, didn't you call me here because you wanted my opinion? If not, I'll leave."

As Ibuki showed signs of leaving, Ryuuen laughed.

"I'll listen. Why do you think that?"

"It's simply because it's disadvantageous for us. As Katsuragi said, we can't win by just studying. The idea is that we *might* win if we use Private Points, but the reward isn't worth how much we're spending. Even I think it's too reckless, and that's proof enough."

"I agree with Ibuki. In terms of cost-effectiveness, it's not good at all. Even if we assume a complete victory, the return isn't even that great."

Katsuragi also conveyed his stance, aligning his viewpoint with Ibuki's.

"Well, if you only look at the returns you can see, sure, that might be the case."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Yeah, this is an exam we're expected to lose. But that also means it's an exam they absolutely cannot afford to lose. If you expect to win, it can create pressure that's always at the back of your mind. And the damage, the shock from actually losing, would be on a whole different scale."

"So you want to hinder Ayanokouji's momentum from the start, is that it? But even if we win by force, are you sure it would cause that much damage?"

"It would. I've had a painful taste of it myself during that incident on the rooftop."

Ryuuen clenched his fists and showed a sharp gaze.

He was confident in his dominant violence and unyielding spirit, and in Ryuuen's mind, no matter what the situation was, he only thought of the ultimate victory.

However, Ayanokouji, who alone boldly entered enemy territory and overwhelmed everyone else, was way beyond the norm.

He physically and mentally defeated the way of thinking that Ryuuen considered absolute.

It took more than a short amount of time to recover after being pushed to the very bottom.

"The Class C guys and Ayanokouji would never think they'll lose. But deep down, they're scared of the 'what if.' That's why it's meaningful for us to keep on fighting. If we can strike them down during his first exam, his maiden voyage, it will be a bigger advantage than the actual Class Point difference."

Even if the reward was only about 100 Class Points, the increase in class points couldn’t be ignored.

Compared to the difference between Ryuuen’s and Horikita's classes, their gap with Class C, to which Ayanokouji belonged, wasn't small.

Given the situation where they couldn't afford any unnecessary defeats, gaining additional Class Points here would be a significant achievement.

The remaining school life they had was only ever getting shorter, never longer.

"But the minimum condition to win would cost over fifteen million… that's steep…"

Ishizaki was counting on his fingers, surprised at the amount of Private Points involved.

"Normally, that amount would give us a good chance at winning, but our opponent is Ayanokouji. He must've calculated that we'd be prepared to blow a large sum, prepared to self-destruct. Even if we manage to snatch victory using penalty points, as long as we can prevent a complete victory, that might be enough."

In the full-class battle, since nobody could use penalty points, the opponent would effectively have two victories in hand.

"Hmm… I understand, but it seems the risk is far greater no matter how you look at it."

Ryuuen himself knew this.

If there were no doubts in his mind, he wouldn't have held this meeting to ask for opinions from Katsuragi and others.

To take on or give up on this special exam—

First, they had to decide on which of these options to pick.

While Ryuuen, who had an aggressive spirit, remained indecisive, Katsuragi now turned his gaze to Ibuki.

"How is Horikita doing?"

"Huh? Why are you asking me?"

"You said you've been eating at Horikita's room often lately. I know she was in a bad state, but has she recovered?"

"I don't think she's recovered. She turns me away when I come, and she always has a gloomy expression. It's annoying."

There were still no signs of improvement, even a week after the transfer.

"I see. It's tough taking on a special exam when she hasn't regained her composure."

"Good. She should just lose miserably."

"That's harsh. Aren't you two friends? Isn't that a bit cold?"

"Haaaaaaa? She's not my friend."

"It's not that I take pleasure in others' misfortune, but if Class A stumbles, it's a situation we should be grateful for. Even if Ichinose picks up a win or two, they won't be much of a threat."

If there's a reason to forcibly secure a victory, this would be it, Katsuragi thought.

If Class B could catch up and surpass Class A, they could suddenly pull ahead in one swift move.

After a while of casual chatter, Ryuuen quickly drank the water left on the table.

"…I've decided how I'll fight."

"Are you really going to go all out to confront them?"

Pouring Private Points into the plan and winning the special exam at all costs.

Having asked that question, Katsuragi judged that the plan had a strong sense of how desperate times called for desperate measures.

"What do you think is the most important thing for him, for Ayanokouji, in the next special exam?"

"That would definitely be 'the first victory.'"

"Right. He made the guys from Class C pay for his transfer. He took over Sakayanagi's position so he could do whatever he wants. But that class isn't stupid. So far, they haven't entrusted everything to someone who hasn't shown anything. So Ayanokouji must want to win no matter what. Moreover, a defeat in a special exam he's expected to win is unthinkable. In a way, it's his first and last chance."

"That makes sense. It'd be super lame if he took command right after transferring and then lost."

Ibuki, as well as the one seated next to her, Ishizaki, completely agreed and nodded.

"To sink Class C's ship in one go—right."

"Even if he knows he has the upper hand, no matter how easy the battle is, he will always take it seriously. After all, he has an infuriatingly extraordinary way of thinking. It wouldn't be surprising if he sees through all five people we select for the small-group battle."

If Ryuuen were to roll some dice to pick the participating students, it would actually be impossible for others to read.

But still, he might guess correctly—he was someone so powerful, they had to consider that possibility, no matter how slim.

"There's also a chance he'll spend all his Private Points to buy penalties."

"Then it would become a battle of financial power."

"That's not all. We absolutely must prevent the information on our selection from leaking."

"They'll definitely try to probe us… Honestly, I can't even imagine what methods they'll use."

Ishizaki's muttering, which almost made it sound like he was talking to himself, also stirred strong doubts within Ryuuen.

There didn't seem to be any significant loopholes in the special exam.

Ayanokouji might not have any qualms about using foul play, but he wouldn't use methods Ryuuen would think of, the kind that would kick up dust.

After all, there was no need to cross a dangerous bridge against an opponent who was significantly inferior in basic academic skills.

The problem would be solved as long as they could secure reliable information regarding Ryuuen's class.

"We should start off with Hashimoto, and it also seems wise to pay special attention to Yamamura."

Upon Katsuragi's words, Ryuuen gave a small nod in agreement.

"Who's Yamamura? Was there such a person in Class C?"

Ibuki tilted her head, not remembering the name.

"Kuku! Try to steal our information if you can, Ayanokouji."

Which students to impose penalty points on.

Including everything, Ryuuen wouldn't even leave a one percent chance of information being leaked to those around him.

It would be impossible to accurately predict everything, and if it were possible, it would be akin to precognition.

He was convinced that such a thing could absolutely not be done.

While feeling convinced, he also felt a bit of anxiety and anticipation.

He wanted to see how the impossible could be made possible.

"Is that okay, Ryuuen? I'll start moving with that in mind too."

Katsuragi, thinking it was best to strike while the iron was hot, headed toward the karaoke exit.

Since he significantly contributed to the improvement of the class's academic performance, he felt a strong sense of responsibility for his actions in exams where academic skills were required.

Seeing the sight of Katsuragi's determined back, Ruuyen was…

Chapter 6:
School Life in Class C

SUNDAY HAD ARRIVED.

Today, I made plans to meet with my new classmates, Yoshida and Shiraishi, to deepen our friendship.

Moreover, Shiraishi was also bringing a friend, though I hadn't asked who it was.

The meeting time was set for 10:30, so after getting ready, I left my room fifteen minutes before then.

The place we agreed to meet was simply in front of the dormitory.

As I descended to the lobby and stepped outside, I spotted Yoshida's restless figure.

"Y-Yo, you're early, Ayanokouji."

"So are you, Yoshida."

"Well, I'm a gentleman. I don't make ladies wait."

"From the way you talk, it sounds like you've been waiting for a while."

"No way. I've been waiting since 9:30."

That's obviously early. Had he been waiting for an hour?

He's significantly passionate about the person he's interested in, but it's doubtful whether waiting an hour early would actually increase his favorability. It would be strange if he went out of his way to point this out, and he might even give the impression that he's too intense.

This initial impression—previously, I probably wouldn't have been able to interpret this situation as smoothly as I just had.

Through my association with Karuizawa, I came to understand this line of thinking better.

However, when it came to love, there was no absolute correct answer, and the difficult part was that you had to see through the person you were interested in and approach them in a suitable manner.

"Do you like Shiraishi?"

I thought he did, and Shiraishi, the person he appeared affectionate to, felt the same way too, so there didn't seem to be any mistakes about it, but I

wanted to confirm just in case.

"What!? I-It's not like I like her or anything! What are you talking about all of a sudden!?"

*I see. So he does **like** her*

The opposite of 'not liking' is 'liking,' and the opposite of 'liking' is 'not liking.' In love, things that wouldn't normally make sense can happen.

This was one of the clear-cut examples typically shown.

"I'm just checking."

"Wait, do you… do you like Shiraishi? Did you break up with Karuizawa and transfer classes just for this, huh? Is that it!?"

Although he said he didn't like her, he clearly wasn't calm; rather, he was openly hostile, though he seemed completely unaware of it. His interpretation of my question was wildly presumptuous.

"Unfortunately, I don't have those types of feelings for her."

"You don't have to lie, man. It doesn't matter to me. Hey, maybe I could even help you get along with Shiraishi if you want me to?"

He forced himself to stay calm, but of course, he didn't feel at ease at all.

He kept digging his own grave, but there was no point in continuing this topic.

"I'll pass. Instead, I want you to tell me about the class. There are things I want to know."

"…Acting tough, huh? Well, fine, you just transferred here, and you need to know about the class. I'll make a special effort to teach you, so ask... or rather, just ask Hashimoto. He thinks highly of you, and he'll even tell you more information than what's needed."

"There are things I can't ask Hashimoto about."

"What do you mean?"

"Like how the class evaluates Hashimoto and how they feel about him. That kind of thing."

Even Hashimoto, who had a generally strong grasp of the class, would struggle to analyze this matter objectively and give accurate reports on it.

"Our evaluation of Hashimoto, huh? Well, it's definitely more negative than positive, that's for sure. I think he's managing things quite skillfully, though."

As he voiced his own thoughts, Yoshida shifted his gaze to the lobby.

At the same time, a bright and cheerful voice could be heard.

"Good morning, Yoshi, Ayanokouji-kun!"

The person who appeared at the meeting location wasn't Shiraishi, but unexpectedly, Nishikawa Ryouko. It looked like she was just casually chatting with me as a new classmate, yet she came to a stop right in front of us.

"Please take care of me today."

"Ah, it's Nishikawa…"

"You don't have to look so unwelcoming~"

"Are you with Shiraishi by any chance?"

"Of course. You didn't think you could have a date just with Asuka, did you, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I didn't think of it as a date."

It wasn't like I didn't have any expectations in terms of deepening my friendly connections and companionships here, but it was different from the direction Nishikawa imagined.

"Eh? Really? You came out so easily when you were invited on a day off. You must've been expecting something good, especially you, Yoshi, definitely."

"No, that's not it! What are you misunderstanding?!"

It seemed that those were indeed Yoshida's intentions.

"Look, Yoshi. I'm going to give you some important advice as a classmate."

"What is it?"

"Asuka is the one person you shouldn't be going after. Oh, and this is advice for Ayanokouji-kun too."

As she approached, Nishikawa[1] looked around and slightly lowered her voice.

"Asuka's experience level isn't like that of your ordinary student, you know?"

Experience level? What could that mean?

"Huh…? E-Experience level?"

It seemed we had the same suspicions, but Yoshida seemed to have realized something.

"You know what I mean. The '**Hundred-Man Slayer**' Asuka—you've heard that nickname, haven't you?"

"…That rumor's real…?"

"Of course. It's not the type of story that spreads if it's a lie."

I wasn't sure what exactly happened, but it was clear that Yoshida was greatly shaken.

However, I couldn't understand the meaning of that nickname.

"It wasn't a hundred friends?"

"Eh? What's this hundred friends thing?"

"Never mind."

Seems like it's completely unrelated…

I still couldn't forget the rhythm Morishita had hummed that one time.

"The 'Hundred-Man Slayer' nickname means she's been in that kind of relationship with a hundred guys. She's cute and, you know, has a sexy vibe, right?"

'That kind of relationship.' It sounded vague, but it was probably talking about a close relationship.

"I'm not sure. I don't know about that part, but I understand what you're trying to say."

Apparently, my seatmate was far more of a specialist in romance than I was.

"Do you think Yoshi could win over Asuka?"

"I-I already said I'm not interested!"

"Then let's leave it at that. Take this chance to give up. Or… well, if you kneel down, you might be able to have sweet dreams for one night."

"…Seriously?"

"Hmm? Didn't you just say you weren't interested?"

It seemed that Nishikawa liked to tease people.

If I were to compare her to someone, she seemed similar to Amasawa.

"Does that 'Hundred-Man Slayer' expression change to the 'Two-Hundred-Man Slayer' when it reaches two hundred?"

I threw out the question, simply curious, and Nishikawa widened her eyes.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you sure make some interesting expressions despite your appearance."

"Is that so? I just asked what I was wondering about."

"The answer is probably no."

"I see. It doesn't roll off the tongue, does it?"

"It's not that… It's more like a 'hundred' is enough? The number's not really important—it's the status—that's what I'm saying."

Status, huh? In romance, having that kind of advantage does influence things.

"Haa… All of a sudden, I'm a bit tired from waiting since this morning. I'll just sit and wait."

Perhaps having used up his morning energy, Yoshida started walking toward a nearby bench with a somewhat disheartened look.

Watching Yoshida with amusement, Nishikawa then turned her gaze in my direction.

"Generally, boys who hear about that fact about Asuka react in two ways. They either get shocked, depressed, and totally turned off by the hundred-men saying, or they blatantly show their ulterior motives, wanting to be the 101st. I wonder which way Yoshi will go. So far, you don't seem to fit either scenario, Ayanokouji-kun, but how do you actually feel?"

"I've come to respect her. It's honestly amazing for someone my age to be involved with a hundred people."

"Eh? Is that what you really think…? It really does seem like you feel that way, huh?"

"Isn't a specialist in any field worthy of respect? Sorry to bring up my previous class, but it's like Sudou in basketball, Onodera in swimming, or Inogashira in sewing."

"Well, I don't know much about sewing, but… Ayanokouji-kun… you even transferred to a lower class on your own free will. You're definitely different."

I'd intended to genuinely compliment Shiraishi's 'Hundred-Man Slayer' title, but somehow it seemed to have put her off a bit. The smile that was on Nishikawa's face since she arrived turned into a slightly strained grin.

"…Hmm. No, wait a minute."

Nishikawa pursed her lips in a troubled manner, seemingly deep in thought.

"Hey. If you really want to know, should I tell you something interesting, just for you?"

With a renewed smile and a slightly mischievous grin, Nishikawa came closer.

"Why Asuka's called the 'Hundred-Man Slayer,' and why she wanted to go out with you today, Ayanokouji-kun—there's actually a big reason for that."

"A big reason?"

It was well communicated, but it was a somewhat concerning remark.

I traced my memory back to the day of the opening ceremony.

Morishita took the initiative to arrange my seat within the class. It was a coincidence that Shiraishi Asuka was next to me, but if Morishita was involved with these two, that might change the story…

"Will you listen? Especially since it's a story I can't let Yoshi hear."

"Sure."

Due to our height difference, I slightly hunched my back so that I could hear what came out of Nishikawa's mouth.

"It's because Asuka thinks it'd be okay to make you the 101st, Ayanokouji-kun. Of course, she isn't romantically interested in you. She's just playing around. How about it? Feeling happy?"

It appeared to be some kind of secret message from Nishikawa, but I highly doubted whether it was actually genuine.

"What's your intention behind this?"

"Nothing much. Just talking about becoming involved in a relationship and having fun between a man and a woman."

"Sorry, but if that's true, I'd refuse."

"W-Why?"

"If I were to have that kind of relationship with Shiraishi, it's possible that you or Shiraishi herself would spread the information. If so, then it wouldn't take long for it to inevitably reach Yoshida’s ears. It would only become a hindrance for my battles in Class C."

With that, I distanced myself from Nishikawa.

Nishikawa narrowed her eyes, seemingly a bit dissatisfied with my refusal.

"I might have to reconsider my impression of you, Ayanokouji-kun."

Up until now, it seemed like she was just teasing a newcomer, but her words clearly showed her discontent and even something akin to hostility.

"Good morning."

As the appointed time approached, the person in question, Shiraishi, appeared from the lobby.

"Morning, Asuka!"

Immediately, her tense emotions dissipated, and Nishikawa reverted to her earlier self.

Yoshida, who'd been sulking on the bench, also quickly ran over to us.

After standing next to Shiraishi, Nishikawa greeted us again.

"Once again, let's get along today, Ayanokouji-kun. Oh, and you too, Yoshi."

"Come on, am I just an afterthought?"

Seems like understanding the class's internal affairs might be more challenging than I expected.

Led by Nishikawa, we headed to karaoke at Keyaki Mall.

In a private room with an L-shaped seating arrangement, Shiraishi, Nishikawa, I, and Yoshida sat in that order from the back.

"Let's start singing right away."

Without even looking at the food menu, Nishikawa handed the microphone she was holding to Yoshida.

"Am I supposed to be singing first? Shouldn't Ayanokouji start since he's the newcomer?"

"That's what you'd call a 'harassment of power,' you know? You have to show us how it's done first, Yoshi."

"But I don't really like singing that much…"

Nishikawa approached the reluctant Yoshida and whispered something in his ear.

Immediately after, Yoshida gave a hard slap to both his cheeks and psyched himself up.

"Guess it can't help it. I'll sing!"

It was easy to guess what she'd just whispered to him, but Yoshida seemed motivated anyway.

As Yoshida's chosen song began to play, Nishikawa asked me to switch places.

As instructed, I switched seats, and Shiraishi stood up and closed the distance between us.

The distance was so close that our clothes almost touched.

"I've been wanting to have a proper conversation with you at least once, Ayanokouji-kun."

"We sit next to each other, couldn't we have done it anytime?"

"It's never very relaxing at school."

Yoshida's singing wasn't very good, but it was heartfelt and filled the room.

Nishikawa was chanting along and keeping the atmosphere lively.

"It's questionable whether you could call this environment relaxing either."

There should at least be a small boundary or simply some personal space between guys and girls, but it seemed Shiraishi didn't try to maintain that, rather, she continued staying close to me.

Could this be one of Shiraishi's techniques as the 'Hundred-Man Slayer'?

"Ryouko-san is my best friend."

"I had a feeling you two were close. You seem to spend a lot of time with Nishikawa during breaks and lunch."

Eventually, the first song ended, and the karaoke room regained its silence.

"Hey, you two, aren't you whispering a bit too closely over there!?"

"Your singing was wonderful, Yoshida-kun. I request an encore."

"Eh? Really? If you say so… But still, the distance between you two—!"

"Alright, Yoshi. Shall we go for the second song?!"

Without allowing him any chance to refuse, Nishikawa, seated next to him, prevented Yoshida from escaping as he tried to put down the microphone.

"Now that we're in the same class, let's exchange contact information."

"That's definitely something we should do."

We both took our phones out and gave each other our numbers so that we could make calls and send each other messages.

"Feel free to contact me anytime."

From our distance and the nuances in her words, Shiraishi's familiarity, kindness, and consideration were evident.

But are these words truly sincere?

"What are you thinking about?"

"I'm wondering why you're acting so kind to me? Most of the class is still keeping their distance from me and observing from afar, like Shimazaki and the others, right?"

"We sit next to each other. And the fact that we ended up alone together this morning, I believe it was fate."

"I don't think it's something as significant as fate…"

"Maybe not for you, Ayanokouji-kun, but I genuinely interpret it that way."

As she spoke, Shiraishi touched my hand without Yoshida seeing.

"Your fingers are long, and your nails are beautiful. Such lovely hands."

"Sorry, but let go of my hand. Yoshida might see and misinterpret our relationship."

I conveyed my concerns, and Shiraishi slowly released my hand, looking a bit surprised.

"You really are interesting, Ayanokouji-kun."

It might be better to separate this matter from whatever Nishikawa was saying about Shiraishi and the opposite sex. At first glance, it might seem that way, but Shiraishi's eyes were not conveying such things.

'*What an interesting experimental subject, like looking at a guinea pig in a small box.*'

At least, that seemed to be what her eyes were conveying to me.

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[1]: In the raw, "Shiraishi" was in place of "Nishikawa" here, with the literal translation meaning, "As she approached, Shiraishi looked around and lowered her voice slightly," however, it's clear that she hadn't arrived yet, so we believe it may be a mistake and changed it.

Part 1

I’D RECENTLY TRANSFERRED classes, and although it was a slow start, my relationships gradually began to change.

However, some things in my school life didn't change—the school lessons.

During class, students generally focused on things quietly, spending a lot of time alternating between monitors and tablets. With each class, the faces of the teachers giving the lectures also varied, but it was a similar scene no matter which class you belonged to.

With special exams looming, students seemed to be working more seriously than usual.

The content we were studying wasn't worth mentioning in detail; it was like revisiting a path I’d traversed many years ago, now taking it on as a form of review.

In such unchanging times, if I had to point out a difference between Horikita's class and my current one, it would be the lack of time wasted and efficiency when studying.

There were individual differences in academic ability, with some students who were fast to grasp new concepts and others slow.

Therefore, students like Ike and Hondou often stumbled over things they didn't understand, resulting in the teachers being asked more questions and even occasional pauses in the lesson.

On the other hand, overall, Class C was highly motivated when it came to learning, and many students understood how to study, making the progress extremely smooth. A solid foundation for learning had been established, creating a virtuous cycle that led to improvement in everyone's academic abilities.

And today, it was time for self-study, where I tended to slack off and lose focus.

Since there were no teachers nearby watching, it was easy to hear some private conversations in the background, but the students in this class still faced their tasks earnestly.

Horikita's class had grown considerably over the last two years, but when it came to learning, it wasn't surprising that they hadn't been able to catch up to or surpass Class C—

Hm? Something feels a bit uncomfortable.

Is it just my imagination?

Upon thinking so, I felt something else that was a bit uncomfortable.

An uncomfortable sensation… right?

What is it? It's not just my imagination, is it?

While I still had my pen in hand, I stopped writing on my tablet.

It was because, in my mind, a faint but recurring uncomfortable sensation was occurring.

However, it felt very small.

The first time, I perceived it as just the wind playing pranks on me, but that wasn't it.

Clearly, this uncomfortable sensation was recurring, and it was happening in unspecified places on my hair.

To investigate its cause, I slowly looked behind me.

"What is it?"

Morishita voiced her question in a low voice, glaring at me.

She held a pen in her hand, just like me, and seemed to be working on something.

"No, I mean…"

"Looking behind you during class, even during the self-study period, is something only a naughty, naughty student would do. Please face forward and focus on what you have to do."

I was given an irrefutable argument.

Fortunately, the uncomfortable sensation in my hair disappeared for some reason when I turned around, so it might be better not to worry about it.

I turned back to the front and resumed working on the tablet.

However—

A little while after resuming, I felt the sensation in my hair again.

If there was a cause, it could only be Morishita, who was sitting behind me.

This time, I turned back a bit quicker.

Then, Morishita, looking like she was caught in the act, quickly grasped something with her left hand and hid it.

Unfortunately, I couldn't see what it was.

"Staring at my face from such a close distance, what a pervert."

"I have no such intention. Are you doing something to the back of my head?"

I decided to ask directly.

"Not at all? I'm seriously engaged in the class."

She tapped the tablet with her pen twice to emphasize that, but her behavior was clearly odd.

Although it was self-study time, it wasn't a situation where I could freely turn around as I pleased.

However, there was no doubt that something was going on.

Morishita was clearly deceiving me, but the surrounding gazes told a different story.

There were clearly those who looked at me with eyes filled with 'sympathy' and 'pity.'

"Hey, Shiraishi."

"Fufufu, what is it?"

My seatmate, upon being addressed, couldn't suppress her laughter and covered her mouth as she chuckled.

"Is Morishita doing something?"

"Well, I don't really know."

Confused by the obvious lie, I realized that I had to deal with it myself. If that was the case—

I pretended to give up and faced forward again.

I immediately continued my studies with my pen.

Of course, Morishita must have known that I wasn't seriously staring down at the tablet.

She was probably trying to catch definitive evidence. But that was fine.

If I can confirm that she's up to something, she might decide to stop her wrongdoings there.

In other words, it was a way of saying, 'I'll overlook this, so don't do anything more.'

I thought this would allow me to concentrate, but such hope was shattered in just a few seconds.

An uncomfortable feeling appeared at the back of my head again.

Did she do that because she saw through my shallow thoughts?

Even if I tried to turn around quickly, there was a limit to how fast I could react when I was exposing my back defenselessly. It was difficult to check what she was holding in her left hand before she could clench her fists to hide it.

But what exactly is she doing…?

Suddenly, I noticed Shiraishi's fingertips moving and pointing toward the floor.

I see… This was the source of that uncomfortable sensation.

Furthermore, Shiraishi motioned with her hand, setting the tip of her left index finger on her desk, tapping it lightly.

The sensation occurred just as her fingertip either touched or nearly touched the desk.

This meant I could move before the sensation came.

Her fingertips rose again, and then lowered.

At that moment, I turned around. Morishita flinched, but this time, I wouldn't let her escape.

Rather than grabbing the hand she was moving, I took her left hand that was clenched into a fist and forcibly opened it.

What came out was an eraser that had long become unnecessary in class.




@Satoshi

"What is this?"

"Well, what could it be?"

"And these crumbs on the floor?"

"I don't know."

She played ignorant, but it was futile. Morishita had been rubbing the eraser on the desk and throwing the resulting crumbs at my head.

"You'd better confess."

"You saved me, Shiraishi. Thanks to you telling me the timing, I caught her red-handed."

"Ah, so that's what it was. You're impressive, Shiraishi Asuka."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't just leave Ayanokouji-kun feeling troubled."

"Isn't this what you call bullying, Morishita?"

"Bullying? What a laughable accusation. Let me ask you something, would you call it bullying if a kitten messes with a lion? Just imagine."

"Well… I wouldn't."

"Right? Bullying is a vile act where the strong prey on the weak. One of us is trying to become the class leader, the physically superior Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, and then there's me, a weak maiden. No matter how you look at it, it's clear and obvious who's strong and who's weak. What I'm doing, if I must say, is similar to Jeanne d'Arc."

"Why is the Maid of Orleans coming up here?"

"Because she's a knight who defeats evil?"

I'm the villain, and Morishita's justice? That's a truth I absolutely can't accept in this situation.

"Cute."

Shiraishi muttered the word, having been watching our exchange with narrowed eyes.

Indeed, if judged solely by appearance, Morishita was indeed blessed in terms of looks.

However, only those who hadn’t actually suffered could deem this behavior cute.

"I finally understand, Shiraishi. This must be why Sugio readily gave up his seat."

"Yes. It seems the student before Morishita-san faced similar troubles."

"As long as evil exists in this world, it's my duty to keep fighting."

Though whatever Morishita was saying shouldn't have made any sense, Shiraishi kept smiling cheerfully throughout.

Chapter 7:
Ayanokouji's Defeat

TWO WEEKS FLEW by, and the day of the third year's first special exam had arrived.

It was 7:40 AM.

Karuizawa had gone to bed rather than forcing herself to stay up all night the previous evening.

Thanks to that, she woke up feeling fully refreshed. She finished preparing and left the dorm quietly by herself.

She had a school life that began alone.

Then school life that was for two.

And then, back to a school life spent alone.

From the time she parted with Ayanokouji until this very day, Karuizawa hasn’t been able to smile even once.

Her heart didn't spare any space for a smile.

Satou and Karuizawa's other friends tried their best to encourage her and make her happy, but it only tightened the grip on her heart even more, making it scream in agony every day.

Yet, it was through her sheer stubbornness that she kept attending school without pause.

On her way to school, Karuizawa unexpectedly came to a stop.

It was because Ayanokouji was sitting on a bench ahead, fiddling with his phone.

Having faced her days mindlessly since their breakup, Karuizawa, still harboring strong feelings for Ayanokouji, felt her heart constrict involuntarily every time she saw her former lover.

Her gaze naturally followed Ayanokouji, and each time their eyes met, she keenly felt that Ayanokouji held no lingering attachment to their breakup.

This realization mercilessly tightened the grip on Karuizawa's heart.

Yet, she had to move forward.

Ideally, she could just greet him with a strong "good morning" and walk away.

It shouldn't be difficult if she could just show herself acting strong.

She repeatedly told herself this and was about to start walking when…

"Good morning, Karuizawa-san."

"!?"

Karuizawa, whose attention was completely captured by Ayanokouji sitting in front of her, was startled by a voice that came from a student approaching from behind.

The face that peered into Karuizawa's had eyes that were large and sparkling; hair that was long, beautiful, and glossy; and lips that were plump—it was a female student who could captivate even those of the same sex.

"Uh, Ichinose-san, good morning…"

"You're earlier than usual today."

"Eh? Oh, yeah, maybe so."

Only then did she realize that she'd left the dorm unusually early that day.

However, it bothered her that Ichinose spoke in a way that implied she knew her routine.

"Do you know… how early I usually leave by?"

"Yeah. It's usually around 7:50 AM, right?"

"Uh… maybe…"

Ichinose confidently pinpointed the time, leaving Karuizawa with a chill.

Rather, it was because she herself hadn't been aware of the exact time she usually went to school.

"Recently, Ayanokouji-kun has been sitting on that bench like that."

"Is that so… You seem to know him quite well."

"Well, I usually go to school at this time, so I see him quite often. Switching up the time you usually leave the dorm can really give you a whole new view, doesn't it?"

While the two stood there chatting, other students gradually walked past.

Most of them greeted Ichinose, who returned their greetings with a smile. School life wasn't all just about having many friends.

Karuizawa knew this, but it was clear that the paths they walked during these past two years of school were vastly different.

Everywhere she looked, be it her right, her left, her front, and her behind, she could only see Ichinose's friends.

It even seemed like students from Class A, Karuizawa's own class, greeted Ichinose with more familiarity than they showed Karuizawa. Ichinose had likely broadened her interactions beyond just the second-year students—she could easily imagine that Ichinose was already connecting with the first years too.

"You're as popular as ever, aren't you?"

"Popular? I'm just greeting my friends, like I did with you."

It might've sounded a bit cliché, but when it was Ichinose who said it, it actually made sense.

It was backed by the achievements she had built up.

"Ah, right. Today is finally the day of the special exam."

"…Well, yes, it is."

"How did your studies go?"

"Well, I tried my best. But you probably don't have anything to worry about, Ichinose-san, so that must be nice."

"That's not true at all. I'm just barely holding up against the pressure."

Ichinose said as much, but she didn't seem to be suffering at all.

At least, that was how it appeared to Karuizawa beside her.

The conversation was naturally coming to an end, and Ichinose would likely start walking soon.

"Can I… ask you something?"

Just as her brain decided she should just see Ichinose off, those words had spilled out.

"Hmm? Ask me anything. Ah, but things like who will participate in the small-group battle or how we'll assign penalty points are secrets, okay?"

"It's not about that…"

"Then there's probably no problem."

Ichinose waited with a smile for Karuizawa to speak.

"Are you… uh, are you and Ayanokouji-kun… dating…?"

Karuizawa asked what was on her mind with a strained voice.

However, she unconsciously looked away, fearful of the potential answer.

It was one of the possible reasons why Ayanokouji had broken up with her—

The idea that he'd left her to date another girl, Ichinose.

As a third-year student, she couldn't help but notice how close Ayanokouji and Ichinose were getting.

It didn't seem like just a friendship.

It wasn't just Karuizawa. Other students also whispered such rumors.

"Me? No way. There's no way Ayanokouji-kun would date *me*."

The response that came back was a strangely phrased denial.

She downplayed herself and elevated Ayanokouji.

Still, no matter how you looked at it, the two seemed like an ideal pair—possibly the perfect couple.

However, she couldn't take Ichinose's words at face value. That denial wasn't something she could easily believe, and Karuizawa turned her averted gaze back toward Ichinose.

"If you're holding back from telling the truth for my sake—"

"It's really true. Ayanokouji-kun and I are not in that kind of relationship."

"But—"

That can't be. Even if they aren't dating, their relationship has definitely changed.

That was why she pressed on, fully prepared to be viewed as persistent.

It was a question she never wanted to ask or hear again.

Sensing Karuizawa's earnest pleas from her wavering eyes, Ichinose let out a quiet sigh.

"That being said, it is kinda like that, huh? Though, it's not the typical kind of relationship you're thinking of."

"What does that mean…? I don't understand… Are you two actually dating?"

"That's really not it. Absolutely not."

"So… that's how it is…"

The virtuous Ichinose gave an unwavering response.

It meant she truly wasn't lying. Karuizawa could believe that much. If they were actually dating, she would probably say so.

However, she couldn't feel genuinely happy about this. Her feelings were complicated.

Even if they aren't dating now, they might be tomorrow.

No, they might even start dating today.




@Satoshi

For Karuizawa, Ichinose dating Ayanokouji was nothing short of despair.

Yet, she inevitably felt a slight sense of relief in her heart for now.

At this moment, there's still salvation.

She forced herself to accept this in her mind.

Meanwhile, Ichinose sensed Karuizawa's heart slightly relaxing as she stood beside her.

Karuizawa was happy about the fact they weren't dating.

And Ichinose realized this. A new emotion had been born in her during her conversation with Karuizawa.

She knew there was a flicker of malice within her, however faint.

Last year, when she had ascertained her romantic feelings for Ayanokouji, Karuizawa was already his girlfriend.

She had cried from the pain more than once or twice as she thought of Karuizawa's existence.

"I understand, Karuizawa-san. Ayanokouji-kun is wonderful, isn't he?"

"…"

"I don't really understand, why would you break up with someone like Ayanokouji-kun?"

Ichinose asked such a question, fully knowing that Ayanokouji had dumped her.

"That's…"

She couldn't reveal the fact that she'd been dumped.

Karuizawa knew this, but she still didn't want to give Ichinose any hope.

"Y-You know, Ichinose-san…? About Ayanokouji-kun, that—"

Getting too close to Ayanokouji would lead to pain. She wanted to give her a warning.

However, while Karuizawa hesitated to continue, Ichinose opened her lips.

"Perhaps he's different from your average person. Is that what you wanted to say?"

Ichinose answered as if she had already read the intent behind her words.

"…Y-Yes."

Since she indeed wanted to say something similar, she could only nod, though a bit disturbed.

Ichinose, standing next to her, seemed to know something about Ayanokouji's secrets. She could intuitively feel it.

"Thank you for the advice, or warning. But I'm okay."

"How can you say that so confidently?"

"How, I'm not quite sure myself. Do you regret breaking up with him?"

"N-Not really… It's really not like that…"

"Is that so? It doesn't seem that way to me. Don't you think you could've maintained such an important relationship if something had been different?"

Regardless of who ended it, there would always be a reason for the breakup to occur within the relationship. If those unstable factors had been dealt with, then maybe the future would've turned out differently.

"This is just my speculation, but maybe your relationship ended because you wanted something in return?"

That comment caused the emotions Karuizawa had been holding back to start bubbling to the surface.

Why should I be criticized by an outsider like Ichinose?

"What do you mean, 'wanted something in return'? I'm not asking for anything like—"

"Because when you love people, you want to be loved too. Because when you care for people, you want to be cared for too. It’s a give and take relationship. It's both painful and sad, and it hurts when you don't get that in return. This probably isn't limited to romantic relationships but also to friends and family—"

"What's that supposed to mean… Isn't that normal…?"

"It usually is, but maybe I'm different."

"That's impossible. Even you, Ichinose-san… If you start dating someone, you'd want the same, right?"

When someone said 'I love you,' they'd want to hear 'I love you too' in return. This seemingly futile exchange was what made love precious.

"Someone? Should I assume you mean Ayanokouji-kun?"

"No—"

"You know, don't you, Karuizawa-san? That I like Ayanokouji-kun."

Without feeling embarrassed or hesitating, Ichinose stated it clearly.

And after a pause, Ichinose continued before Karuizawa could speak.

"I guess I'm more about giving than receiving. I want to be actively involved in helping everyone in my class, but I don't expect anything in

return. I believe Ayanokouji-kun feels the same way. I don’t need anyone to return my feelings. As long as I’m allowed to like them, that’s enough for me.

"…That would be impossible to endure…"

"It is possible. I already said something similar earlier, but this isn't just about romance. I want to be useful to someone by my side. If there's someone in trouble near me, I want to help. That's all."

This was undoubtedly Ichinose's true feelings.

It was an unpaid service.

"That's…"

For Karuizawa, the time she was spending now was nothing but cruel and suffocating.

Yet, from the gaze Ichinose toward her, Karuizawa was certain of something.

It was something that only those who had fallen for the same person could understand.

Of all people, as the one who stood beside that person of the opposite sex first, she couldn't help but ask.

"What if…"

"Hm?"

"What if I… asked for help… from you, Ichinose-san… would you help me?"

Karuizawa was naturally included among those "someones" Ichinose had previously spoken of.

At least, she should've been.

It was unthinkable for Karuizawa, a romantic rival, to seek help from Ichinose.

For Ichinose, these words must've come as a complete surprise.

After a brief silence, Ichinose gave a small smile.

"Sorry, I take back what I said earlier. Maybe I can’t help you."

Goodwill.

Hypocrisy.

It was a new way of thinking for Ichinose; it was different from her other sides.

"I don't have the power to help everyone."

There were times when choices had to be made.

Previously, Ichinose would’ve tried to help all a hundred people if there were a hundred people who needed it.

Even if she only had the power to help fifty, she would've set her sights far too high.

That would mean failing to save even the fifty who could’ve been saved.

In that case, it would've been better not to aim too high and save all fifty from the start instead.

This was Ichinose's new set of values and priorities.

And within the initial fifty, Karuizawa Kei simply wasn't included.

"Ah, right. I hadn't mentioned it, but the reason Ayanokouji-kun's sitting on the bench is because…"

Ichinose spoke, smiling down at Karuizawa's downcast eyes.

"He's waiting to meet with me at this time."

Unable to respond, Karuizawa could only lower her gaze even further.

"And there's one more thing I want to say. Even if there were some important events or some deep connection between me and Ayanokouji-kun, something that we can't tell others, by that day, by that time, it was already after he had said goodbye to you, Karuizawa-san. There's nothing that would cause any trouble between us. Yeah, so we can continue being friends—there's no problem with that, right?"

Having said everything, Ichinose walked away and called out to Ayanokouji.

Ayanokouji put away his phone, stood up, and started walking beside Ichinose.

He must have noticed Karuizawa standing still behind him for a moment, but that was all.

He neither turned his eyes toward her nor did he change his expression.

Ichinose's face, looking at Ayanokouji, was filled with happiness.

Karuizawa felt something rising from the pit of her stomach and stepped off the school path, hiding herself in the bushes.

Unseen by anyone.

Part 1

AFTER THEIR LUNCH break and just before the start of the special exam, Class 3-B, Ryuuen's class, was enveloped in excessive stress.

Most students spent almost all their time studying until the special exam, solely to score even one more point and avoid Ryuuen's admonishments.

Yet, their only wish was to avoid being selected as part of the five participants. If they were chosen and defeated, no one knew what kind of treatment they'd receive from Ryuuen.

The participants chosen for the small-group battle were usually communicated to the parties involved beforehand.

However, Ryuuen kept completely silent, not revealing even a single person.

Until the start of the exam, everyone was a candidate.

In the face of such an aggressive approach, everyone felt like they couldn't afford to hold back.

Katsuragi had a grasp of the entire class's academic abilities, and he could feel the improvements the class had made in less than two weeks. Of course, individuals like Kaneda, Katsuragi, and Shiina, who weren’t worried about any harsh treatment they might’ve received, had only one thing in mind: to score as many points as possible for the class, regardless of whether they would participate in the small-group battle. However, their expressions remained grim throughout, understanding that they were far from matching their opponents, Class C.

"Now, I'll announce the names of the five students participating in the small-group battle."

Sakagami, their homeroom teacher, was the only person Ryuuen had informed regarding the five names the day before.

"First, 'Ishizaki Daichi'; second, 'Yabu Nanami'; third, 'Ibuki Mio'; fourth, 'Kondou Reon'; fifth, 'Kinoshita Minori.' These are the five representatives for your small-group battle."

As all the names were announced, the students looked at each other, unable to control their emotions.

Even though it was unclear who would be chosen, the combination was utterly chaotic, something that seemed absolutely impossible for Ryuuen to choose.

The participants had several students who were among the lowest in terms of academic ability in their class, those who lacked motivation and weren't good at studying. Particularly, Ibuki, who'd managed to keep up with her studies until the beginning of her second year, had gradually fallen behind, and now her academic abilities had declined to the point where she was even on par with Ishizaki. Such was the selection. Moreover, among those that should've been prioritized as participants, not a single name was listed.

Pulling out his chair, Tokitou reflected on all of the hard work he had gone through during these past two weeks and directed his irritation toward Ryuuen.

"What is this ridiculous lineup, Ryuuen? Have you given up on the small-group battle?"

The full-class battle was already nearly hopeless.

The only way to overturn that result was to miraculously win four times in the small-group battle.

Everyone in the class faintly harbored that miracle in their hearts.

But Ryuuen answered without a hint of hesitation.

"Yeah, I've given up. No matter how much we strategize, this isn't a match we can win from the start. You dissatisfied?"

"Dissatisfied? Very much so. Sure, I never thought we could win this special exam by playing it straight. And if we'd been splashing Private Points around to buy penalty points, I would've been dissatisfied with that too. That being said, there was no need to give up before we even started. What do you think we were studying so desperately for?"

"For what? For your own damn sake."

"Don't mess with me!"

Ryuuen and Tokitou quarreling had become a common sight. Sakagami, ignoring their conversation, took off his glasses and began to carefully wipe the lenses.

"Hah! Then let me ask you this—you think we could have a chance at winning this if we played it straight?"

"There's a possibility. Not all of them are smart. Maybe they're using people who can only score around sixty points because they're afraid of us hitting them with penalty points. In that case, if we put Kaneda or Katsuragi against them, we might have a chance of winning—"

"What you're saying is way too far from reality to even call it a child's fantasy."

"That's… but still, there was no reason to give up from the start!"

"No reason? No, there is a reason. Sakagami, are there any among the five I nominated who've been given penalty points?"

"…None. Zero."

Ryuuen smirked wickedly upon hearing that report, convinced that he had chosen the right strategy.

"So what? There's no point in making Ishizaki and the others participate."

"Not really. The opponents couldn't see through any of the five people I nominated. That means they couldn't read my thoughts at all."

On the day he met Ayanokouji, he held a strategy meeting in the karaoke room.

Ryuuen called Katsuragi back at the end and withdrew all the strategies he'd previously conveyed.

In the past, he would've forcefully jumped into the fray and focused all his efforts on defeating Ayanokouji.

Then, he would've been outsmarted by Ayanokouji's superior strategies, likely getting hit by a counterattack.

He paused, realizing how important it was to observe the situation.

On top of a special exam that was purely disadvantageous for his class, at the moment, there was no method he could take to combat Ayanokouji, and mindlessly stepping on the accelerator would be nothing but recklessness.

It was crucial that he calmly applied the brakes and took control of the situation according to the circumstances.

In other words, it was a new way of fighting that Ayanokouji wouldn't have been able to anticipate.

The opponent would assume that Ryuuen would always act with victory in mind. Depending on the situation, they'd think he might even invest the Private Points he had accumulated to attack. Ayanokouji had to think

seriously to win. However, what awaited him at the end of his desperate thoughts was only the fact that no one could see through it.

With him unable to see through Ryuuen's strategy to retreat rather than fight, Ayanokouji showed himself looking foolish, struggling to identify who Ryuuen had chosen as participants.

It was a miss. All five were completely off the mark. That was the reality.

"Ryuuen, it seems you've managed to outsmart the opponent first. They must be surprised."

"Kukuku, it just shows that he's not omnipotent after all."

As if to say everything had gone as planned, Ryuuen's attitude had upset Tokitou once more.

"Even if you manage to embarrass that guy by outsmarting his strategy like this, it's still going to be all okay for them in the end, right? They're most likely just going to be grateful that we're going at them with a lineup made up of these idiots."

"Everyone except Ayanokouji, that is."

"Seems like he's become the talk of the town with his unreasonable transfer, but what about Ayanokouji? Does he think he can replace Sakayanagi as their leader?"

Tokitou spoke, unaware of the details, and Katsuragi replied in response.

"At least Ryuuen thinks so. I think so too. However, there's no point in discussing it here, so I'll omit it, but Ayanokouji is currently being questioned for his qualifications to become their leader. Whether Ayanokouji can read Ryuuen's thoughts is now a crucial element that will weigh heavily in the future."

"Were you trying to make Ayanokouji misread?"

"That's right."

"Even if that's effective in the future, this is just too much. We might end up losing seven straight matches and losing class points."

"That won't happen."

Ryuuen laughed and denied the possibility, but Tokitou couldn't understand and clicked his tongue.

"We'll probably be defeated in the full-class battle, and our selection for the small-group battle is just terrible. We're definitely getting a complete defeat…"

"No? I've read Ayanokouji's thoughts. If I'm right, that idiot's even participating in the small-group battle, isn't he?"

"Correct. The five participants on the other side are 'Ayanokouji Kiyotaka' as their first, 'Shimazaki Ikkei' as their second, 'Fukuyama Shinobu' as their third, 'Sanada Kousei' as their fourth, and 'Sawada Yasumi' as their fifth. And… the penalty points you specified are being applied as planned to Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, all one hundred of them. This means that no matter how many points he gets, he would score a zero. They wouldn't be able to score a complete victory unless Ishizaki-kun scores a zero."

"What…? All one hundred penalty points applied to Ayanokouji…!?"

"I told you, I've read his thoughts."

Even Ishizaki, who wasn't great academically, wouldn't score zero unless he left his paper blank.

Of course, Ishizaki would never do such a thing.

This meant that no matter how much they lost at that point, one victory was 100% guaranteed.

"Can I really win against Ayanokouji!? Seriously, that's great!"

Looking at the result alone, with one win and six losses, they were likely to lose, but that one win became invaluable.

"I was confused when I heard the plan, but this must be the optimal solution while avoiding risks. The opponent's lineup is straightforward, only containing academically gifted students. I don't know who among us was chosen for their penalty points, but it's safe to assume it was mostly our top students. So, it was indeed a losing battle."

If students with similar abilities were to clash, depending on the combinations and developments, Class B might've been able to snatch one or two victories, but considering the two defeats in the full-class battle, their odds of winning remained low.

Tokitou also had no choice but to swallow his frustration upon seeing the members the opponent had put forward.

"I'll at least let them taste the sweet victory wine. But Ayanokouji's considerations have been completely wasted. Knowing him, I wouldn't be surprised if he had boldly announced his predictions before the exam."

To take command in Class C, such feats were required.

"As it turns out, you've made a complete fool of him."

"This will make it difficult for Class C to easily accept Ayanokouji."

Even if Ayanokouji were to become the leader eventually, delaying it was crucial.

To eventually defeat Ayanokouji on a perfect stage, Ryuuen wanted to show him that he could learn to change and fight flexibly, and the results that came of it. This development was all ideal for Ryuuen.

Part 2

MEANWHILE, HORIKITA'S CLASS, Class A, was also experiencing that same moment.

It was Class 3-A versus Class 3-D. Although Ichinose's class had a slight advantage due to the number difference, Horikita's class still had a good chance at winning the full-class battle, and depending on how well they had seen through each other in the small-group battle and the penalty point applications, it could go either way.

It was supposed to be a close and intense battle.

The tense atmosphere was about to become heavier with Chabashira's next words.

"Unfortunately… three of the five you chose were targeted by the opponent's penalty points. Your second selection, 'Wan Mei-Yui,' your third selection, 'Yukimura Teruhiko,' and your fourth selection, 'Kouenji Rokusuke,' will each have twenty-five points deducted from their exam results. On the other hand, your correctly assigned penalty points on the opponent's small-group battle are their second selection, 'Kanzaki Ryuuji,' and their third selection, 'Tsube Hitomi,' each of whom will have ten points deducted."

"Twenty-five points for three people…!? That much…!?"

The situation was indeed dire. A twenty-five-point difference was almost enough to bring students from academic levels A and D to the same level.

"Did they use their Private Points to apply a large number of penalty points?"

"Unfortunately, information about how many additional penalty points the opponent purchased isn't disclosed. All we know is that three people were targeted for the penalty application."

If twenty-five penalty points were applied to ten people each, then they'd need a total of 250 penalty points.

Subtracting the initial 100 penalty points given, they'd have to prepare 150 more points out of pocket, costing a total of 7.5 million Private Points.

Even the assumption that they were applying the penalty points to just ten people involved a somewhat unrealistic sum of Private Points.

If it was hard to imagine such a large investment, the next thought that came to mind was—

"Hey, Hirata. I don't want to think about it, but could this mean there was a leak?"

Sudou interpreted and accepted the reality he faced.

"I can't deny it… But I only spoke about who I'd assign with a few people—the people I talked to in order to help decide who to pick and the actual participants. Oh, and also Horikita-san."

In selecting the five for the small-group battle this time, Horikita had entrusted Hirata with the responsibility, judging that she couldn't make a calm decision by herself. Hirata wasn't the type to decide alone, so he had discussions with a few key people and selected the five participants. Needless to say, the selection of these five classmates was top secret, and they had tight control over the information to prevent leaks.

"Then it must be one of them."

"No… I can't imagine that happening."

"But look at the people who were assigned, no one would normally choose Kouenji. He's not the type to actively participate, and our opponent knows that—"

As he began to speak, Sudou realized one possibility.

"Could it be Kouenji? You informed the participants beforehand, didn't you?"

Kouenji showed no reaction to the question, but soon Hirata interjected, denying the possibility.

"That's not possible. I hadn't told Kouenji-kun in advance that I'd chosen him. I only told him that he might be chosen as a participant."

During the discussions, it was decided that excluding Kouenji from the small-group battle from the start would only be welcomed by the opponent.

From Ike to Kouenji, it was important to thoroughly examine and carefully select from everyone available.

Eventually, they concluded that choosing Kouenji would catch the opponent off guard. Kouenji didn't follow anyone's instructions, but he had been relatively serious about past written exams.

The small-group battle was merely an extension of the full-class battle, and it didn't require any extra work for the selected individuals.

Therefore, they assumed that Kouenji would receive a reasonably high score without much effort.

The fact that he was targeted as a nominee was completely unexpected.

"Then why? No matter how you think about it, this is—"

"It can’t be because our information got leaked, right? After all, the other two weren't targeted. If it’d been completely leaked, it wouldn't be strange if everyone had been selected for penalty points. There's no need to deliberately leave out those two."

Kushida pointed this out to Sudou, who didn't want to take on the exam while harboring doubts.

"…That's true, isn't it…"

"Then did Ichinose-san guess the three people correctly only using pure speculation? That’s amazing…"

Alongside this, there was also her boldness in assigning twenty-five penalty points each.

Many of their classmates, including Shinohara, were surprised by this unconventional method.

All except for one person.

"…I don't… think that's it."

It was almost like Karuizawa was muttering to herself.

"What do you mean 'I don't think that's it,' Kei-chan?"

From a distant seat, Satou voiced her confusion.

"Maybe… it wasn't Ichinose-san who saw through them…"

She paused for a moment.

Saying that name made her feel heavy.

That happy scene *those two* had this morning lingered in her mind.

That was why Karuizawa reached a single conclusion.

"Could it be Ayanokouji-kun?"

It was a classmate from not long ago.

Hearing that name, Ike raised his voice with slight irritation.

"Huh? Why Ayanokouji? He's in Class C and has nothing to do with us."

"We, Class A, are enemies even from Class C's perspective, right?"

With emotionless eyes, Karuizawa looked toward Ike.

Feeling an unusual intensity in her gaze, Ike caught his breath.

"Well… maybe…"

Hirata felt as if the tangled threads were unraveling upon hearing Karuizawa's words.

"It's possible… He was in the same class as us for two years. He would understand better than anyone how the state of the class is and who might be chosen. He knew that Kouenji-kun had a positive attitude towards the written exams, so it's not surprising that he was targeted."

"If that's the case, then Ayanokouji really is the worst…!"

"We shouldn't jump to conclusions. Whether the information had been leaked or Ayanokouji-kun had been involved, it's all just speculation. We have no choice but to fight with the hand we're dealt."

They were already crushed by despair before the exam even started.

Yet, they had to overcome this handicap and win.

"I'm sorry, everyone… It's because I… couldn't do anything…"

Horikita voiced her regrets and apologized.

She intensely loathed herself.

If she had been more reliable, perhaps the situation might've changed a bit.

"We haven't lost yet. Even if we're at a disadvantage, if we refuse to give up and continue fighting, we should still have a chance."

Without panicking, Hirata calmly conveyed the situation. Lowering their motivation here would do more harm than good. The points they could gain wouldn't increase, but they could certainly decrease…

Soon, Chabashira announced the start of the special exam.

Part 3

THE SPECIAL EXAM conducted in the early afternoon had ended, and soon, it was time for Class 3-D's homeroom period to start. The results were to be announced on the same day, so many students were visibly restless.

Ichinose slowly looked around the class, analyzing the expressions of each student, and felt hopeful about the upcoming results. They weren't sure about the outcome of the full-class battle, but in the small-group battle, their assigned penalty points went better than anyone had anticipated.

Their odds of winning, which were around fifty percent, must have risen to over seventy afterward—that was what she predicted.

Of course, they couldn't let their guard down until the very end.

There was still the possibility that Horikita's class, despite multiple twenty-point handicaps, could still get multiple high scores or achieve more than expected in the full-class battle.

They had high expectations and a bit of anxiety.

However, the moment Hoshinomiya entered the classroom, the anxieties were immediately swept away from the whole class.

It was a characteristic typical of Hoshinomiya, which couldn't really be called a strong or a weak point, that made the result evident.

Before even announcing the results, her expression had already softened significantly, and she could hardly contain her joy, making the outcome obvious to everyone.

"Everyone, sorry to keep you waiting. The results of the special exam are in, and I'd like to announce them!"

"Yesss! We did it!"

Shibata prematurely took his victory stance.

"Hey, I haven't said anything yet~?"

"I mean, it's clear as day, isn't it?! We did it, we did it!"

Shibata pointed out how her atmosphere made it obvious and started hopping around, but Hoshinomiya's cheeks remained relaxed.

"Shibata-kun's become really cheerful lately. I mean, isn't it a bit too much? It’s like he’s a new person."

Kobashi and the person who sat in front of her, Iizuka, started whispering about Shibata.

"Look, there was that heartbreak… It's not like he's despairing, but maybe he can't hold himself together without acting cheerful."

"Ah~ And it's not just Shibata-kun, right? Well, it can't be helped~"

"Can you believe that Honami-chan made a public confession? Eh, wait, is she already dating Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I don't know, but they've been coming to school together a lot lately, so maybe they are?"

"Hmm… I mean, I guess Ayanokouji-kun is cool and all, but still, for him to win over Honami-chan… I wonder what kind of interaction they had."

Iizuka looked at Ichinose and nodded in admiration.

"Shh, don't stare too much, or they'll notice. The boys are all tense about that matter right now. It's better not to make a fuss."

"But I'm curious about Karuizawa-san and stuff… Should I ask?"

"No way. That kind of thing is, you know, tactless."

"Okay, everyone, focus on the results~"

As the students started getting noisy, Hoshinomiya lightly called out to them and cleared her throat.

Then, she operated the tablet, and the results were displayed.

※ *The winners of each match will be bolded*

Class A vs. Class D:

Full-Class Battle:
Class A — 2633 pts vs. **Class D — 2712 pts**

Small-Group Battles:
1: Sudou Ken — 66 pts vs. **Himeno Yuki — 69 pts**
2: Wan Mei-Yui — 82 pts (Penalty 25) vs. **Kanzaki Ryuuji — 75 pts (Penalty 10)**
3: Yukimura Teruhiko — 84 pts (Penalty 25) vs **Tsube Hitomi — 77 pts (Penalty 10)**
4: **Mori Nene — 69 pts** vs. Kobashi Yume — 68 pts

5: Kouenji Rokusuke — 72 pts (Penalty 25) vs. **Beppu Ryouta — 71 pts**

Class B vs. Class C:

Full-Class Battle:
Class B — 2327 pts vs. **Class C — 2880 pts**

Small-Group Battles:
1: **Ishizaki Daichi — 40 pts** vs. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka 100 pts (Penalty 100)
2: Yabu Nanami — 47 pts vs. **Shimazaki Ikkei — 81 pts**
3: Ibuki Mio — 43 pts vs. **Fukuyama Shinobu — 79 pts**
4: Kondou Reon — 47 pts vs. **Sanada Kousei — 83 pts**
5: Kinoshita Minori — 50 pts vs. **Sawada Yasumi — 80 pts**

Both leaders, Horikita and Ichinose, were wary that they'd get targeted by the penalty points, so they didn't participate in the small-group battles. Class A opted for a strategy that paired top students with those with moderate abilities, including unexpected combinations like Sudou and Kouenji.

On the other hand, Class D primarily chose their participants from those who were a bit above average within their class.

Looking at the results alone, both of the upper two classes were defeated, but Class D didn't win by a large margin. Few would consider it an easy victory.

"It was scary, but I'm glad we bought the penalty points."

Ichinose gave a nod at Amikura's happy tone.

Aside from the three who were accurately targeted within the small-group participants, twenty-five penalty points were also designated to Hirata Yousuke and Kushida Kikyou, which meant that Ichinose and her class had to pay an additional 1.25 million Private Points out of their own pockets to get the required additional penalty points. Although it was a significant expense, when divided amongst forty people, each person only had to be burdened with paying 31,250 Private Points, which wasn’t too

taxing on the wallet. Plus, with their monthly income increasing by ten thousand Private Points due to their victory, they'd recover their investment in four months with some to spare.

"Congratulations, everyone. We definitely had to defeat Class A, and we did it splendidly!"

Even though they anticipated the outcome, the class erupted in joy as it was confirmed.

"We did it, Honami-chan! We won, we won!"

The nearby girls also exploded with joy along with their teacher's words.

"Phew. That's a relief. It feels like a weight's been lifted off my shoulders." Ichinose shared her joy with Shiranami who sat beside her, exchanging high-fives.

Seeing the students' joyous expressions, their homeroom teacher Hoshinomiya also nodded happily.

"Yes, yes. As your homeroom teacher, I'm very satisfied with the result. Of course, there's still a big gap, so we need to stay focused and keep working hard~"

"By the way… I thought that Ayanokouji was the only one who ended up losing, but he actually scored perfectly on that test!?"

"There were some really difficult questions, right? I didn't even understand some of the questions…"

As surprise arose in their classroom, Kobashi and Iizuka looked at each other.

One particular thought had struck them—'*Is this why!?*'

"The quiet, handsome boy who's been hiding his abilities… Ah, this is why, Kobashi-san…"

"This is why, Iizuka-san… surely this is why… Honami-chan knew this…"

The two joined their hands together, interpreted things their own way, and repeatedly nodded at each other with sparkling eyes.

Unaware of their conversation, Ichinose took out her phone and sent a message to Ayanokouji.

['Getting a perfect score sure is amazing. It's a pity that some of the penalty points were wasted, but I'm glad Class C could win. Our class also won thanks to you, Ayanokouji-kun. As expected, Kouenji-kun showed up, and Horikita-san didn't participate. Thank you so much.']

As soon as she sent it, the message was read, and a reply came back.

['It's thanks to your courage in choosing to trust in my advice that you won.'] Ichinose couldn't help but smile at such a humble reply.

However, since they were still technically in class, she decided not to continue the conversation and immediately turned off her phone.

Part 4

MASHIMA-SENSEI FINISHED ANNOUNCING Class C's victory and left the classroom. Normally, students would've started to leave their seats and head home, but no one seemed eager to leave the classroom.

The first to stand up was Shimazaki.

Or rather, it would be more accurate to say that Shimazaki was waiting for the moment he was able to move.

He stood up silently from his chair and walked straight to my desk without a hint of hesitation.

Several students also started moving to see what was happening.

Shimazaki's face, as he approached, was unmistakably stern.

"Ayanokouji. You know what I want to say, right?" Shimazaki spoke, pointing at the monitor still displaying the results of the special exam.

"You missed every single participant. You really made a remarkable debut."

"Calm down, Shimazaki. We won the exam, so it's all the same in the end." Hashimoto hurriedly intervened between me and Shimazaki, but Shimazaki forcefully pushed him aside.

"I told you before the exam, didn't I? This time, we're not judging on whether the class won."

"I believe we were focusing on the accuracy of penalty points assigned."

"I was expecting you to correctly guess at least two of them, secretly hoping for three—"

"Winners will be right, and losers will be wrong. Let's call it even this time, okay?"

Hashimoto tried to mediate, still flustered by the outcome.

"Sorry, but that's not going to happen. I intend to make things clear here."

"Then let's talk among the three of us. There's no need to air our grievances in front of everyone."

As Shimazaki clenched his fist, ready to reject this new proposal, the classroom door abruptly opened. Everyone's words and attention were

disrupted by the unexpected noise.

"Yo, don't mind me."

Ryuuen led the way as he and his usual group, Ishizaki, Ibuki, and Albert, entered the classroom without permission.

"Hey, what's the meaning of this sudden—!"

As the intimidating group barged in, Shimizu, who sat in the front row near the door, bravely tried to stand up, but a large figure blocked him from approaching Ryuuen.

Overwhelmed by the pressure, Shimizu immediately sat back down.

While this scene unfolded near the door, Sawada, a girl who'd been listening to the conversation with Shimazaki near me, unintentionally blocked Ryuuen's path. Unable to find the right moment to move, she froze, and Ryuuen forcibly cleared the way, grabbing her shoulder.

"Kyaa!?"

With a small scream, she staggered and fell onto a desk, quickly bracing herself with her hands.

Although it wasn't a great fall, Ryuuen's ruthless action froze the entire class.

It felt like a brawl might break out right there in the classroom, in broad daylight.

"We're busy here, you know? Geez, I only have one body."

Unable to leave Shimazaki, who was trying to approach me with clenched fists, Hashimoto lamented not having more bodies to deal with the situation that required more. He seemed to be sending a look for help to Kitou, who was nearby when Sawada almost fell, but Kitou didn't say a word, didn't move, and just sat in his seat, watching the situation unfold.

"Why are there so few allies…?"

With a resolve to act, Hashimoto stood alone between Shimazaki and Ryuuen.

"I came all the way here for a winner's interview, move it."

Smirking, Ryuuen ignored Hashimoto and continued to approach me.

"I'll take responsibility. Shoot him[1] immediately."

Someone behind me seemed to whisper such an absurdity, but it was clear that she wouldn't actually take responsibility, so I decided to ignore it.

"Give me a break, Ryuuen. I'm busy today."

"So what?"

"It's not about 'what'... I don't expect you to understand, but… damn it."

As Ryuuen advanced toward Hashimoto, he grabbed his shoulder just as he had done with Sawada.

Hashimoto hesitated for a moment, wondering whether to retaliate, but Ryuuen pushed him aside and forcefully made his way toward me.

Hashimoto must've decided that he couldn't exactly strike first.

"So? Has it been officially decided that you'll lead Class C from now on, Ayanokouji?"

"According to Shimazaki, the outcome doesn't matter; what mattered was my precision in selecting the right students to assign the penalty points to in the small-group battles. Unfortunately, I couldn't identify any of the students you nominated."

The nomination results, showing that I had gotten zero out of five students correct, were still displayed on the monitor.

"Well, isn't that troublesome. No wonder it's gloomy in here despite your class winning, but I guess you're not planning on making excuses about how it would be unthinkable that I'd be choosing a lineup of idiots, right?"

"Who are you calling idiots?"

"Eh, me and Ibuki, right?"

Ishizaki casually pointed back and forth between himself and Ibuki.

"I know that! I meant that he didn't have to say it in front of my face, dumbass!"

"What, so you knew he was talking about you. Besides, we're behind him, not in front."

"That's not the point!"

Ibuki gave Ishizaki a hard kick on his butt, but ignoring the farce behind him, Ryuuen continued.

"So you weren’t recognized as a leader this time. That's too bad."

Hashimoto, whom Ryuuen had previously pushed aside, intervened again.

"Don't just assume things. Regardless of the process, we won the special exam. That's why we were discussing future plans with Shimazaki and others. Right?"

Hashimoto sent a pleading look, begging to be acknowledged just this once.

However… Shimazaki didn’t nod in agreement.

"I told you, this special exam was supposed to be an easy win. Written exams are our class's forte. Winning or losing doesn't qualify Ayanokouji. It's about whether he could accurately impose penalty points on the participants. The overall result was disastrously clear."

Indeed, despite handicaps, the total score for our full-class battle was significantly higher compared to the other three classes.

"But, Shimazaki, that's…"

Hashimoto tried to say something, but Ryuuen interrupted.

"Kukuku. I see, it does seem like you're busy. It looks like the celebration for Ayanokouji's rise to leadership will have to wait."

Ryuuen, having grasped the situation, turned away with a satisfied smile.

Hashimoto quietly clicked his tongue, but for now, he probably just wanted the troublemakers to leave.

Ryuuen seemed to have finished confirming the situation, and normally, no one would stop him from leaving.

That is, except one person, me.

"Ryuuen, considering that's your take on it, aren't your senses a bit too numb?"

"Huh? My senses, you say."

He stopped in his tracks, not understanding the meaning behind my words, and turned his head to look back at me.

"If you don't understand, you should ask Shimazaki to continue what he was saying."

Ryuuen immediately stopped laughing and cast a sharp glance at Shimazaki, who stood nearby.

"Hey, Ayanokouji, can't that wait until after Ryuuen leaves?"

Hashimoto, who didn't think this would turn out well, gave his suggestion quietly, but I refused.

Shimazaki, who had shown a moment of flinching as if intimidated by a snake, took a deep breath and raised his face.

"Then I won't be holding back, Ayanokouji. I didn't come here to complain. There are many things I don't like, honestly… but still, I came to acknowledge you for now—about taking command in this class."

Shimazaki's words were not of rejection, but of acknowledgment.

Naturally, Ryuuen and Hashimoto couldn't understand why he said such a thing.

"Ah? What a strange thing to say. This guy couldn't see through my nominations. Didn’t you say you were focusing on those results? Moreover, Ayanokouji willingly participated in the small-group battle and received a massive penalty from me. He scored zero points. Because of that, you lost your chance at a precious complete victory."

Not only had I not been able to see through his selection, they had managed to get a complete reading us on top of that—it was the worst possible outcome

Understanding this, Hashimoto, who had been standing by, also wanted to somehow calm Shimazaki down.

"Indeed, if Ayanokouji himself hadn't participated in the small-group battle, we might've had a good chance at achieving a complete victory. But… after seeing that result…"

Shimazaki chuckled and looked back at the monitor that remained displayed.

Following him, Ryuuen also looked at the results, but he didn't feel any sense of discomfort.

Class C had six wins and one defeat. It was a victory Ryuuen had deliberately offered. In the small-group battles, he didn't let me guess any of the participants' identities, and I participated, receiving all of their penalties. A complete victory was thwarted.

It was exactly the result he’d envisioned and aimed for.

But in reality, the point I wanted to make was completely different.

"I don't understand."

In response to Ryuuen, who sought an answer, I began to explain part of it in Shimazaki's place.

"The key to victory lies in the small-group battles. Indeed, it's important to see through who the opponent's class selects, so it's perfectly natural for Shimazaki and the rest of Class C to base their evaluation on that. However, if the opponent wasn't willing to take the exam seriously, there's nothing to see through. Even if I could predict students like Ibuki or Ishizaki appearing, there's no value in assigning them penalty points."

"Hah, well, normally that would be the case, but that's the focus of this time. It only makes sense for you to try to see through the students I nominate. It's an exam you're probably gonna win even if you miss all of

them, so if you miss it, it means you've got a class that can stand on its own without you needing to sit as the leader from the start."

"What I really had to see through wasn't your irrational selection after you chose to abandon thinking, but the essence of the opponent—your very aim. Whether the enemy will fight head-on, how they will fight, and how we should respond to that is what's important."

Ryuuen wouldn't just miss the valuable opportunity to take me on.

However, in a contest of academic ability, his hopes of winning were slim. Would he pour funds into it to aim for victory, or would he give up? That became the focus. And I predicted that Ryuuen would choose to step down from the battle while still scheming to inflict damage on his opponent.

Choosing to deliberately abandon a weak area, a path that could seem like a wise decision upon first glance.

The real battle wasn't in April, during our first term, but later, in the second and third terms.

That was why he wanted to delay the time when I would become the Class C leader for as long as possible.

He wanted to postpone Class C's realization that I should become the leader, so that the decision to entrust me with the role would be made later.

However, all these were merely passive methods of fighting that stemmed from an underlying fear.

"Shimazaki. After this result, how do you feel about my presence here?"

"Honestly, you're far more amazing than I imagined. No wonder Hashimoto relies on you."

"Huh?"

Instead of blaming him for the unexpected, Ryuuen furrowed his brow at Shimazaki's words of praise.

"Think about it, Ryuuen. In this written exam, even students with an A in academic ability, which is the same as Ayanokoouji's evaluation, could barely score around eighty points. I was one of them. Yet, Ayanokouji alone scored a perfect score, standing out from the rest of us. There were some incredibly difficult questions there… I have to admit that, whether I like it or not."

Being a student who prided himself on his academic abilities, he felt something undeniable.

"That isn't the point. So what if his written scores are better than others?"

"That's exactly the point. In the end, what we wanted to know wasn't whether he could see through the opponents in the small-group battles or anything like that. What we really wanted to know was his strength—whether he was the man capable of saving this class after we were in a pinch following Sakayanagi's expulsion. And… after I explained everything, I'm once again reminded that he made the best choice for the class's victory without being confused by my meaningless demands."

With Shimazaki's explanation, Ryuuen's numb senses began to slightly thaw.

"It's not just that he scored a hundred points. The fact that a dangerous guy like you was completely focused on him is incredible. Normally, you wouldn't give all one hundred penalty points to one person. Even giving twenty or thirty would almost ensure safety."

Ryuuen had anticipated that I would come to participate in the small-group battle to demonstrate my strength.

He decided to play a move that preserved Private Points and minimized risk.

His class's defeat wasn't a cheap price to pay, but if I had lost in the small-group battle and missed a complete victory, it would've had a worse impact on how I could maneuver in Class C.

I definitely won't let Ayanokouji win. I'll prevent their complete victory by embellishing it with Ayanokouji's defeat—

Such thoughts also contributed to why he gave me a maximum penalty of one hundred points.

It was, in essence, the highest level of 'caution' apparent to anyone's eyes.

Ryuuen's reading was correct.

It was correct, but it was meaningless since it was read.

I went into the small-group battle assuming defeat to show the enormous penalty he was marking me with.

"You've done well to study and understand my abilities during my time as a student here. However, most of Class C wouldn't have known those things. They didn't even know how high a score I could get in this special exam or the extent to which you were on guard. I chose the top five students in terms of academic ability from Class C. It was an extremely

orthodox strategy; in other words, there weren't any twists. However, I predicted that you would choose your participants unconventionally, and I knew you would impose the penalty points on me. I just needed to have a backup plan for the off chance things didn't work out. Assigning the penalties to smart students like Katsuragi, Hiyori, and Kaneda—that's the best way to increase Class C's chances of winning. Because of that, there was no need to engage in a deceptive battle of wits."

Even if some of their participants had been accurately penalized, would that really have been enough?

Some of them would've thought it was just by chance, that I just had good luck.

Of course. A strategy that relied on the roll of the dice couldn't be perfectly read from the start.

There was no need to make a bad bet.

The undeniable result was conveyed from Shimazaki to my other classmates, one after another.

"Ryuuen, no, everyone was only looking at whether they won or lost in this special exam. That's natural, but I was also focusing on achieving something different. The truth is, someone like Ayanokouji Kiyotaka is far from ordinary. He showed that he could produce outstanding results and that he's been thoroughly marked by a leader like you. Not all of that was necessary, but I was looking for something that anyone could clearly see. If you look through the monitor, the fact is that there's only been one defeat in the small-group battles. However, no one can conclude that he lost due to his lack of academic ability. That defeat definitely stands out in an unusual way."

"Haha, there's no doubt about it. He's definitely proven himself to be an incredible powerhouse."

Hashimoto, who had observed this special exam more intently than anyone else, showed a strained smile.

If I hadn't participated in the small-group battles, those around me wouldn't have known the number of penalty points I had received. That was why my participation had meaning.

Ryuuen and the others triumphantly showed up to check on how I was feeling.

Even that was all within the plan I'd anticipated.

It was exactly as scripted; Ryuuen moved predictably from beginning to end.

"Ryuuen, did this turn out the way you wanted it to?"

The remaining Class C students glared at Ryuuen, the intruder.

I was supposed to be driven into enemy territory, but it all came back to him.

"That's how it is, huh…? Bring it on."

Ryuuen started walking after having said his piece, leaving Class C behind.

The last one out, Albert, closed the door behind him, and cheers of joy erupted from the class.

Having seen the refreshing sight of their enemy miserably retreating, they couldn't hide their joy.

"Is this the ending you were aiming for? Since when did you start planning all of this?"

"From the beginning. Information isn't just something you gather. Because it's being gathered, you should try to use it to your advantage. I talked about the special exam with you and Morishita at the café. Remember when those two first years who were instructed by Ryuuen came to pick up on the conversation?"

"Ah, I thought it was impressive that you immediately saw through their reconnaissance."

"You and Morishita were having a serious discussion about how I had to identify two or three participants in the small-group battle to be recognized by the class. That discussion was recorded by the first years, who were 'guns' sent by Ryueen, and delivered to his ears. Not only that, but they were also monitoring Shimazaki and the others."

Ryuuen would definitely use such valuable information.

"You took advantage of that, but—"

"Even though I said I had all the first year's data memorized, Morishita was skeptical about whether they were actually students who received Ryuuen's instructions, right?"

"Yes, it felt like it was lacking in basis."

"There was one other thing I hadn't revealed. From the day of the opening ceremony until the day the special exam was announced, I had a certain person busy running around the first years."

"Running around? Who?"

"As you would expect, Ryuuen was keeping an eye on people like Hashimoto, who gathers information in Class C. Moving carelessly would give away your intentions. However, there's someone else from a different class who's able to smoothly communicate and quickly gain our kouhai's trust, allowing them to naturally draw out information."

"It’s Ichinose Honami, right?"

"That's right. Those first years were approached by students from Ryuuen's class and agreed to cooperate in exchange for Private Points, as seen and heard by their fellow first years. They hadn’t built the kind of relationship where they could cover for one another yet. However, it was important information we wouldn't usually get our hands on so easily."

"That's why you were immediately convinced that those two came to check things out."

As each element was intertwined with the other, it was increasingly easier to pinpoint.

"An alliance brings various benefits. And this time, Ichinose was able to defeat Class A because she listened to my advice. Because we teamed up, we gave each other information, accepted it, and were able to implement it. As a result, we defeated the top two classes and closed the gap by a hundred points each."

As Hashimoto and Morishita stood in awe, Shimazaki, who had been sharing his joy with his friends, held out his hand to me.

"Ayanokouji… welcome to Class C."

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to working with you."

As I shook hands with Shimazaki, classmates came up to me one after the other to shake my hands.

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[1]: It's just Morishita being quirky.

Part 5

"U-UM, RYUUEN-SAN, LISTE—MHFMMGMF!"

After leaving the classroom, Ibuki covered Ishizaki's mouth and stopped him as he tried to speak, halting their tracks.

Ryuuen, walking alone, didn't notice that Ishizaki and the others had stopped.

Originally, everyone in the class, not just Ryuuen, knew it was going to be a tough battle. He fought head-on in a subject the class was bad at, knowing he had almost no chance of winning.

Therefore, he aimed to secure an advantage later on, in a method different from winning by the rules. He intended to embarrass Ayanokouji and delay his ascent to the leader's position.

However, his scheme failed miserably. Ayanokouji had read all his thoughts.

It was a complete waste of effort. He may as well have been wrestling without an opponent.

He'd mistakenly believed that the enemy was more formidable and thought in a more sophisticated way, utilizing more advanced strategies in this exam.

When he looked into it, it was nothing special.

Ayanokouji did nothing extraordinary, yet he succeeded in making his uniqueness known to the class and their entire year.

He scored a perfect score that no one else could achieve, and even foresaw Ryuuen's utmost caution with a full, one-hundred-point penalty alongside his triumphant entry into the classroom.

No, was that what made it so extraordinary?

"What a ridiculous guy…"

In the end, Ayanokouji had read his behavioral patterns and his psychology.

He even anticipated the flexibility he'd tried to incorporate into his thinking.

Unconsciously, his arm suddenly moved, and he punched the corridor wall.

His body signaled that he needed to punish and inflict pain on himself to suppress his emotions.

The gap in their class points narrowed, but he was still leading.

If the next special exam wasn't about academic ability, there might be a chance—

No, is there really a chance?

If he lost, he could win the next time.

If he lost again, then he could win the time after that.

That had been his creed, the ultimate victory.

It was starting to waver again.

"Tch…"

Complacency, overconfidence, arrogance.

He thought he had discarded such things long ago.

Yet, in reality, he'd dug his own grave and suffered defeat.

"Can I really not win alone…?"

He recalled his interactions with Sakayanagi, who left school just a few weeks ago.

Unknowingly, Ryuuen had begun to step into a long, dark tunnel.




@Satoshi

Chapter 8:
Enemies and Allies

WHERE DID THE responsibility for Class A's defeat lie?

That was something clear from the very beginning.

It lay with me, who'd been entrusted with the class's leadership, yet I hadn't recovered from the shock of Ayanokouji-kun's transfer, unable to devise even a single strategy.

Perhaps if I'd managed one or two effective strategies, we might've had a chance…

Or did our results just seem close, while in reality, it was a crushing defeat?

After school, I was in Class A's deserted classroom.

I remained alone in that place, unable to come up with an answer.

After our loss, no one openly blamed me.

On the contrary, everyone just comforted me, saying there'd be a next time.

However, most of Sudou-kun's and the others' warm words hardly registered.

I didn't remember exactly what they said; I couldn't recall.

And before I knew it, I was just sitting there, my mind void, remaining in my chair until I was the very last one left.

From the classroom dyed in twilight, I suddenly looked out the window.

It was then that I first realized that the sun was about to set.

"I should go home…"

Without thinking, I stood up, reached for the door, only to realize I had forgotten my bag and returned to my seat.

Then, I walked through the deserted corridor and headed to the entrance hall.

What am I doing here?

What's my goal in this place? I felt an intense sense of loneliness.

I'm becoming useless, hopelessly so…

Can I recover by tomorrow?

Can I start walking forward the day after tomorrow?
I didn't know.
I didn't know anything.
I was stuck in a loop.
I put on my shoes, went outside, and started walking.
...Let's go home.
Anyway, I wanted to return to the dorm and lie down in bed—




@Satoshi

Suddenly, my thoughts were interrupted, and my vision shook violently.

An unexpected shock hit me from the depths of my heart.

I felt a sharp pain in my back and, without warning, I was thrown forward.

Although my hands reflexively reached out, I couldn't manage to properly break my fall and slid across the ground.

Moreover, the ground was a gravel-filled area, hardly soft.

My bag rolled away, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Ugh…!"

The pain followed belatedly. My hands and knees, which tried to protect me, especially felt the sting.

"What… What was that!?"

It was only later that I realized the unbelievable fact that I'd been kicked.

Then, although delayed, my brain transmitted a thought to me—*I need to check who the perpetrator is*.

"You've grown pathetic, Horikita. You can't even dodge a kick like that."

The owner of the voice that kicked me hadn't even a hint of malice, not even one percent.

With her arms crossed, she scoffed as if she was looking down on me; it was Ibuki-san.

"What are you doing…? You're out of your mind."

Don't you know what happens when you kick someone who's defenseless with full force?

Before I could tell her off and direct my anger at her, Ibuki-san cast a contemptuous glare in my direction.

"Your pathetic appearance has always been irritating to me. It pisses me off just looking at you."

"Just don't look at me then… It's that simple."

Why do I have to get kicked by some barbarian without any reason, especially when I'm having such rough days, and right after a painful defeat too?

It was truly adding insult to injury.

I sighed as I looked at the small amounts of blood seeping into my palm.

"See, that's what I mean. That kind of spineless attitude keeps jumping into my line of sight; it can't be helped. You should be thankful I only

kicked you."

"I don't understand what you mean."

I didn't want to deal with Ibuki-san right then.

I dusted myself off, stood up, and picked up my bag.

Fortunately, it seemed my knees weren't scraped.

"Hmph. Can't you even retaliate? Well, even if you did, I'd just counter it."

"I wouldn't do that… Besides, I'm not…"

Even at such a time, Ayanokouji-kun's image came to my mind.

"Ugh, you just thought about Ayanokouji again, didn't you?"

"…So what? It's none of your business."

"Everyone's always going off about Ayanokouji this, Ayanokouji that. Can't you be glad that the plague is finally gone from your class?"

"I thought you were a bit—no, quite lacking in wisdom, but you really are stupid. How could I be happy about him being gone?"

"I'd jump for joy. Just seeing his face makes me so angry… Ah, just thinking about it makes me angry. I thought I could finally get one over on him, but it was Ryuuen who ended up embarrassed."

Ibuki-san, truly irritated, kicked the ground.

"What are you even talking about…?"

I muttered my confusion, then I recalled today's exam results. Ayanokouji-kun had predictably defeated Ryuuen-kun's class…

It was done with a flashy performance that left an unusual impact.

Even the exam's results felt like a distant, unrelated event until just then.

"If you plan to stay this pathetic forever, I'm done with you. Don't ever get involved with me again, in fact, don't even come into my sight."

"I don't recall ever being a bother to you, and to begin with, we never had such a deep relationship in the first place."

In fact, I spent a lot of my own time, money, and effort to help her when she was short on cash.

I only remembered being criticized, never thanked.

"Oh well. Bye then."

Having vented what she wanted to say, Ibuki-san walked away.

I crouched down on the spot, shutting my eyes against the pain that my back was still inflicted with.

"Why does it always have to be like this…?"

My school life as a third-year student had just begun.

The moment I saw that 'Class A' nameplate was my only joy.

It's been painful.

Someone…

Help me…

Ayanokouji-kun—

"Are you okay?"

As I crouched with my head down toward the ground, someone called out to me.

"It looked like she hit your back really hard, are you hurt? Should I call a teacher?"

It was Karuizawa-san who had looked at me, concerned, apparently having seen everything that transpired.

Seeing her still in her uniform, it seemed she hadn't gone home yet.

"I'm fine… the pain is finally starting to subside. She really has no common sense…"

As I tried to grasp the hand she offered, I remembered that my own palm was covered in blood and dirt and tried to pull back, but Karuizawa-san gently grabbed my wrist and helped me up.

Then, she brushed the dirt off my uniform with a handkerchief she had.

I didn't have the energy to refuse, so I just watched her, devoted as she was, do as she pleased.

"I'm sorry, and thank you. I must have shown you something ridiculous… Did you hear what was being said?"

"No… I was sitting on the bench when I saw the exchange between you and Ibuki-san."

She pointed to a bench further toward the dorms as she spoke.

Normally, I would've noticed her, but Karuizawa-san hadn't appeared in my sight.

That was why I hadn't sensed Ibuki-san's presence either.

She picked up my bag and urged me to sit on the bench.

Despite my bravado, I was still dealing with a significant amount of pain, so I followed her lead.

"Sorry about the handkerchief. It must be dirty, right?"

"It's fine. That's what it's there for, to get dirty."

"I'm really hopeless right now…"

I sighed and closed my eyes.

I was showing her such an utterly pitiful appearance.

"I'm sorry about today's exam as well. I couldn't lead the class to victory."

"I don't think it's your fault. If we had scored more points, we could've won the full-class battle."

"Still, it's my responsibility."

I really need to be more careful…

I even made Karuizawa-san seriously worried.

"That's kind of surprising."

As Karuizawa-san sat beside me, she voiced her thoughts.

"Surprising?"

"I always thought of you as someone much more composed, Horikita-san."

"That's not true. I'm just…"

I almost denied it, but soon, I couldn't speak.

Because that denial was a lie.

"…It's not true. I thought I was quite strong myself, but it wasn't me who was strong…"

I clenched my hands that were resting on my knee.

A slow pain spread from my injured palms.

"I realized that it was only because Ayanokouji-kun was in the class that I was able to stand up straight."

I was just being supported. I thought it was my own strength.

"I'm a weak person. It's okay if you laugh."

Being mocked would probably be better for me now than being comforted.

"I won't laugh. I'm just as weak."

But she didn't try to blame me.

"That's not true. You've had a distinct backbone from the moment you entered school. Whether all your methods were praiseworthy is another matter."

She quickly made friends with classmates of the same gender and became the center of her circle in no time.

There were a few bad rumors, but there was no doubt she was at the center.

I couldn't even think of imitating what she had done.

I wonder if Ayanokouji-kun's transfer was a good thing for Karuizawa-san…

As the one who initiated the breakup, maybe she felt it was better that he left.

But since that day, I felt that Karuizawa-san hadn’t been smiling.

Is it simply because she's anxious about the class's future?

"What kind of person was Ayanokouji-kun to you…?"

Despite feeling I shouldn't pry, the words naturally slipped out.

"What kind of person, huh…? It's hard to sum up in one word…"

Karuizawa-san looked up at the evening sky and recalled her memories.

"He's a crucial person to me. Someone important… someone I love…"

Her profile and words didn't seem like those of someone who had turned away from Ayanokouji-kun.

"…Was it his idea? Maybe…"

"I can't say. Not saying it… that's become my reason for existence."

"…You're…"

How shallow and foolish am I…?

My suffering was nothing compared to Karuizawa-san's.

I finally understood that here.

"It's tough when various hardships pile up, isn't it?"

"…It really, really is…"

What had been lodged deep in my chest all this time had started to loosen in front of Karuizawa-san.

I felt my clouded vision gradually clearing.

"Ouch…! Seriously, she's such a handful. This is just violence, no matter how you look at it."

As I calmed down a bit, the pain in my palm flared up again.

"Perhaps, but… maybe Ibuki-san was worried about you in her own way?"

"Her? That's impossible."

"I was sitting on this bench all day, but Ibuki-san was lingering around here and didn't seem to want to go home. It kind of felt like she was waiting for someone?"

"She must have been waiting for someone else."

If even Ibuki-san was worried about me, it must've been really serious.

That's bad. Regardless of her true intentions, it's true that I'm in a terrible state.

"Hey, Horikita-san. Can I ask you a question that might be a bit insensitive?"

"An insensitive question? What is it?"

"Do you… like Ayanokouji-kun too?"

"Eh—?"

The look in Karuizawa-san's eyes as she turned to me didn't show that she was joking. It was a gaze that showed her sincerity.

"What are you talking about? That's ridiculous."

If I liked him…? There's no way that could be…

Despite the thought, spring break's events naturally flashed back.

The pounding in my chest at that time—

It was a pleasant feeling that I couldn't describe, yet at the same time, it was embarrassing.

They were emotions I'd never experienced before.

"There's no way that could be true—"

That was all I could manage to squeeze out.

"I've never experienced liking someone before, other than my family…"

"But you couldn't respond right away, isn't that telling? If you didn't like him even a little, you'd deny it right away, right? Like, 'He was just a business partner,' or something… I'm not sure if I'm using that phrase right, though."

Rather than Karuizawa-san getting angry as she spoke, she began to show a small smile instead.

Her sadness and frustration—it was something incomparable to someone like me.

"You're… a much better person than I thought."

"Wow, you only just realized that now?"

"Yes. I thought you were the type of student who was more on the obnoxious side."

"How rude~ Just kidding."

Karuizawa-san, self-deprecating, continued her words.

"I think I actually was a nasty type of student. I was arrogant, selfish, thinking it was okay not to return money I borrowed from others, that I could do whatever I wanted. At least, that's how I was right after I enrolled."

"Ah, I'm sorry. It was because of my tactless remark earlier… It's not something to be praised."

"No, it's okay. It's the truth. I hated that part of myself too. It's something I can say now that I've changed."

"…Why were you able to change?"

"Kiyotaka—no, Ayanokouji-kun… he saved me from the darkness."

"Darkness…?"

Karuizawa-san looked at me, her expression somewhat fleeting.

"I'll tell only you, Horikita-san, the secret I have with Ayanokouji-kun. Even Maya-chan doesn't know."

Karuizawa-san gently held my hand.

Her hand was cold, but for some reason, it had a strangely comforting warmth.

The hand that should’ve been hurting forgot its pain at that moment.

And what she told me was the life of a girl named Karuizawa Kei.

A past I couldn’t have imagined.

The bullying she endured during middle school. Deciding to climb to the top of the school's social hierarchy, even if it meant being disliked, to change her life. The fake romance with Hirata-kun.

And then… how some students, upon realizing the truth, sparked a new wave of bullying. How she was freed from that thanks to Ayanokouji-kun's intervention. And how, in the end, that had been orchestrated too.

The events of her first year. The battle with Ryuuen-kun on the rooftop. I knew about this from talking to Ibuki-san this past summer, but her memory was unreliable. The details were unclear, with some parts missing. I knew Karuizawa-san suffered terribly at Ryuuen-kun's hands, but I didn't know the circumstances.

This was all filled in by matching it with her own memories.

I noticed a single tear falling from my cheek.

I sympathized with her harsh past.

Trying to become strong by playing the role of someone unpleasant—I realized just how difficult and steep that path really was.

But that wasn't why I cried.

I should’ve had a deeper understanding when Ibuki-san told me at that time.

"I… haven't been taught anything by him…"

He had always been by my side.

Nearby, I felt like I knew him.

But I was wrong.

Perhaps I knew him less than anyone else.

What he always showed me was only his back.

He never turned around or waited.

"How pathetic."

I felt pathetic.

As if I, who’d been left out, was the most hurt and depressed, convinced that I was the victim.

"I'm pathetic, aren't I…?"

"I feel the same way."

Karuizawa-san replied, laughing.

Seeing her natural smile, my expression naturally softened.

"That might've been my first proper laugh in a while."

"Me too."

Karuizawa-san and I.

I never thought we'd have anything in common.

But now, I felt more connected to her than anyone else in the class.

I squeezed her hand back.

Then, perhaps Karuizawa-san's pent-up feelings began to overflow.

A tear sparkled on her cheek.

"We both got involved with a really difficult person, didn't we?"

"Yes, really… We really did."

I realized that it was better not to delve too deeply into him.

But…

I couldn't back down now.

"Now that it's come to this, I have no choice but to make him turn his head this way. And I *will* graduate with everyone in Class A. I promise."

It wouldn't be easy.

With him as an enemy, graduating from Class A had become an unprecedented challenge.

But I wouldn't stop anymore.

"You really are strong, Horikita-san."

"Not at all. I'm a weak person, but I've realized that I'm not alone."

With comrades by my side, it wouldn't be impossible.

"Alright… then I also… need to start changing my mindset soon."

Karuizawa-san wiped her tears, gave a mighty stretch, and stood up from the bench.

Then, she turned around with a smile again.

"Let's make him regret transferring out of our class."

"Yes—let's definitely make him regret it."

I finally took a step forward.

Both in reality and in my heart.

Part 1

THE SPECIAL EXAM ended successfully with victories for Class C and Class D.

After that, Shimazaki and the others held a small welcome party for me at Keyaki Mall, where we celebrated our victory. As I was on my way back, the sun had already begun to set, and it was the twilight before nightfall.

After sending my classmates home first, I took a detour from the usual route to the dormitory.

I looked up at the sky and thought about the future.

It would be at least several weeks until the next special exam would be announced by the school.

Typically, most students would use this downtime to spend their time as regular students, also using it to recharge.

However, each day was indeed passing by, and the remaining time continued to decrease.

For third-year students, career choices were always a concern.

It wasn't that 'it was only just April', rather, 'it was already April'; for a class that was catching up, there was no time for rest.

Therefore, it was necessary to make all possible preparations now.

It was just like preparing emergency food and disaster supplies for a catastrophe.

If things could get done without using them, all the better.

At dusk, Kushida, a student from Class A whom I had called out, was quietly waiting alone for me while leaning on the railing.

"Why did you choose this place to meet?"

As I approached, having asked the question, Kushida answered without turning around.

"When we first entered school, you saw quite a lot of things you shouldn't have, Ayanokouji-kun."

Though she evaded the question, I didn't pursue it further and let it go.

"That did happen."

Kushida, who’d unexpectedly reunited with Horikita from the same middle school, had been under excessive stress, which she kept bottled up. Her classmates, who were under the belief that she was more gentle-natured, must've been truly surprised to see her true nature.




@Satoshi

Back then, Kushida had shown she was willing to use her own body in a moment of desperation to keep me silent.

It was only two years ago, but strangely, it feels like it's been a long time.

"It was something like an accident, but I was really anxious when you threatened me."

"Really? You've been thinking about setting me up since then, haven't you?"

"I have no such intentions. Really."

Even though I answered, Kushida, who sent me a brief glance, didn't seem to believe me at all.

When I first entered school, there was still so much I didn't know.

The peers' circumstances were among the most significant.

In the White Room, people my age were dropping out and disappearing one after another.

I'd been alone in that environment for a long time.

Before entering school, I'd never once gotten close to a girl my age after leaving the White Room.

No…

Just once before entering school, I met a girl who dropped out of the White Room.

Perhaps my brain deemed it unnecessary, as I had almost completely forgotten about that girl.

Occasionally, I would remember a past that wasn't necessary, like a glimpse of my childhood.

What was that girl's name?

What kind of conversation did we have?

Or maybe we didn't talk at all.

I couldn't remember 99% of it.

It might've been a side effect of dedicating all my brain's resources to learning.

If I hadn't left the White Room, I wouldn't have directed my attention to such things.

Perhaps because I learned about various human patterns at this school, I became slightly interested in my past.

I wondered how that girl and the others were doing.

Some, like Yagami, might've been undergoing re-education.

"Why did you ask me to come?"

Perhaps because I'd been reminiscing and remained silent, Kushida prompted me.

"I was just wondering how the class is doing. I'm a bit worried."

"Really? If you were that interested, you wouldn't have transferred."

"True."

"The actual topic is something else, isn't it?"

After I lined up beside her, I decided to bring up the reason why I called her here to the perceptive Kushida.

"To close the gap we have with Class A, it would be easier to have an insider from now on."

"What? Are you seriously asking me to betray my class?"

"That's exactly it. If you deliver results, I'll pay you in private points."

When I acknowledged it, Kushida seemed to have worn a faint smile.

"Because of our previous Private Point transaction, I ended up in trouble. Do you think I would cooperate with you again now that you've become an enemy?"

Kushida, without turning to face me the entire time, expressed her refusal.

"You're free not to cooperate, but in that case, I can't guarantee I'll keep your secrets."

Her true nature had already been exposed in Class A.

However, it wasn't widely known among the other classes yet.

"Do you think that counts as a threat? Ryuuen-kun knows about it too."

"Since it's Ryuuen, any negative rumor he spreads about you will lack credibility."

Even if Ryuuen were to spread rumors about Kushida's malicious nature, she'd be able to deny knowing anything about it. Students from Class A wouldn't bother helping Ryuuen either.

"Then isn't it the same for you, Ayanokouji-kun? You transferred on your own, so there's no guarantee people would believe anything you expose."

"It depends on how it's done."

"…You seem confident?"

"I won't deny it."

Kushida narrowed her eyes, not surprised by my answer as if she had anticipated it.

What else might be reflected in her eyes as she gazes at the scenery?

"You don't even need my strength to take down Horikita's pathetic class."

"It won't be that easy. Horikita will definitely recover soon."

"Huh? You sure think highly of her, don't you?"

It might've been difficult for Horikita alone, but with the help of her classmates, it'd be a different story.

Sooner or later, she would become a significant obstacle for Classes C and D.

"Besides, if we need to forcibly expel some people in the future, that would change things."

Upon hearing my words, Kushida looked at me for the first time, trying to ascertain my true intentions.

"Expulsions… from our class?"

"I see no special reason to exclude anyone."

Based on Kushida's information, expulsions would occur within Class A.

Hearing this, there was only one thing to think.

"That's, like, really risky. Even if I get a little allowance on the side and drag down the class, it's meaningless if I can't graduate from Class A. If it ever comes out that I'm connected to you, I'd completely lose my standing."

"Then you'll have to save up enough Private Points to transfer in the remaining year."

"How serious are you?"

It was just superficial skepticism. She wasn't trying to discern which of my words were actually true.

Is she assuming I was lying from the start, or is there another reason?

And she's also trying to mask her true intentions, not letting me read them.

She didn't want me to know where her feelings really stood.

"I'm not asking for an immediate answer. You're free to tell Horikita or anyone else about this invitation to betrayal. If you're recording this on your phone, feel free to spread that too. It would strengthen the unity of Horikita's class."

"What's that about? So what do you want, Ayanokouji-kun? You want to bring down Class A, right?"

"Unfortunately, I want more than just one thing."

I avoided going into details, and Kushida didn't seem inclined to pursue it.

"I don't really get it, but it seems like you just want things to go your way. You were the only one to score perfectly on the special exam, so I guess there's no need to hide anything anymore."

"That's right."

I had said enough here for today.

I could ask for Kushida's response another time.

"…Did you give advice to Ichinose-san's class this time? They got three of them right."

"Just a little. Considering Horikita's mental state, Hirata probably took the lead instead. Yukimura might've said he could win even with some penalty points, and Wan Mei-Yui would likely follow, trying to meet Hirata's expectations. You guys wouldn't use Horikita, who stands out as the class's leader, to give her a rest. Koenji, who generally takes his studies seriously, presented the class with an opportunity to exploit."

"Weren't you scared of them blaming you if your predictions had failed?"

"Of course, it's all within the realm of predictions, and I can't guarantee anything as absolute. However, it's worth the gamble rather than choosing five random people, right?"

Behind her deductions lay not just my own influence, but also information that Ichinose herself gathered directly, like who Hirata called together and how the plan was formed. That couldn't be overlooked.

That was why Ichinose could accept my advice.

This wasn't a relationship that would've worked if one of us had only relied on the other.

My phone vibrated, so I took it out and looked at its screen.

"Who's it from?"

"Hashimoto. He's inviting me to continue my welcome party at the dorm."

"I see you've been recognized by Class C after achieving results in the special exam."

"That's right."

"Hey."

As I turned to leave, Kushida spoke to me again.

"What's up?"

"Are you really going to prepare Private Points for me?"

"Of course. I'll tell you the amount before you do anything. If you're not satisfied, you can refuse at any time. That being said, it's not necessary right now. Both my class and I are quite financially strained."

Unfortunately, I couldn't prepare Kushida a satisfactory amount right away.

"Let me think about it a little."

"Of course. There's no set deadline."

As I started walking, it felt like someone behind me was watching, and I turned around.

Kushida was holding the handrail and staring at me.

"I mean—albeit reluctantly—I do appreciate you, Ayanokouji-kun."

Before I could reply to her words, Kushida looked away.

"That's all. I just thought I should tell you that."

"Is that so? Well, see you later."

Her words carried meaning, but there was no need to dwell on them now.

It was now up to Kushida whether to prioritize her own convenience or the class’s.

With that choice, you could say that there was one more thing to look forward to in the future.

Epilogue:
What Awaits Ahead

IT WAS THE afternoon of the day after my welcome party and after my meeting with Kushida.

There was a class-related issue I wanted to address soon, and I was planning to involve a certain person, but surprisingly, that person approached me first.

I received a fervent request to meet with them immediately, so I left the classroom to respond to them.

In the hallway, students who had finished getting ready to go home were beginning to appear one after the other.

My timing coincided with my former classmates Hondou and Okitani, but they inadvertently looked away. Their reaction seemed to reflect not only the transfer issue but also the results of the recent exam. Their impression of me seemed to be gradually changing.

Without paying much attention to those two, I headed to the exit and left the school.

Then, I headed straight back to the dorm.

"Ah—"

On the way there, I saw Utomiya and Tsubaki walking toward me.

"…Hello."

Utomiya, not bothering to hide his reluctance, gave a light nod.

"It feels like it's been a while since I've seen the two of you together."

"We're not together all the time."

Tsubaki answered indifferently.

Since there was nothing in particular to talk about, I tried to pass by rather than stopping.

"There's a rumor about you transferring classes."

Tsubaki seemed uninterested, but she mentioned the topic as a casual conversation starter.

"Going from Class A to C right after just reaching Class A, that certainly isn't normal."

"Well, it's because Senpai isn't normal, right?"

"Maybe so."

The last time I spoke with Tsubaki was early in the morning during the training camp, where we had a brief chat.

We talked about who they wanted to meet after graduation.

Eventually, Horikita and Ibuki woke up, interrupting our conversation, and although it seemed like we could've continued chatting, we hadn't had the chance to talk since then.

Even now, as we met, it didn't seem like they wanted to bring up anything important.

"We have somewhere to be, so excuse us."

"Sure."

I also had an appointment and couldn't afford to chat for long.

We started walking and passed each other.

At that moment, Tsubaki directed an intense stare toward me from the corner of her eye.

After passing by the seemingly eager Tsubaki, I felt a sense of nostalgia.

"Tsubaki Sakurako… huh?"

A forgotten memory.

Unnecessary memories.

Humans are such mysterious creatures.

Even if you thought you had forgotten something, it was surprising what you might've been able to find.

"What is it? It's creepy when you suddenly call me by my full name."

Having caught her voice, Tsubaki stopped and turned around, looking somewhat displeased.

Calling it creepy was probably too much, but indeed, somebody calling you by your full name could be jarring.

At first, Morishita’s way of addressing me made me feel really uncomfortable, though, now I tried not to mind it.

"I remembered the time when we talked during the training camp."

"Huh? You remember what the conversation was about? That must've been trivial for you, Senpai."

"What did you talk to this person about?"

"Ah, it's nothing to do with you, Utomiya-kun."

Utomiya sharply interjected and averted his gaze uncomfortably.

"We were interrupted in the middle of our conversation back then."

"Well, yes, but it wasn't a big deal for you, Senpai, so it doesn't really matter—"

"Recently, I suddenly thought of someone other than my family that I'd like to meet. It's probably thanks to the story you told at the training camp, so I should at least thank you."

"…Someone other than your family? Who is it?"

I thought Tsubaki would've been troubled by such lengthy information, but for some reason, she asked me a question in response.

"How should I put this? If I had to put it in familiar terms, they would probably be a childhood friend… I guess."

Yes. I had remembered them again.

I had forgotten most of their names already, but there were children my age who studied together with me in the White Room.

Among them was a girl.

Her name was Yuki.

That was her name. I couldn't be sure I was right, but I might've been able to recall because the name Yuki reminded me of the camellia, Yuki-Tsubaki[1], and somehow the impression I got from Tsubaki seemed to remind me of Yuki.

That must've been the accidental trigger that evoked this faint memory.

No—was it really just a coincidence?

'Senpai, do you like snow[2]?'

This was a question Tsubaki asked during the training camp. At that time, it felt normal, but now it felt different.

"…What will you do when you meet them?"

Tsubaki shouldn't have been interested in this anymore, but she continued.

"I'm not actually going to meet them. It's just that I suddenly felt nostalgic, so I thought I'd like to."

The past and present. If we had met again, things might have seemed different than before.

But it'd be better not to meet.

I merely felt like things might've been different, nothing more.

The reality probably hadn't changed.

The new emotions that might've risen… would probably be nothing.

Whether there really was a connection between *that girl* and Tsubaki, it was still a meaningless, pointless matter.

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[1]: "Yuki-Tsubaki" is the Japanese name for the snow camellia, otherwise known as Camellia japonica subsp. rusticana.

[2]: "Snow" in Japanese is "Yuki," with the same exact kanji character (雪).

Part 1

THE PLACE A certain individual called me to was near the garbage disposal area behind the dormitory.

Since it was still early after school, this spot was one of the less frequented areas.

By the time I arrived, that person had already blended into the shadows, waiting for me.

"Sorry, did I keep you waiting?"

When I quietly called out to them, a figure had stepped forward from the darkness.

"Good, you didn't run away."

The one who was muttering was a student from Class C, Kitou Hayato.

Since I transferred, I hadn’t had a single conversation with Kitou.

"If a classmate calls, it's my duty to respond."

"…Already acting like the class leader?"

"I believe I'm not mistaken in my perception. I think it's acceptable to let me take the helm to some extent. Though, you seem to think otherwise."

I didn't think I had a particularly good relationship with Kitou, but I didn't think it was bad either.

At least before my transfer, I thought we were on terms where we could at least exchange greetings without any problems.

"I don't recognize you as a leader."

"Well, considering we haven't even had a proper conversation or made eye contact until now, I assumed that'd be the case. You can't bring yourself to recognize anyone other than Sakayanagi, can you?"

"No… It doesn't matter to me whether it's Sakayanagi."

"That’s strange. Then why did you obediently follow Sakayanagi?"

"As long as I'm not the person leading the class, someone needs to step forward. When asked to choose between Katsuragi or Sakayanagi, I simply chose the one with a higher chance of winning… because I thought that was the best way to graduate from Class A."

As he spoke, Kitou's face grew increasingly irritated.

"But… Sakayanagi only thought about her own convenience in the end. She essentially didn't care about Class A at all, she just did whatever she wanted as long as she was enjoying herself. Still, I thought it was okay as long as she produced results…"

For the quiet Kitou, whether it was Sakayanagi or Katsuragi, or even a third party, it didn't matter who someone was as long as they could lead everyone to Class A; he had simply bet on Sakayanagi because he saw a higher possibility in her.

It didn't matter whether he liked or disliked someone—that was what he wanted to express. He just made his judgment in a purely detached, matter-of-fact manner based solely on the advantages and disadvantages someone could bring to the class.

"This was what happened after I entrusted things to someone else."

"I'm not in a position to talk about other people, but because of somebody's selfish actions, the class had gone down two ranks. We're almost at the bottom. It's natural for you to feel dissatisfied."

"You're the same as Sakayanagi. You don't really care about graduating from Class A."

"Indeed, I also intend to do as I please. It must be troublesome for you, Kitou. However, I at least plan to raise our current class to a point where we can seize the chance to move up to Class A. Isn't that enough?"

"I don't trust you."

'That's exactly why, this time, instead of making crude judgments based solely on advantages and disadvantages, I decided to take a step forward and get involved myself'—that was what he seemed to think.

"I'll see for myself whether you're trustworthy or not…"

As he spoke, he pulled up his black leather gloves and clenched both fists tightly.

"You're strong, I already know that… Show me that you can suppress my dissatisfaction with your strength."

Kitou didn't care about what strategies I could come up with for special exams, or how well I'd be able to read the opponent's thoughts. No matter what accomplishments I achieved, his doubts would still remain.

From what it seemed, if I could demonstrate the pure difference in strength between us, he would suppress his dissatisfaction and comply.

"This idea's similar to Ryuuen's—it's simple, but it's not bad. If you want to test me that way, I'm willing to go along with it. However, before that, I have a warning for you."

Kitou, feeling ready for battle, probably had no idea what I was about to discuss.

"Warning…? What do you mean?"

"Even if you're not good at talking, I understand that you have confidence in your physical strength. At least when Ryuuen stormed into the classroom, you should've been the first to act."

"You wanted me to punch Ryuuen?"

"No. I'm saying that if you had acted fast enough, you could've prevented Sawada from getting into danger. She could've had a serious injury there."

Kitou, who was sitting near Sawada, deliberately waited rather than moved.

"Don't make me laugh. I don't recognize you as—"

"You not recognizing me as the class leader is too childish a reason. Even Koenji, at times, will move to protect a classmate if they're in danger. I'm not trying to impose some old-fashioned values where men would protect women, but if we're classmates, the strong wouldn't need a reason for them to protect the weak."

"Classmates…? If I don't think of them like that, it wouldn't be a problem, right?"

"If you truly think of them that way, then yes, there wouldn't be a problem. But if that's the case, then 'Kitou Hayato's' existence is unnecessary in Class C."

Classmates who tried to make one-sided demands without working with the class—such nonsense would only be tolerated if they possessed a certain level of strength. Otherwise, there was no other option but to make them disappear.

"Fine… If you win, I'll follow you from now on… only if you win, that is—"

Kitou cut off his words and reached out his long arm toward me.

Before his arm could reach my chest, I grabbed and stopped it.

But he didn't panic. Instead, he tried to pull me toward him with the arm that I grabbed. I could tell before he could even move that he intended to

land a hit regardless of the situation and break my will to fight.

Most people would've shut their mouths with that one intimidating blow.

"Mu…!?"

However, when he realized he couldn't easily pull me in, he immediately brushed off my arm.

Instead of recklessly diving in for a follow-up attack, Kitou observed the situation.

He seemed used to fighting, capable of instinctively sensing danger.

He took a pause, then he gave a provocative yet light tap on the ground with his feet.

"When I glare at people, most of them would feel somewhat disgusted and scared at the same time."

That wasn't just because he was strong.

He also implied he had an appearance people would fear—it was a self-mockery

"Unfortunately, I'm not interested in such superficial things."

He fixed me with a sharp gaze, perhaps feeling uncomfortable that I seemed indifferent. Then, he took a powerful step forward and swung his right fist forward.

It was a straight punch with no wasted motion; the sound of it slicing through the air echoed in my ear.

Without panicking, I stepped back and dodged his fist.

I dodged similar attacks two, three times. Then, Kitou stopped, looking dissatisfied.

"…Why won't you attack back…?"

"I wonder why."

When I evaded the question, Kitou softly clicked his tongue and swung his fist again.

This time, he focused on using his left arm, but that fist didn't reach me either.

Typically, when facing an opponent with long reach like Kitou, the strategy was to use footwork to close the gap and bring the fight into close quarters.

However, Kitou knew of this. That was why he wouldn't take a step in so easily.

Kitou grew increasingly irritated by my unexpected movements, and there was no sign of me returning his attacks.

This time, he seemed intent on using his legs, launching a kick.

When the tip of his foot was about to hit my abdomen, I dodged it just like his fists, creating a large opening. I didn't miss that opportunity and brushed Kitou's body back with the palm of my hand.

"Ugh…!?"

Kitou lost his balance and took a step back, his footing slightly unstable

In comparison, Ryuuen used both his hands and feet equally, and he was skilled in attacking using unconventional methods. On the other hand, Kitou wasn't as proficient with his legs, but his upper body movements were more refined than Ryuuen's, and he understood how having long arm reach gave him advantages in a fight.

The moment he tried to regain his composure, focusing on his footing—

I twisted my left fist into Kitou's abdomen.

Agony. Speechlessness.

It was a careless complacency born from the assumption that I wouldn't attack yet.

Kitou intended to use his arms to go for a counterattack, but out of a defensive reflex, they moved toward his own abdomen.

Since I hadn't planned on attacking him repeatedly, I intended to end it with this one strike.

I didn't use my dominant arm, but I thought that was enough.

However, Kitou bent his knees and quickly resumed a fighting stance.

Perhaps it was his tenacity that prevented him from being easily defeated.

Even after a brief exchange of blows, the difference in strength should’ve been clear, but his resolve wasn’t broken. Before his brain could realize he was in an impossible situation, Kitou kicked the ground, stretched out both his hands, and closed the distance once again.

It would've been easy to deflect his hands, but I chose to challenge it.

Using both his hands, he caught my neck and pushed my back against the wall with the momentum. Normally, people would try to escape the pressure by grabbing the opponent's arms.

However, that was a mistake. It wouldn't be easy to pry the opponent's arms away.

Having quickly spread my hands, I slapped both of Kitou's ears with my palm.

Unexpected and vulnerable to such an attack, Kitou's face contorted, his arms released me, and he quickly retreated back.

At that moment, I delivered a front kick, forcing Kitou to bend his knees again.

"Ugh…!"

Despite showing a pained expression from the intense blow, Kitou immediately dropped to one knee.

He didn't completely fall, firmly displaying his determination that he had yet to be defeated.

"You're strong… Is there this much of a difference…?"

"You're strong enough, but that's why you should use your strength properly. In a normal school life, violence isn't necessary. However, there are times when students find themselves in danger due to forces beyond their control. I want you to protect those students. In return, though it may sound odd, I promise to take Class C to a position where we can aim for Class A."

"I won't believe that so easily."

"That's fine. The results will show shortly with the flow of time."

I extended my hand to Kitou, who looked at me with a strong gaze, unafraid.

"Aren't you worried that I might grab that hand someday and drag you down by force?"

"I'll look forward to that."

Having heard my response, Kitou gave a small nod and took my hand.

With my start in Class C, having this rough side to things wasn't necessarily bad.

A conversation for those who sought it.

A show of strength for those who sought it.



I had to close the distance with each student in their most suitable way. For that, I was willing to engage in anything.

Part 2

AFTER SCHOOL, AYANOKOUJI quickly left the classroom. Having seen him off, Morishita immediately stood up and, with a pen in her hand, forcefully jabbed Hashimoto's left shoulder, who'd been looking down at his phone as he sat at his desk. It was more of a stab than a jab. Hashimoto, grimacing in pain, turned around. Morishita signaled with her eyes to follow her, and they headed to the hallway alone.

A little while later, Hashimoto came out of the classroom, holding his left shoulder with his right hand.

"Hey, that hurts, Morishita. Don't call me out so violently—"

"I'll get straight to the point. Please go out with me."

"…What?"

He was so shocked that he momentarily forgot the pain.

"Hey, you're pretty bold… But, no way, I never thought you liked me…"

"Huh? What are you misunderstanding? I need you to go out and accompany me to the student council room right after this—that's what I meant."

"You're completely missing the subject matter here… That's definitely on purpose."

"In case you were imagining me as your girlfriend, even picturing me in my underwear or less, and even fantasizing about touching me or doing this and that, I thought this would be a good opportunity to maintain a proper distance between us as classmates."

"What the hell are you even saying so fast? Well, don't worry, you're not my type."

"Even so, they say all men are beasts. Aren't you planning to apply old-fashioned proverbs like 'A man's shame is to refuse a prepared meal set before him[1]' to modern times?"

"I'm not planning to do anything… But if you want me to accompany you, why don't you just act like you want me to accompany you? Wait, why me specifically anyway? I have nothing to do with the student council."

It was clear to Hashimoto that Morishita was wary of him, or rather disliked him.

"If you're feeling lonely, you should ask Ayanokouji instead."

"I think he was holding it in before he could go to the bathroom today or something, so he quickly left."

"Really? Then maybe tomorrow or—"

"It's an urgent matter. I want to check on Horikita Suzune's condition."

"…Horikita's? Why her?"

For the first time, Hashimoto was slightly interested in Morishita's plans.

The pain finally subsided, so he lowered his right hand from his shoulder.

"She was defeated by Ichinose Honami's class in yesterday's special exam, and I want to check on how she's feeling. If I drag Ayanokouji Kiyotaka here, it'll complicate things. I'm not interested in seeing her when she's distressed."

"Well, if you bring Ayanokouji along, the conversation would definitely be dominated by talk about his transfer. That's a problem that goes beyond just the results of the special exam."

"In that case, you have some connections with Horikita Suzune, and you seem capable of extracting information with your eloquence."

"Should I take that as a compliment?"

"Yes, of course. It's your specialty as a traitor."

"Again with that… Well, I don't have any plans after this, so I might as well keep you company."

"Even if this opportunity deepens our friendship, don't misunderstand. It won't raise your favorability parameter by even a millimeter."

"That's not going to happen…"

Just as Morishita was about to start walking, a voice reached their ears from behind.

"May I join you?"

The one who spoke with narrowed eyes and apparent interest was Shiraishi.

"Shiraishi!? When did you…?"

"When I saw you two sneaking out, it piqued my curiosity."

"Unfortunately, you’re not invited, Shiraishi Asuka."

"It's fine to have secrets, but we're classmates. We're allies, right?"

Despite Morishita's dismissive words, Shiraishi responded with a gentle demeanor.

"I'd rather not bring someone I'm not close to."

"Oh, then is Hashimoto-kun someone you're close with?"

"Of course not, but it's about to what extent—like the front and back of a toilet seat."

"I'm the front in that analogy, right? Though, I'd hate being the front too."

"Morishita-san, both of us had been leaving everything to Sakayanagi-san; we've only been quietly observing things these past two years. It wouldn't be strange for us to want to act for the class now, would it?"

Despite being compared to the back of a toilet seat, Shiraishi didn't seem to mind and shared her thoughts.

"You look displeased. You're quite cheeky."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"Fine. It'll be troublesome if we encounter Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. Come along quickly."

With Shiraishi coming along as an uninvited guest, Morishita led the way as they started moving. "By the way, Shiraishi, I heard you took Yoshida and Nishikawa to karaoke with Ayanokouji?"

"Yes. I thought it'd be meaningful for deepening the friendships in our class."

"I'm not surprised you're inviting boys now, but you're not planning on making a move on him, are you?"

"Am I not allowed to get along with Ayanokouji-kun?"

"I'm not saying it's bad, but you should stop. You'll only get hurt."

"I don't mind getting hurt. It seems fun."

After voicing her sincere response, Shiraishi continued.

"Nevertheless, he truly achieved a magnificent first victory."

"Well, it's certainly a great start. He didn't just win a safe victory, he also used Ryuuen to establish his position in the class in one fell swoop. He's truly the best help we can receive."

Hashimoto smiled happily, but Morishita started murmuring as he turned around.

"I'm a little scared, Hashimoto Masayoshi."

"Huh? Scared? Of what?"

"Of Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. Even when he acts with us, he always watches his words and picks up on any enemies around, and he uses us when we're not in the know. He also gave Ichinose Honami advice and made sure Horikita Suzune's class didn't win. He showed no mercy even to old friends."

"That's quite something. It would be troublesome if he shows mercy and holds back, though."

"That's true. But don't you think he's too ruthless? Even if he wants to do as he pleases in Class C, it's like he doesn't have a heart."

"He's not a robot. You're thinking too much. He does have emotions, even if there isn't much."

"Isn't that just on the surface?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"I don't care what happens to you, but still, I'll offer you some advice. He's merely an ally of convenience, a helper pulled in by an unavoidable strategy. We're also just tools for him."

Morishita's serious expression and opinion, or rather her analysis of Ayanokouji, made Hashimoto clear his throat.

Despite Shiraishi not joining in the conversation, she had been keenly listening in.

"I understand. That's how I've been interacting with everyone, and that won't change."

"That's good then. But I recommend not getting too involved."

"Can you even say that about someone else? You've always liked being alone, but you seem quite taken with Ayanokouji."

With a smirk, Hashimoto teased Morishita, but she moved toward the window with her eyes slightly opened.

"Could it be… perhaps… this is… a koi[2]?"

"Indeed, those in the pond are the koi fish the vice chairman often feeds."

Morishita looked down from the window, and Shiraishi calmly interjected.

"Huh, well done, Shiraishi Asuka. To follow along with my double-entendre comedy routine."

"Not bad, Shiraishi."

"No, it's not much."

"Come on, let's not do anything silly and head to the student council room."

Morishita muttered as if nothing had happened and started walking, followed by Hashimoto and Shiraishi.

"By the way, Shiraishi Asuka, you really seem to have taken an interest in Ayanokouji Kiyotaka."

"Wouldn't it be strange if I didn't? He's an oddball who moved to a lower class. Despite that, his abilities are unquestionable. Above all, his voice is wonderful."

"Voice? Well, whatever, but like I said, he's a dangerous person. You'll get burned."

"That's why it's fine."

"…That's why it's fine?"

Despite usually being aloof, Morishita was completely puzzled.

"There's no need to worry. Though, why exactly are we heading to the student council?"

"By process of elimination. If we invade her class, we'll stand out, and it's the same at a café or on the way to the dorms. If we push into her room in the dorm, she'll naturally be on guard. However, there aren't a lot of people entering the area during student council activities, and we can observe her natural behavior."

Eventually, the three approached the floor where the student council room was.

"Are you going to visit her directly, Morishita?"

"That depends on the situation, but—"

"Oops—"

When they arrived at the student council room, the door happened to open, and Morishita, Hashimoto, and Shiraishi reflexively hid around the corner.

They didn't know whether there was a need to hide. The subconscious psychology of people engaged in guilty behavior—that was what led to their actions.

"You really are a hard worker, Nanase-san."

While hiding, they silently watched the student council president Horikita and the second-year secretary Nanase.

"It's not like that. It's all thanks to your precise instructions, President Horikita."

While being modest, she voiced her appreciation for Horikita.

If it were just superficial, it might've sounded somewhat sarcastic, but Horikita didn't take it that way.

Her pure gaze and actions were genuinely commendable.

Having been assigned to Class D upon enrollment, Nanase had remained in Class D even after fighting through her first year.

Fortunately, the gap in points with the higher classes wasn't that bad.

However, with Housen as the leader, Horikita thought that Nanase's strengths couldn't be utilized. She felt that if Nanase had taken the lead, they could've aimed higher.

However, it would be somewhat problematic for a third-year like Horikita to say that.

Still, it was inevitable that she felt like taking her side, which wouldn't be a very fair perspective.

"Are you also aiming for Class A, Nanase-san?"

"Yes, I definitely want to graduate from Class A. However, as long as I can finish my school life safely, that would be the best outcome for me."

"Because you can succeed in further studies or employment on your own?"

Nanase's grades, as far as the OAA could show, were excellent. Her conduct was impeccable.

Unless she had very high aspirations, it seemed she could easily do anything.

"It's not like that, but… may I ask you a little about Ayanokouji-senpai?"

There was no particular surprise in her words.

Ayanokouji's class transfer was a concern for anyone who knew him, even for a kouhai.

"That’s fine, but I don't have much to tell you. He changed classes without telling anyone."

"Without telling you, Horikita-senpai? That must've been very hard."

"I can't just say I'm fine, but what's done is done. We just have to look forward a little at a time from now on."

Ayanokouji transferred, and they had recently faced defeat in a special exam. However, Horikita's expression was surprisingly bright.

"Would you like to have tea at Keyaki Mall afterward?"

"Are you fine with that, Horikita-senpai?"

"Of course."

"Can I join you later? I want to make a phone call to tell a friend something."

"Sure. Is it okay if I go ahead? If it's going to be quick, I can wait here."

"The cafe might be crowded right now, so it might be better if you go ahead."

"That makes sense. Then I'll head there first."

"Yes, Horikita-senpai. See you later."

Three people holding their breaths had eavesdropped on the exchange.

Fortunately, Horikita was descending the opposite staircase, so she didn't walk toward Hashimoto and the others, allowing them to breathe a sigh of relief.

While seeing off Horikita, Nanase took out her phone from her pocket.

"Hello."

It seemed the phone had already been ringing, and Nanase continued the call.

"We agreed not to make any unnecessary calls, didn't we, Tsukishiro-san?"




@Satoshi

The three, who had no interest in Nanase's phone call, exchanged glances upon hearing the familiar name.

"I understand. I'll continue to monitor Ayanokouji-senpai for another year. However, I'm still concerned about Ishigami Kyou. As initially expected, he seems to have an intellectual curiosity and a role similar to mine. Also… a student who caught my attention has enrolled in the first year. I wouldn't think this is the case, but… you're not involved in that, are you?"

The conversation was unlike what a typical student would discuss, and it kept going.

"That's right. If it becomes necessary—"

Nanase took out another phone from her pocket with her free hand.

"Sorry, I have to excuse myself due to an urgent matter."

Just as the conversation seemed to continue, Nanase abruptly ended the call.

"Horikita-senpai, what's the matter…? Ah, I see. Understood. I'll head there in ten minutes. Yes, yes. Excuse me."

Nanase had a phone in both her left and right hands.

In this school, there was a rule stating that students could only possess one mobile phone at a time.

Realizing they'd seen something they shouldn't have, the three stopped peeping and withdrew.

However, that slight movement made a little noise.

The corridor was silent.

Were they noticed?

In that delicate situation, the three of them couldn't move at all.

If only she would walk on the opposite side like Horikita, there wouldn't be a problem.

That was what they had hoped for, and just a few seconds later—

"Senpai, what might you guys be doing in a place like this?"

Without a sound, Nanase suddenly appeared before the three of them as they were hiding around the corner, and spoke up.

"Uh!? No, we just needed to see Horikita, you know?"

"Yes, we just arrived. Is there a problem?"

"Is that so? Horikita-senpai went down the opposite side about a minute ago. You might still be able to catch up with her, Hashimoto-senpai, Morishita-senpai. You too, Shiraishi-senpai."

Nanase smiled, having confidently named the three there.

"You know about me, huh?"

"Yes, Shiraishi-senpai. I'm part of the student council, so I have a general grasp of all the senpai."

Nanase appraised Shiraishi for a moment without making it seem unnatural, then looked away.

"Well then, senpai, I'll take my leave now."

Nanase spoke, bowing deeply and descending the stairs.

"Man, that really scared me. I broke out in a cold sweat."

"I hope we weren't noticed. And not only that, she had two phones, right?"

"Plus, Tsukishiro? *The* Tsukishiro? What's up with that second year?"

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka's name came up too. It smells fishy. The blood I inherited from my master detective grandpa is starting to stir."

"That's definitely a lie. So, what do we do? Should we follow Nanase now?"

"I think it's better if we don't, Hashimoto-kun. Seems like she's quite sensitive to people's presence."

Shiraishi muttered in response to Hashimoto's suggestion, staring down the stairs where Nanase had disappeared.

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[1]: If it isn't clear, this Japanese proverb "据え膳食わぬは男の恥" means that it's shameful to reject a woman's advances.

[2]: This is wordplay on "koi" as in the Japanese word for romantic love and "koi" as in the fish.

Author's Afterword

HELLO! KINUGASA HERE. How are you? I look forward to your continued support in 2025 as well.

My recent concern is definitely pillows. Considering the strain on my neck and back, I've been wanting the ideal pillow, but it's hard to find. I've probably been continuously buying new ones for the past year or two.

When I spent a lot of money on a custom pillow, I thought it was perfect, but after using it for a while, it just didn't feel right…

It's not only the height, but recently I've realized that pillows that are too firm or have too much rebound just don't suit me.

And if they're too soft or sink too much, that doesn't feel right either…

I think my quest for the perfect pillow will continue.

I desperately want the ideal pillow…

Let's keep the chit-chat to this for now, and talk a bit about "Classroom of the Elite."

We're finally entering the last year of high school in the story.

Although only two years have passed in the story, we've almost hit a ten-year milestone in the real world. I feel like I've aged quite a bit along with the readers.

The third-year arc should have around the same length as the first- and second-year arcs, but take that with a grain of salt.

And finally, my goal for this year—

I've thought about it a lot, but…

I'll work harder at my job.

I want to try new things too.

I hope the day when I can talk about these things comes soon.

See you in the next volume!

Y2V12.75 - Ibuki Mio Short Story: Behind the Scenes

(Original translation provided by Drago, edited by LegacyEMTLs)

MARCH 30TH.

Ibuki was irritated.

Needless to say, the cause was unmistakably the not-so-entertaining movie and the idiotic couple—in other words, Ayanokouji and Karuizawa, seated next to her.

Quickly leaving behind the theater that had served to pile up her frustration, Ibuki let out a sigh.

She then took out her phone and checked her Private Points balance.

"…There's barely any left."

The monthly Private Points allowance was more than sufficient as pocket money for a second-year high school student. Because of this, normally, saving money shouldn't be difficult.

However, Ibuki had a tendency to spend everything she got without thinking of the consequences, and as a result, she was always tight on finances. That was precisely why, recalling how the time she'd been looking forward to was ruined, her irritation began to build up again.

While Private Points would be replenished with each new month, naturally, it was always a struggle when she got to the end of each month.

How would I get through today, how would I get through tomorrow—she was forced to confront this sort of battle.

If only the movie had been satisfying—

The emotions she tried to suppress started bubbling up.

"Ahh, this is so annoying."

How should I alleviate my annoyance?

Harboring this sentiment, what Ibuki found was a certain object.

That being, a trash can placed in Keyaki Mall.

She approached it without concern for the people around and kicked it.

She thought kicking it would make her feel a little better after all.

However…

Though it wobbled, since it contained more trash than she'd expected, it didn't fall over.

It was also because it was somewhat of a half-hearted kick; it wasn't weak, but it wasn't strong either.

"…Are you trying to irritate me too?"

As if mocking her, the trash can only slightly shifted in position, standing there with a faux innocent look.

The action Ibuki thought would help her vent actually had the opposite effect.

What started as just wanting to kick it shifted to wanting to knock it over.

If she could dramatically spill its contents, she'd surely feel better.

"You little—!"

This time, stronger, faster than before.

She imagined the trash can as someone she disliked.

She was about to deliver a kick with enough force such that Ayanokouji would definitely be knocked over… or rather, knock the trash can over.

"What are you doing, Ibuki?"

"…!?"

Just before she completed the motion, a somewhat angry male voice reached her.

Her body froze, and she turned toward the voice.

There stood Katsuragi with his arms crossed, frowning with a puzzled expression.

"Why are you here…?"

"What do you mean, 'why'? There's nothing strange about me walking around Keyaki Mall on my day off, is there?"

"Well, that's true, but…"

"You seem pretty irritated from what I can see, but I can't say kicking trash cans is very commendable. If you don't strive to act with moderation, it won't benefit our class."

"What do you mean 'benefit our class'? What's the big deal if I kick a trash can over a little?"

She displayed an attitude indicating she didn't think she did anything wrong.

In response, Katsuragi slightly closed the distance between them.

"If you engage in behavior unbecoming of a student and the school discovers it, you'll receive a negative evaluation. Whether it's a weekday, weekend, or even spring break, the consequences remain the same. I thought you'd have more than sufficiently learned that during these two years."

"Acting so high and mighty…"

"High and mighty? I wasn't being high and mighty. I merely stated common sense, decency expected of a student. Besides, Ibuki, you…"

As Katsuragi began his lengthy lecture, Ibuki didn't even try to conceal her tongue-clicking.

The feeling that she had been caught by a troublesome person began to dominate her thoughts.

Seeing how Katauragi continued to ramble on, Ibuki interrupted him with a wave of her hand.

"Yes, yes. I was wrong, okay, okay. Then, bye… "

As if to run away, Ibuki began walking and attempted to pass by Katsuragi, but then she was grabbed by the arm.

"What are you doing?"

"The trash can didn't fall over, but it's out of position. You need to fix that."

"Haa? So what about its position? As if anyone cares about that."

"At the very least, I care. And the fact that I care means the school might care as well."

Saying this, Katsuragi pointed at a surveillance camera.

"You're seriously such a stickler. The school isn't watching us all the time, much less at a place like this. Or rather, who cares about the position of a trash can?"

"Of course, I would hope that's the case. However, it's better safe than sorry."

As Katsuragi spoke, he brought Ibuki back to the trash can.

"…How ridiculous."

With the desire to be released quickly taking priority, Ibuki reluctantly picked up the trash can.

"There, is this good enough?"

"No, it's not. The original position was about twenty centimeters more to the right."

"Haaa?"

"About twenty centimeters more to the right."

Katsuragi repeated what he said, instructing her to return the trash can to its proper place.

Although Ibuki was getting irritated again, she lifted the trash can with an exasperated sigh and moved it about twenty centimeters.

"Is. This. Okay. Now!?"

"Yes. Well, this should be good enough."

Satisfied, Katsuragi turned toward the surveillance camera and gave a slight bow.

"Are you stupid?"

Though these words involuntarily escaped from her mouth at his overly courteous behavior, Katsuragi was unbothered and began walking away.

Ibuki was about to watch him leave, but there was something she was caught up on.

"Haven't you already accomplished your goal?"

"Goal?"

"Sakayanagi lost to Ryuuen and dropped out of school. There's no need for you to be so eager anymore, is there?"

"…I see. Certainly, that was one of my goals. However, I would've preferred accomplishing it with my own hands though…"

Katsuragi stopped, folded his arms, and reflected on the end-of-year special exam by himself.

"But that doesn't mean my goals have disappeared. There's also my goal to graduate from Class A."

"So you want those privileges too, huh?"

"Naturally. Those who don't desire such privileges are probably in the minority. However, that isn't the only important thing. Not just me on my own, but winning Class A with all of our classmates—that's what's critical."

Katsuragi wasn't originally in Ryueen's class.

In fact, the time they spent as adversaries was still slightly longer than their current relationship.

But right now, he answered without any embarrassment that he was thinking about his current class more than anyone else. At this demeanour, Ibuki felt it was a false goodwill, in other words, it was faux benevolence[1].

"Are you serious?"

"Of course, I'm serious."

In other words, it wasn't sanctimonious.

He firmly answered that he currently had the resolve to move forward with Ryueen and the class.

"Is that why you're going around teaching those idiots how to study?"

"The expression, 'Going around teaching,' isn't quite accurate. I also respond to their requests for help; there's that too. I can't leave people like that alone. It's in my nature, you see."

"So if someone asks for help, you'll help them?"

"Well… I suppose there's no harm in putting it that way."

"Then let me kick you."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"It's exactly what it sounds like. I'm feeling incredibly irritated right now, so I'm really itching to kick something, you see."

"What a troublesome personality. However, unfortunately, I'm not inclined to let you kick me."

"Then who should I kick?"

"You shouldn't kick anyone, but if you absolutely must kick someone, then I suppose there's no other choice than to find someone who would enjoy being kicked or someone who would benefit from being kicked. If such an odd person exists, that is."

"I see… well, that makes sense."

"Apart from that, if there's anything else I can help you with, I'm willing to lend a hand."

"Hmm…?"

Setting aside whether Katsuragi's actions were benevolent or faux benevolent, it was unmistakable that he was considerate and looked after people.

Having reached this peculiar conclusion, Ibuki made a proposal.

"Then buy me a meal."

"How did we go from kicking and not kicking to this?"

"You said you'd help me, right? I'm in trouble 'cause I don't have any money. Look."

She displayed her Private Points balance on her phone screen.

"…You should have more than this even when you entered school."

"I'm bragging, but I'm seriously broke."

"Don't brag about that."

"So with that said, feed me something. Eating something delicious should help release my stress."

"I see, I understand."

Katsuragi folded his arms, gave a nod, then opened his eyes.

"I refuse."

"Wait, why? Aren't you supposed to extend a helping hand to troubled classmates?!"

"Only if they're truly troubled."

"Come on, I'm genuinely troubled. I have almost no Private Points left!"

"If you're broke, you can eat the wild plants set. The school provides proper relief measures. It's not like you're in a state where you can't eat anything. Besides, your Private Points will be replenished in April. I don't see any need for me to help at this point."

Faced with Katsuragi's frank attitude, Ibuki glared at him.

"But I want to eat something better."

"Then from next month onward, you should straighten yourself up and learn how to save a little."

"I already am saving here. It's just that girls have various expenses—it can't be helped."

She made an excuse that didn't apply to her at all to dodge the issue.

"I see. Then, as a man, there's not much I can help with. You should seek advice from another woman who knows how to save money."

If she could ask such a person for advice, she wouldn't be struggling in the first place.

She tried to argue back, but Katsuragi had already started walking away.

She regretted even momentarily thinking that he might've been considerate and looked after people.

"What's with him…? Ah jeez, getting angry made me hungry…"

After glaring at him until his back disappeared from view, Ibuki held her stomach.

"Gonna go home…"

Deciding there was no point in staying at Keyaki Mall, she immediately returned to the dormitory.

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[1]: The raw is 偽りの善意、つまり偽善, which is somewhat wordplay. The former, "偽りの善意," which is translated here as "false goodwill," is literally just stating the definition of "偽善" (notice how both these characters are in the former). "偽善" also often gets translated as "hypocrisy," but that's not accurate, and it doesn't capture the word's meaning well, which is why it's translated as "faux belevolence" here.

Part 1

INSTEAD OF RETURNING to her own room, she visited a certain different room and firmly knocked on its door.

"What business do you have here?"

The one who came out looking annoyed was a student from another class, Horikita Suzune.

"Can I come in for a bit?"

"What if I say no?"

"…Then fine."

Ibuki immediately turned her back at her dissatisfied attitude, but Horikita quickly stopped her.

"I'm joking. You can come in."

"Then you should've said so from the beginning."

Ibuki returned and entered Horikita's room.

"Let me guess—you're planning to eat dinner here anyway, right? It's the end of the month, after all.”

"Quit arbitrarily jumping to conclusions."

"Then am I wrong?"

"…Well, not this time."

After letting Ibuki in, Horikita began preparing tea.

"Your timing is still a little off for having dinner, so just relax for a while. I'll call Kushida-san over later too."

"Her too? Every time, she just keeps going on and on. It's annoying."

Due to having lots of school information, Kushida had no shortage of topics, and she would go on talking for a lengthy period of time.

"You're annoying too, you know."

Although in a different way, Horikita pointed out that Ibuki was the same.

"Huh? Don't lump me together with her."

Despite saying this, about an hour later, Kushida also arrived at Horikita's room to join them.

Ibuki, Horikita, and Kushida.

Recently, these three had been spending more time together, even though it should've been an unpleasant time for Ibuki, or rather, for each of them here.

"If it weren't for the free meals, I wouldn’t have come to a place like this…"

Ibuki muttered quietly.

"Did you say something?"

Horikita turned around from the kitchen, but Ibuki bluntly answered that it was nothing.

Then, she flopped down on the floor.

While staring at the ceiling of Horikita's room, which she’d become quite familiar with, she thought…

That she shouldn’t keep living like this.

That she couldn't keep hanging around here.

That’s right. Ibuki didn't want to admit it.

The fact that she was getting closer to Horikita and Kushida, whom she both detested.

The fact that she’d begun to understand that this was becoming a comfortable space for her.

So it would be better to distance herself before it was too late.

Being alone would surely make her happier in the end, after all.

That's the kind of person I am, she thought.

Even if she didn't distance herself, Horikita and Kushida would eventually leave her anyway.

She understood this.

It was only natural, given her difficult personality.

She should leave immediately.

She should never come back.

Though that was what she momentarily thought, as soon as the delicious smell of food began wafting through the air, she stopped thinking about it.

Since she was broke right now, it couldn't be helped.

After all, she thought that distancing herself could wait until another time.

Ibuki's irritation mysteriously disappeared along with the meal.

Shiraishi Asuka’s Short Story: The Secrets She Harbors

(Original translation provided by Drago, edited by LegacyEMTLs)

WHILE HARBORING RESTLESS emotions, Shiraishi arrived at school earlier than anyone else.

Taking her seat amidst the quiet classroom, she shifted her gaze to the empty seat on her left.

Since the day before, that place had become a certain student's seat.

From Class 1-D to Class 3-A.

And then from Class 3-A to Class 3-C.

That person's true intentions remained unclear.

Did he decide to transfer to become a savior, or is there still a side to him we haven't seen?

Either way, for Shiraishi, this was a matter beyond her expectations.

"This is troubling, isn't it?“

Only after speaking these words did she realize she’d been troubled.

"I—"

What do I want?

Now that she knew about Ayanokouji’s transfer, and that fact was seeping into reality, she needed to think.

An inexpressible emotion—

No, that wasn't accurate.

She understood, but pretended not to.

"…There’s a… mountain of problems, isn’t there?"

Starting up her tablet, she grabbed the pen and began to draw a person.

The very person at the center of this commotion.

What kind of expression, what kind of gesture would be better—she didn’t really know the answers to these questions yet.

From now on, throughout the upcoming school year, she'd surely become better and better at drawing him.

She'd surely hear his voice, and come to know.

"No, but that's…"

She was thinking about it again.

She had to avoid thinking about it.

This secret… these feelings mustn't be known to others.

Shiraishi made a mental note of this.

Emotions she abandoned years ago.

Why, now of all times, is this happening?

"…I am… foolish, aren't I?"

Immediately after she uttered these words of self-reproach to herself, she reacted to the sound of the door opening, and Shiraishi was surprised to see someone unexpected standing at the entrance.

"Good morning."

That person spotted Shiraishi and greeted her.

"Good morning to you, too."

After returning the greeting, Shiraishi calmed herself.

She deleted the half-finished drawing on her tablet with natural motion and pretended to study.

"I didn't expect someone to be here already. You're rather early."

"…Yes, I woke up unusually early today. But you're early too, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Since I've switched classes, it's like I'm a transfer student from a different school. Rather than being welcomed, I thought it'd be better to be the one doing the welcoming."

"It's an interesting coincidence—two people who are early risers sitting next to each other in such a large, empty classroom."

"Maybe."

He had a voice with little inflection.

Even so, it wasn't as though it was completely devoid of emotion.

Shiraishi listened intently, letting Ayanokouji's voice seep into her body, familiarizing it.

Silence fell upon them.

Wanting to hear more of his voice, Shiraishi spoke to him.

"Why did you decide to transfer to this class, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Shiraishi continued after a short pause.

"I can't believe you'd choose to drop to a lower class after finally making it to Class A."

"That might be true under normal circumstances."

He was ever so calm.

Or perhaps it was to hide his emotions.

At his voice, as elusive as clouds, Shiraishi almost wore her delight on her sleeves.

"If it's not normal, then… why did you decide to transfer?"

Because of that, she couldn't help but continue.

Even while knowing she shouldn't overstep, she ended up doing so.

While faintly recalling her own bitter past.

While deeply reflecting that she must never repeat her mistakes.

Morishita Ai's Short Story: Gatling Gun

(Original translation provided by Drago, edited by LegacyEMTLs)

THIS WOULD BE a life-or-death battle. I firmly resolved myself for this.

To end this war, I must pull the trigger.

Fire—!

Immediately following this declaration in my mind, I shot a large bullet (eraser shaving) with my right index finger, flying out in a straight line.

The target was the evil titan sitting before my eyes, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka —the back of his head.

Impact!

The first shot hit near the crown of his head.

It seems that firing just one shot isn't enough to inflict damage after all.

I, the commander, placed multiple bullets (eraser shavings) I had prepared in advance on my palm.

Allow me to show you our army's strongest weapon. Gatling gun— unload!

This time, I fired multiple pieces of eraser shavings (bullets) in rapid succession.

I was certain I had to be causing damage to the target…!

Just as I was attempting to confirm the extent of the damage, the target in question, the titan, began to move and turned around.

"What is it?

I had asked in response.

Of course, I had accounted for the opponent noticing my attack.

My abundance of combat experience wasn't just for show, you know.

"No, I mean…"

"Looking behind you during class, even during the self-study period, is something only a naughty, naughty student would do. Please face forward and focus on what you have to do."

After I made him face forward, though he appeared a bit troubled, he soon seemingly returned to his studies.

Well then, shall we resume the attack?

Tap-tap. As I fired the Gatling gun again, the enemy, now on higher alert, turned around even more vigorously than I had accounted for.

Kuh… While I hid the eraser properly, it'd be great if he hadn't found out, but…

"Staring at my face from such a close distance, what a pervert."

To divert attention from my left hand clutching the eraser, I responded to change the subject.

"I have no such intention. Are you doing something to the back of my head?"

"Not at all? I'm seriously engaged in the class."

I somehow managed to live another day. I needed to defeat him while I was still able to somehow keep the damage received to a minimum.

…However, at that time, I had no way of knowing.

That actually, it wasn't only Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, there was another enemy beside him…

Shiraishi Asuka's Short Story: An Extra Pair of Ears

(Original translation provided by Drago, edited by LegacyEMTLs)

PRESSING MY PHONE to my right ear, I closed my eyes and calmed my mind.

"You know what I mean. The 'Hundred-Man Slayer' Asuka—you've heard that nickname, haven't you?"

Ryouko-san's clear, high-pitched voice was always pleasant to hear, wasn't it?

"…That rumor's real…?"

"Of course. It's not the type of story that spreads if it's a lie."

Yoshida-kun's voice—I didn't dislike it, but it was flat and uninteresting.

"It wasn't a hundred friends?"

In the next moment, reacting to Ayanokouji-kun's voice reaching my ears, I slowly opened my eyes.

"Aah… It's this voice after all, isn't it…?"

As if my body were shivering with excitement, it ran from my ears to my brain, then throughout my entire body.

A voice, clinical and colorless, devoid of emotion.

A voice most unsuitable for observation, one impossible to analyze.

Yet, I wonder why it makes my heart race so much.

Is it because his true nature is so beyond conventional thought?

Whether it be violence or domination, cunningness or vileness, he executed everything with that voice.

"I-I already said I'm not interested!"

So much so that Yoshida-kun's voice, which I shouldn't have disliked, suddenly felt like a racket.

I had become entranced by his voice.

"Does that 'Hundred-Man Slayer' expression change to the 'Two-Hundred-Man Slayer' when it reaches two hundred?"

What impression he had of me—I wanted to know his sentiments.

Whether it was praise or condemnation, either was fine.

Please tell me with that wonderful voice.

"I've come to respect her. It's honestly amazing for someone my age to be involved with a hundred people."

"Eh? Is that what you really think…? It really does seem like you feel that way, huh?"

"Isn't a specialist in any field worthy of respect? Sorry to bring up my previous class, but it's like Sudou in basketball, Onodera in swimming, or Inogashira in sewing."

"As expected, your way of thinking is wonderful, Ayanokouji-kun."

While feeling it was a shame to temporarily part, I reluctantly removed the phone from my ear.

I couldn't hold myself back anymore.

From here on out, allow me to hear your voice not through the phone, but directly in person.

"Sakayanagi-san. Please leave the rest to me."

Getting up from the sofa, I decided to head outside where he waited.

Ibuki Mio's Short Story: Concern?

(Original translation provided by Drago, edited by LegacyEMTLs)

IBUKI HAD A lingering frustration she'd been carrying.

The defeat in the special exam, Ryueen's strategy being seen through by Ayanokouji being used—it was neither of these reasons.

No, while those were frustrating, there was something else… an even greater frustration.

That was Horikita Suzune.

When she heard Horikita had become dispirited learning of Ayanokouji's transfer, she held her stomach and laughed.

But that joy didn't last long, and gradually, she began to feel stressed. It was because Horikita had stopped cooking and abandoned her duty of supporting and maintaining her, the cash-strapped Ibuki's, stomach's peace and stability.

Regardless of whether Ibuki visited her room or called her, she received no proper response.

And today, Class A had been defeated in the special exam.

While this was good news for Ibuki's class, personally, she couldn't honestly be happy about it. Horikita would only become more dejected.

So, who knew when Horikita would be able to provide meals for her again?

"…Why do I have to act so considerate?"

It was after school. Growing irritated with Horikita, who hadn't emerged from the school building, Ibuki paced back and forth near the entrance, waiting. Once she came out, she'd give her a sharp stimulus to cheer her up, and then make her cook.

Such one-sided thoughts ran laps inside her mind.

But no matter how long she waited, there was no sign of Horikita coming out.

She'd gone to check the shoe lockers once, but Horikita's shoes were still there, so she hadn't gone home.

"Come out already. How concerned do you plan to make… no, no, I'm not concerned."

When a strange emotion surfaced, she pushed it out of her mind. Her thoughts were getting weird because she hadn't eaten anything delicious for a while. That was her conclusion.

After that, perhaps another thirty minutes of going back and forth in the same place…

"Ah… she's coming out."

Horikita, whom she'd been waiting for, finally emerged from the school building.

She looked lifeless from behind, and as expected, Ibuki couldn't feel a speck of spirit or vigor.

'You shouldn't kick anyone, but if you absolutely must kick someone, then I suppose there’s no other choice than to find someone who would enjoy being kicked or someone who would benefit from being kicked. If such an odd person exists, that is.'

As she stared at her back, Ibuki remembered what Katsuragi had once told her.

By the time she recalled it, she was already running on impulse.

The only thing she could do right now—that is, to deliver a merciless kick to Horikita's back.

Guidebook Short Story:
A Pillar of Support

AS 1 AM on Thursday night approached, I, Hasebe Haruka, was seated in front of my computer, quietly waiting for the moment.

I was thinking about Ayanokouji-kun's class transfer.

He looked the same as always at the victory celebration at the end of spring break.

But I couldn't tell what was in his heart.

Days had passed since the opening ceremony, and the class was still in chaos, with many unable to grasp the situation.

Even Horikita-san hadn't been informed about the transfer.

Could it be…

"…My fault?"

I couldn't help but think so.

I resented Ayanokouji-kun because Airi had been expelled.

I thought he had trampled on her feelings and those of our group.

I didn't know Ayanokouji-kun's true intentions.

But to survive in this school, sacrifices sometimes had to be made.

I thought I had learned that much.

I wasn't particularly surprised that Ayanokouji-kun had chosen to transfer.

"How arrogant of me, right?"

It wasn't because I saw Ayanokouji-kun as an enemy or wanted to start over with the group.

It wasn't as if I got tired of such convenient excuses.

Ayanokouji-kun wouldn't transfer for such reasons.

Surely, it was beyond my understanding.

He must've had his own reasons.

At 1 AM, my computer screen automatically changed.

A cheap title appeared, and two male hosts were shown amid the audience's applause.

A comedy duo that was becoming a bit famous.

Despite having school in the morning, this was why I stayed up late.

The online show 'Idol in the Making' was broadcast every Thursday at this time.

Idols were invited to the studio, where they tackled topics presented by the show while participating in an online popularity vote. Every two months, the top-ranked participant would graduate from the show and secure new work.

Conversely, the lowest-ranked would drop out and be replaced by a new candidate.

It seemed to be a long-running show, having passed its third anniversary.

I had only started watching it a few months ago.

To see the idol in the making who had joined the show.

Their numbers were pinned on their chests in order of age.

My favorite idol was wearing the number nine.

"Let's get right to it and announce the first topic! Ta-da! The steaming hot oden reaction battle!"

A crudely written flip chart was turned over.

Last time, when she first appeared on an online show, she was barely known. However, she had managed to secure sixth place in the popularity vote, which was a promising start.

Her conversational skills were admittedly not great, but her earnestness and dedication to every challenge had captured some fans' hearts.

I watched the screen intently, waiting for her turn.

She nervously watched the previous idols' reactions.

"Is it okay if I talk a little?"

I started muttering to myself and continued.

"Yeah, that's right. He transferred."

This was also a monologue. Knowing it wouldn't reach her, I spoke to the girl through the screen. A considerable amount of time had passed since we last met.

But her feelings on the other side of the screen hadn't changed.

I remembered last week's topic.

'Please confess who your first love was.'

She confessed her true feelings with a shy expression.

It was about someone she met in her first year of high school, and whom she still had a crush on.

From the outside, it could've seemed like a painful event, a past she wouldn't want to remember.

Yet, instead of being gloomy, that girl had started walking forward.

I, who should've been leading and holding her hand, was left behind before I knew it.

She was helping me. From afar, she waved and smiled at me, telling me to walk.

Then I had to walk.

As a friend worthy of her.

Still, her impulsive remarks were risky and made everyone around her panic.

As an idol, admitting to having a crush was still immature.

But that was okay.

Because she was still an idol in training.

And a crush is still safe, right?

"Maybe you should've shown this side of yourself to Ayanokouji-kun sooner...?"

Her striving figure.

Her bright smile.

Knowing this, could it have changed Ayanokouji-kun's feelings about his class?

"…No."

Probably not.

In Ayanokouji-kun's heart, her presence must've vanished.

If it were to sprout again, it would be after zero turned into one.

Not the zero from Advanced Nurturing High School, when you couldn't do anything.

But the idol who was fighting hard on the other side of this screen, transformed into one.

I wish she could say this back then—

'Thanks to that time, I've become stronger. I'm not interested in you anymore, though.'

Then, even Ayanokouji-kun would be taken aback.

"No… she wouldn't say something like that."

She would definitely show her sincere gratitude.

Not as a two-faced idol, but as a clumsy idol who only fought honestly and directly.

"Keep going…"

I cheered her on through the screen.

Now, I can only see her through the screen. She can't hear my voice.

My voice won't reach her.

But I won't stop.

"Keep going…"

Over and over.

I'd keep cheering.

"I'll also work hard for one more year… so you won't laugh at me when we finally meet on the outside, okay?"

I had long been overtaken by her.

So, no matter what, I must not stop.

I had to chase after her.

Now wasn't the time to be discouraged by Ayanokouji-kun's actions.

Let's work hard together.

And in one year, I'll definitely go to meet you—

"Keep going, Airi."

I called her name and smiled at her through the screen.

Guidebook Short Story:
Mock Date

THIS STORY TOOK place just before the second-year deserted island exam began.

I, Karuizawa Kei, had made my way to Keyaki Mall after school.

Keyaki Mall was bustling with students at this time.

There were those who came to hang out with friends, and others who came to shop or get a haircut, among various other uses.

Or perhaps… to go on a date with a lover.

In any case, since we couldn't leave the school premises, Keyaki Mall was an essential place.

Normally, I would often come here to hang out with my friends.

But today… I went alone.

There wasn't anything in particular I wanted to buy.

I just wanted to try something experimental.

"Phew, I'm kind of nervous."

I muttered to myself as I entered the mall from the north entrance.

It had been nearly an hour since school ended, so there were quite a lot of students around.

"Yeah, this should be fine."

I reassured myself by looking around at the crowd and walked on.

First, as planned, I headed to the general store.

The store itself was small, but there were about four girls inside, browsing various items and enjoying themselves.

Well then.

I held my phone in my hand and wandered around the store.

Soon after, a message arrived on my phone, signaling that everything was ready.

I almost couldn't contain my smile but held it back and casually looked at the products by myself.

New products circulated every week, so I never got bored, especially with cute phone accessories around.

However, I had bought so many recently that my phone strap was becoming heavier than the phone itself, so today, I had to resist.

Resist… Resist… Maybe I can't!

"This is cute~"

A strap that had just arrived was extremely cute.

It was a small kitten with a ribbon.

I took a photo of the product I liked with my phone and sent it, then muttered to myself as I slowly toured the store.

[Do you like this kind of thing?]

I smiled at the message that came back and sent, *[Surprising?]* and received *[A little.]* in reply.

[I might swoon if my boyfriend gave me something like this♡]

I was about to send such a message but felt embarrassed and deleted it.

Certainly, I didn't have the courage to go that far in today's trial.

Next, the person I was messaging sent a photo, and I excitedly looked at it…

[I thought you'd like this kind of thing.]

The photo pictured a strap with a skull and crossbones.

[No, no, that's not it. Terrible taste. Only middle school boys would use that.]

And this time, I sent back a slightly mean reply.

Sweet talk wasn't the only important thing.

Maybe I should reveal why I was here today.

I wandered around the store by myself, but in fact, there was another person walking a different route from me.

It went without saying… it was my boyfriend, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. Super cool and both smart and athletic.

It's almost as if he stepped out of a manga…

"Maybe I'm praising him too much…"

I corrected myself after saying it.

After all, I wasn't exactly good at relationships.

Ahem, anyway, this was a way we could hold a mock date. We would arrive at the meeting place separately and then wander around the store independently.

If someone else heard about it, they would surely ask, 'What's that?' But this was an attempt to enjoy dating while keeping our relationship a secret.

Well… I guess people would say, 'Just go public with your relationship with Kiyotaka,' but it's okay for now.

[What should we do next?]

[Can we look around a bit more?]

After our exchange, I wandered around the store.

Yes, nobody noticed.

It was true. It was because we each came to the store separately and looked at different things.

Of course, I felt happy that he was nearby, but at the same time, I really wanted to talk directly.

To communicate with our words, our eyes, and our touching hands. That was the essence of dating I had in mind.

After that, we left the general store and killed time by visiting supermarkets and bookstores, changing places and browsing different items.

It was a fun but lonely date.

I didn't think the attempt was a failure, but it was complicated…

I really wanted to date Kiyotaka openly and proudly as soon as possible. Yes, that was what I thought once again, with a renewed conviction.

And then…

It was around 7:30 that evening.

I was watching TV in my room when I sat up at the sound of a knock.

"Hmm?"

It wasn't the chime, but a light knock.

I wondered who it could be, but I couldn't hear any voices.

Feeling a bit curious, I opened the front door…

There was a small paper bag with pink patterns placed on the hallway floor. There was no one around.

Feeling curious, I picked it up and brought it inside.

It's for me, right?

Before opening it, I touched it from the top.

"Hmm, could this be…?"

I had an inkling of what it might've been, so I took the item out of the bag…

There was a small kitten strap with a ribbon.

Seeing it, I couldn't help but laugh.

"He really is simple-minded."

If you think something like this will make you popular, you're totally mistaken.

I removed all the other straps and attached the kitten strap to my cell phone, smiling.

"I'm not satisfied with just this."

I spent the rest of the day looking at the strap.

Guidebook Short Story:
Ever Since That Time...

(Also known as Volume 10.25)

AFTER THE SURVIVAL and elimination special exam ended, the first break arrived.

I went to the gym without anyone telling me to.

After training alone for a while and sweating it out, I headed to the rest area. Sitting on a chair, partly to cool down, I remembered something and took out my phone.

Then, I searched for a certain word.

"…I see."

I could only be convinced after looking at the article that came up.

While admiring the photos in the article alone, I heard…

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Morning."

The ones who appeared in the rest area were Ichinose and Amikura. They seemed to have come to the gym.

"Oh, that's a cute photo. It's a red panda, right?"

Amikura squinted and asked, having seen my phone screen.

"Yeah. I was just doing some research."

I turned off the screen as if to dodge the question, but Ichinose seemed to have some insight.

"Is it related to the exam question? Ayanokouji-kun, you got it wrong, didn't you?"

It was the special exam from the other day.

It was a memorable moment, so there was no way they would’ve forgotten, even if it was about another class.

"Now that you mention it, you got the tapioca question wrong too. Are you surprisingly that ignorant of the world?"

Hearing Ichinose's words, Amikura also seemed to understand and asked.

"I can't deny it. Probably because I hardly ever watch TV."

I offered the most common excuse, but both of them just smiled wryly.

"Honestly, I didn't think not liking TV would backfire like that."

"Is that really the problem? These things garnered quite a buzz on the internet too, didn't they?"

Amikura expressed her doubt; perhaps my not-watching-TV excuse wasn't persuasive enough.

"We've discovered an unexpected weakness, huh?"

Ichinose chuckled at my confused expression.

Right after, Akiyama, a member of the gym staff, appeared and called out to Ichinose.

There seemed to be a mistake in some paperwork she had filled out, and she was asked to rewrite it, so they both headed toward the counter.

They'd probably be back soon, but for the moment, it was just me and Amikura left to ourselves.

Feeling it'd be strange to leave just then, I decided to either wait until Ichinose came back or leave on my own once Amikura left.

Since we came to the gym together, Amikura probably intended to wait for Ichinose to return as well.

I sat down on a chair, leaving one empty next to me.

"Honami-chan's really changed, huh? It's like, unimaginable when you think about how she was like a few months ago…"

"Is that so?"

Indeed. Recently, Ichinose started showing a side of herself that she hadn't before.

But to say it was achieved after only a few months was an exaggeration.

It wasn't surprising, as the changes in Ichinose that Amikura mentioned weren't about the current situation.

"It was right after our second-year deserted island exam ended, and the second term had just started, I think."

Amikura began to speak, smiling as if recalling something funny.

"Back then, Honami-chan seemed unstable, or rather, she was often lost in thought."

"The deserted island exam, huh?"

Hearing that, I caught up with Amikura's story.

That was when I received an unexpected confession from Ichinose and told her about Kei.

Considering Ichinose's feelings, it wasn't surprising that she seemed unstable to others.

"Right around that time, a little incident happened in the class… Oh, but keep this story between us, okay? Don't tell Honami-chan."

I don't intend to tell, but it felt like this might turn into something I'd have to bear a bit of responsibility for hearing.

"I don't think he had any malicious intentions, but there was a time when a boy in the class accidentally overheard a rumor that Honami-chan might like you. Well, it all started with a message that Honami-chan sent by mistake…"

Apps were convenient since you could send messages with just a press of a button. Therefore, it wasn't uncommon to mistakenly send a message to someone other than the intended recipient due to a misclick. Even if you could delete your message, sometimes the message gets seen before it can be retracted.

For a while after the deserted island exam, Ichinose was going through a mentally unstable period.

It wouldn't be surprising if she made a small mistake.

"I didn't see the text myself, but I think it was something like, 'I want to calm down and talk. Can we meet in person?' Taken out of context, it sounds quite meaningful, right?"

"Yeah, that's true. So, the classmate Ichinose mistakenly sent her message to was a boy?"

"Different class. Though, the problem lies in who she accidentally sent it to. That person was Ishizaki-kun, and during the break, he came to our class and boldly asked, 'What does this message mean?' while showing the screen."

Apparently, that caused a stir. The fact that the misdirected recipient was Ishizaki meant the message wasn't taken too seriously, which was a relief, but on the other hand, it was problematic that he thoughtlessly came to check the message with the person involved.

However, it wasn't unusual for Ichinose to be on casual messaging terms with Ishizaki.

"Honami-chan was flustered but immediately corrected it, telling him it was a missent message. Ishizaki-kun was convinced and went back to his class, but the difficulties was what followed. The fact that it was a

mistakenly sent message meant that she intended to send that important message to someone else."

That might've sparked the rumors among the boys in the class.

"But why does that lead to me?"

"You'd understand if you saw it, right?"

For some reason, I was met with a somewhat forceful smile.

"Well, that's limited to those with sharp intuition… The boys started making noise for a different reason. Ayanokouji-kun, maybe it's because your 'A' and Ishizaki-kun's 'I' are close in the contact list[1], which is arranged in alphabetical order. There are other names close by, but you and Honami-chan are often seen together…"

The accumulation of past events and the missent message to Ishizaki led to such speculation.

"Honami-chan is always bright and composed, but she gets quite flustered when it comes to matters concerning herself. Maybe she couldn't come up with a good excuse at that time, and she turned pale with her eyes drawn to the floor."

It seemed to be another difficult situation.

Somehow, I could picture the scene at that time.

I can't tell the truth.

But I can't pin it on just anyone either.

And since I just said it was sent to the wrong person, I can't pretend it never happened.

Even though I wandered into this myself, it feels like I've approached a dead end.

"Catching sight of the scene, from our point of view, it was very rare to see Honami-chan like that."

Basically, Ichinose was a very capable person.

She'd usually overcome most things and could resolve situations herself.

However, as Amikura described, this was a period when she was in poor condition.

"We were watching over her for a while, but it gradually started to feel heavy. Boys who didn't think it was you started to wonder if she was planning to confess to someone."

She couldn't sort it out by herself, and the situation only worsened with her silence.



"How did she get through that predicament?"

It wasn’t easy to imagine Ichinose pulling off a miraculous recovery from there.

"Like me, the girls knew who Honami-chan intended to send it to. We secretly discussed how to help and stepped in to support her."

Apparently, they managed to get through the situation by working together.

There was a girl who had sought love advice from Ichinose, and she had been thinking of a reply to her.

The message was mistakenly sent during that exchange.

The silence was out of consideration for the possibility of it leading back to that girl.

It was a result of her trying to protect that girl's privacy.

With testimonies from several people, most of the boys immediately corrected their misunderstanding.

"There was nothing to do but accept it, right?"

"Yeah."

It would be different if the girls were putting on a bad act, making it obvious they were covering for her, but judging from their tone, they must have handled it well.

"Are you responsible for returning Honami-chan back to normal?"

"I didn't do anything special. Ichinose just recovered with her own strength."

"I see… but still, thank you."

"You're thanking someone who didn't do anything?"

"I just assume you're being modest. That's why I'm grateful."

Whether I admit it or not, the truth seemed irrelevant.

"But why tell me this? Is it because you thought I was the one who helped?"

"No, it's a different matter."

Amikura had been calm throughout, but her expression stiffened slightly.

"You can tell if you look, but even now, Honami-chan sees you as someone very special. You’re the only one in this school who can have a strong influence on her, that's why."

I realized that she wasn't just standing idly by while being friends with Ichinose.

She understood her nature; she knew Ichinose Honami well.

"I'm telling you this because… I don't want you to make Honami-chan sad or hurt her."

She said this with a bit of difficulty, but her words were clear.

"I don't intend to intentionally hurt her, but that's quite a difficult request."

"Right."

Amikura agreed without denying it.

"Of course, I understand your position. It's not about whether you're dating. I just don't want her to be unnecessarily hurt."

Upon answering, Amikura chuckled wryly and continued, muttering.

"It's tough for Honami-chan, falling for a guy who has a girlfriend."

"You're pretty straightforward, aren't you?"

"I have a vague idea of you too. I figure you aren’t flustered, right?"

"Maybe."

Even if it wasn't today, Amikura must've been planning to have this conversation with me sooner or later.

As gym buddies, a chance to be alone together would’ve come at some point.

"I understand what you want to say. I'll deal with it well."

I couldn't say anything for certain, so I asked for her understanding.

"I'm sorry, it's not my place to tell you this as a third party."

Amikura knew this, so she didn't press the issue too hard.

"You can't just abandon her as a friend. It's not a bad thing."

I showed my understanding, and Ichinose returned.

"Sorry to keep you both waiting,"

"No, not at all."

Considering it was a conversation that was embarrassing for the person involved, Amikura was momentarily flustered.

Ichinose, who had returned, didn't change her expression at all, but it wouldn't be surprising if she had realized something with her keen eyes.

However, she didn't ask what we were talking about.

Maybe it was just speculation, but perhaps Ichinose didn't want to make Amikura tell a clumsy lie.

"Well then, I'm going to head home soon. See you two later."

I said my goodbyes to Ichinose and Amikura and left the gym.

I was unexpectedly told about a situation that occurred in Ichinose's class, but as soon as I stepped outside, I received a message.

[Were you having another private talk with Mako-chan? About me?]

She only came to check with me to avoid negatively impacting Amikura.

Moreover, it seemed she was able to guess that we were talking about an issue concerning her.

She was probably curious about what we talked about, but I couldn’t tell her because of the promise I made to Amikura.

[Looks like you've got a good best friend.]

So, I decided to reply with that.

There was nothing to worry about, and it certainly wouldn't lower Amikura's position.

Ichinose sent back a sticker with an illustration labeled 'super happy' in response to my message.

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[1]: The Japanese “Alphabet” is ordered by the Gojuuon—this places the vowels あ(a) and ㇵ(i) directly next to each other.

LegacyEMTLs Afterword

Hey there, Colibri here.
Just wanted to say thanks for reading our translation. Countless hours of work and effort went into it and I just wanna say thank you to everyone in the team for being a part of this, and thank you to the reader for supporting us by reading our translation. If you encounter any errors, feel free to report them on our site. And if you have any comments, you can add them to the comments section of the Y3V1 page. Spread our name through word of mouth and feel free to share these files so long as you credit us.
Anyways, see you next time with Y3V2.

Colibri

★·☆·★

Hi, FS7 here.
Thanks for reading our translation. This is our first new volume release as a TL group so we hope the quality is up to par. We're planning to redesign some of the mechanisms for translation to make it even better for Y3V2. Also, just like Colibri said, please report any issues to us. We're very particular about our translations so we're more than happy to rectify any issues if made aware of them.
Thanks.

FS7

★·☆·★

One more lead here, F2P2W.
We spent a lot more effort on this volume compared to our translation of V0 since we're on a much stricter deadline this time. I'll say this again, the team is full of people taking on multiple things at once—whether that be school, jobs, or personal projects—all while working on LegacyEMTLs, so please be kind to the team~

Also, you will see a lot of the team bashing Anime Anyway here. Please don't take it too seriously… don't send hate to anybody. Don't take our other leads as examples.
That being said, we hope to bring good quality reads for those patiently waiting for the Seven Seas official translations! And I hope you all win your 50/50s early pity.
Signing out.

F2P2W

LegacyEMTLs Credits

Colibri - Lead / Dev
"Spread your legs"

FS7 - Lead / MTL Dev / Lazy JE Checker
"I gotta be the biggest Anime Anyway hater in LegacyEMTLs"

F2P2W - Lead / Head Editor
"Please don't actually send hate to anime anyway... Besides that, persimmons are bomb."

Jéra - JE Checker / Editor
「今宵の恐怖劇を始めよう」

Ichinose Honami - JE Checker
"If anime anyway gets less than 1000 views by Y3V6 I'll flash on a colored illustration"

Kall - Editor
"I don't like expending more effort than I have to - Anime Anyway (Probably)"

ECA - Editor
"skibidi toilet, skibidi toilet, ts pmo 💔 "

Mika - Editor
"Quis ut Deus"

Sky - Editor
"Shoutout to the team for the hard work, enjoy the read."

Hiyori's Only Lover - Editor
"Why is Hiyori's name only mentioned once??? Arcangel Pa"

Unknown - Editor
"Ayano the rizzler"

BigFaulty - Illustrator
"Inchinose>>>"

FZ - Illustrator
"CoMiC sAnS iS sUpErIoR"