NOVEL

9.5

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

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ART: TOMOSE SHUNSAKU

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"Now, because no one else is watching."
It seemed like she was constantly observing her surroundings, and deemed it to be the perfect timing.
Ichinose wrapped her hand around my arm and started taking pictures.
"I won't keep the first one on my phone so...it's fine right?"

Sakayanagi Arisu

Shiina Hiyori

9.5
WELCOME TO CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

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STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2 9.5

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Chapter 1 - Irreplaceable Daily Life

NOW BEING IN the second year, the Advanced Nurturing High School's winter break began for the second time.

There was no need to do anything special.

Just being able to enjoy the holidays that many students experience was the best. A fulfilling time.

However, the time left for me was silently, but surely, decreasing.

Yet, there was no hurry.

Because, just being able to live for myself until today, I was satisfied enough.

Friends.

Lovers.

Upperclassmen and underclassmen.

Encounters.

I had been staying at this school for a long time, as have many others. From here on out, it will be an extended battle.

I'll spend every second of my remaining time as a student, as long as it's allowed.

And eventually, it will come—

Parting

Today is not a given.

Neither is tomorrow.

Every day, we must understand that our daily lives are irreplaceable.

Chapter 2 - Song of Loneliness

***D**ECEMBER 24TH. The first day of winter break.*

In the morning, I woke up with a strange feeling.

"… I had a weird dream."

Murmuring, I slowly stood up. It seemed that I had broken into a slight sweat while sleeping.

Usually, I don't pay much attention to my dreams.

Whether it's good or bad, in the end, dreams aren't reality. And humans, by nature, tend to forget them.

Even if exceptions existed in the world, I was also one of those who forget.

It was something you could remember immediately after waking up, but the memory slips away in a blink of an eye.

"—The homeroom teacher was a bunny girl, or something like that…"

Despite my resistance to try to remember, it was basically a futile effort.

To a third party, that might sound like a perplexing statement.

No, I don't think the main point of the dream was about the bunny girl.

Even if I tried to dig up more about my dream, my effort would likely go to waste.

So I quickly gave up trying to recall my dream.

Since there were no classes, I took my time getting ready for the day as the morning hours slowly passed by.

Matching toothbrushes and cups of different colors were placed on the bathroom counter.

Since distancing myself from Kei, who I always did things with, I had been returning to my usual life.

But that wasn't to say our relationship was over.

It was more like a temporary break between lovers due to my purposefully caused misunderstandings.

There has been exactly no change in my emotional state due to those events.

Of course, it's no other than because I'm the one who led the situation to this stalemate, but if this was an unexpected turn of events, would I have been able to feel a bit shaken?

"...I wonder."

In the end, emotional changes were based on the premise that the other person was indispensable to you. If that wasn't the case, emotions wouldn't be affected.

Even when it came to matters of personal significance, there was no need to hesitate in tormenting or cutting off a lover if necessary. Naturally, this applies to both sides.

However, I believed that feelings are a separate obligation to have as a lover.

As long as you are sharing time together, it is only natural to avoid making that time feel uncomfortable.

Moreover, since we gave each other precious time, it was better to bring joy rather than misery.

Of course, this line of thinking was based on human morals and ethics. Keeping Kei involved in my experiments and constantly causing her mental stress and strain wasn't a good idea.

I didn't plunge into this cold war without a plan—I did have one.

Going shopping for the Christmas present that we had promised before our relationship worsened.

The fact that this was still on the agenda kept us engaged in conversation.

Originally, I was supposed to have a morning date with Kei.

Unfortunately, it was rainy, and the bad weather had continued since winter break. While it was a little disappointing, the forecast already predicted rain all day on Christmas, so no one hoped for clear skies.

I had no control over the weather, so there was no helping it. But there was something unexpected that happened.

I glanced at the calendar on my desk in my room. The December calendar, with a heart drawn in pink ink enclosing the dates 24th and 25th… but…

It happened last night, after the end of the second term.

I tried to contact Kei directly on the 24th, but the call didn't go through.

I waited for a while, sending messages, and waiting for a response, but they remained unread.

After about an hour of hesitation, I finally got a call back.

The first word I heard from Kei, who was coughing weakly but intensely, was “Influenza.”

Seasonal influenza was a common flu that infected people regardless of age.

Cases usually increased significantly from late November to December, so it wasn't unusual for this time of year.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Kei had fallen ill and was suddenly bedridden.

Despite feeling weak, Kei probably wanted to fulfill the promise on the 24th, even if it meant crawling.

However, influenza spread through droplets in the air. If Kei were to go to Keyaki Mall under these circumstances, it would be selfish and would risk infecting others.

Kei apologized for not being able to manage her condition, which had been apparent just before being diagnosed.

Of course, I couldn't blame Kei for contracting the flu and instead urged her to prioritize rest and recovery.

On the other hand, I made sure to convey that our promise was still in effect and decided to reschedule our meeting.

If Kei were to tell me to cancel the promise in the meantime, there would be a possibility of it falling through, but as of now, that seemed unlikely.

If there were any changes to Kei's feelings, it would be due to interference from a third party’s suggestion, but someone as dependent as Kei wouldn't entertain such ideas.

If there was any hope of repairing our relationship, I couldn't imagine abandoning the option as a way out.

It was unclear how quickly it would take for her to recover, but for now, we decided to wrap up our conversation in the shortest time possible before the end of the year.

Both of us had various things we wanted to confirm about our relationship and current situation, but considering Kei's high fever and battered state, it wasn't possible to have a proper conversation.

I told Kei to prioritize rest first and ended the call.

Afterward, I confirmed that a friend had bought everything Kei needed while bedridden, so she wasn't in any trouble. Arrangements were made to respond in case of an emergency at night, which was helpful, considering the curfew.

This happened last night, on the 23rd.

This morning, I learned that there were confirmed cases of influenza among several students, regardless of their year.

For second years, it was fortunate that they managed to get through the special exams unscathed.

There might have been those who struggled in their exams with poor health without anyone knowing.

Since I hadn't been in close contact with Kei these past few days, my condition remained unchanged.

The real question now was how to spend the day.

The plans for today and tomorrow's Christmas were completely wiped clean.

[Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun. I heard that Karuizawa-san has the flu. Are you okay?]

Ichinose sent a message to my phone, followed by more messages.

[It seems like a few others are feeling unwell too. Are you alright, Ayanokōji-kun?]

As expected, Ichinose had a wide information network and was quick to hear things. She also seemed to grasp the situation regarding Kei's condition.

[Unfortunately, I think she'll be bedridden for some time.]

[Is that so… I'm worried. If you need help, just let me know.]

[Thank you.]

After some exchanges back and forth, she asked me what my plans were for the day.

Originally, I had saved this day for Kei, but… I still had to go to Keyaki Mall to pick something up, so I was still intending to go out.

[I think I'll go to the gym.]

I replied, assuming that was the plan and not feeling like joining anyone else.

[Oh, really? What time will you be going?]

[I have nothing to do, so maybe around noon.]

[I see. I was planning to go to the gym around lunchtime too, but should I cancel my plans?]

[Why?]

[Because it may seem like we're meeting up. Of course, it's just a coincidence!]

We both happened to plan on going to the gym, so it was a coincidence. There was no point in worrying about that.

It might have been a consideration for my girlfriend, Kei, but it was excessive.

On the contrary, it might have been more perverse if she tried to adjust the schedule here.

[Don't worry about it. I'll just go as planned. If we happen to meet at the gym, I'll count on you then.]

After sending that message, a read-receipt appeared immediately, and a mascot-like character holding an “OK” sign was sent back.

Well then, I'll leave preparations like changing clothes and hair setting for going out until later.

The time had just passed 9 a.m.

I decided to spend my morning leisurely by doing chores like laundry and cleaning.

2.1

Inside the Keyaki Mall, just before noon, the atmosphere was imbued with the spirit of Christmas Eve. Even flashier decorations filled the mall than the previous day.

There seemed to be a higher ratio of couples among the crowd of people who came to enjoy themselves.

As I had previously informed Ichinose, I decided to drop by the gym which I had recently joined.

Although I was still a new member, I wanted to go as much as possible since I paid the monthly fees.

Maybe there won't be anyone there?

With that in mind, I proceeded to check in at the reception.

Contrary to my wishes, when I changed into my gym attire and stepped into the training room, it wasn't empty.

Several male and female students could be seen, as well as some adults.

What particularly caught my eye was a person who was about to start bench pressing.

It was Mashima-sensei, the teacher in charge of class 2-A.

He had a large, muscular build and wore gym attire that complimented his appearance.

"Good morning, Mashima-sensei."

"Hm? Ayanokōji? Are you a gym member too?"

While he was about to lie down sideways, he replied, looking a little surprised.

"I joined just a little while ago."

“I see, I see. That's a really good thing. Welcome!” For some reason, Mashima-sensei nodded happily, as if his child had just passed an entrance exam.

His reaction was a bit exaggerated for just a single student joining the gym.

“Is there any specific reason you joined?”

“I realized that my physical strength had weakened compared to my past self, so I wanted to get it back.”

“Your reasoning isn’t very student-like.”

“I'm not sure if I'll stick with it for a long time.”

“It's fine. I also decided to start training with some reservations, but now I've become a regular. It isn’t bad to work up a sweat alongside fellow students in the same environment.”

Mashima-sensei seemed to be more energetic than usual and looked welcoming.

“Furthermore, I commend your dedication to go to the gym on the first day of winter break.”

“Do you have any plans for Christmas Eve, Sensei?”

“Hmm? No, I'm planning to sweat at the gym all day, unfortunately.”

He answered without hesitation. However, it seemed like he was thinking about something…

“Probably.”

Probably. He murmured that to himself, but why?

“Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing. Since it’s your first time here, it’s normal to feel a bit disoriented.”

“Well, yeah.”

I knew how to use and handle the equipment, but I kept that to myself thinking it would sound excessive to say it. I thought it would be easier to assume that I knew nothing, as a newcomer.

Anyway, it was about time for me to start doing something—

“Alright.”

“Alright?”

“Since you're here, why don't you see what my training looks like?”

“Huh? Oh, sure...”

I was about to start something myself, but Mashima-sensei stopped me. He laid down on the bench and began to align the bar with his line of sight. Without exerting himself, he lifted the bar a few times to adjust it. Then, he raised the safety bars on both sides higher than his chest.

“When doing bench presses, never forget these safety bars. In case of a collapse, they'll support you.”

“I'll keep that in mind.”

I couldn't tell him that I already knew that, so all I could do was watch him.

However, not answering at all might create an awkward atmosphere, so I decided to ask a typical question.

“Sensei, how much can you lift?”

“Well... I’ll go up to 80 kg this time, but it's possible to reach 100 kg. They say only one in a hundred people can lift 100 kg.”

He wasn’t boasting, but he seemed to brim with confidence in himself. He intentionally showed off his strength.

I had never heard of such a statistic before, but who knows if that was true. It sounded like a cheap quote from somewhere.

“But if you push yourself too hard, you can injure your body. It's not like a TV show where you lift it once and it's over. You train your pectoral muscles by doing several sets.”

Did he study and practice this method from watching TV or something? While watching him pant and sweat, I began to wonder what I was still doing there.

I came all the way to the gym early in the morning, only to end up attending an observation course. After watching him for a while and seeing him finish three sets, Mashima-sensei got up.

“Phew. Well, that's about it.”

“That was really informative.”

“Good to hear. During winter break, I plan to come six days a week, except for Thursdays. Even during the third term, I'll be coming at night, so if you need help with anything, feel free to reach out to me.”

That was really specific. *Was there something happening on Thursdays?*

“If you need help, I don't mind teaching you—”

“No, that's fine. Sorry for bothering you Mashima-sensei; for the time being, I’ll prioritize attendance and light weight training.” I quickly cut him off and made it a priority to wrap this conversation up.

“I see. If you have any problems, feel free to ask. I'll be at the gym as much as possible during winter break.”

After receiving those generous words from Mashima-sensei, I decided to work out on my own.

For the next 30 minutes, I continued training at the gym. At some point, the atmosphere inside the gym changed momentarily.

Some students who were facing the equipment suddenly turned their eyes in unison.

Wondering what they were looking at, I followed their gaze and saw a familiar figure from my class, Kōenji. He was attracting attention, but he didn't seem to care and started his training.

I thought people watched him because of his eccentric behavior, but that didn't seem to be the case.

I could faintly hear the voices of some male students from other years nearby.

“Kōenji really is amazing, isn't he?”

“Yeah, it's not normal for a high school student to be able to do that…”

His extraordinary physical abilities, far beyond those of a normal high school student, were evident even in his workout, and he seemed to be drawing attention as an athletically impressive student.

Indeed, one could immediately sense his physical prowess from his refined muscles and flexibility.

His movements were efficient, and a serious demeanor unlike his usual eccentricity was present.

Upon reflection, Kōenji seemed to be tirelessly devoted to training his body in various ways.

Considering this, it wasn’t strange that he was going to the gym; rather, one could argue he was the most suitable candidate for it.

Even Mashima-sensei seemed to respect Kōenji, stopping his own workout to watch him.

Looking at it objectively, it could be said that Kōenji was far beyond the realm of a typical student.

Blessed with natural physical abilities and unrelenting daily training for maintaining his physique, I realized once again that Kōenji was dedicated to the pursuit of physical excellence, regardless of time and place, throughout his school life.

Compared to the beginner-level workout Mashima-sensei had demonstrated, Kōenji’s training was truly captivating.

Moreover, it goes without saying that he was the type to excel even when in the spotlight, rather than feeling nervous, anxious, or irritated.

“Kōenji-kun is always very popular.”

I heard someone say this, confirming that the attention on him was not just for today.

“Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun,” she greeted me again.

“Hey,” I replied.

“It's raining heavily today too, isn't it? By the way, how long ago did you arrive?”

“About 30 minutes ago, I guess.”

“I see. Actually, I was supposed to arrive around that time too, but I got caught up talking with a friend and arrived late.”

Ichinose replied, standing next to me and looking at me from a close distance.

“It's a shame that Christmas Eve is today.”

“Well, it's fine. There's no need to obsess over it.”

“Girls might not feel the same way, you know?”

“I see... I can't deny that.”

As men, we couldn't know how attached women are to special days.

After having a light chat, Ichinose asked me to join her on the treadmill, and we stood side by side on two machines.

Then we spent 30 minutes in our individually paced settings without talking to each other.

“Phew, working out with someone really makes a difference in motivation, huh?”

“That might be true. In that sense, starting with Amikura was the right choice.”

Ichinose smiled and wiped the sweat from her forehead with a towel. Following that, I spent another enjoyable hour or so at the gym with Ichinose.

Later, when Amikura showed up at the gym, I told her I was leaving. Ichinose said she would chat with Amikura for a while, so we went our separate ways.

“Are you leaving already?”

Mashima-sensei, who noticed that I was about to leave the training room, stopped his training and called out to me.

Although he said “already,” I had been in the gym for about two hours—a substantial amount of time.

“Yeah, well, I'm pretty tired. Do you realize it's been two hours, Sensei?”

“Two hours? Hmm, is that so? I didn't realize it's been that long.”

He was so absorbed in his training that he didn't notice the time at all.

“I think you should take a break, Mashima-sensei. You've been training for almost three hours without any breaks. Accumulated fatigue can lead to injuries, so it's important to get some rest every now and then.”

I braced myself for a potentially angry response as I offered this advice, but instead, Mashima-sensei seemed surprised and crossed his arms.

“...You might be right. I've been trying to put my all into becoming a better teacher, but maybe I'm pushing myself too hard.”

Perhaps no one around him had ever given him such advice before.

He was clearly desperate for results and a stronger body, but his passion had blinded him to his own exhaustion.

“Alright, I'll call it quits for today.”

He graciously accepted my advice.

“See you later.”

I bowed my head slightly, planning to leave the scene, but Mashima-sensei came after me.

“Can we talk for a minute?”

“Huh? Sure.”

I thought it might be related to the gym, but he led me to the break room instead. “Did I do something wrong that upset you, Sensei?”

I asked, unable to grasp the reason for his invitation. “No, don't worry about that. You've been doing just fine in the gym.”

He seemed to have been observing my activities closely, but...

Seeing my doubtful eyes, Mashima-sensei lowered his gaze.

“...The truth is, I was so engrossed in my training that I wasn't paying any attention to my surroundings. I'll admit that.”

He looked apologetic as he made his confession.

His sincere response somehow made me feel guilty. It was winter break for the teachers, and they were free to enjoy themselves on the premises, with no obligation to supervise the students.

I felt as if I had extracted an apology from him by using his responsibilities as an adult against him.

“So, the reason you want to talk to me is—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Mashima-sensei looked around to make sure no one else was around.

“Actually, I have a favor to ask of you.”

“What is it?”

Just as he was about to explain, we were interrupted by a visitor—a beautiful woman with long, wavy hair.

She was one of the employees who worked at this gym, and upon noticing us, she smiled and walked toward us.

“Mashima-san, you overworked yourself again today, didn’t you?”

“No, not really.”

Mashima-sensei answered with a casual greeting.

As expected, she seemed to remember the names of those who frequented the gym more than I did.

“And the boy over there is…”

“His name is Ayanokōji. Although he's not in my class, he's an excellent student from Class B.”

Mashima-sensei strongly tapped my back as if to prompt me to greet her as well.

It was probably meant to be lighter, but the slap from his well-trained body was quite powerful…

“I'm Ayanokōji.”

“We've met a few times at the reception. You were with Ichinose-chan.”

As expected of the staff. Even I, who had only recently started coming, had left an impression on them.

“Oh, sorry. I just came to get something I needed during the break, so excuse me.”

The staff member spoke with a soft tone, bowed gently, and took out several towels from the employee shelf.

She held them to her chest as she returned to the reception area.

Mashima-sensei seemed to be waiting for her to leave, not even sparing a glance in my direction.

Once the staff member left, Mashima-sensei didn't move at all.

“Sensei?”

“Ah, what is it, Ayanokōji?”

“Well, didn’t you want to talk to me about something?”

“Yeah, I did, but let's do that some other time.”

“Huh? Well, if that's the case, please excuse me.”

“Hold on.”

As I turned my back, he suddenly grabbed both of my shoulders from behind.

“...What is it now?”

For some reason, Mashima-sensei seemed a bit off today.

His usual calm and collected demeanor as a teacher appeared to be compromised.

“I think this is fate, so I will confess.”

“It seems like you've tried to confess quite a few times today, huh?”

But, he was finally getting to the point, so that was a relief.

“The staff member who was here earlier—her name is Akiyama-san.”

“I wasn't really paying attention, but she did have a name tag. What about her?”

“...I want you to investigate her. As carefully and discreetly as possible.”

“Huh?”

I attempted to turn around, but he firmly gripped my shoulders, preventing me from moving.

“I've never had any issues with the opposite sex at school before. However, ever since I started coming to the gym, things have changed. I believe you can grasp what I'm implying without going into too much detail.”

“Well, I can already guess what you’re trying to say. You have feelings for that woman named Akiyama-san, right?”

“...You could say that.”

Well, then there was no other way to describe it.

“Despite having a somewhat child-like face, she’s a beautiful, mature woman.”

“Ah...”

Certainly, she was a beautiful, mature woman, but something about that statement struck me as odd.

“Wouldn’t the same apply to Hoshinomiya-sensei and Chabashira-sensei? There’s no rule forbidding romantic relationships between staff members, right?”

“Actually, it is against the rules.”

“Oh, really? But I bet there are teachers who secretly date.”

“I won't deny that it happens. But regarding Chabashira and Hoshinomiya, even if dating wasn't forbidden, I wouldn’t date either of them.”

He stated this decisively and firmly.

“May I ask the reason?”

“I'm sorry, but I have no intention of discussing it further. We’re teacher and student, after all. It's not a conversation we need to have.”

“Then I'll go home. The conversation we're having right now seems pretty pointless too.”

“Hoshinomiya is too lighthearted. Chabashira is too serious. That's all.”

Mashima-sensei offered a concise and clear answer that was easy to grasp.

Assuming that both were equally attractive, Hoshinomiya-sensei appeared to be the flirtatious type who might continue to engage with others even in a committed relationship.

On the other hand, Chabashira-sensei seemed like someone who hadn't had a single lover, because she had been holding onto a love from her student days.

If she were to fall in love with another man, it would likely be an intense, emotional affair.

“But you can't say for sure that Akiyama-san, a staff member, isn't like them.”

It was something that couldn’t be determined from the surface, but as you got to know each other—

“That's absolutely impossible.”

Though there was no basis for it, he dismissed the idea with nothing but the strength of his assumptions.

“I've known both of them since we were students, and I've never considered either as a potential romantic partner.

Not even once.

Besides, picking between my two closest friends and rivals would have a significant impact on my school life.”

Mashima-sensei asserted that he wouldn't let that happen.

“Well, that's true.”

“That's why I'm asking you.”

“Why me?”

“Do you think I can ask any of the other teachers?”

“Well, you’re right, but…”

“You're the only one who goes to the gym, remains discreet, and seems trustworthy.”

“Don't tell me, Sensei, when you first found me, were you happy because…”

“Of course, it's because I gained a gym buddy.”

No, that was definitely a lie.

This was clearly the expression of someone who found a student they could rely on for this task.

Now, I could say with confidence that it was.

“You understand what I want to know, right?”

“I can guess—if she has a boyfriend, her type, and her hobbies and interests.”

“Right on. Chabashira is truly fortunate to have a student like you.”

Is this really the Mashima-sensei I've always known?

Although I understand there is a difference between one’s professional and personal life, this side of him took me by surprise.

Nonetheless, his voice remained calm and his expression composed.

“I don't expect you to act right away. Akiyama-san saw us together today, so there's no rush. Whether it's after winter break or later, just take your time to get closer and find out what you can.”

Methodically and discreetly, exactly how Mashima-sensei wanted.

“I'll give it a try, but please don't expect too much.”

“I understand.”

“Akiyama-san is working today, though—”

“Except for Thursdays, she works six days a week, correct?”

“...Yes. How did you know?”

It wasn't that I knew, but Mashima-sensei had mentioned he would go to the gym every day except Thursday.

While his initial goal for joining the gym was likely to train his body, it seemed his primary focus had shifted to Akiyama-san... Yet, there was no room to criticize his dedication to training.

Finally freed from Mashima-sensei's grip, I hurriedly left the scene.

2.2

After leaving the gym, I contemplated my plans for the rest of the day. I had decided in advance to pick up some items at a shop and then explore Keyaki Mall before returning home.

In line with Mashima-sensei's advice, I intended to take my time and carefully handle his request. As I pondered on the best approach, I hoped that they would resolve the matter by themselves in the meantime.

It's still early in the afternoon. Heading home now would leave me with an excess of idle time in my room.

I took out my phone and scrolled through my contacts.

It wouldn't be a bad idea to call up a male friend and hang out.

"...No one comes to mind."

I skimmed through the list and quietly turned off my phone screen.

Without thinking about it too much, I realized I had almost no experience of spontaneously calling up a friend of the same gender to hang out.

"Are you free? Why don't we hang out for a while?"

The thought of saying that and being rejected with a simple "I'm busy" was disheartening.

Yōsuke might've understood my feelings and accepted my invitation, but I didn't want him to feel obligated to do so.

In other words, inviting someone to hang out could be quite challenging and demanding.

Ultimately, it was better for me to remain alone rather than inconveniencing others.

"What even is a friend, I wonder?"

As I progressed through the second half of my second year, I once again recognized my struggle with the social aspect of life.

I descended to the first floor on the escalator.

It was still daytime, and the number of students there had increased considerably.

If initiating a conversation was difficult, could there be an alternate approach? For example, a chance encounter?

It would be great to be unexpectedly discovered and invited to hang out. I looked around, but at times like these, my classmates were nowhere to be found.

No students from my year were in sight either.

If I continued searching around for someone, I might come across as suspicious.

For that reason, I abandoned the idea of meeting someone and chose to enjoy my solo time instead.

I stopped in front of one of the floor maps placed throughout the mall.

Although I had an understanding of the shops and their locations, I decided to check if anything new had opened.

No major changes were apparent, and I didn't find anything new. However, one store did pique my interest.

Should I give it a try? I wondered.

It was a rental shop – a place I rarely visit. This shop offered an array of DVDs and BDs featuring movies and anime, both old and new. They also had music CDs.

But the demand for such a shop wasn't very high, since we could watch video content anytime and anywhere through a monthly online streaming service if we got permission from the school.

Only those seeking to watch specific titles visited the shop, resulting in a limited customer base.

This made me decide to pay the shop a visit during the winter break.

With ample time on my hands, it was good to have such an experience every once in a while.

I felt like I was making excuses, but I wasn't lonely at all.

Just to be sure, I mentally repeated this to myself.

After gathering a few items at the shop, I headed to the rental place.

It was a small, somewhat cramped space, and its walls were lined with an extensive selection of discs. While discs were typically stored in boxes or cases, this shop placed them in black and transparent OPP protective bags with printed papers showing what seemed to be the back of each package. This made it easy to identify the kind of films at a glance.

When using a computer or tablet, I typically judge whether a title looks interesting or not based on its thumbnail.

However, being in an environment where I could physically pick up each item led me to consider options I might typically overlook.

So, I found myself reading the plot summaries carefully.

Though countless works are easily accessible nowadays, it was also easy to miss some hidden gems.

That was why I thought it wasn’t a bad idea to search for them like this occasionally.

I might even start visiting rental shops more often. Still, the problem remained—even if I found something interesting, there was no need to rent it here. I could watch it for free and without a return deadline back at the dorm.

I figured that running such rental shops would become increasingly difficult in the future. The same went for electronics retail stores.

I'd heard that people frequently visit stores to inspect items in person, only to purchase them at lower prices online.

After enjoying the video section for a while, I moved on to the music corner. I don't usually listen to music on my own.

I may have heard the latest hits or famous songs on TV, but that's about it. I'd never bought an album myself, and I wasn't particularly keen on doing so now.

That was why I decided to explore the music section, hoping to discover something new.

I had initially thought there was no one else in the rental shop, but it turned out there was another customer.

A petite student, with their back towards me, was wearing headphones.

They didn't notice my presence due to the background music playing in the shop. At first, I didn't know who it was, but I recognized them as I got closer.

It was Shiranami Chihiro from Ichinose's class. Although we hadn't interacted much, we attended a few unusual events together in the past.

Recently, we were close by during the uninhabited island test and on the ship afterward.

I wondered what she was listening to.

My knowledge of Japanese music was limited, so I was curious. But since Shiranami was engrossed in the music, she wouldn't have noticed me if I spoke softly. And if I abruptly entered her line of sight, it would most likely startle her.

I could have waited for the song to end, but it wouldn't have been easy to strike up a conversation afterward. So, I decided to go closer and eavesdrop on her music.

To avoid looking suspicious, I casually pretended to browse the items on display.

“Ah...?!”

Oh, no. Did I startle her? I might have gotten too close out of curiosity about the music.

The girl quickly took off her headphones.

“Ah, Ayanokōji-kun?!”

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you.”

With the headphones removed from her ears, the music was clearly audible.

Along with a somewhat melancholic guitar tone, the female singer's voice and lyrics reached my ears: 'A broken heart can only be healed by time. That person is now with someone else...'

It seemed to be a heartbreak song. As the lyrics played, she quickly pressed the stop button, and the song came to an abrupt halt.

“W-w-what do you want?!”

The girl, still quite surprised, asked nervously.

“Well... I don't need anything. I was just wondering what you were listening to. That's all.” Even though I answered honestly, it remained to be seen whether she would believe me or not.

She was from another class, and we didn't have a particularly close relationship.

We wouldn't talk unless there was a reason, let alone by mere coincidence. Additionally, given the differences between boys and girls, my behavior might be considered suspicious.

“Sorry for bothering you. I'll leave now.”

I realized that staying any longer by Shiranami's side would only cause her discomfort.

Withdrawing as quickly as possible seemed like my only course of action.

“Um... well...”

Shiranami seemed to want to say something.

At the very least, she wasn't the type to engage in conversation with someone she wasn’t close to.

If I tried to prompt her to speak more quickly, she might’ve ended up swallowing her words.

So, I didn't look directly into Shiranami's eyes and instead averted my gaze elsewhere.

I tried to create the least intimidating atmosphere I could and waited for her to speak.

“Um... do you have a little time... right now...?”

Unexpectedly, Shiranami asked if we could spend more time together.

“If you think this isn’t a good place to chat, do you want to go somewhere else?”

Although the rental shop wasn't crowded, it wasn’t an ideal spot for off-topic conversations, especially if we had no intention of making a purchase.

“Yeah... let's go somewhere else. I don’t think it’ll take too long.”

“Well, then—”

“Ah, but... I'd prefer it if it wasn't a place that stands out too much. I don't want people to get the wrong idea.”

I was going to suggest a random café, but she quickly expressed her concerns.

“What should we do, then? I’m open to whatever you feel comfortable with.”

“...I'll leave it up to you, Ayanokōji-kun.”

She left the decision to me, albeit with certain restrictions.

It seemed a bit unfair, but as the one who started this conversation, it was my responsibility to find a suitable location.

I had to think of a place that met all her requirements.

2.3

After considering a few options, I started moving with Shiranami. The school grounds were off-limits during winter break, and the rainy weather made it difficult to stay outdoors.

On the other hand, many students were scattered throughout the indoor areas.

The only saving grace was that Shiranami seemed determined to avoid drawing attention to us.

In cases like this, even if we weren't close, we'd typically walk next to each other with a group-like vibe, or maintain a one or two-step distance.

However, there was a considerable gap between me in front and Shiranami following behind. From a side view, one would likely assume we weren't together.

Therefore, even though it was Christmas Eve, there was no need to worry about being mistaken for a couple or anything similar.

"...What?"

"Nothing."

If I focused too much on the distance between us, Shiranami seemed more likely to fall further behind.

It wasn't my idea to extend the invitation, but it was still troublesome.

Regardless, I had initiated the conversation and established a connection, so I supposed it was inevitable.

After aimlessly wandering around for a bit, we eventually reached a rest area.

Several vending machines were lined up, and there were a couple of wooden benches without backrests.

Surprisingly, only a few students frequented this spot, and today was no exception as there was no one in sight.

“Do you want something to drink—”

“No, thanks.”

“Shall we sit on the bench—”

“I don't need to.”

After being declined twice, I decided not to push my luck any further.

“Shall we talk?”

Shiranami stood facing me, maintaining a considerable distance between us as she rubbed her hands together.

It seemed she had some difficulty speaking her mind, but she mustered up the courage to ask me.

“What is your relationship with Honami-chan, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“What do you mean by ‘relationship’?”

“Are you just classmates? Or friends? Or are you something more than that?”

Each word was spoken meekly, but her question clearly conveyed what she wanted to know. My response seemed to be of great importance to Shiranami.

Of course, I understood why.

Her curiosity stemmed from the time I was forming a relationship with Ichinose.

During the previous year, when we were still first-year students, Shiranami gathered the courage to confess her feelings to Ichinose, who stood right before her.

It went beyond mere friendship; instead, it was a romantic attraction to someone of the same gender.

No, that description wasn’t quite accurate.

In this day and age, gender made no difference whatsoever. Shiranami, as an individual, simply felt a deep affection for Ichinose.

That was all there was to it.

And she didn't like the notion of Ichinose having feelings for me. The situation was straightforward and easy to comprehend without needing further explanation.

"How should I put it? I'm a little hesitant—"

"Don't hesitate and just answer me."

"I'm not hesitating. It's just difficult for me to judge if I qualify to call her a friend."

"...What do you mean by that?"

Shiranami looked puzzled, her eyebrows furrowing as she struggled to understand what I meant.

"I only have a few friends. I don't even know the boundaries of what constitutes a friend. Is someone you merely talk to not a friend? Where do you draw the line between an acquaintance and a friend?"

"That's... Uh, I'm not sure where the line is..."

"Like you, I'm also not certain. If I were to base it on my perspective, I would say we're friends."

"That's a bit ambiguous, isn't it...? Are you trying to dodge the question?"

I had no intention of dodging the question; I meant to answer quite seriously.

"So you're just friends, right? Neither of you have any romantic feelings toward each other, correct?"

I didn't directly ask Shiranami, but I couldn't imagine her being unaware of Ichinose's feelings.

Shiranami said it was mutual, but what she probably wanted to ascertain were my feelings toward her.

"You're sure that it's like this, right? Because you're dating Karuizawa-san."

Unable to wait for my response, Shiranami added her assumption.

“Whether I have a girlfriend or not shouldn't matter, right? The question is about my feelings toward Ichinose.”

“Of course it matters. That's because one can only be in love with a single person at a time.”

Shiranami replied with a romantic, or rather a pure-hearted girl's perspective.

It didn't seem like she doubted me; instead, she genuinely believed it.

“Isn't it possible to view multiple people as romantic interests simultaneously?”

It was a case that could be considered regardless of men or women.

“No, it's not!”

However, Shiranami strongly rejected it.

Judging from her tightly clenched small hands, she appeared to be angry.

“My apologies. That topic was unrelated to our discussion. Currently, there's no relationship between Ichinose and me like the one you’re worried about.”

“...Currently?”

As expected, Shiranami picked up on the caveat I added just in case, becoming sensitive to every word I said.

“No one knows what the future holds.”

“Even so, if it was a normal relationship, you wouldn't add ‘currently,' I think...”

Shiranami might have a point.

If this conversation wasn't about Ichinose, but rather about a close female friend like Amikura, I might not have added 'currently.'

I could have clearly stated that we were just friends, nothing more and nothing less.

“Even if Honami-chan had feelings for you, as long as you don't feel the same way, I think you wouldn't have said 'currently.' And yet, you did... You wouldn’t have said that if you weren't thinking of breaking up with Karuizawa-san and dating Honami-chan.”

Shiranami uttered those words with difficulty, as if she disliked saying them.

While she was most likely looking at the tip of my nose as she spoke, avoiding eye contact, it took courage to say that.

“I think Honami-chan is free to like whoever she wants... but I can't just stand by and watch her date someone who's insincere...”

“Is someone considered insincere just because they've broken up with someone else before?”

“Well... not exactly like that...”

As Ichinose's classmate, Shiranami couldn't discuss her condition. I thought she might’ve already noticed a change, but there was no evidence of that.

Ichinose's recently changed demeanor. The heart of the matter was that I didn’t want to inadvertently influence anyone until I could assess how it would affect her.

That was why, even if it casted a shadow over Shiranami's heart, all I could do was add 'currently' and be vague.

“I didn't mean to trouble you. It's just that, given the situation, I knew there was a chance my words would not be taken lightly, so I had no choice but to word it in a way that includes some insurance.”

Even if it might’ve been a bit harsh, it was better to express it firmly.

Although she showed a face as if that wasn’t the case for a moment, it seemed that she realized that her intensity had risen more than she had imagined.

“...I'm sorry. It seems like I've said too much...”

She was so desperate that she temporarily lost track of the extent of her statement. It was that serious.

“You're worried about Ichinose, aren't you?”

It was natural to be concerned about a best friend—even more so for someone she had feelings for.

“Ah, um... I'm really sorry!”

As she calmed down, she began to take her own misstep heavily and seriously.

“Lately, I've been hearing a lot of stories about you and Honami-chan...”

“Rumors are just rumors.”

“Right... Like about how you started going to the gym together to be alone, ignoring your studies, and you calling her to your room even though you have a girlfriend... I accepted such baseless rumors so easily...”

Hmm... Huh?

“What's wrong? You've been calm all this time, but now you suddenly have a strange expression on your face.”

“I was just thinking about how such baseless rumors, or perhaps even facts that aren't a big deal, ended up getting spread around with such detail.”

“That's an odd way of putting it. Rumors and facts are unrelated, aren't they?”

“Of course, there are many cases where they are unrelated.”

“...Huh?”

“Huh?”

“You two didn't go to the gym alone, right?”

“No, we didn't. I just started going to the gym. But it isn’t impossible to run into Ichinose there, right?”

That was exactly what happened today.

I had received a message, but it wasn’t like we promised to meet at the gym.

“Well, that might be true. Mako-chan also goes to the gym. Oh, but the rumor about calling Ichinose to your room is definitely baseless, right?”

“That's true. I haven't invited Ichinose into my room.”

There were three similar occurrences with Ichinose, but the first one happened while our class was undergoing the special vote exam as freshmen. The second time was on a rainy day at the end of the school year. The third time happened very recently, but it was just Ichinose who voluntarily waited in front of my room.

It was likely during the third instance, when Ichinose was waiting, that someone saw her.

“...I believe you.”

Though hesitant, Shiranami conceded, showing her most positive expression of the day.

However, depending on how Shiranami interpreted things from now on, she might’ve ended up feeling betrayed.

Should I add a disclaimer just in case?

However, if I said something that sounded like a lame excuse here, it would cast a shadow on her heart once again.

“Can I add one more thing?”

“U-uh, what is it?”

“Whether Ichinose falls in love with someone, or is already in love, it doesn't mean that your value, Shiranami, diminishes. However, if you do

things that Ichinose doesn't approve of, it might have an adverse effect. Do you understand what I'm saying?”

“...Yeah.”

Not being able to be with the person someone loved—that was what made it so unbearable, and as a result, people tried interfering with their happiness.

It was only natural that the person they loved wouldn't be pleased when they saw such behavior.

“I’m kind of an unpleasant girl, huh?”

As Shiranami calmed down, she seemed to start reflecting on the things she had said today.

“I'm just complaining and venting my frustration on you...”

She had felt that way since she requested that we change locations to talk.

However, even without considering the fact that she was the one who had invited me to talk, I had no intention of blaming Shiranami from the get-go.

“Even during the uninhabited island exam in the summer, you helped me when I was lost...”

Since her admission, she had always harbored special feelings for Ichinose. Now, as she suppressed her emotions, she continued to support Ichinose as an important friend with her presence.

It wasn’t unreasonable for her to feel resentment toward someone like me and be subconsciously hostile.

“Don't worry about it. If anything, I'm the one who got in the way and made things worse by lecturing you—”

“I'm really sorry!”

Before I could finish, I was interrupted by an apology from Shiranami.

“Um, um, it's not that I don't like you... It's really not like that...”

I already understood everything, but Shiranami didn't seem to realize that, so she started to explain herself. *Even if I tried stopping her, she wouldn't be convinced, so maybe I should just listen for a while.*

After that, Shiranami continued to ask for my forgiveness, scattering the conversation in all directions with 80% apologies and 20% explanations.

Chapter 3 - A Slight Premonition

I SLIPPED INTO MY casual clothes, which I hadn't worn in a while, and began to pour hot water into a cup. As I did so, I noticed light streaming in from the window and decided to open the curtain.

“It's piled up quite a bit...”

The rain that had been falling until dark had turned into snow and continued to fall throughout the night.

At the moment, the snowfall was sporadic and appeared to cease by the afternoon, but a snowstorm was forecasted to start this evening and continue onward.

The TV reported that the snowy days would persist for a while.

“No wonder it's gotten colder.”

It was the season when hot coffee tasted the best—truly the real deal.

Standing in the kitchen, I held a cup of freshly brewed coffee in my right hand.

In my other hand, I held my cell phone, its screen displaying items and prices.

Until recently, I was unaware that Keyaki Mall had been running web advertisements for those living in ANHS. Today marked the end of the Christmas sales rush, and they were holding a major sale to commemorate the occasion.

I unexpectedly discovered this information last night.

The class group chat was abuzz with excitement as everyone shared their plans and experiences, and that's when I stumbled upon it.

The first ones to divert the topic in the group chat were Ike and Shinohara.

Even though they were both in the group chat, neither of them had read any messages since the chat started at around 9 p.m., and the conversation among the classmates was incredibly lively.

Was it a coincidence, or were they together?

Naturally, most people assumed the latter.

Some even tried calling them, half envious and half teasing, but since their phones were switched off, none of the calls connected.

However, no one believed that the switched-off phones were merely a coincidence, and the chat log continued to progress.

The chat continued to buzz with activity as the topics shifted, and I was amazed that the conversation never dwindled for hours on end.

Among the various subjects, what caught my attention was the big sale.

“Wow… even home appliances are this affordable?”

Being careful not to burn myself, I slowly sipped my coffee while scrolling through the screen with my finger.

From popular items for boys, like game consoles and games, to daily necessities like hair dryers and electric toothbrushes, as well as an extensive selection of kitchen gadgets, like mixers and slicers, were present.

Lately, I had been cooking more frequently, and several items piqued my interest.

For some reason, I found myself drawn to a yogurt maker, which was also listed as a limited-stock special offer in the online advertisement.

This felt like a sign that it was time to buy it. While it was best to minimize use of private points, I could justify the expense by using the yogurt maker in the future.

However, I wondered how many times I would eat yogurt during the remainder of my school life and whether it would be more cost-effective to simply buy it—no, that was a pointless thought.

I just wanted this yogurt maker.

And I wanted to try using it.

That was probably all there was to it.

If I only considered the cost-performance ratio, it was obvious that I wouldn't buy it. The more I thought about it, the less likely I was to purchase the yogurt maker.

So I stopped thinking about it.

They were offering it at a special discount, so I would buy it. That was all.

The only remaining factor to consider was the “limited stock” aspect.

Since Keyaki Mall's primary target audience was students, it was unlikely that they would have a large inventory.

There was a good chance that they only had a few units in stock.

Besides, this big sale was rumored to be popular among the students.

While I hadn’t paid much attention to it the previous year, apparently, it had gained popularity and sold out without me realizing it (according to the class group chat).

“Shall I go and check it out...?”

Honestly, I had no experience with this kind of sale, so I didn't know how it worked.

Should I participate, or just observe?

As I pondered this, a message popped up on my phone.

[*Good morning. Is it okay if I call you later? Will it bother you?*]

It was from Ichinose, who I'd been with at the gym yesterday. Was she being cautious, considering the possibility that Kei might be around if she was feeling better?

No, that wasn't it. Ichinose already knew about the flu. She wouldn't assume it had been cured in just a day.

It was probably just a formality.

I decided to call her directly, implying that it was fine.

"Good morning. Are you free right now?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

"Um, do you have any plans for today, Ayanokōji-kun?"

"Plans? No, I haven't scheduled anything special."

"As I thought, Karuizawa-san hasn't recovered yet, right?"

"It's the flu, so it'll probably take a while longer."

"I see... I'd like to visit her, but the school issued a cautionary notice, didn't it?"

"It seems so. They advised against unnecessary contact."

The school sent emails to students and school staff advising them not to visit patients, or go out unnecessarily while the flu was rampant.

"I'm keeping an eye on the situation, just in case."

"Oh, that's good to know."

She seemed relieved, not just on the surface, but genuinely from the bottom of her heart.

"By the way, are you planning to go to Keyaki Mall today?"

"Well... I was thinking of going out later, but if there's something you want to talk about, we can set a time and meet at Keyaki Mall?"

"No, that's not necessary. It might sound like a lame excuse, but I wasn't asking if you had a date or appointment. I just wanted to know if you're going to Keyaki Mall today."

“Should I just answer that I'll probably go then?”

“Yes, that's enough. Thank you.”

After that, Ichinose added one more thing.

“If you ever need help, just let me know. I want to support you and Karuizawa-san.”

The phone call ended soon, and I never found out what Ichinose wanted. Anyways, I checked the time and made up my mind.

“Alright…”

The time was 9:45 AM.

It was the perfect time to leave the dormitory, as it matched the time that Keyaki Mall opened.

Considering Ichinose's words, I decided to take a bold step and make a surprise visit.

I’ll go straight to the mall, targeting the electronics retail store.

Then, I’ll grab a yogurt maker, not looking at anything else. It will only make me a victim of the store's consumer strategy if I end up buying more than I require.

I left the empty coffee cup on the sink and headed for the door.

It was time for “*Mission Start*.”

3.1

The same day, at 9:55 AM, I arrived at Keyaki Mall.

At the entrance closest to the dormitory, it seemed that seven students were already waiting for the store to open. There were five girls and two boys in the group. Among the girls, there was one group of three, and one group of two, neither of which seemed to be focusing on the upcoming battle while engrossed in their conversations.

On the other hand, the boys were of different years. A first-year and a third-year student; neither seemed to be expecting someone to approach as they fiddled with their mobile phones. Apparently, they were acting independently.

While it was possible that they would head to the electronics store, it was hard to believe that they were aiming to purchase a yogurt maker.

The first-year boy was slightly overweight and wore glasses, holding his mobile phone horizontally with both hands. He was sliding and tapping his fingers restlessly, making it highly likely that he was playing a game on his phone.

In that case, he would likely belong to the group of people looking to buy gaming consoles or games.

However...

I couldn't help but feel a strange sense of discomfort.

Why aren't my classmates here?

I took out my mobile phone and looked at the group chat that had been so lively yesterday.

In the chat, many students, regardless of gender, stated they would go to the electronics store and purchase their desired items. Among them, Hondō's excited message about a long-desired item being advertised was also present.

That item was completely unrelated to me, but the competition for it seemed to be very tough.

Many voices around me were anxiously wondering if they'd be able to buy it even if they rushed in at the sale's opening, and some were even reminding themselves to be careful not to oversleep.

The time on my cell phone progressed to 9:56 a.m.

As the opening time was getting closer, I couldn't find Hondō's figure, let alone anyone from my year.

Considering the flow of the chat, it was strange that my classmates weren't showing up.

"...What's going on?"

A strange feeling overtook me as students who should've been here weren't present.

None of the seven people here seemed to be restless or uneasy.

Normally, they would be glued to the entrance, ready to fight every single second.

Can they really buy what they want while leisurely playing mobile games?

I felt a sense of unease and decided to muster up my courage and check the situation.

Fortunately, my kōhai was playing a game here.

"May I have a moment?"

"...Yes?"

The first-year student, who looked slightly annoyed, raised his head and was indeed playing.

The screen was paused. Perhaps he had pressed the pause button.

I could immediately sense the vibe that he didn't want to be talked to by his senpai, but I had to confirm something.

"What did you come to Keyaki Mall for?"

“Huh? What's going on? Is this like a TV show prank or something? I don't understand.”

“...Hmm?”

I had intended to speak as naturally as possible so as not to make him wary of me, but it seemed that his defensiveness had been kicked up a notch three times.

However, since I didn't have much time to talk leisurely, I reluctantly brought up the main issue.

“I thought you came here today to see the sale at the electronics store. They say game consoles and stuff are cheap too.”

I tried to emphasize the gaming part as much as possible so that the message would get through.

Then, he seemed to understand and showed a reaction as if thinking, ‘Ah, I see.’

However—

“Well, even though game consoles are called the latest hardware, they are old LCD types and the controllers are prone to breaking. They have a bad reputation. Even at a big sale, it feels more like a clearance sale, and they’re still not highly rated works, even if they’re sold at a 20-30% discount from the list price. Besides, I prefer to buy the digital versions.”

—*I see.*

I could understand, but not fully grasp, the content of my kōhai's story.

One certainty was that he wasn’t interested in the sale at all.

“Today’s the release date for the manga I want, so I'm only going to the bookstore. Oh, are you curious why I buy paper books instead of e-books, even though I prefer to download games?”

“Uh, no...”

“Sure, e-books can be purchased as soon as the date changes, and it's attractive to be able to view them anytime on mobile or tablet. But I like the feeling of holding a book in my hand. I suppose I could say I want to forever own manga and novels in paper form. As I mentioned, though, this is limited to manga and novels only. I surprisingly don't have the same fondness for other e-books. For example, books that compile a year's worth of best-selling products, photo books, and so on. I'm tolerant of those. Well, I used to buy those in paper as well up until middle school, but since entering this school, I've had more chances to use phones and tablets, so I've transitioned. Oh, is it time to go now? I want to work hard on my game’s events.”

I thought I listened carefully, but about 20% of the information had already slipped out of my head.

Since his pronunciation was slightly unclear, I felt like my brain was refusing to contain the information.

After finishing talking at a tremendous speed about something I didn't even ask about, my kōhai resumed using his phone.

He wouldn't even look at me anymore.

It’s now 9:58 a.m.

It should be the time when more familiar faces and students start showing up.

Could it be that it isn’t attracting as much attention as I thought?

Perhaps it was just as my kōhai said—clearance disguised as a grand sale.

However, I heard that last year's event was a great success, and judging from my classmates’ reactions, like Hondō, they seemed to be looking forward to it.

Could it be that I got the date wrong?

In the chat, they had said *tomorrow*, but I wondered if there was a possibility that it was a mistake.

Perhaps it was because the conversation took place just before the date changed that I began to think it might've been tomorrow.

I hurriedly took out my cell phone and accessed the online advertisement again.

"...It's today."

The misunderstanding disappeared in an instant.

As the opening of the store approached, the number of students gathered didn't grow at all.

What was going on...?

No, let's stop thinking about it.

As soon as the store opens, I'll head straight to the store and buy a yogurt maker.

That should be fine.

"By the way, Yuko sent me a picture earlier, and the line at the north exit is crazy. Look at this."

"Wow. I went there last year too. But there wasn't much in stock, so I couldn't buy what I wanted. Wait, why is it from the north exit?"

"Last year, remember there was a girl in Class B who got injured during the opening rush?"

"Ah, right. But everyone was in a hurry, so it seemed like no one paid attention to her."

"Exactly. So this year, they're gathering at the north exit, and the staff will guide them."

The reality I wanted to hear, yet didn't, reached my ears. As I learned the truth, Keyaki Mall mercilessly opened at 10 a.m.

3.2

The electronics store was bustling with many students and school staff.

I had been watching the store's situation from a step away.

The customers who had gathered for the 30-minute pre-opening lineup entered the store in advance and bought the featured products.

I wondered how many goods the general admission customers could buy. But strangely, I wasn't worried.

I was wondering whether there were any students who wanted a yogurt maker.

No, there mustn't be.

That's why I shouldn't worry—was what I thought and entered the store late, but my hopes were shattered.

The yogurt maker mentioned in the announcement was already sold out.

I was confronted with the reality that someone had already bought it.

Seeing that, I was about to reach for the latest yogurt maker out of desperation, but the price was more than double that of the sale item, so I somehow managed to refrain from buying it and left the store.

Even now, students who successfully purchased their target items from the store were coming out with satisfied expressions.

"It's frustrating…"

Without any lies, I expressed my feelings at the moment.

It was my terrible mistake for not investigating the sales pattern during the sale.

Is this the end for a loser who failed to gather information?

On the way back, I went to the supermarket inside the mall. As if being guided, I was drawn into the store without grabbing a basket and went straight to the dairy products corner.

Numerous manufacturers sold milk and yogurt. *Just moments ago, I would've been able to obtain the magical power that could turn this milk into yogurt.*

I wanted to try it out. My desire was growing even stronger.

The distance between the milk carton and yogurt, which I always used to pick up casually, now seemed so far away.

But it wasn't just a matter of distance.

It was as if an invisible glass barrier was blocking me.

I couldn't help but wonder if this was how a young boy must have felt when he desired a trumpet placed on the other side of a showcase… but that was probably different.

As I stood there, other students continued to pick up milk and yogurt and make their purchases.

In my dorm room, I was just running out of yogurt.

But picking it up here would mean… admitting defeat, wouldn't it?

I tried to persuade myself to leave, but my feet wouldn't budge.

That was because—

The milk was unusually on sale today.

And the yogurt was also about 20 yen cheaper than usual.

If it weren't for the yogurt maker incident, I would've definitely bought some and taken it home.

As if under a spell, I was unable to move away from the dairy section.

“Eggs are also cheaper than they've been lately…”

Inflation and global affairs continued to increasingly drive up prices.

Although this school had its own unique rules, somewhat isolated from society, its essence didn't differ from the outside world.

Once I graduate, I'll be faced with confronting these prices and consulting with my wallet every day.

Even though that fate wouldn't come for me, I could still think this way since I was technically an ordinary person right now.

I shouldn't have even considered coming to check things out.

Regardless, I couldn't continue standing here forever.

I made up my mind to forcibly leave, dragging my heavy feet with great effort.

"What happened? I've never seen you make such a dejected face before, Ayanokōji."

"...Kiryūin-senpai."

While I was getting ready to make my retreat, Kiryūin called out to me.

Strangely enough, the heaviness in my legs seemed to lighten, and I was able to effortlessly leave the spot.

After all, I had only come by to see the yogurt display, not with any other particular purpose in mind.

As I left the store empty-handed, Kiryūin followed behind me.

In the flow of the conversation, I explained the situation in detail to her.

I probably wanted someone to listen to me.

I wanted my regret of not being able to buy the yogurt maker to be understood.

Last night, I learned about the sale.

I rushed to the store when it opened, but I misunderstood the waiting line location.

As a result, others bought it before me, and I couldn't get it.

After hearing all these events, Kiryūin laughed as if it was amusing.

“You never cease to interest me, Ayanokōji. You're truly a special guy.”

“Really? I just consider myself to be an ordinary high school student.”

“That's a unique joke. Well, actually, it's partly true.”

After denying it, she reaffirmed it.

“I laughed because you acted so much like a normal high school student. Insisting on a yogurt maker is unusual, but it wouldn't be odd if you replaced it with another desired product.”

“I see...”

“But did you really want a yogurt maker that much? I think it would be much cheaper, tastier, and safer to buy yogurt from a store.”

Saying that, she looked back at the supermarket that was fading off into the distance.

“There's a purpose in making it yourself and eating it. I lost that chance.”

“You're passionate, even though you're expressionless.”

“Do you not cook?”

When I asked, Kiryūin nodded confidently without hesitation.

“When I was little, I tried to please my parents, but I haven't done it since.”

“Were the results bad?”

“No? It was an indescribable result. Not particularly delicious, nor bad. My parents seemed happy with the intention though. Usually, you would want to see their happy faces again, and improve your cooking.”

She didn't follow that standard path and abandoned cooking altogether.

“I usually just grab something from the convenience store or the school cafeteria. Even if I stop by the supermarket, I usually just buy ready-made dishes in the deli corner.”

Contrary to what I had thought, she didn't cook at all.

Surprisingly, the idea of her not cooking seemed right upon closer inspection.

“What about you? How did you come to love cooking?”

“Since I started high school. It was my first time living alone, and with being in Class D, there were times when the class points were exhausted.”

“You thought about saving money on food expenses by cooking, huh?”

“Even if free meals are available, it's a pain to eat them all year round. Plus, by cooking repeatedly, you can improve your skills and efficiency. I wanted to achieve the best cost-performance, and I recently started thinking about it.”

The yogurt maker held the potential for a new step up.

Not being able to get it made me feel regretful again.

“So? If you really wanted it, why not just buy it?”

“The price difference from the sale item was too high. It has various functions, but I only wanted to ferment milk, so I deemed it unnecessary.”

That would be playing into the store's hands by impulsively purchasing a high-priced product.

“Have you tried searching online?”

“No, not yet.”

“Before feeling down, try looking online. You might find it surprisingly cheap. I have some recommended websites.”

Taking out her cell phone, Kiryūin began typing.

We made sure not to obstruct the flow of traffic and stood at the edge of the aisle to browse through the products. Then, we found a yogurt maker at nearly the same price as today's special discounts.

“That's surprising.”

“It's not much of a sale. It's not just this school's electronics store that’s struggling with inventory management of the same models. It's common knowledge for young people these days.”

“I’m learning something new.”

“Why not buy it online?”

“I realize that I can buy it at the same price but found something else, so I've decided to search for something simpler, and buy it after returning to my room.”

Upon further examination, the yogurt maker on sale had more than enough functionality.

Moreover, an even more simplified version was available for a lower price.

“Anyway, do you need to buy anything, Kiryūin-senpai?”

“I just followed you because I was intrigued by your hunched-over back. I don't have any particular business at the supermarket.”

It seemed that she didn't have any errands over there.

“That's unusual—to go out of your way to approach me just because I'm interesting.”

Maybe she was really bored during the winter break.

“I know what you're thinking. But it's not because I'm bored that I'm sticking my nose into trivial matters.”

“It's still suspicious.”

When I conveyed my honest thoughts, she smiled bitterly and explained again.

“It's because it's you, Ayanokōji.”

“I’m not someone worth evaluating.”

“You know that it's pointless to be humble at this point. The scene of you confronting them on that uninhabited island is permanently engraved in my mind.”

The scene of the final showdown with Tsukishiro last summer on the beach. Kiryūin had been exchanging blows with Shiba, who appeared to be Tsukishiro's subordinate, in order to help me. It wasn't unreasonable for her to hold me in high regard due to the unusual circumstances and the physical aspect of the fight.

“That's why it's so disappointing.”

“Disappointing?”

Like a girl confessing her hidden feelings, Kiryūin let out a deep sigh.

“I often thought about it around that summer, like, if there was a system to repeat a grade in this school.”

“Repeating a grade?”

It was something that students who couldn’t graduate from Class A might’ve considered in desperation, but would quickly give up on. After all, this school didn’t recognize repeating a grade as an option in its rules.

“It's a ridiculous thought, right?”

“Without a doubt. Most students don't resist the established rules.”

Breaking the rules was something anyone could do. To fight and overturn them, to persuade, and change them—*that’s what’s difficult*.

“Even so, I wanted to consider staying for another year. If that was possible, I could’ve observed your journey closely for another year.”

“Looks like there are some students who think about such things. It's quite unusual.”

I thought about Kiryūin; it wouldn't be just a daydream in her head.

“Nothing’s unattainable with private points. Based on that logic, I even tried seeking confirmation from teachers, but the answer was no.”

“Let me ask you, what if someone prepared the total amount of 20 million points?”

If the school didn't acknowledge repeating years, the only thing that could overturn that would be paying an enormous price.

I was glad I asked, but it seemed like the answer could have already been seen in Kiryūin's expression.

“The largest purchase in this school is the right to move to any class. Unless you're a real oddball, you could get your dream position in your third year as long as you move to Class A just before graduating.”

“True. There's probably no purchase greater than that.”

Confirmation of getting to Class A was valued higher than the right to repeat a year would never change.

Who would willingly invest 20 million points in a high-risk repeat year?

“Why isn't a repeat year allowed even if someone prepared a huge amount of points? Isn't it strange? The rights to prevent expulsion, invalidate expulsion, or move classes are in the school's rulebook, but the repeat system is excluded from the start.”

That was certainly true. The value of private points, where nothing was unattainable, wasn’t an exaggeration. However, it was true that even within that, there were still things that couldn’t be bought.

As mentioned earlier, deliberately repeating a year wasn’t something students could judge as more valuable than moving to Class A.

However, since it wasn’t permitted, there must be a reason.

“Students who wish to repeat a year will have been enrolled in this school for over a year, so they’ll have a lot of knowledge about special exams and such. From an information standpoint, it might be deemed unfair to other classes.”

Information, huh?

It was certainly a possible argument, but sharing information could happen even without repeating.

Senpais could leave as much information for kōhais as possible in everyday life, and the advantage wouldn't be significant.

Special exams would generally be different for students one grade ahead.

Even in written exams, the advantage might not prevail, and it was unlikely that it would have a significant impact overall.

"Perhaps it's because it could result in lowering the school's reputation?"

"Well? How so?"

"This school grants great privileges to those who graduate from Class A. Companies also accept and evaluate students who have graduated from that class, and deem them as outstanding. But wouldn't doubts arise about the school's value when a student who has repeated a year mixes in? For university admissions and job offers that can only be seen from the outside, they would see the fact that someone has graduated from Class A, but for some reason, repeated a year. You can even apply this to yourself. An oddball who has inefficiently failed to graduate from Class A and has repeated. While such a person has the ability, it becomes blurred for the employer. Evaluations become very difficult."

The school would no longer want to send out such a student.

"So, not adopting the repeat system is to eliminate troublesome patterns?"

"If you're looking for a reason that makes sense, it would be this."

It was a plausible argument.

"If I were to interview myself, I might hold off on hiring."

It was self-deprecating humor that could only be said because of her confidence in her abilities.

“If you’re thinking about repeating on a whim, transfer to Nagumo's class, please.”

“I'm not interested in that.”

“What if you had 20 million points saved up from your own abilities?”

“Even then, I don't care. I'm fine graduating in any class.”

“For you, graduating in Class A or Class D doesn't make a big difference, but usually someone would think to make the best out of being able to graduate in Class A.”

As long as no one was unhappy, it would be better to transfer to Class A.

“Besides, after graduation, there’s a system that allows you to exchange private points for actual cash. That's what’s important to me.”

That amount, no matter how much, would be valuable funding for a student who has just graduated from high school.

Still, it couldn't be compared to the potential future benefits of graduating from Class A.

“Private points can grant most students' desires, but they can't grant everything. It could have that type of meaning as well.”

“That's true. You can't use them to fire the teachers you don't like, for example.”

With a sly grin, Kiryūin spoke dangerously.

“It's like you've tried it before.”

“Heh, I'll keep that as a no-comment.”

“So you really have no interest in Class A?”

“It's not that surprising. While it may be a curious situation, I don't think I'm the first. Besides, I thought you felt the same way, didn't you?”

Indeed, I wasn't very attached to graduating from Class A since I wouldn't receive the school's maximum support—their generous benefits upon graduation.

“True, you and I might not be that different. But even if there are other students like me who have no interest in Class A, there's still a huge difference with you, Kiryūin-senpai.”

“And that difference is?”

“Contribution to the class. Normally, people will move for the sake of their friends, even when it's unnecessary for them. An able person like you could’ve helped Class B and stood up against former Student Council President Nagumo. Even with differing personalities and ideas, your classmates must have relied on you more than once or twice.”

“Yeah...” Kiryūin affirmed as if it wasn't her concern.

“But for three years, up until now, you've only acted for yourself.”

“Maybe I’ve been contributing in my own way in secret? I just might not have been able to compete with Nagumo.”

“If you view yourself in your class—no, if you look at the entire third-year body, you'll understand. You only move for your own sake, but you don’t hold others back. That's why both enemies and allies perceive you as a non-existence.”

Pretty much invisible to both enemies and allies.

It wasn't easy to become this way, regardless of one's abilities.

“Even those who had voiced their resentment about my lack of cooperation stopped talking to me eventually.”

However, because her grades had been excellent, their disregard for her was unavoidable and forgiven.

She was highly rated by the school for both her academic and physical abilities, which meant she had been achieving solid results in written exams, athletic classes, and tournaments. She wasn't cutting corners in the visible areas like some of our classmates (me included).

“Can I ask you a question too?”

“Do you have something you want to ask?”

“That's a ridiculous question. I have countless things I want to ask. But even if I ask 10 or 20 questions, there's no guarantee that I'll only get the truth.”

She was aware of her limits and pointed out such a premise before voicing the question.

“Is it safe to assume that you've resolved the various problems you've been carrying?”

It was a vague question, but I didn't need to think too deeply to understand what she was talking about.

“Thanks to you, I'm living a peaceful life now.”

As I was doing now, I walked around this place as I always had.

“No matter how many times I look back, I can't forget your smooth movements from that day on the beach. It surpassed my expectations, imagination, and all conceivable human potential. Even if I told my ojii-sama, he wouldn’t believe it.”

“Your ojii-sama[1]?”

“Sorry, was that difficult to understand? I'm talking about my own grandfather.”

Kiryūin said, narrowing her eyes as if recalling her grandfather.

It was rare for someone to call their grandfather “ojii-sama,” from my perspective.

“That's an unusual way to call him.”

“Well, I come from a fairly privileged background. At home, I’m always addressed as ojou-sama[2].”

“Oh, so that’s what you meant? Well, no, I guess I can't completely disagree then.”

I always sensed something refined about her upbringing.

On the other hand, there was also a wildness to her, so I never had any concrete evidence.

“I spent more time living with my grandfather when I was young than with my busy parents. To put it simply, I was a total grandpa's girl.”

She smiled nostalgically, her eyes narrowing. It wasn't a face she could make if there were many unpleasant memories.

“When I found out I was going to this school, I was really down about not being able to see him for three years.”

“So your grandfather really doted on you, huh?”

“He used to say that he'd be glad to have me back if I ever dropped out like it was his catchphrase.”

That was a pretty cruel thing to say to a grandchild that was about to spread her wings.

It seemed like he wasn't an ordinary grandfather, just from that statement alone.

“But wouldn't he be shocked if you actually dropped out?”

“No, I'm sure he’d be genuinely happy. Besides, if I had decided to choose my own path, with just one word from my grandfather, I could've gone to most universities or companies.”

In other words, even without graduating from Class A, she could receive the same—or even greater—support from her grandfather. It seemed she had both power and affection at her disposal.

There was a guy in our class with a similar situation, though his way of thinking was different.

“By any chance, do you know Kōenji?”

“Kōenji? Why would his name suddenly come up?”

“The reason? Well, you see, that's...”

I noticed Kōenji walking towards us and tried to ask her about their relationship because of the conversation we were having.

“I don't think I have any connection to someone as eccentric as him.”

He was attracting the attention of the surrounding students, staring at him as if he was some strange creature.

He was carrying a large box with a famous brand's logo on it by himself. Judging by the unique shape of the cardboard box, I guessed that it was a large, flat-screen TV.

“Don't you know? Apparently, Kōenji is the son of a very famous businessman. Not only that, but his name has already been mentioned as the next president.”

“Is that so? Maybe that's the root of his eccentricity. But unfortunately, I don't know much about that. If he's that famous though, it wouldn't be surprising if my grandfather had some connections… Well, either way, it has nothing to do with me.”

It seemed Kiryūin didn't have much knowledge about the political or financial world. In that sense, I was grateful that she didn't find my somewhat unusual last name, 'Ayanokōji,' suspicious.

Even if she did recognize the name, it would be a stretch to link it directly to me. It wasn’t easy to think that a rare name meant the same lineage.

“Could it be that the underlying reason you're not interested in Class A is because of that?”

“No way. I chose to dive into this school because I was sick of being born into such a wealthy family. I have no intention of relying on them after graduation. The third years have already finished their class battles, so like everyone else in Class B and below, we're focusing on studying and job hunting.”

In other words, Kiryūin had a clear direction for her future.

And she apparently had no intention of receiving any favor from her family.

“Can I go ahead and ask what path you're planning to take, Kiryūin-senpai?”

“I'm going to enroll in college for now. If I can get in as a scholarship student, I can keep costs down. I'll work part-time to make up for the money I lack in daily life. It's not really anything worth mentioning.”

“Setting aside the scholarship part, you seem like a pretty normal student.”

“I want to be carefree, study hard, and become an adult all on my own. After that, maybe I'll work at a small or mid-sized company. It doesn't even have to be that big. I just want to live a life that has nothing to do with the Kiryūin name or status.”

Living a life that didn't stand out, wasn't tied down, and was simply free.

That was the strong will I sensed in Kiryūin's words.

“Not bad, huh?”

“Right? I don't need anything special. At least that's what I think for now.”

In a way, it was similar to my thoughts when I first entered this school. Whether my class rank went up or down didn't matter. I would continue living for my own freedom.

There was someone who stuck to that idea for three years right beside me.

“But a peaceful and flat life isn't easy to get, even if it seems easy now. After graduation, the name Kiryūin will follow me whether I like it or not.”

I didn't know anything about the Kiryūin family, but if it was a relatively famous one, then it was natural for them to have certain things set in place.

Even if someone like me could escape to this school out of rebelliousness, the end would still come when three years passed.

“Wouldn't your grandfather support your choices?”

“My grandfather isn’t really the issue. If anything, it would be my parents. Unlike my grandfather, they don't have a sense of humor. If they find out I'm leading a normal life, I can easily imagine their reaction.”

Listening to this, I felt like the situation was eerily similar to mine.

“I don't regret my actions the past three years… I've lived as I pleased.”

There was a slight hesitation in her voice as she declared her conviction.

“Nevertheless, I wanted to try to see myself choosing something other than just chasing freedom. That might be why I've been looking for ways to repeat a grade.”

If Kiryūin-senpai had lived her life to the fullest for three years, there was no doubt that she’d have been a threat to Nagumo’s Class A.

Living according to one's lineage may also be a difficult thing.

“The battle with Nagumo isn't over yet, right? What are you going to do about it?”

“I would like to resolve the matter as soon as possible, but right now, I don't have an answer.”

Everything depended on what the school decided. Whether there would be room for Nagumo and my battle was all up to luck.

And besides—

There were situations that wouldn't be realized regardless of whether we wanted them or not.

“I can't imagine you being careless or arrogant, but be careful during the third term.”

“Is that advice from my senpai?”

“It's not necessarily advice. Just the other day, I heard Nagumo talking on the phone with someone. He seems to be tirelessly gathering rumors about second-year students.”

Is Nagumo trying even harder than anyone else to make our battle a reality?

“The special exam you'll be taking next might be more troublesome than you think.”

“The school won't indirectly leak information, but it seems easy to guess the difficulty of the special exams based on past statistics. So, what was the special exam in the first term of the second year like?”

If there was a high probability of the same trend continuing, Nagumo must’ve been making inferences from the special exam last year.

“Well, in our year, Nagumo took control of everything and had all the authority. I'm just a Class B student living my daily life. I don't remember everything in detail.”

“I see.”

Indeed, it was rare for Kiryūin to participate in special exams.

However, the fact that she didn’t even remember some aspects made me a little suspicious.

“But during that special exam, one person did leave Class B.”

“Did they leave the school? As in dropping out?”

“That’s how I remember it. It was probably a necessary sacrifice, though it must be related to Nagumo's adjustments.”

The ideal victories and rewards that Nagumo had in mind.

If expulsion was an inevitable part of the special exam, then there would be some casualties.

If Kiryūin's story was true, perhaps there would be a hard start in the third term as well.

“Usually, it seems like it would be Class D or Class C being cut, right?”

“In any case, I don't remember anything about the other classes.”

She was probably less interested in other classes than in the TV news that was covered this morning.

Yet, for someone who claimed to remember nothing, some essential memories seemed to linger.

“I'm not saying it'll be the same as last year, though. There's no need to worry too much.”

“Your alleged ignorance isn’t really persuasive.”

In this situation, I didn't press deep, and just let it slide.

“Sorry to hold you up. It's not often that I get to talk with you about such trivial matters. It was a good opportunity.”

“No problem. I'm glad I got to talk to you too, Kiryūin-senpai.”

Kiryūin began to walk away, but quickly stopped and turned back.

“This is just my intuition, but I have a feeling that we'll meet again somewhere. Not at this school, but soon in the future.”

“Do your intuitions usually turn out to be true?”

“Usually, they have about 50% accuracy.”

That sounds like just a simple guess…

“But this time, I have more confidence. If forced to give a reason, it's because you're not just an ordinary high school student. If you don't disappear into society, you might catch my eye again.”

“Wouldn't it be better if that didn't happen? You’re supposed to want a normal life.”

“Hmm? Hahaha, that may be true.”

Kiryūin gently raised her hand and began walking out of the Keyaki Mall.

To meet again somewhere, huh?

That future would likely never come.

But if such a future existed—

No, I'll discard that thought.

There was no significance in such far-fetched fantasies.

Now, I was free to live my life in this moment.

That alone was enough.

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[1]: *"Ojii-sama"* is a less common way of referring to someone's grandfather in comparison to *"祖父 (sofu)"* or *"おじいさん (ojii-san)"*.

[2]*"Ojou-sama"* is a formal Japanese word for young, high-class lady.

Both phrases are typically uncommon which is why Ayanokōji was confused.

3.3

After parting with Kiryūin, I recalled the interaction between Ichinose and me this morning.

I had been wondering if she'd come to Keyaki Mall, but I didn't know her purpose for coming.

Under normal circumstances, I should've informed her by phone that I was inside the mall, but it seemed like she was rejecting that or avoiding it somehow.

Judging from that unique scenario, it could be assumed that by simply going to Keyaki Mall, it wouldn't be necessary to bother looking for Ichinose.

For the time being, I chose to go home without trying to find her.

If I couldn't meet her before I went outside, I could always turn back.

With that thought, I returned to the mall's entrance.

The large Christmas tree that was just set up yesterday attracted many friends and couples. They were taking photos and admiring it, but it would be removed the following day.

Kei, who had been bedridden, must have deeply regretted it, but there was nothing that could be done. Influenza was showing signs of spreading, and nearly 20 people in the school had already tested positive.

As I passed by the tree, I saw a lot of students gathered around.

No, at this moment, there might've been more students than yesterday.

In the crowd, I spotted Ichinose, who seemed to be enjoying a lively conversation, surrounded by three female first-year students.

I didn't have the courage to call out to her here, so I decided to watch her from a distance for a while.

By chance, Hoshinomiya-sensei and Chabashira-sensei, walking beside each other, noticed me while passing.

During long vacations, it was common to see teachers in casual clothes. Still, it was impossible not to feel a sense of incongruity about Chabashira-sensei, who loved wearing suits.

“Oh? Are you alone?”

The first one to approach me was Hoshinomiya-sensei, followed by Chabashira-sensei.

“Uh, yeah.”

“I thought you'd be lovey-dovey with your girlfriend today and yesterday. Did you get dumped?”

“Don't tease the students, Chie. Besides, Karuizawa has the flu.”

Chabashira-sensei explained that there was a reason.

“I know that.”

“You knew and still teased?”

“Because it's annoying, isn't it? It's unacceptable for students a year younger to spend Christmas with their lover, or something like that!”

“You used to do that every year up until now. This year's just different.”

“That's why I can't stand it. Maybe I can understand Sae-chan's feelings for the first time.”

“Don't lump me in with you. I'm a person who doesn't mind being alone on Christmas. It's a pity, Ayanokōji. You haven't met Karuizawa, right?”

“Can't be helped. Besides, I don't mind being alone on Christmas either.”

As I answered, Chabashira-sensei gave a slight grin and Hoshinomiya-sensei seemed even unhappier.

Looking at the contrasting pair, I thought about Mashima-sensei.

If he sided with either of them, it would undoubtedly be very troublesome.

“Where are you teachers going now?”

“To karaoke! We teachers also have the right to have fun, you know? Right?”

“Chie’s the only one who wants to sing. I'm just being dragged along.”

“Oh, really? Isn't Sae-chan excited too?”

“I'm not excited...”

It must be hard for the teachers too—with the constant tense atmosphere of the class competition.

The two of them, good friends or bad, traded barbs as they headed to karaoke.

While we were all talking, I noticed Ichinose was looking our way.

It seemed that the girls' conversation had finished, and she was waiting for me.

“What a coincidence, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Yeah, quite a coincidence. You seemed to be having a great time with your kōhais from the first year.”

“They're from Class 1-B. Yagami-kun, a former member of the student council, suddenly dropped out, didn't he? They still seem to be affected by it, and they're somewhat confused. But they were trying to be positive about it.”

Given the nature of why he got expelled from the school, I assumed that the class itself wasn’t penalized, but they inevitably suffered damage from the lack of students. This difficult situation would continue for some time.

“How long have you been here?”

“Since around 10:30, I think.”

Considering that it was almost 12 o'clock, she had been waiting for over an hour.

No, describing it as *waiting* might be incorrect.

Ultimately, Ichinose was acting based on her own principles today.

“Hey, Ayanokōji-kun, could you take a picture with me?”

With that, Ichinose shyly took out her phone.

“To make some memories, I took pictures with various people here today.”

To prove it was true, Ichinose opened her photo album and showed the section with today's date. As expected, she had taken several photos with various students in front of the Christmas tree.

Some of the shots included boys from her class.

In addition, there were also photographs with the first-year students from earlier.

Ichinose had mentioned that she was waiting here to make memories, but her real goal became apparent shortly after.

“However... I want to take a picture with you, Ayanokōji-kun. That's my main wish.”

Ichinose didn't explain further, but it wasn't difficult to understand.

If there was a photo of just the two of us on her phone, Kei and her close friends might not respond well if they found out.

However, if she had photos with many others, both male and female, there would be no issue if someone happened to question her.

In fact, there weren't many, but I could see two shots with boys from other classes.

Those boys either looked pleased or awkwardly showed a peace sign from Ichinose calling them out.

Regardless of their year, there was no uniformity in the sort of boys.

It seemed like she was responding to the photo requests of all the students who had called out to her without discriminating.

“So... Would you mind taking a picture with me?”

“Of course. I have no reason to refuse.”

“I'm glad.”

She had put in a tremendous amount of effort just to take a picture with me.

“I actually didn't plan on taking photos with so many, but a lot of people started calling out to me after they heard about it. It was a bit difficult.”

It seemed that the rumor that Ichinose wanted to take photos with people had started to spread.

“How many people have you taken photos with so far?”

“Um, let's see... I think the people from earlier were my 43rd.”

That’s quite a lot... It was evident that she was taking these photos at a high rate.

“I plan on continuing for a while. It wouldn't make much sense if I stopped now, right?”

According to Ichinose, this was so no trace was left even after the goal had been reached.

“Well, it's not that it doesn't look suspicious in a different way.”

Ichinose smiled as she looked back on her actions—those that could objectively be viewed as bizarre.

If I had done the same thing, I would’ve undoubtedly been treated as a completely suspicious person.

However, the same actions look entirely different with Ichinose.

Ichinose pulled my arm and guided me to adjust the angle.

Then, she leaned in and held her cell phone with the front camera on.

“Now’s the time—no one else is looking.”

She seemed to be constantly observing the surroundings and decided it was the perfect timing.

Ichinose put her hand around my arm and took a picture.

Then, she took another with a little gap between us, without her hand on my arm.

“The first one won't be saved on my phone, so… It's okay, right?”

“Is this asking for a post-fact approval?”

“…Yeah. If you don't want it, I'll delete it now.”

“No, you can keep it. I don't intend to blame anyone if someone else sees it. It's my responsibility for allowing the photo to be taken, no matter how it's used.”

“Are you sure? If I misuse it, it could cause a rift in your relationship with Karuizawa-san…”

“It's strange to complain after conveniently taking a picture, right?”

If you were going to be photographed, you wouldn’t permit it without being prepared.

Of course, it was different if you were forced.

We closed the distance between us in about 10 seconds, and before we knew it, we were back to our usual distance.

During that time, no one saw us being intimate.

“By the way, Ayanokōji-kun, you met with Chihiro-chan yesterday, right?”

Chihiro Shiranami. I recalled the image of her wearing headphones and listening to music.

“You know a lot.”

“It's common for us to gather both on weekdays and holidays, so I felt like Chihiro-chan's behavior was a bit different yesterday. We didn't talk about anything specific, but she reacted to your name, so I thought maybe you had met and spoken with her.”

Ichinose, who always cared about her classmates' mental state, may easily notice changes.

“By the way, what do you mean by her feeling a bit different? I hope it wasn’t in a bad way.”

“It's okay. I don't know what you talked about, but I felt like Chihiro-chan was laughing more than usual yesterday.”

The risky bet worked, and urging her to be prepared seemed to have had a positive effect.

“I'm glad to hear that.”

“But…”

Although I was delighted by Shiranami's growth, Ichinose wasn’t finished.

“Right now, she cares about me more than anyone else, but you can’t get too involved, okay? She’s easily swayed.”

A warning not to close the distance with Shiranami any further than it was.

“When you want to hang out with Chihiro-chan, I'd like you to call me too.”

“I understand. I’ll make sure to do that.”

Whether it was for her responsibility as a protector for her class or for her own well-being, I would have to be cautious when meeting with Shiranami in the future.

“Ichinose-senpai! Ayanokōji-senpai! Hello!”

“Ah, it's Nanase-san.”

Upon finding me and Ichinose, Nanase approached us with a slight jog.

“I heard you two were over here taking photos with people, so I came too.”

Apparently, the rumor had spread far enough to reach Nanase.

“Wouldn't it get out of hand at this rate? You might be taking pictures until midnight.”

“Well, that's how it goes. Maybe I'll become a legendary girl who took a picture with every student in front of the Christmas tree.”

Ichinose smiled as she responded to the jest with another jest.

“Are you joining as well, Ayanokōji-senpai?”

“No, I just heard the rumor and came to take photos with Ichinose. I won't get in your way.”

Feeling it would be improper to join in, I decided to step back.

“I don't mind if you join us.”

“No, I'll pass. Being tied up to this place like Ichinose is tough, and there aren't many people who'd want to take a photo with me anyway.”

Nanase, sensing the situation, didn't force the issue and stood shoulder to shoulder with Ichinose. The two began adjusting their positions for the photo when Nanase seemed to notice something and stopped.

“Sorry, can you wait a moment?”

“Hm? Sure, but what's up?”

Apologizing to Ichinose, Nanase hurried over in a certain direction. It seemed that a student from her class, Hōsen, was there. He was walking alone with a scary expression, not even looking in our direction.

Nanase approached him like a puppy, called out to him, and pointed in our direction while talking to him.

“Could she be inviting Hōsen-kun?”

“It seems like it.”

While it wasn't strange for her to invite a classmate, the particular classmate at hand was Hōsen. He didn't seem like the type to take photos with others.

However, after a brief conversation with Nanase, Hōsen changed direction and started walking towards us while keeping his scary expression.

“Looks like he's coming.”

“It seems like it.”

Hōsen's gaze captured not only Ichinose but also me standing beside her.

I had been enjoying a leisurely winter break, so I'd prefer to avoid any potential trouble.

“Um, would it be okay for Hōsen-kun to join the photo too?”

“I don't mind at all, but are you sure about that?”

Ichinose's words suggested her hesitance of Hōsen’s desires. Hōsen remained silent, staring at me and Ichinose with a scary face.

“It's totally fine. Now, please, Hōsen-kun.”

Saying that, Nanase pushed Hōsen's back, somewhat forcibly.

I thought he’d definitely resist, but surprisingly, Hōsen closed the distance with light steps.

“You've been staring at me. Is there something on my face?”

As soon as he said that, he glared at me and started to get in my face.

“Well, umm, it's just...”

It wasn’t an expected behavior. I couldn't help but suspect that there was an ulterior motive behind it.

“Huh? If you have something to say, say it.”

“Nothing really.”

“Hmph.”

As I backed off, Hōsen snorted and looked away.

He had an impressive presence for a first-year student. *If I’m not careful, would I get stabbed with a knife again?*

Although Hōsen and Nanase were finished taking photos with Ichinose, Hōsen still looked like he had something to say.

As he started to walk away with his hands in his pockets, I couldn't help but ask, “What was that about?”

As Nanase approached me, she whispered in a low voice, “Actually, Hōsen-kun really likes Ichinose-senpai.”

“...Seriously?”

I couldn't see it. Well, I did find it strange that he’d pose for a photo with Ichinose, but still, that was a surprising revelation.

“He came to check things out because he heard she was taking photos here.”

So it wasn't a coincidence that he happened to pass by.

“But, maybe it really was just a coincidence?”

“I don't think so. I was called out to Keyaki Mall by him. He probably couldn't approach Ichinose-san by himself, so he used me instead.”

I wondered if he just wanted to take a photo with Ichinose based on some calculation.

At least based on what I saw, that didn't seem to be the case.

Hōsen had already disappeared, so there was no way to confirm it any further.

“Hey, Ichinose, let's take a picture together!”

Two third-year girls approached Ichinose, waving their hands.

If this continued, there might be more and more of them.

I decided to give a quick wave to my senpais as well and backed off.

“See you, Ayanokōji-kun!”

Ichinose waved her small hand and smoothly switched her attention to the senpais.

It seemed to have turned into a large-scale event, and I was one person out of the 46, including Nanase and Hōsen.

Chapter 4 - Gauging Intentions

DECEMBER 26TH.

On this day, with no club activities, Sudō and some others from Horikita's class gathered at the Keyaki Mall café.

There were a total of eight people: Ike, Sudō, Shinohara, Matsushita, Mori, Wang, Maezono, and Onodera.

It was Maezono who proposed these students' gathering. She stated that she wanted to discuss something "important" regarding the future of the class. However, everyone initially scratched their heads at her request for several reasons.

Firstly, the topic was too rigid and serious to be raised by a female student like Maezono.

And secondly, key members of the class seemed to be deliberately excluded.

It was unclear why key figures such as Horikita and Hirata weren't invited.

They'd be indispensable for discussing the future of the class.

However, since the majority of the selected members didn't have any strong feelings against gathering, they accepted Maezono's invitation as a part of a fun activity, although Matsushita remained skeptical about it throughout.

Nevertheless, Matsushita didn't confront Maezono directly about her suspicions, and like the other six invitees, she pretended to merely show up at the meeting.

Perhaps because there was a relatively large number of people (eight in total), Maezono set the meeting location at the Keyaki Mall café.

By the time they reached their scheduled meeting time at 11:30, six of them, excluding Ike and Shinohara, were present.

Seeing the assembled members, Matsushita's doubts only deepened.

She questioned not only the selection of students but also the point of the discussion on the future of the class within such a public place.

To begin with, she didn't expect any substantial discussion from someone of Maezono's personality and ability.

However, she would've appreciated more effort in choosing the location for a meeting considered "important." Maezono, on the other hand, showed no signs of understanding or sympathy for Matsushita's concerns and simply bursted into loud laughter while discussing a TV show she had watched the previous day.

Matsushita was relatively close to Maezono and noticed she seemed livelier in recent days.

"Sorry to keep you waiting~"

Ignoring Matsushita's thoughts, Ike and Shinohara arrived late at the meeting location.

As the two of them held hands and appeared to be on friendly terms, they sat down on adjoining chairs that were arranged for them by the others.

"You guys are showing off your love in public during the day, huh? And you're late!"

While being dragged by the heat of their love, Sudō reprimanded Ike.

"Hehehe! That's not true. Right, Satsuki?"

"Yeah, yeah, it's normal. Sudō-kun, you're used to being late, aren't you?"

Even when they sat down, the two didn't let go of each other's hands, prompting Sudō to sigh.

"I haven't been late recently."

Although he replied as such, it seemed that his response didn't reach Shinohara and the others.

"Hey, those two..."

"Seems like it."

Maezono whispered, and Matsushita nodded.

The behavior of both parties seemed to have changed noticeably on either the 24th or the 25th.

They undoubtedly predicted that those two passed a certain line from their previous relationship. Rumors of a romantic relationship between the two were circulating during the school trip, but there was no definitive evidence.

With their current attitudes, their classmates would surely realize the truth soon.

"That Kanji guy..."

Sudō had been friends with Ike for a long time, and last year, they had often excitedly discussed what they'd do if they got girlfriends.

Sudō, frustrated at having been outdone, was so surprised that he heavily sighed as he saw them openly affectionate.

"What's up, Sudō-kun?"

Onodera, sitting next to Sudō, couldn't quite understand his complex feelings, so she whispered a question in concern.

"It's nothing. Anyway, it's good that our class is back to normal, right?"

"Yeah, it was tense until just a while ago."

Following the unanimous special exam, there were concerns that some friendships might've been shattered due to Kushida's ruthless exposé. Wang, whose crush on Hirata became well-known, was saved by Matsushita and her friends' support, while Shinohara, who had been ridiculed for her looks, had recovered completely thanks to her boyfriend Ike's support.

The fact that they could gather like this was proof that the relationships were gradually being repaired over time.

"Maezono, let's get on with it."

Unable to stand watching the lovey-dovey couple any longer, Sudō urged her to continue.

"That's true. Ahem, thank you everyone for gathering today."

First, Maezono expressed her gratitude to all seven of the attendees who came.

Initially, Maezono was aggressive and confrontational, with a bad attitude and language. However, over time, she had softened and became more relaxed.

At least, none of the members present seemed to dislike her at the moment. She had even become close friends with Wang and Satō.

Matsushita was also in a positive relationship with Maezono, but she didn't hold her in high regard.

"I've no issues with gathering, but why is it just us discussing the class's future? It's important, right?"

Sudō, who asked the same question, also shared Matsushita's doubt.

Feeling that her concern was voiced, Matsushita hoped for the conversation to progress.

"Now that you mention it, why?"

Ike and Shinohara looked at each other as if they were realizing the situation for the first time.

Matsushita, meanwhile, had a theory lingering in the back of her mind, but...

"Yeah, there's actually a good reason for that... I deliberately didn't invite Hirata-kun and the others. There's something I want to clear up before the third term begins."

Maezono talked about the purpose of the discussion after making it clear that it was a well-thought-out decision.

"What you want to clear up is regarding Ayanokōji-kun, isn't it?"

The person mentioned was their classmate. Excluding Maezono, the other seven people didn't particularly react, or rather, they didn't seem to understand why Ayanokōji's name was brought up.

"To be honest, perhaps it’s problematic for me to say this, but I don't like Ayanokōji-kun. Rather—no, that's not quite right. I find him hard to deal with."

Having judged her expression to be harsh, she corrected herself after saying it.

"Hard to deal with? Why?"

Wang asked while continuing the conversation, accepting Maezono's candid evaluation.

"Ayanokōji-kun isn't a troublemaker, and he doesn't forcefully invoke interactions, right?"

Wang honestly didn't think Ayanokōji had done anything to give Maezono a bad impression.

"That's true, but I don't like dark and hard-to-get-along-with people… I feel like our wavelengths don't match, and it makes me feel uncomfortable, so I distanced myself from him, kind of?"

"So, you're saying it's a one-sided aversion?"

Matsushita, who had been silent until now, questioned Maezono.

"Uh… You might be right."

"Ayanokōji’s more of a gloomy person, right? Like an introverted type? He's always quiet."

Ike agreed that Maezono's image of Ayanokōji wasn’t entirely wrong.

Ignoring whether they liked or hated him, no one immediately denied that Ayanokōji's personality gave off a quiet and dark impression. However, just as they thought that…

"Things have changed now. At least, that's what I think."

The first one to object was Sudō.

"First of all, if he was really gloomy, there's no way he could be dating Karuizawa. Right?"

He didn't just deny it, but also provided the reasoning behind it.

"Well, I admit it was surprising that he's dating Karuizawa. But still..."

Ike's impression of Ayanokōji didn't change much, even though there were aspects that he agreed with.

"Lately, you've been talking to Ayanokōji a lot, haven't you? When did you guys become friends?"

Ike prodded, seemingly concluding that Sudō's defense came more from protective feelings rather than logic.

Sudō picked up a filled cup, frowning in response.

"Well, not just me, but you and everyone were playing quite a bit when we first enrolled, right?"

"Yeah, but that was because of our classmate-like relationship, and even then, we weren't particularly close friends. Were you really thinking he was your friend?"

"At that time..."

Sudō, who had been talking back until now, choked on his words when recalling their enrollment days.

As Sudō and Ike glared at each other, Maezono intervened in a hurry.

"Wait, wait, don't start a fight! We haven't even touched on the main topic yet. Since Sudō-kun recently started getting along with Ayanokōji-kun, I wanted to ask him about various things today."

The glaring stopped, and Sudō took a breath before replying.

"...Me?"

"Yeah. Among us, you seem to know the most about Ayanokōji-kun's recent situation."

Understanding there was no point in dragging the topic any further, Maezono slightly lowered her voice and started the discussion.

Still, to her friends who hadn't understood yet, she added.

"Ayanokōji-kun isn't just our gloomy classmate... I think he's hiding something."

Now everyone, including Ike and Shinohara, understood what Maezono wanted to say.

"Is today's gathering to discuss who Ayanokōji-kun really is?"

In response to Wang's words, Maezono nodded not once but twice.

"I excluded his girlfriend Karuizawa-san, of course, as well as her close friends like Satō-san and those who have more contact with Ayanokōji-kun, such as Hirata-kun and Horikita-san, as well as Hasebe-san's group."

"Why is that? I think it's better if there are more people who know the details."

"Do you really think so? I'm worried they might cover it up. I think either all or some of the people I just mentioned might know his true nature."

Maezono murmured her excuse, otherwise, things wouldn't make sense.

That was why she excluded students who, to her understanding, had a strong connection with Ayanokōji.

"So, why did you call me?"

"You can't have a smooth discussion if everyone’s clueless about Ayanokōji-kun, right? I thought you’d tell us honestly."

Someone with information was also indispensable to further the discussion.

Maezono seemed proud as she said she'd chosen trustworthy people after giving it some thought.

"I think I get it now. But is it really necessary to be so cautious while talking?"

Shinohara was beginning to understand the situation, but she still found it a bit confusing.

"For now, yes. It's best if we can talk and find out there's nothing going on... I mean, Ayanokōji-kun's existence is obviously odd, isn't it?"

The attendees exchanged glances.

There was a moment of silence before someone unexpectedly backed up Maezono's opinion.

"...Honestly, there are some aspects that I find a bit mysterious too."

Wang hesitated but admitted what she felt.

"Right? I knew it!"

Glad to find someone who agreed, Maezono couldn't hide her joy.

"Mysterious? What exactly do you mean?"

Unsure of which point Wang was referring to, Shinohara leaned forward to hear her explanation.

"Ayanokōji's OAA is likely higher in reality than what the school has disclosed and evaluated, whether it's academic or physical ability."

"Speaking of which, what's his OAA like?"

Not quite aware of Ayanokōji's OAA themselves, Ike showed it to Shinohara on his phone.

"...It does seem odd. I can't accept that he's overall better than me."

Ike looked at the displayed OAA with a serious expression.

"No, that's just because you're no good, Kanji."

"Ever since it was introduced, his OAA has significantly improved. It could be that he's been working hard to develop his abilities like Sudō-kun, but there's no evidence of that."

Sudō, whose academic abilities had once been rated the lowest, being E, managed to improve his grades through daily study and an improved attitude, which was clear for the whole class to see.

On the other hand, no one had seen any signs of Ayanokōji's efforts. It seemed reasonable for Wang to find this strange as everyone suddenly became aware of his high test scores and sudden display of speed.

"So the conclusion is that he wasn't giving it his all?"

Maezono voiced something she'd been wanting to say even before gathering her friends.

"That is a possibility."

"So he's holding back?"

"Yeah, he wasn't serious the whole time, right?"

"What would be the point in that?"

"Maybe he just hates working hard?"

As each person had their own opinion, the discussion became more and more disorderly.

"Wait a minute. I understand what you're all saying, but it's not necessarily true, is it? Ayanokōji-kun doesn't seem to enjoy standing out, so there's a chance he was putting in effort secretly, right?"

Matsushita interjected, trying to stop the flurry of negative speculation. She pointed out the possibility that he'd been working on his abilities behind the scenes, just as Sudō had done in front of everyone.

If it turned out that he'd been hiding his abilities from the start, it would make a bad impression—as if he hadn't been contributing to the class. In that case, she wanted to steer the conversation in a more positive direction.

"When we first entered the school, he didn't seem amazing, but maybe he was desperately trying to improve himself. Look, I've been working hard recently, and making progress."

Ike said without thinking too deeply, wanting to support Ayanokōji.

"Do you really get it, Ike-kun?"

Maezono asked Ike, with a slightly angry tone.

"Wh-what do you mean? Yeah right—as if I don't know what I'm talking about."

"But did you notice that, during the recent special exam, Ayanokōji-kun managed to perfectly solve five questions?"

"Well, I did notice that... but weren't there others who got all of them right?"

Students like Horikita and Hirata, with academic abilities of B or higher, had perfect scores.

"The problems Ayanokōji-kun solved were more difficult than the ones Horikita-san and the others solved. I checked other classes' results, and even students with academic ability A made mistakes; it was a high difficulty level."

Maezono strongly argued that it couldn't be achieved with just a bit of effort.

"But, you know, he was good at math, wasn't he? Then it's possible, right?"

"Only one of the problems he solved was math. The others were two English questions, one chemistry question, and one modern literature question. It's not just one subject."

In gathering the seven people, Maezono had done her research beforehand and emphasized that Ayanokōji wasn't just strong in one specific subject.

"Maybe that's it—that's what I felt was a bit strange."

Wang, one of the better students among them, nodded in agreement.

"Considering that, the gap between the OAA and his actual ability seems even greater than I thought."

"Right? Right? Isn't it strange?"

Matsushita thought about interrupting Maezono's conclusion, but she held back. It would clearly be a stretch to say that the exam happened to cover the areas he had studied. If she defended Ayanokōji too much, it might've seemed like she was just protecting him.

In fact, Matsushita wanted Ayanokōji to contribute to the class in the future and didn't want him to unnecessarily accumulate disdain from the other students.

That was why she decided not to openly support him at that point.

"Maybe he just had a great hunch."

Matsushita was saved by Ike's innocent remark. While he wasn't bent on defending Ayanokōji, Ike naturally spoke for him, making it seem necessary to have him here.

"No, it's not just a hunch or a coincidence. Ayanokōji-kun should've always been good at studying."

Maezono clearly stated that it couldn't be explained by luck or coincidence.

"Are there any other reasons?"

Wang seemed interested in the truth, so she asked. Maezono lowered her voice again.

"I heard this from someone else, but... during the uninhabited island exam this year, there were tests held all over the island to get supplies and points, right? I heard that the academic tests Ayanokōji-kun participated in were extremely difficult, but he answered them all correctly."

The fact that he had high academic abilities since before the special exam in December acted as a credible truth in the discussion, although Maezono had mentioned that she heard it from someone.

"I don't know the truth... but yes. The image Ayanokōji-kun gave off at the beginning of our enrollment and now hasn't changed much... but

somehow, the atmosphere around him drastically shifted. Hirata-kun seems to trust him a lot too. They call each other by their first names. I think he's the only one Hirata-kun does that with."

As someone who had been watching Hirata closer than anyone else and had feelings for him, Wang was most likely right. Everyone in the meeting listened to what she said with unspoken trust.

"Horikita-san is the one leading our class… but, behind the scenes, hasn't Ayanokōji-kun been involved more than once or twice?"

In response to Maezono's passionate plea, Onodera, Ike, and Shinohara nodded deeper in agreement.

Matsushita listened to the conversations and realized that, once again, her classmates were beginning to notice the potential Ayanokōji possessed.

Of course, this was because Ayanokōji had been acting more openly than he had in his first year, but the problem was the possibility of him being negatively perceived.

Considering this, Matsushita decided that it was time to move to a different position.

"Maezono-san's intuition might be right. Ayanokōji-kun has maintained average grades for a long time, so even if he achieves good results now, it won't immediately turn into an A or higher. But if he had been serious from the beginning, he might have at least had an A in terms of academics."

Even the skeptical Matsushita admitted this, and Maezono's face changed to a triumphant one.

"Sudō-kun, do you know anything special about him? Preferably something that we don't know."

Expecting an interesting response, Maezono asked the hesitating Sudō.

"What? Is there something? If there is, tell me."

A woman's intuition. Maezono caught onto his expression and pressed on. At the beginning of his second year, he witnessed the incident with Hōsen and felt something: a glimpse of Ayanokōji's strength.

Sudō wondered whether he should tell them about these events. Although the series of incidents were hidden to make it seem like they never happened, there was no need for him to keep quiet about Ayanokōji's abilities, right?

He questioned himself internally. If revealing the truth would cause problems, he should urge himself to keep silent.

"...That's right... You guys only pay attention to his studies, but I think his real strength isn't just his academic ability."

"What do you mean?"

"You guys saw it too, right? Ayanokōji's speed in the relay race. He's faster than me."

Although they never directly competed at full strength, Sudō admitted defeat before even trying.

However, at this stage, the surrounding people weren’t too surprised; after all, they had already seen his extraordinary ability when he competed against the former student council president, Horikita Manabu.

"Well, that's true, but everyone knows that already, right?"

But what Sudō actually wanted to convey was different.

"Besides, he's not just fast. To be honest, it's a bit frustrating, but his overall athletic ability is better than mine."

"B-better than you!?"

Sudō continued, choosing his words carefully so as to accurately convey Ayanokōji's impressiveness.

"If I can beat him in anything, it's probably just basketball. And even then, I'd rather not play against him. I don't feel like I'd lose, but I have an inkling I'd be pushed to my limits as we play—like an intuition, I guess."

The fact that Sudō, who had the top athletic abilities in their year, was conceding defeat added a strange sense of reality to that unbelievable understanding.

"It would be amazing if it's true, but what's your basis for this?"

Excited yet skeptical, Maezono urged Sudō to provide a convincing explanation.

Deciding that he couldn't talk about the incident with Hōsen, he made up a story.

"I had a fight with Ayanokōji before. I got into an argument and tried to punch him, but I couldn't land a single hit. It's like... I could feel his impressiveness while fighting him."

Sudō lied while taking a sip of water.

During this time, he remembered the moment when he faced Hōsen. Sudō couldn't do anything against him, yet Ayanokōji dealt with him without any hesitation. And he calmly handled the terrifying situation of being stabbed with a knife.

Having witnessed a reality that made him realize he couldn't win even if they fought, Sudō's true feelings in his story made it more believable, and Maezono seemed convinced.

"I wonder if Karuizawa-san started dating Ayanokōji-kun because she realized he was more high-spec than Hirata-kun? ...If so, that's an incredible sense of smell."

Maezono expressed her candid impressions in a half-admiring, half-exasperated tone.

"Well, I did wonder before why Karuizawa chose to date Ayanokōji, you know."

It was something that couldn't be understood unless one experienced Ayanokōji's magnificence up close.

"If Karuizawa saw through it, it makes sense why she chose Ayanokōji."

But now, a different emotion rose in Sudō.

If so, there's no reason for Ayanokōji to make Karuizawa his girlfriend, he thought.

Setting aside her appearance, her personality wasn't overwhelmingly attractive.

However, this was his own completely subjective opinion, so he refrained from voicing it here.

"From your point of view, Ken, this is a pretty incredible assessment. Even after being told, I still don't quite get it."

Ike said, unable to feel anything even after Sudō explained himself.

"It's not unreasonable. After all, this is something you can't understand unless you experience it yourself."

"Indeed. So, what do you think we should do to understand his brilliance?"

Maezono asked Sudō, wanting to prove it somehow.

"Well, how about this… you suddenly attack him from behind."

"No, no, that's a sneak attack."

"Even with a sneak attack, you won't be able to hit Ayanokōji."

"I can do it if it's a sneak attack. But I won't do it because it's unfair."

"Do you want to give it a try from the front? It's got a 0% chance, man, 0%."

"Who knows? I'm pretty confident in my fighting skills."

Ike stood up and punched out with his right and left fists alternately.

He said, "shush," with his mouth, but there was no sharpness in his movements.

"You've never been in a proper fight, have you?"

Shinohara said exasperatedly, urging him to sit down because it was embarrassing.

"Ugh, shut up. I don't bully the weak."

"Alright, alright."

"Well, let's put aside the fight for now. If this is true, I'd really like Ayanokōji to go all out. If so, our class would be secure, and we might even be able to move up to Class A, right?"

If a significant contribution could be made using his academic and physical abilities, the class would benefit.

Ike mentioned that the situation should improve beyond the current state.

"That's true. As classmates, we should ask him to cooperate, don't you think?"

Wang expressed that if they had a strong ally in the class, they should definitely ask for help.

"I agree. After winter break, let's ask him directly."

Considering the situation, there was no reason anyone would object, and Shinohara immediately agreed with the statement.

The growing expectations for Ayanokōji—although this was something Matsushita had always hoped for, at the same time, she felt that they mustn’t make a big mistake.

"Wait, let me give you a piece of advice. I understand the desire to depend on and feel reassured by Ayanokōji-kun, but it's best not to say or demand that in public."

"Why not? If we don't say something, he won't be proactive, right?"

Shinohara complained, saying that they wouldn't stand a chance if he went back to being the unnoticed student he was before.

"That may be true. However, we should also consider why he's been so quiet until now, shouldn't we?"

Sensing Ayanokōji's feelings, the passionate students softened their criticism.

For a while, Sudō, who had been a listener, seemed to be satisfied and deliberately drew attention with a cough.

"Yeah, if he didn't like standing out so much, provoking him unnecessarily could backfire."

"Yeah, wouldn't it be a loss if he became uncooperative? Like when he got all the answers right in that special exam; he's willing to help us."

Having explained the risk of forcing him into the limelight, Shinohara and the others seemed to feel the accompanying danger.

"I agree. If he’s someone unpredictable when left alone like Kōenji-kun, it would be different, but he's not that type. I think it's fine to treat him as we always have."

As if to reinforce the point, Onodera strongly agreed with both Matsushita and Sudō and explained her reasoning.

In this gathering, all eight people shared a common understanding.

Ayanokōji was a skilled person beyond the OAA.

And from then on, as they expected him to show his skills, they wouldn’t rush him.

However, only Maezono, who planned the gathering, had a different idea.

"Is it really okay like that?"

"Huh?"

"I understand that Ayanokōji-kun is an amazing student, but because of that, I feel scared, and creeped out. I mean, he specifically named

Sakura-san, who was in the same close-knit group as him, to be dropped out, right? He also cornered Kushida-san... If Ayanokōji-kun puts his mind to it, he could even make someone in our class drop out."

The group had been absorbed in the conversation. Having gathered for over an hour, one by one, groups of students were entering and leaving the cafe.

One student, who arrived a few minutes before the first person appeared within the group, Wang, finished their drink and left their seat with an empty cup in hand.

"It was an unavoidable decision. Our class had no way to succeed other than to force someone to drop out due to Kushida's choices. Choosing the dropout based on the OAA standard without personal feelings is reasonable."

Sudō immediately countered, and everyone, including Ike, widened their eyes.

"What, did I say something weird?"

Maezono was puzzled at Sudō's panic.

"Rather than weird... "

Matsushita continued as if to take over.

"I've been feeling that you seem more intelligent in the way you talk and speak compared to a while ago. People do grow up, huh?"

"What? What's that about?"

"I mean, if it was the previous Sudō-kun, you wouldn't have been able to say words like 'personal feelings' or 'reasonable,' right?"

"Yeah, I agree," Onodera added.

"No, that's normal. How much do you underestimate me?"

"Doesn't that mean you've grown that much?"

Onodera showed a happy expression as if she was being praised.

"Stop joking around. Uh, what was it... Yeah, Ayanokōji isn't a bad guy."

Feeling embarrassed about being praised, Sudō awkwardly tried to return to the topic.

"I know. It was a test where someone absolutely had to drop out. But do you remember the previous exchange with Kushida-san? The relentless way he cornered her... It was emotionless... like a machine, you know?"

"Ayanokōji didn't want to do that either. He had no choice but to be ruthless."

Sudō still stood by Ayanokōji's side, defending him.

"In a similar situation, would you let Ayanokōji-kun make an emotionless decision again?"

"It's not that I rely solely on Ayanokōji, but isn't it necessary to make objective judgments?"

"Objective, huh? Do you think that's a good idea too?"

Maezono asked, vaguely glancing at Ike and Shinohara.

Students whose names were listed at the bottom of the class due to the OAA.

A premonition of the future that Ayanokōji would choose the next expulsion candidate.

"Well, it's true that Ayanokōji's approach is a bit... How should I put it? Having many friends is a respectable ability, and I want that taken into consideration too. If I were to be expelled, Satsuki would cry, and that wouldn't be efficient, right?"

"Absolutely not."

Shinohara clung to Ike's arm, refusing to let go.

"There's also the previous case where Hasebe-san had been incredibly distressed for a long time due to that situation..."

In light of this recent fact, even Wang's expression became clouded.

"In my opinion, right now, it's still fine. But… I definitely think we should avoid a future where Ayanokōji-kun becomes the class leader," Maezono said.

Those words expressed the invisible fears within her.

"There's no way Ayanokōji would become a leader. That's not his style, right?"

"Can't say that for sure. If he has the ability, I think he'll be recognized as the class leader."

"I would welcome it. If Ayanokōji-kun truly has the ability, I wouldn't mind him being the leader."

Matsushita, who prided herself on her excellence, believed that it would be ideal for Ayanokōji to eventually take charge of the class. Lower-ranking students would have to fear the risk of being expelled, but on the other hand, those in the upper ranks would have a sense of security knowing they wouldn't be expelled as long as they didn't disrupt the class order.

However, Horikita, who fought as their leader, was different. It wasn’t impossible for her to be swayed by emotions. You wouldn’t know what reason you’d be cut for, so you couldn’t be too careful.

"I strongly oppose Ayanokōji-kun being the leader."

"Then what do you think would be ideal, Maezono-san?"

Matsushita expressed her concern to Maezono and wanted to know what she thought.

"Well, that's—"

She tried to answer in a hurry, but she stumbled on her words. Perhaps she didn’t have a clear answer of her own.

"Isn't that why we're discussing like this? Because we don't know?"

She forcibly gave an evasive answer.

"Anyway, there's no way we can find the answer by discussing Ayanokōji-kun's approach any further. Also, no matter what anyone says, the current leader of the class is Horikita-san. If we want to delve deeper into this conversation, we need to invite her, right?"

Matsushita conveyed her stern words as softly as possible.

It wasn’t that she wanted to argue with Maezono.

She didn’t want to move the conversation centered around herself in that situation.

What they should do now was gather information and prevent actions that would hinder Ayanokōji from improving the class.

Although Matsushita understood the lower-ranking students' fear of his cold judgment, it didn't concern her.

She silently apologized in her heart.

"But… maybe there's something we could discover if we keep talking?"

Maezono still seemed hesitant to end the discussion, but after that, the conversation didn't expand any further, and the topic eventually shifted to the events on Christmas Eve.

4.1

Just before 2 p.m. on the same day, a male student stuffed an empty cup into a trash can outside Keyaki Mall, and a female student appeared, glaring at him.

Since both were from the same class, the male student raised his hand cheerfully.

"Yo, Masumi-chan. You arrived earlier than I thought."

"Can you stop calling me that? And don't call me out on a holiday."

"Don't say that. I've got some interesting information today."

"I know you like gathering info, but don't involve me in it."

"Harsh. This is quite useful, you know?"

"Then report it to Sakayanagi, and earn some brownie points yourself."

"I have other things in mind too. The only person I can talk to honestly in class is you, Masumi-chan."

"That's a lie, isn’t it?"

"It's not. At least you can voice your opinions to the princess without fear."

Hashimoto answered, appreciating that point.

"So what? That has nothing to do with being honest. I dislike such a casual approach."

Even when she clearly expressed she hated it, Hashimoto showed no signs of concern and tried to continue the conversation.

"Well, just listen. Let me tell you what I overheard."

Having said that, Hashimoto conveyed that he had eavesdropped on a group's conversation at Keyaki Mall during the day. Based on the

recorded facts on his cell phone, he began to explain and supplement in his own words.

It was about a topic discussed by Sudō and seven other students in Class B.

By the time she finished listening, Kamuro, who had no interest whatsoever, showed a change in attitude.

"Right? Interesting story, wasn't it?"

"I knew some of it to some extent."

"Horikita isn’t the core of Class B after all. The glimpses shown on the uninhabited island, the strange uneasiness and flow up to this point, and behind the unanimous special exam. There’s something far more radical than I imagined going on. It can’t be easy to cut off a girl from a group you were friends with, could it? It meant that he could be extremely ruthless. She was cute too, even if she was a bit plain."

"What does her appearance have to do with this?"

"It definitely matters. If Sakura were ugly, you might think that cutting her off wouldn’t be a big deal. Her appearance matters more than you think."

Hashimoto insisted, but Kamuro didn’t agree. However, she showed some understanding towards the first part of his statement.

"Ayanokōji can make ruthless decisions based solely on interests, regardless of how close he is to someone."

"That's right. And at least during the point of the unanimous special exam, Ayanokōji's placement within the class was not high at all. It's extremely difficult for someone like that to control and guide the class."

Hashimoto made sure to lock and save the recording on his cell phone so that it wouldn't be accidentally deleted.

"By the way, I've been wondering about something since earlier."

"What is it?"

"How could you eavesdrop on such an important conversation?"

"It was just a coincidence. I was lucky."

Hashimoto answered without hesitation, but Kamuro didn't believe it at all.

"Coincidence, huh?"

Hashimoto's recorded audio data started from the point when the members of Horikita's class began gathering at the café.

It was unlikely that he'd predict such an important conversation, considering the higher possibility of engaging in meaningless small talk.

Even if he was randomly collecting information, could there be such a convenient coincidence?

"Really? You're doubting that it was just a coincidence?"

"Not necessarily. I won't pry if you don't want to talk about it. Let it be a coincidence, right?"

Deciding that it was wisest not to dig too deeply, Kamuro chose not to probe any further.

Moreover, Hashimoto showed no signs of answering Kamuro's question.

"So? It was certainly interesting information, but what's next? What's the significance of knowing this?"

"Before reaching a conclusion, if it’s confirmed that Ayanokōji isn’t a normal guy, then I’m curious about where, when, and what he’s been doing from the time he entered the school up until now. Upon admission, that troublemaker Ryūen was rampaging around, but he’s suddenly grown quiet. And recently, there’s been an increasing number of interactions between him and Ayanokōji, right?"

While skillfully incorporating facts he already knew, Hashimoto made assumptions and predictions for Kamuro.

"...Is it that Ryūen lost to Ayanokōji, who was hiding behind Horikita?"

"Ryūen isn't the kind of guy who gets hung up on just one victory or defeat. If this flow is correct, it wasn't just a mere loss. I'd say he lost to Ayanokōji, demonstrating an overwhelming difference in ability."

"If that's the case, what's the reason for Ryūen's involvement with him afterward? Aiming for revenge?"

"That could be on his mind as well. But perhaps it's also related to Ayanokōji's character. If he believes that he can get Ayanokōji on his side, and work in his favor, it's better to have him as an ally rather than an enemy, right?"

"In other words, he's using Ayanokōji to his advantage... That’s just like Ryūen, isn’t it?"

He wouldn't just accept defeat. He was always persistent, just as everyone imagined.

"There's that too, but in this case, there's more to it."

"More?"

"Ryūen probably uses Ayanokōji for his own benefit, but Ayanokōji undoubtedly knows this. It's more like, 'Try your best because I'm letting you use me.’"

"What does Ayanokōji gain in doing that? Supporting Horikita from the shadows makes more sense for advancing the class."

"Who knows? Maybe he wants Ryūen to help crush Ichinose and Sakayanagi? If Ayanokōji isn't the type to take the spotlight, depending on the aggressive Ryūen seems like a sensible idea, right?"

"I suppose it could be."

"I've always been suspicious of it, but the thick mist is gradually clearing. Ayanokōji, who belongs to Horikita's class, is the most troublesome enemy. And..."

For a moment, Hashimoto hesitated, but he continued.

"Ayanokōji's capabilities are greater than Sakayanagi's."

"Can you say that for sure?"

"Yeah, I don't plan on attaching 'possibly' or 'probably' anymore. I was convinced by today's conversation."

No matter who the target was, normally, such an overestimation was impossible.

"If what you're saying is correct, we're in big trouble."

"Big trouble indeed. Most importantly, at the end of the third term, huge amounts of points are expected to be at stake in the final exam. If we lose to Ryūen, we won't be able to escape."

Hashimoto calmly stated something that no one in Class A would say.

Kamuro was slightly annoyed by this and stared at him.

The future confrontation with Ayanokōji's class was yet to be determined.

Though they were bound to clash eventually, it was possible that it was still a ways away.

What needed to be concerned about first was the final exam, conducted at the end of the third term.

"So you think we're going to lose to Ryūen there, huh? That's why you're concerned about Class A's future. Or perhaps you're even wishing for our failure?"

"I don't want to lose. And Masumi-chan, you get mad when I say something like that."

Despite knowing that he didn't have faith in Sakayanagi, Hashimoto was a little surprised.

But that wasn't the reason for Kamuro's anger.

"I just don't like your negative thinking. You always assume the same thing."

"I won't deny being pessimistic. But it's not bad to prepare for the worst."

In this school, you never knew what kind of turnaround or loophole might be in play.

Hashimoto was always cautious about that, but of course, he couldn't cope with everything.

"So you foresee, and then…? All you can do is let yourself have some room for your feelings."

Kamuro, who concluded that it was futile, got tired of the repeated negative remarks.

"Don't say that. You're the only one I can talk to about this, Masumi-chan."

"Ugh…"

Although Kamuro was being used by Sakayanagi, she didn’t completely surrender her heart.

She would complain if she didn't like something, and without hesitation, she would refuse depending on the situation.

Sakayanagi liked that aspect of her, and so did Hashimoto.

"Having some room in your heart isn't a bad thing, is it?"

Returning a joke, of course, was just one of the byproducts of Hashimoto mentally preparing himself for the worst-case scenario.

"If we continue to be in the same class, that would be true."

By adding a single phrase, another meaning was created in the pessimistic thinking.

"If you're talking about the class change ticket, it's a risky bet. I can't imagine it being given to the losing class, and even if we could get it by the end of the school year, there would only be a limited time to use it."

The class change ticket, while seemingly versatile, actually had little merit.

The higher ranked the class, the less reason there was to move to a lower one.

"Even if we lose in your worst-case scenario, we'd only be at a draw at best. Even if you were lucky enough to get a class change ticket in that state, could you use it? Even assuming Ayanokōji's ability is the best in the school year, it would take a lot of resolve to jump in."

Even if Ayanokōji's class rose to Class A temporarily, the closer they were to a draw, the more likely it would be for the positions to switch in a single special exam.

If Sakayanagi retaliated and rose again, the class change would lead to a major failure.

However, there might be a chance of being saved if he'd be lucky enough to get a class change ticket from Ayanokōji's class again, but that was just a series of hypotheticals.

"It's something you can't use unless we're clearly losing steam, like Ichinose's class."

This kind of discussion wasn't only conducted by Hashimoto and Kamuro.

It was one of those common topics that were casually being discussed among students.

"There's more than one way to switch classes, right?"

"If you're talking about spending 20 million points, it's utterly impossible. It's even more unrealistic."

Kamuro continued with an exasperated tone.

On the other hand, Hashimoto always took into consideration the possibility of cooperation among classes, not individuals.

"I know it's none of my business, but what about taking advantage of the situation like that?"

Kamuro didn't say it explicitly, but Sakayanagi was always aware that Hashimoto was making suspicious moves. He himself had reported such activities several times. She was probably watching over them after having various students from different years investigate as well.

If he showed signs of betraying the class and making a move, he'd be immediately targeted.

"All that matters is that, in the end, you're in Class A. It's a simple story that seems difficult."

"I get what you're saying, but it's better for you not to think about strange things."

As a classmate, she offered him advice and a warning.

Hashimoto responded with a small thank you, but his attitude was far from receptive.

It's not that I want to betray anyone.

I just can't rely solely on Sakayanagi if I want to graduate in Class A.

The initial dominance of one strong class has faded, and now three powerful classes are breathing down our necks.

Well, I've always considered the possibility of three formidable classes.

But my miscalculation was thinking that Ichinose's class would stand out among them.

Up until the middle of our second year, I never truly realized the impact Ayanokōji had.

Despite having scouted him several times, he never showed any obvious signs of being a powerhouse.

It was probably intentional.

But in the last few months, Ayanokōji had been taking actions that stood out, making his previously inconspicuous behavior seem like a lie. He had originally seemed uninterested in the class struggles. What caused this change?

Perhaps he had intended to win from the beginning.

Had he held back until this point just to decide when to propel the class forward?

Questions surfaced and disappeared one after another.

I can see the whole picture with Sakayanagi, Ryūen, and Ichinose.

What kind of person they are and what kind of motives they have.

But I can't see that from Ayanokōji.

He's a troublesome existence.

"For now, I still want more information. I plan to investigate Ayanokōji and his surroundings again."

"You can do that on your own, can't you?"

Sakayanagi's never ordered me not to scout or gather information on Ayanokōji.

Kamuro also thought that if I was curious, I could act as I pleased.

In fact, today's audio data is valuable for the upcoming battle.

However, he suddenly realized something.

From an early point last year, Sakayanagi had instructed Kamuro alone to investigate Ayanokōji.

I wonder how much she had been able to gauge Ayanokōji's abilities at that point.

But could she have really seen his true power at that time?

In that moment, a possibility was born in Kamuro's mind.

Could it be that Sakayanagi had known of Ayanokōji's abilities from an unimaginable source...?

"Hey, Masumi-chan?"

As a hand waved in front of her, Kamuro, whose mind had been elsewhere, quickly brushed it away.

"...What?"

"No, you were just spacing out. This is an important conversation, you know?"

Kamuro stopped thinking for a moment and listened to Hashimoto's story.

"I have a bad feeling about this."

"Would you help me get in touch with Ayanokōji? Together, I mean."

"...Why me?"

"I'm definitely being cautious. Ryūen might be pulling the strings."

"Even if I'm there, Ayanokōji would still be cautious. Rather, he'll be even more so if I'm around."

"If the number of opponents double, Ayanokōji's caution also increases. If we have four eyes and ears, the information we gather will double, right?"

"I'm okay with that proposal, but I have one condition."

"Oh, what's that?"

"Never call me Masumi-chan again. This is an absolute condition."

"O-oh, okay. Kamuro-chan will do... right?"

It seemed like they reached an agreement here, but Kamuro continued.

"Also, there's one more thing. I'll be the only one who makes contact with Ayanokōji."

"Only you?"

At her proposal, Hashimoto showed a puzzled face.

"If I'm seen with you, Sakayanagi might sniff us out, and it might cause unnecessary misunderstandings."

"I can't deny that."

It was a request for a solo mission, fearing that Ayanokōji's caution would increase.

However, for Hashimoto, it wasn’t an attractive offer.

"I'll look into what you want to know. Compromise with that."

But if he insisted on accompanying her, Kamuro would decisively pretend the conversation had never happened.

On top of that, she refused to let him call her Masumi for some reason.

Through their nearly two-year relationship, Hashimoto had come to understand Kamuro well.

"Well… guess there's no choice. Okay, let's team up."

Agreeing for now, Hashimoto extended his right hand.

Without returning the handshake, Kamuro simply sent him a cold gaze.

"You're always so cold. I really like you, Kamuro-chan, you know?"

"I don't know how you can say that when you have a girlfriend."

"Oh, if I break up with her, will you go out with me?"

"Not a chance."

Hashimoto pretended to be disappointed, holding his forehead. Kamuro shook her head, playing along with his farce.

"I'm leaving already."

"Sorry to have kept you. But make sure to tell me the date and time of the plan."

On that point alone, Hashimoto was insistent.

4.2

On the same day, each student was busy with their own intentions.

Without knowing such things, even I would spend the day with an unusual group of people. December 26—the day after Christmas.

This day was also known as the day when the least number of cakes were sold in a year.

Well, to be more precise, there was a period when it was famous for being a day when cakes didn’t sell. There were various theories, but one of the reasons was that Christmas would have already passed.

Japanese people would quickly switch their mood to the New Year after Christmas.

In recent years, it seemed that the habit of eating cakes all year round without being bound only by events had been established.

However, it was still a day when cakes didn’t sell well throughout the year.

That was why some people intentionally bought cakes at a discount, like a 50% off, on the 26th.

When I woke up in the morning, I didn't particularly care and thought I’d spend the whole day in my room.

This was because Kei was expected to recover soon. Her fever had already subsided, and she seemed to be gradually regaining her ability to move.

If Kei wished to restore our relationship in the future, then we’d return to how our relationship was before.

The room was clean enough, but there must have been dust and dirt in places I couldn't see.

I decided to thoroughly clean it up today. I lined up the cleaning supplies I prepared in advance on the table and started the battle.

As such, my lonely chores began in the morning.

I moved the furniture, wiped down everything with a cloth, and thoroughly disinfected everything with alcohol.

Of course, after finishing my room, I moved on to the toilet, bath, and closet. Finally, by the time the kitchen was completed, the sun had already set. It wasn't snowing at the time, but there was no sign of any snow melting yet either.

"Unsold Christmas cakes, huh?"

The 26th was almost over. Most of the cakes that couldn’t be sold on this day would be discarded based on the expiration date.

I wondered if they were on sale.

I don't need a whole cake, but if there are slices being sold at a discount, I might want to buy one. With that in mind, I decided to head to Keyaki Mall while I watched the setting sun.

4.3

In the evening, Keyaki Mall showed a different scene. Now that Christmas had passed, the trees were already removed in various places, and preparations for the New Year were underway.

There wasn’t a store specifically for cakes in Keyaki Mall, so I headed to the cake section in the mall's supermarket. However—

"It's not here."

The regular cakes were on display, but I couldn't find any discounted ones.

The special Christmas corner’s been removed, and I can't even find a whole cake. Did they all sell out, or were they already discarded?

Since the mall was located within the school grounds, the number of customers was limited, so they may not have stocked too much.

I wasn't particularly craving it, but I couldn't help feeling a little disappointed now that it wasn’t available.

Even so, it wasn't worth buying at the full price and bringing back.

I didn't want to waste money here, even though I made a pointless trip.

For now, I went around the inside of the supermarket two or three times to see if there was anything I needed, but in the end, I left the store empty-handed.

"Ayanokōji-kun."

Just as I was about to leave Keyaki Mall, I was called out from the side.

Sakayanagi, sitting on a bench and waving her hand toward me, was the one who called.

"Are you going home now?"

"Yes."

"It seems you've only been here for about 15 minutes."

"Have you been watching?"

"I just saw you leaving the dormitory."

I see. In that case, it's not surprising that she'd want to call out to me. I had left the dormitory just a few minutes ago and was leaving without buying anything.

I told her about Kei being bedridden with the flu and spending Christmas without doing anything. In addition, I talked about coming to the supermarket thinking that I might've been able to eat a cake at a cheap price.

"Is that so?"

"I missed the timing, so the opportunity slipped away."

If I didn't eat it even on the 25th, I would be off course this year.

"I couldn't have it today, but I'll eat it next year."

"Hehe."

Sakayanagi, still seated on the bench, laughed elegantly.

"What's so funny?"

"No one can guarantee they'll be able to eat cake at this school next year, right?"

"...Indeed."

"In your case, if you go back to your parents, you'll be living a life without cake."

"I wouldn't be able to get a cake even on my birthday."

Should I go back to the supermarket now?

Sakayanagi, who couldn't see my shallow thinking, stood up with her cane.

"By the way, I don't recommend the supermarket's cake."

"Is that so?"

"I hate to say it, but it's a mass-produced product that could be found anywhere. It has to be handmade by a craftsman."

"But there are limited places where you can buy a cake."

"The convenience store also has surprisingly good options."

Oh, right. The Mont Blanc that Sakayanagi brought before was from a convenience store, I think.

"In order to get a truly satisfying taste, you have to order it."

Sakayanagi started walking and stopped as she passed by.

"Would you mind accompanying me for a while?"

"Where to? Going out alone with the leader of Class A would stand out too much."

"Don't worry. Our one-on-one time will end soon."

No sooner after Sakayanagi said that, she lightly raised her hand in a direction away from me

A male student who spotted Sakayanagi then quickly approached her.

"I'm sorry, Sakayanagi-san. Did I keep you waiting?"

"You're a bit late. But, thanks to that, I was able to kill some enjoyable time, so it's fine."

It seemed that the time she killed was our casual chat.

"Sanada-kun, have you ever spoken to Ayanokōji-kun before?"

"No. Actually, today's the first time."

While bowing politely to me, Sanada answered her question.

As a student from the same year, I had seen his face several times. However, there were no opportunities to talk face-to-face until now, so it was the first time as Sanada said.

His name was Sanada Kousei. His OAA was as follows:

Academic Ability – A

Physical Ability – C+

Adaptability – B+

Social Contribution – B+

Overall Ability – B

He was an extremely talented person with an A in academic ability—something only a limited number of second-year students could obtain.

His physical ability was average, and there were no outstanding weaknesses in other areas.

Although Sanada was an honor student, I had never seen him with Sakayanagi before.

As I had been interacting with more and more Class A students recently, I was reminded of how little contact I had with Sakayanagi's classmates.

At least, it didn't seem like the two of them just happened to be together by chance.

"I've always wanted to talk to you, Ayanokōji-kun."

His speech was polite, and his demeanor was gentle.

It didn’t feel bad to have someone of the same sex take an interest in me.

"Is that so?"

I didn't think I had done anything to attract Sanada's attention.

"Oh really? What aspects caught your eye?"

On my behalf, Sakayanagi asked Sanada that question.

"He’s recently stood out in Class B, and also—"

Without breaking his smiling posture, Sanada approached me.

Then he gently grabbed my right arm and moved me away from Sakayanagi, who was standing next to me.

"Excuse me, but what kind of relationship do you have with Sakayanagi-san?"

"What kind? Well, there's nothing special between us, really."

"She's the leader of Class 2-A. She isn't someone you can approach without reason."

I wonder if he perceives me as a strong enemy.

From his polite words, an unknown anger—or rather, a wariness, seeped out.

"It's also odd that she seems so friendly in a one-on-one situation with the opposite sex."

That was an interesting way to put it. I wanted to say that it wasn't like that, but it was difficult.

Sakayanagi usually didn't take much individual action. In fact, she acted with others a good amount.

A one-on-one with Sakayanagi, especially with the opposite sex, was rare.

Even if it was a common sight among classmates, people from other classes wouldn't be able to grasp that fact.

No, it's better not to overthink things.

It might've been a separate issue how much I picked up from Sanada's wording and whether he was intentionally cherry-picking. If anything, it would be faster to pretend to be someone oblivious who didn't notice anything when dealing with such an opponent.

"Last year, during the final exam, I had a chance to talk with her. Our relationship is neither more nor less than that."

I better give a firm answer and keep it vague.

Regardless of the intention behind his question, this was the better choice.

"I see. I understand. Sorry for asking in such a scary way."

"I don't mind."

"Have the two of you gentlemen finished catching up?"

"Yes. Ayanokōji-kun, if it's alright with you, could you accompany us for a little while after this? Of course, only if Sakayanagi-san allows it."

"Hm?"

"Oh, what a coincidence, Sanada-kun. I was also thinking of inviting him."

I didn't really understand, but Sakayanagi and Sanada seemed to have the same ideas, smiling at each other.

I was led by the two of them, moving farther away from the exit and walking back into the mall.

"Here it is."

In no time, we arrived at a general store.

It was a popular store with a variety of small items that were particularly popular among girls.

The Class A students entered the store without hesitation and began to look for something.

"Ayanokōji-kun, please wait for a moment. If you'd like, please feel free to look around the store."

Even if I was told to look around, I wasn’t told any specifics, so all I could do was watch from the side.

The quiet conversation between the two was being drowned out by the store's background music, and I couldn't partake in the conversation. As a result, I reluctantly distanced myself.

Then, without any particular purpose, I wandered around the store to pass the time.

I waited five minutes, then ten minutes, and their conversation only became more lively. There was no sign of their shopping coming to an end.

When I had finally run out of things to see in the store and approached to check on them, Sanada hurriedly reached into his pocket.

"Excuse me, I need to make a phone call."

After giving a polite excuse, Sanada walked outside the store and stopped.

"Today, I was on a date with Sanada-kun. I spent Christmas with him."

"Is that so? That's news to me."

I thought there was a slight date-like atmosphere, but that was an unexpected new fact.

However, until now, I didn't know that Sakayanagi had such a partner. Was there an event that caused a major change in their relationship just before Christmas? Or had they been maintaining a close relationship without making it public?

"But is it okay to be so open about it? If people find out how important he is, it wouldn't be strange if someone comes after him as a weakness in the future."

Protecting oneself and protecting a third party were at entirely different difficulty levels. In Sakayanagi's case, having limited mobility meant a higher possibility of falling behind.

"Of course, I suppose you have that much confidence in yourself... but what's going on?"

Sakayanagi remained silent and stared at me in response to my analysis. *Or rather, was she angry?*

"Didn't you understand it was just a little joke?"

"Which part?"

"Well, it's not that Sanada-kun and I had a date planned."

"Huh?"

I was confused considering that she said the complete opposite of what I understood.

"I'm sorry, Sakayanagi-san. I kept you waiting."

After ending the phone call, Sanada apologized and slowly returned to us.

"How did it go?"

"Good. I made the arrangement."

He blushed slightly, stroked his own cheek, and happily smiled.

"The person on the phone was Miya-san from Class 1-B. She recently started dating Sanada-kun. I was just giving him some advice on what to give her as a present."

This story was entirely different from what I was first told. Apparently, that had been a joke.

I didn't quite understand the humor, but it didn't seem like a situation to argue, so I let it pass.

"I gave her a well-thought-out present for Christmas, but then her birthday's just four days after. Since we just started dating, I thought about giving her one present for both occasions, but I wondered if it would be better to celebrate twice."

So that's what it was.

Indeed, if one's birthday was close to a major event like Christmas, for couples, it might've been hard to decide how to celebrate.

It would be easier to combine the celebrations, but there was also the possibility that the person being celebrated might not appreciate it.

"Anyway, she's your kouhai, huh? How did that happen?"

"It's because of our club activities. I belong to the band club, and she's my kouhai there."

I see. I overlooked the fact that those in cultural clubs might become friends.

Spending time together in club activities allowed them to get to know each other and deepen their bond.

"But I'm surprised, Sakayanagi. You give advice on such matters too?"

"I don't think I'm the best fit, but Sanada-kun seems to be keeping their relationship a secret for now. There seem to be various things going on in club activities."

She answered while still giving me a slightly displeased look.

I wondered if there were restrictions on dating a senpai or kouhai, or if there was a rule prohibiting romance for a certain period after joining the club. It was unclear, but such constraints might exist.

Of course, even if they did, it was more likely an unspoken rule agreed upon by the students rather than an official school rule.

If it had been made explicit, it would've been impossible to apply only to the band club.

"As expected of Sakayanagi-san, huh? I mean, you noticed it."

The sharp Sakayanagi must have sensed the change in her classmates and probably collected information.

That was why Sanada decided to rely on her as well.

"I understand the situation, but why did you invite me?"

It would be understandable if I were to play some advisory role, but I didn't give a single piece of advice. The two of them had already decided on a present.

"Well..."

Instead of a slightly troubled Sanada, Sakayanagi told the truth.

"I just wanted to tease you a little."

"Was that why you said that earlier?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, you weren't surprised or suspicious."

There was some surprise, but no suspicion.

To begin with, I didn't have much interest in who she does or doesn't date.

"Please don't take it seriously. The reason I invited you was so it wouldn't be mistaken for a date. What would you think if you saw me and Sanada-kun together?"

"There might be some misunderstandings."

If I mixed in, it would be two boys and one girl.

This way, his kouhai girlfriend wouldn't have any doubts whether or not it was a date.

"It would've been better to invite someone else earlier, but that would've revealed the fact that Sanada-kun had a girlfriend. I was planning to invite someone by pretending that I just so happened to be there outside of the supermarket."

It seemed that I was the one who was chosen for that role.

Was it right to talk to them? Was it wrong?

In this case, I got to know Sanada, so I guess it was right.

I didn't see what the present was, but he was holding it carefully.

That alone probably meant he cared about her.

"Good luck, Sanada-kun."

"Yes, thank you, Sakayanagi-san."

Holding the newly purchased present close to his chest, Sanada bowed his head.

With a happy expression and a straight back, he started walking, perhaps heading to see his girlfriend next. He might even give her the gift impulsively before her birthday.

"By the way, Ayanokōji-kun, have you given up on the cake today?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah, that's the plan. I thought I'd stop by on the way home and—"

"I don't recommend convenience store sweets right now. This season isn't the best for them."

I was going to check the convenience store... but was preempted by her helpful advice.

"If I were you, I would quietly go home and take my revenge next year. If you settle for something here, how should I put it... it's a bit of a pity."

It was just a cake. I had a feeling it was up to the individual to decide when and where to eat it, but that feeling went away.

"...It seems like it might be better not to."

If I bought one here now, Sakayanagi would label me as a disappointing person.

4.4

That day, I ultimately returned to the dormitory without buying a cake.

Then, as if to shake off any evil thoughts, I studied New Year's traditions online, which was coming up.

I had spent last year without thinking about it too deeply, and I had some regrets.

I might be able to do something appropriate for the holiday after the New Year.

Not even a single rice cake was served to celebrate the New Year in the White Room.

It was around 8 p.m. when I finished dinner while doing various research.

As I began to wonder whether to take a bath or not, a phone call came in.

"*Good evening, Ayanokōji-kun.*"

"I wasn't expecting a call from you at this time, Sakayanagi."

"*I thought I'd check in just in case.*"

"I'm not a disappointing person, just so you know."

I answered that as a joke preemptively.

"*Hehe, I suppose not. Ayanokōji-kun isn't a disappointing person after all.*"

But looking at the reaction on the other side of the phone, was that her actual intention for calling?

"I'll save it for next year's fun."

I wasn't saying that out of spite, but I was honestly conveying my positive feelings.

"*Is that so?*"

Sakayanagi, who seemed happy, laughed on the other side of the phone.

“*Changing the subject, has Karuizawa-san's condition improved?*”

"The fever seems to have dropped. All that's left is to endure two more days."

Even if the fever fell, according to the rules, you must stay in your room for two days after recovery.

“*Is that so? That's convenient for us. May I make an appointment with you now?*”

"Right now? I don't have any problems with that, but what's the matter?"

“*Why don't we save that for when we meet? Would you mind if I visit your room?*”

"Are you planning to come to my room?"

“*Is it inconvenient all of a sudden?*”

"No, not really."

“*Then, I won’t have any hesitation.*”

As soon as I answered, the call was cut off.

I didn't even have time to think about the abrupt ending of the call before hearing a gentle knock.

"I see."

I stood and headed towards the door; opening it revealed Sakayanagi, the caller.

"Were you out somewhere?"

She looked very well dressed for someone who came from her room.

Additionally, there was a slight dusting of snow on her shoulders and hat.

"Merry Christmas. Santa has arrived."

As soon as our eyes met, Sakayanagi held out a small box with one hand.

She nodded in satisfaction as I accepted the box.

But to call herself Santa...

"It's already the night of the 26th. Santa Claus is quite late, isn't he?"

"Santa Claus is modeled after Saint Nicholas, who is said to have existed in the southern coastal region of Turkey. Considering that he has to finish delivering presents, ride his sleigh all the way to Japan, and then to this location, it's understandable that he'd be a little late, isn't it?"

Answering like so, it was hard to tell if she was being too serious or poking fun.

"Only you would make such a unique rebuttal."

Anyway, it wasn't a good idea to keep her standing at the front door, so I decided to invite her into my room.

"I won't hesitate to intrude."

"So? What business does this tardy Santa have?"

"I think you already know, but I've brought a Christmas cake. Since I'm calling myself Santa, it's fine for you to openly accept the present."

"Well, judging from the box, I had a feeling it might be something like that, but I'm experiencing a strong sense of déjà vu."

Could it be that Sakayanagi had been scheming for this moment since that time all along?

"Yes, that's exactly why. I promised to bring a different cake, didn't I?"

Indeed. Back then, she had detected my lack of enthusiasm for the Mont Blanc cake and had told me that she would allow me to take my revenge next year...

"So this happening today was no coincidence, right?"

"Of course. I thought it would be a perfect opportunity since you wanted to eat a cake. I also didn't recommend the convenience store sweets in order to avoid duplicate cakes."

"So that was why you pushed me with such an expression."

"Exactly. It went splendidly according to my strategy."

If I had stopped by the convenience store and decided to eat a cake on the way, it would've been doubtful whether I would have enjoyed the cake that Sakayanagi brought.

"You seem to have spent Christmas alone, so I've come to save you."

"Is it okay for the leader of Class A to come rolling into a boy's room late at night?"

"It would be more troublesome for you if it were discovered."

I couldn't deny that. If Sakayanagi forced herself in, the amount of condemnation I'd receive would undoubtedly be greater.

"Besides, it's still 8 p.m. It's not a surprisingly late hour for winter break, is it?"

"Maybe."

"You seem to be keeping your room as neat as ever. I'm impressed. I've visited several girls' rooms, but none of them are as clean as this."

After complimenting me, Sakayanagi asked for permission and sat down on the bed.

Then, she took off the coat she was wearing.

"If I couldn't meet you today, what would you've done?"

There would've been several possible scenarios; I could've been sleeping, going out, and so on.

"I was planning to visit at a time completely unrelated to Christmas."

So it just happened to be today.

It seemed that she also had Karuizawa in mind.

"I believe you already know this, but I've prepared two cakes for us."

I had a feeling there were two cakes when I received the box. It seemed heavier than just one. She supposedly intended for us to eat them together here and then leave.

"Alright, I'll get the drinks ready. Is the same as last time okay?"

"I'll graciously look forward to it."

I headed to the kitchen to prepare the coffee I made last time.

"Gradually, you look more natural standing in the kitchen."

"Living in the dormitory, opportunities to cook tend to naturally increase."

"Isn't that up to you? With convenience stores and the school cafeteria, it isn't difficult to find food even if you don't have money."

"...Maybe. I might just want to cook for myself."

"That's something unimaginable in the White Room. But it's a shame, isn't it? Even if you become a professional-grade chef, there won't be a place to showcase those skills after graduation."

Like at Keyaki Mall, she seemed more interested in discussing such topics today.

"It's true, but are you trying to probe something? I doubt you can see everything that goes on in the White Room. I don't think Chairman Sakayanagi would casually reveal it to his daughter."

I couldn't see Sakayanagi's expression since my back was turned, but she was probably smiling.

"Indeed. What I'm saying is only within the realm of imagination. As you said, I don't have a complete grasp of the White Room's details. But isn't it close enough?"

"Right. After I graduate, or even if I'm expelled, I'll be returned to the White Room and take on the role of an instructor. I'll be responsible for nurturing my successors until I'm no longer needed."

Until recently, I had no doubt about that outcome.

However, I do feel a slight skepticism now.

The merits and demerits of attending this school for three years—when weighed against each other, there were inevitably some aspects that appeared irrational.

Of course, I didn't know the details of the situation outside. That man said that the White Room was up and running again, but without any solid information, there was no way to know whether or not that was true from here.

As I brought the cups of coffee, I also prepared two thin plates.

These were for serving the cake.

"By the way, can I expect the cake to be good?"

"I don't know your tastes, but if it isn't good this time, I'll just arrange another opportunity. In fact, it might be better to fail this time and get a chance to try again."

I didn't expect her to say she'd be content even if it wasn't delicious.

Maybe I should lie and say it tastes good anyway.

"I'm confident in discerning any acting."

"Don't read ahead of me."

"Your everyday thought process is quite easy to understand. It's very simple and clear."

Sakayanagi seemed to understand that I was still an ordinary second-year student with little experience. It appeared she took into account school life matters and external-factor influences in her calculations and considerations.

When I opened the box, there were two classic shortcakes placed side by side.

"Where did you buy these? You didn't have them prepared beforehand, did you?"

The box had what looked like a logo of the cakemaker.

It didn't seem like something normally sold at convenience stores or supermarkets.

"It has a somewhat unusual backstory. I was planning to buy sweets from a convenience store before visiting, but on the way, I met my classmate Sawada coming back from Keyaki Mall. He said the famous shop's cake he had ordered was delayed due to the snow and arrived today. However, he gave up on having it during Christmas and ended up eating another cake. He was bringing it home wondering what to do... and that's how it happened."

"So you snatched a delicious-looking cake from Sawada?"

Nevertheless, such a coincidence did exist.

Well, it was about Sakayanagi. There was a possibility that she had obtained all that information beforehand.

It would be rude to pursue that point further.

"Rest assured, I've paid the private points properly. I don't know if Sawada-san was going to eat these two cakes by himself or with someone specific."

There are probably more students nurturing love than you imagine.

I decided to eat the cake I received from Sakayanagi.

I had eaten shortcake a few times before, but as it boasted to be from a famous shop, it felt different—even starting from the cream. It tasted much better than the Mont Blanc I had last time.

"It seems to have suited your taste."

"I haven't said anything yet."

Feeling that I was exposed, I couldn't help but move my hand and take a second bite.

"Even without saying anything, I understand. Though, I do feel a little conflicted since I didn't choose it."

Sakayanagi, who replied so, also carried the cake to her mouth and nodded satisfactorily.

"But the taste seems to be exceptional."

Showing her acceptance of what needed to be acknowledged, Sakayanagi seemed happy.

Without talking about anything, the two of us finished eating the cake and took a breather.

As it was about time for the clock to pass nine, she broached the subject.

"Would you like to take a walk outside for a little while?"

"Outside?"

I could refuse, but after this, I would only take a bath and go to bed.

Before that, it wouldn't be bad to take a walk on the snow-covered road; I had limited opportunities to experience it.

"It might be nice."

I decided to accept her proposal as there was no particular reason to reject it.

Above all, it seemed that Sakayanagi still wanted to talk.

"Then I'll wait for you in the lobby first."

Considering my need to change clothes, Sakayanagi stood up with her cane.

I decided to get ready and follow her.

4.5

I met up with Sakayanagi, who was standing and waiting in the dormitory lobby, and we went outside together.

At this time, there were no other students that were immediately visible.

"It's really cold outside after all."

The snow had just begun to fall on Christmas Eve, and with the low temperature, it had accumulated quite a bit.

"Snow was said to be rare last year too, but now it's been continuing for two years in a row."

The depth of the snow made walking a bit difficult, but Sakayanagi seemed to be enjoying herself rather than being troubled.

"It would be troublesome if it snowed all year round, but it's a lovely environment to enjoy occasionally."

"But isn't it inconvenient when there's snow piled up?"

"Of course, it’s significantly harder to walk efficiently, but don't worry. I gained experience in even harder situations during the school trip."

Sakayanagi, with an air of confidence, began a lecture on walking with a cane in the snow.

She had a happy and excited tone as if she was unveiling a new strategy.

However, it looked extremely precarious from the sidelines.

Just as I thought so, Sakayanagi tried to pull the cane out of the snow, and when it didn't come out easily, she nearly lost her balance.

I had already considered following up and stopped her from falling as I grabbed her shoulder before it became serious.

"Careful."

"Hehe."

Instead of being flustered from nearly falling, Sakayanagi laughed amusingly.

"You're that kind of person."

"Huh?"

My lack of understanding seemed to please Sakayanagi even more.

"I was confident that I could walk well. However, if I push myself too hard, my risk of falling will grow. Though, I predicted that even if I failed, you'd help me."

She expressed that her prediction was confirmed when my hand reached out to save her.

That was why she couldn't help but laugh.

"Considering it wasn't guaranteed, you did well."

It was like attempting a bungee jump without a safety line.

Although, if the snow net was perfect, there would be a low risk of injury.

"So, why did you invite me for a nighttime walk? Do you have something you want to talk about?"

"Do you think so?"

When I nodded, Sakayanagi smiled as usual and then asked.

"How does Class A look to you, Ayanokōji-kun?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'd like to know what you feel about our strengths and weaknesses."

"I see. Quite an unexpected question."

"Is that so?"

Sakayanagi had unquestionable confidence in herself.

It was surprising that she sought advice that could influence her class's direction.

"As a basic premise, do you think I'd give advice to an enemy?"

"If you consider Class A as an enemy, there's no helping it."

Sakayanagi smiled a little, seemingly pleased.

"But I think you'll answer."

"May I ask your reason?"

"If I look objectively at what you're trying to do, I can make an educated guess."

It seemed that Sakayanagi already had a vision of what I had in mind.

There had been signs of it for some time, but I hadn't realized the extent of her confidence.

"If you're so sure about it, isn't it needless for me to even talk about the overall evaluation of Class A? Or can't you trust your own judgment without my complete approval?"

"That's a foolish question, isn't it?"

Still, I decided to voice my thoughts.

Class A, under Sakayanagi's guidance, was efficiently conducting well-organized battles.

They were shedding what needed to be shed and picking up what needed to be picked up.

It was a class that steadily accumulated class points.

They had overall high academic ability and average, but consistent, physical ability. If there were any weaknesses, so far, it would be the lack of students who excelled in special skills.

Sakayanagi, walking beside me, accepted my words without arguing.

"Up to this point, anyone could have given the same answer, to be honest."

"Then, can I get some of your unique insights?"

"Well..."

It might've been a bit harsh, but it seemed that Sakayanagi wanted it that way.

"You're confident in yourself. It's true that you have abilities that are a cut above the rest compared to the leaders of other classes, however, that's precisely why you seem to be a step behind in building relationships with your classmates."

You can control them, but in the end, you're just manipulating them.

The students of Class A should have more individual intentions. It would help improve the class.

For that, Sakayanagi, the ruler, must become more friendly with her classmates.

"I don't think that's necessary. I want to make judgments without involving emotions. If I get too close to others, emotions will spring up. Hesitation when trying to cut off a beloved pet is a sign of weakness."

"That's your choice."

It wasn't a mistake. If you could carry out that solitary strength, it was also a valuable weapon.

"By the way, there's something I've been curious about."

"What is it?"

"Why do you keep an eye on me? Lately, I've been feeling the Class A's gaze quite a bit. If something interests you, you can always ask me directly like now."

"That's not the case. I haven't ordered anyone to make contact with you."

She denied that point outright.

"There's no point in letting a third party investigate you. You've recently become less resistant to standing out, so people who have

noticed some of your potential have started doing it on their own. Some of them report to me so diligently even though I haven't asked."

The content was insignificant, and Sakayanagi didn't seem to find any beneficial information in it.

That was why she dismissed it as meaningless.

"They move spontaneously because they care about the class?"

"It may be partly for the sake of earning points from me, but as long as they don't realize it's meaningless, they're still lacking."

No matter how useful their actions may have been, Sakayanagi couldn’t favor them.

Sakayanagi walked together with me, poking holes in the snow with her cane. There was still no sign of anyone around.

"Let's end our walk here."

"Then let's head back."

"Yes. But Ayanokōji-kun, please go ahead. I'll stay here a while longer, enjoying the night breeze."

"Isn't it dangerous?"

"Even if I fall, it's only snow, and this isn't a snowy mountain."

Indeed. There was no way we’d get into any trouble, like getting stranded.

"We might not see each other again this year. Please have a pleasant end to the year."

"You too. Have a good New Year’s."

With the year-end greetings out of the way, I decided to part ways with Sakayanagi.

I trudged the snowy path towards the dormitory.

After about ten steps, I couldn't hear the sound of Sakayanagi walking anymore.

"Ayanokōji-kun."

She gently called my name, so I turned around.

With a scarf around her mouth, Sakayanagi seemed cold, but she looked at me.

"What's up?"

"There’s something I want to tell you. Can you listen from there?"

"I knew it. There was still something left to discuss."

With some distance between us, Sakayanagi and I faced each other and resumed our conversation.

"Did you know I still had something to say?"

"Sort of."

"Sometimes, even I need courage. This distance is what gives me that courage."

Less than ten meters apart.

This was the courage Sakayanagi needed to express herself.

"I have come to like you."

Such words.

"This is not as a human being, but as a person of the opposite sex."

I quietly listened to those words from Sakayanagi—words that could be taken as a confession.

"Can you just remember that?"

"Do you not need a reply?"

"Yes. I don't need that right now. Please feel free to go home."

"Is that so?"

I wanted to turn around and walk away, but I stopped.

"Can you let me say just one thing?"

"What is it?"

"I probably value you more than you think, Sakayanagi. That's why I want to know."

I just had to know at that moment.

"Can you turn that emotion from a weakness into a strength?"

Sakayanagi was smart; she would surely understand what I meant.

So there was no need for further explanation.

"What a foolish question."

Sakayanagi laughed as she replied. Her eyes shone brightly even in the darkness, full of a strong color.

4.6

After Ayanokōji left, Sakayanagi quietly blushed and smiled all alone.

"I talked with Ichinose-san the other day, on the last day of the second term."

She muttered with a soft voice that was almost swept away by the wind.

"I always thought I was in a position to teach her, but I found out that wasn't the case."

It was the moment Sakayanagi became fully aware of her own love.

In the middle of a snowy night with no one around, Sakayanagi continued her monologue.

"I recognize you as an enemy that I must defeat."

This was the truth.

Without a doubt, the real truth.

"As a natural-born genius, I can't lose to a created genius like you."

That was her belief.

"But you recognized that my feelings to defeat you gave birth to another type of feeling, didn't you?"

Towards Ayanokōji's out-of-sight back.

Delivering her unreachable voice.

She spoke the words once more.

"I love you."

Ichinose, who was as insignificant as trash on the side of the road, had made Sakayanagi realize this.

"Even if I had expressed my feelings more clearly, your expression wouldn't have changed."

That was the only reason she chose not to say it more firmly to his face.

Nevertheless, she wasn't scared of being accepted or rejected.

"Yes, that's how you are, Ayanokōji-kun. You're not the kind of person who would let petty things, something to this extent, disturb your heart."

Ordinarily, a maiden would be hurt and troubled by this.

However, Sakayanagi was the opposite.

If anything, it made her feel even more attracted to Ayanokōji.

"You treat all of us in this school, me included, like children. You think everything will go according to your plan, and you've made it so."

She took a step, walking along the snowy path.

Ayanokōji's plan was clearly understood.

The picture she imagined for the third year.

It wouldn't be interesting if I let things go just as he wanted.

So, what should I do to disturb it?

The answer was already clear.

I want to obstruct him.

I want to see his troubled face.

I want to confront him with things he can't foresee.

I want to draw out his emotions and break him. I want to love him.

"It's a pity. Your plan has been going awry since the summer uninhabited island exam."

I couldn't help wanting to say that, but it's still a secret.

It's precisely because we don't know—precisely because we can't foresee—that there is excitement in what lies ahead.

"I assure you that this fact will be the first step in changing you in an unexpected direction."

I can't help looking forward to what decisions he'll make in the future.

"I really can't wait for the third term…"

Chapter 5 - A Quiet Tremor

ON THE MORNING of December 28th, as the end of the year approached, I looked at my cell phone beside my pillow.

About 30 minutes prior to 7 a.m., a message had arrived.

The content was a modest message from Kei informing me that she had recovered.

Having seen the message as I laid on my back, I got up and switched to lying face down.

[*Are you awake?*]

I sent the message and a read notice came in less than 3 seconds.

It was clear that she was holding her cell phone the whole time, waiting for my response.

[*Yes, I'm awake.*]

I had reached out to her several times to check up on her condition since she caught the flu, but that was it.

There were no signs of her usual high-spirit self, and she didn't send any stamps.

[*What's your plan for today?*]

I tried to ask. I had intended to invite her if she told me she was free, but…

[*Sorry. I plan to hang out with Maya-chan after this. She encouraged me the entire time I was bedridden and followed up a lot, so I wanted to thank her too. Is that bad?*]

Of course it wasn't bad. That was something she should prioritize—something important.

If she prioritized me and neglected Satō, that would betray true friendship.

Naturally, I wouldn't try to rain on her parade with this matter. And I shouldn't.

[*Understood. Can I call you tonight? Around 9 pm? I want to talk about things happening tomorrow and beyond that.*]

What happened during the Christmas we were supposed to spend together and the growing distance between us lately.

There were many things we should discuss as boyfriend and girlfriend.

[*Yeah.*]

Shortly after, she sent another short message.

[*Then, I'll be waiting for your call.*]

At least her physical condition had improved; that was a relief.

It was important that we scheduled something before the end of the year.

The only question now is how I'm going to spend today.

Either show my face at the gym, which I hadn't visited for some days, or spend the day in my room not going out.

Ideally, I wouldn't want to overlap with the time Kei and Satō would spend together.

So, I crossed off the option of going to the gym from my list as well as Keyaki Mall.

If Kei and Satō kept worrying about my presence, they wouldn't be able to enjoy themselves.

When I was about to pick up my cell phone again to let her know my intention to stay in my room all day, a sound rang out.

Thinking it might've been Kei, the thought quickly vanished when an unregistered number showed on the display.

However, I remembered this number.

What a dilemma.

I continued to stare at the screen for a while.

It seemed unlikely that the ringing would stop anytime soon, so I decided to answer it.

“Hey, answer it faster when I call.”

Ryūen, on the other end of the line, expressed his dissatisfaction before I could respond.

“I was in the bathroom.”

“Really? Didn't you just try to ignore me until it stopped ringing?”

Good job. Be it Sakayanagi or Ryūen—both seemed to be getting better at reading my everyday thoughts.

“Lend me some time. Meet me at Keyaki Mall’s north entrance in 30 minutes.”

Without any interest in my excuses, he only conveyed his own business.

“What about my plans? I have a tight schedule, you know.”

“Postpone it.”

He unilaterally cut off the call after forcefully demanding us to meet.

“He's still so self-centered.”

His attitude wasn’t surprising. It was just like Ryūen's usual behavior.

5.1

The peak of the snowfall had passed, and the thickly piled-up snow painted pictures as it melted.

There was still some snow left in the shadows, but it was probably just a matter of time.

However, getting called by Ryūen around the end of the year like this…

There was a chance for him to converse with me at the school festival, and we even coincidentally ended up in the same group for the school trip, but we shouldn't have had any interactions after that.

In the midst of winter break, it was hard to imagine any conversation related to exams.

Not knowing what the matter was, I arrived at the Keyaki Mall's north entrance almost exactly at the promised time.

Ryūen wasn't there, but instead, another person was leaning against the wall with their arms crossed.

"Katsuragi? This isn't a coincidence, is it?"

Keyaki Mall hadn't opened yet. There was no reason to be there at that time unless you needed to be the first person in the store.

"You got a call from Ryūen, didn't you? It's the same for me."

If Katsuragi was also being called, it didn't seem to be just some small talk.

"It's a bad habit of Ryūen to unilaterally call us out whenever something happens."

Since transferring from Class A to Ryūen's class, Katsuragi had been active with Ryūen in many instances.

"You've become quite the strategist. It seems that even Ryūen trusts your abilities."

“That would be nice.”

While he didn't show a happy expression, it didn't seem like he was completely displeased either.

“So, what's the reason for the call?”

“*I don't know*. You'll have to ask Ryūen directly.”

It seemed that even Katsuragi, who was likely called out in the same way, wasn’t informed of the details of the conversation.

“You must have guessed it would be some unpleasant scheme. I’m sure you’re aware of that as well.”

“Well, there's a possibility of it being a troublesome matter.”

“Then you could have ignored it.”

“Wouldn't that just make it more troublesome later?”

“That's limited to ordinary students. Your name comes up occasionally, but he mentions it with the highest praise. It's proof that he understands that you're an opponent he can't beat now.”

“Praise? ...I can't imagine.”

“Erase him, crush him, kill him. Any of them would be a great compliment, right?”

“That's not a compliment. It’s a disaster.”

Half of it might’ve been Katsuragi's teasing, as he slightly raised the corners of his mouth and smiled.

“There’s no one outside of the class who’s equal or better than him. And there’s no one who can truly talk to him. In that sense, your existence is also important to him.”

Sakayanagi would also be fine in terms of being his equal or better, but she was the opponent right in front of him that needed to be taken down.

We didn't have a relationship where we could honestly talk to each other.

“Still, it's amazing that you were able to defeat Sakayanagi, even though it was a special exam where you had advantageous elements. It would be nice if this broke her pride a little.”

“Sakayanagi did what she could and lost, so the impact of the defeat will be limited. We were just riding the wave that was coming along due to multiple things lining up to our advantage.”

“Riding the wave, huh? But it's also a special exam where you can't win without having strengths, even if you do handstands.”

Katsuragi praised that our victory was undeniably due to the strength of the class.

“On the other hand, your class seemed to be far behind Ichinose's class.”

“That class takes on any special exam with a positive attitude, adheres to the basics, and holds itself together.”

It wasn’t an opponent that could easily be defeated, Katsuragi analyzed.

“Our class's task is clear. Our academic ability is overwhelmingly inferior compared to other classes. We have to do something about it; otherwise, we’ll have to face several unfavorable battles in the future.”

The challenges were visible, but improving them would be incredibly difficult.

Academic ability wasn’t something that could be acquired overnight.

“In the last special exam, I told them to give up short-term gains and raise the academic ability of the entire class, but Ryūen didn't seem to want to listen.”

If they couldn’t win with a straightforward approach, they tended to rely on underhanded tactics and surprise attacks.

“However, just leaving it alone won't lead to a breakthrough or resolution to the current situation. People are interested in that they unconsciously choose their opponents. Ryūen uses all the members of the class like his limbs, but even so, there will always be students that he values and those that he hardly uses.”

“It's not just about abilities, is it?”

If there were obedient students like Ishizaki and Albert, who tended to get involved in trouble easily, and those who were rebellious and disliked wrongdoings, it was natural for Ryūen to value the former.

“Yes. It's not just about abilities. You can see signs of it elsewhere. Strange, isn't it?”

“Yeah.”

“That's why I think those students, who Ryūen doesn't often use, have extra time and can actively learn to study. Of course, without him knowing.”

If Ryūen heard about this, would he berate Katsuragi for doing unnecessary things? Even if he showed anger on the surface, he might not actually stop Katsuragi's actions. Ryūen, who had grown this far, should judge it as a necessary measure. It was also one of the reasons he paid a large sum of money to poach Katsuragi.

“Is it okay for me to hear something so important?”

“It's strange, but by sharing a secret with someone, it can sometimes help with your mental well-being.”

“As a result, I might tell Ryūen.”

“If you were that kind of person, I'd only have to reflect on my mistake in judging you.”

He expressed his trust in me in such a way.

And he artfully applied pressure to prevent a betrayal.

At that point, Katsuragi interrupted the conversation and turned to face my back.

“Here comes the brazen man. He doesn't seem to be reflecting on his tardiness.”

Following Katsuragi's gaze, who backed away from the wall exasperatedly, I saw Ryūen slowly approaching us.

On his left wrist was a plastic bag, perhaps from stopping at a convenience store.

“It seems we're all here.”

“Shouldn't you apologize to Ayanokōji at least?”

“*I don't know*. Just be grateful that you weren't called out during the New Year’s holidays.”

Despite Katsuragi urging him to apologize, he ignored it and started walking. For a brief moment, Katsuragi and I exchanged glances that seemed to express, 'We're in for some trouble.' Ryūen pulled out a hamburger from a plastic bag and placed the empty bag into his pocket.

He tore open the wrapping paper and started eating as if he missed out on breakfast.

Katsuragi looked at him with a baffled expression, wondering why he couldn't at least have finished his meal beforehand.

“I'd like to hear why you called both me and Ayanokōji out.”

Although he was asked with a strong tone, he had no intention to answer immediately. Instead, he continued to silently chew his food.

After repeating this several times, he finally began to speak once his stomach was satisfied.

“I heard interesting news from the third years. Apparently, a big obstacle awaits us in the third term where we'll face others from our same year.”

“A big obstacle? You're talking about the final exam, right? It's nothing surprising.”

Preparations for the more intense final exams were confirmed several times and in various forms.

It was hard to believe that Ryūen called us out just to tell us something we already knew.

“Isn't it possible that it's not just the final exam?”

In response to Katsuragi's reply, I cut in after a slight delay.

“We've been focusing on the end of the third term, but there might be something else.”

“Did you hear something too, Ayanokōji?”

“I heard that there might be a special exam at the beginning of the third term that could result in some students being expelled. I don't know how true it is though.”

Ryūen might’ve heard the same thing, and upon hearing this, he grinned.

“By the way, when did you hear this?”

“On December 25th, three days ago. The source was Kiryūin of Class 3-B.”

“On the same day, my source was Class 3-D’s Ibeyama.”

“If there truly is a risky exam, how come both of you heard about it at almost the same time?”

“Just a coincidence… or perhaps—”

“Or perhaps the school controlled the information and released it at that time.”

As this idea began to appear more certain, Ryūen forcefully bit into his hamburger.

Horikita’s Class B heard it from Kiryūin in Class 3-B.

Ryūen’s Class D heard it from Ibeyama in Class 3-D.

The fact that the information sources matched our classes intrigued us.

If Sakayanagi heard from Class 3-A and Ichinose from Class 3-C, then our assumptions would be correct.

“However, can we really be sure of this? Couldn't someone just be spreading false rumors after talking to the third-year students? Besides, we're in the middle of winter break right now.”

“Heh. That's precisely why it's credible.”

Students naturally lose their sense of urgency during the break. The relaxed atmosphere made their days enjoyable. If this was a false rumor, making the students prepare for battle early on wouldn’t accomplish much. Any mental strain causing unease couldn't be expected either.

“A warning to be prepared for a shock—it's natural to think that way.”

Given the situation that both Ryūen and I knew the same thing, Katsuragi calmly analyzed it.

It was a message aimed at a specific class of third-year students, and the information flowed smoothly.

“Has anyone else heard something similar?”

Upon Katsuragi's question, I shook my head from side to side, and Ryūen didn't react, but he likely shared the same answer.

If Ishizaki and the others had heard it, they would’ve immediately reported it to Ryūen.

“Should we assume that it was announced to one representative from each class?”

“We can't be sure, but it's probably safe to assume that Sakayanagi and Ichinose have been notified as well. They wouldn't be so stupid as to miss this kind of information, no matter how indirect.”

“But then a question arises. Why was Ayanokōji chosen for class 2-B? If we were to consider it in order, wouldn't it be Horikita? Or maybe you being chosen was just a coincidence, and there's a possibility that someone other than Sakayanagi and Ichinose was chosen... No, that's unlikely.”

Halfway through making a new hypothesis, Katsuragi denied himself.

“The school’s ultimately neutral. If they're going to give a warning, they should’ve prepared the leaders in advance. It was necessary to select someone who could understand and accept the third year’s warnings, at least.”

“Suzune has been getting more powerful, but it wouldn’t be surprising if the school and third-year students interpreted Ayanokōji as the leader and chose him. It's not particularly shocking.”

Indeed. Recently, I’ve had many opportunities to talk to Nagumo and Kiriyama when dealing with the student council.

Still, Kiriyama likely would’ve chosen Horikita.

More importantly, why Kiryūin had made contact with me wasn’t resolved yet.

If I had to interpret the situation, I'd say that the third-year leaders were instructed by the school to deliver the message to the second-year leaders.

Kiriyama intended to inform Horikita, but Kiryūin, who had overheard the conversation, volunteered and chose to approach me and deliver the message—

I couldn't tell if this interpretation was correct, but since I had come to know the content of the message, it was my duty to inform Horikita.

"If we assume that the same thing happened last year, there might be a special exam hinted at before or after the mixed training camp."

Katsuragi muttered and then organized his scattered thoughts once more.

"There will be several special exams in the third term—one in early January and the other in late January—and another one in early March with the class voting special exam. This will be followed by the final exam for a total of four."

Adding to the three first-year exams, there might've been a total of four second-year exams, meaning there were more possible exam opportunities.

However, this was all mere speculation, and I mustn't forget that.

Apparently, the class voting special exam was an unexpected event that wasn't held every year.

If it didn't exist, there would be a total of three special exams conducted in the third term.

In the end, last year was last year. It was merely a reference.

There was even a possibility that no special exams would be held, but this was highly unlikely.

It couldn't be said for sure that there weren't or couldn't be cases where there were more than four exams.

“Class voting, huh? You had Totsuka expelled by Sakayanagi, didn't you?”

“...Yes.”

As Katsuragi's expression darkened, perhaps recalling last year's bitter incident, Ryūen, who had finished his hamburger, cheerfully added.

“Depending on the situation, it won't be just one or two expulsions, right?”

As he casually said, it was better to be prepared for the risks that came with the truth.

“Expulsions, huh? I'd prefer not to have any.”

“Don't say such soft things. There are still too many students in our year. It won't be interesting unless we have an exam that can thin out even five or ten students.”

Against Katsuragi, who would likely be thinking about his classmates, Ryūen expressed the opposite idea.

“Don't forget that you also have the risk of being targeted, Ryūen.”

“Bring it on. Whether it's Sakayanagi or Ichinose, if they come after me, I'll just crush them.”

“It's fine if it's an obvious enemy. But there's no guarantee that someone won't come and kick you from within.”

Within—that meant his own class.

Ryūen, who always took a stand against his enemies, surely had many foes.

However, he wasn’t the kind of guy who would feel anxious about such things.

“It’ll be easier to talk if we don't have to choose someone to cut from here.”

“Indeed... But I must say, if you arbitrarily decide to abandon your own people, I'll resist.”

“Do as you like.”

Even if Katsuragi, who previously intervened in the class vote, seemed to be a hindrance, Ryūen would have no mercy. However, he still functioned as a stopper to a certain extent.

Yet, the mystery didn’t fade away.

Katsuragi, who walked next to him, must have harbored the same concerns since his expression remained stern.

There was no need for the three of us to gather and converse like this if the sole purpose was to iron out our differences in the face of the impending special exam.

“In the next special exam, if the rules allow a one-on-one battle, I'll take on Sakayanagi.”

Those were the words that came out of Ryūen as if he’d seen through both my and Katsuragi’s thoughts.

“What's your intention, Ryūen? Isn't a direct confrontation at the final exam enough for you?”

“It's not enough. I want to see that woman's face covered in humiliation at least one more time.”

Naming the opponents he wanted to fight meant that he was telling us not to interfere.

“Even without a warning, there’s a low possibility that Horikita would actively desire a confrontation with Sakayanagi's class. Currently, unless the special exam places a heavy emphasis on teamwork, there's no merit in fighting against her class, which has a higher overall ability.”

If she had to choose between the lowest-ranked class and the top, she would probably opt for Ichinose.

“It's not advisable to nominate Class A at this point. If the special exam revolves around academics like the previous one, we would be facing a formidable opponent.”

Indeed, there was no need to nominate at this stage.

But Ryūen seemed ready to fight, even if it meant taking risks.

“Sakayanagi probably thinks I'm the one she can defeat anytime. I'll correct that misconceived notion.”

“...I don't want to agree.”

“So, Katsuragi. Will you go with Ichinose? Ichinose has become quite a troublesome opponent.”

It seemed that even Ryūen had noticed that Ichinose was beginning to change. Though Katsuragi might have to revise his understanding, he would still object to naming Sakayanagi.

“Evaluating Ichinose as troublesome isn't bad. But overall, she still falls short compared to Sakayanagi. Even if the assessment was overturned, they were still incomparable. For now, we should wait for information to be disclosed in the third term.”

Katsuragi, who didn't underestimate Ichinose, suggested that they should choose who to fight after learning about the special exam's contents.

“Does the reason even matter? Ryūen simply wants to fight Sakayanagi.”

“That's the problem. A leader should choose the most promising method and pick the best option. Confirming a fight with a powerful enemy at this point is like throwing away victory.”

The three of us continued our stroll and discussion around Keyaki Mall without stopping.

It seemed my release wouldn't be granted anytime soon.

5.2

The big Christmas tree that should’ve been adorning the entrance had already been removed.

As she gazed at the empty space, Karuizawa showed a melancholic expression.

“Haah—”

A heavy sigh slipped out unintentionally.

Satō, who had just arrived at the meeting place, heard it from behind Karuizawa.

“Kei-chan, did you wait long?”

“Ah, Maya-chan. No, not at all. I just got here too.”

Having fully recovered on the 28th, Karuizawa had invited Satō to hang out.

As she had explained to Ayanokōji, she had relied on Satō's help many times during her bout with the flu.

Satō had provided her with anything she needed, regardless of the time.

She replied promptly to any messages when she was feeling lonely.

She even listened to the painful feelings that Karuizawa wanted to express to Ayanokōji so many times but couldn’t.

And she happily accepted Karuizawa's sudden invitation without any dismay.

“Sorry for inviting you out of the blue.”

“It's totally fine. I'm just glad you're feeling better. I'm really happy for you.”

“Thank you. But isn't this too much fuss over just the flu?”

“It can be serious for some people, you know.”

Satō held Karuizawa's hand and joyfully celebrated her recovery like a child.

“I might be overstepping my bounds, but... did you properly tell Ayanokōji-kun that you're better now?”

“Yeah, I told him this morning. We also agreed to talk about the promise we couldn't fulfill on Christmas night.”

“Oh, that's great, isn't it?!”

Although Satō jumped to the conclusion that everything was resolved and they had made up, she quickly withdrew her smile upon seeing Karuizawa's uneasy expression.

“We might be able to keep our promise to meet, but... I don't know about anything beyond that.”

“What do you mean...? It was just a little fight, right?”

From what Satō had heard, it didn't seem like an issue as serious as the people involved claimed it to be. If anyone was at fault, it was Ayanokōji.

However, there was another issue that had been lingering on Karuizawa's mind for some time.

“Kiyotaka might actually have started to like Ichinose-san.”

Falling in love with someone else.

Karuizawa had been continuously pondering this worst-case scenario while she was feeling under the weather.

“No, no, no, that's absolutely not true. Don't worry, okay?”

“...Yeah...”

With her answers returning to normal, Satō was relieved to confirm that her words were reaching Karuizawa.

At the same time, she regretted digging her own grave and, unable to take it back, desperately tried to change the subject.

“It-it’ll be New Year's soon, right? Time flies, doesn't it?”

The Christmas tree had been removed. The decor was already set for New Year’s.

“Yeah, I guess... I really wanted to see the Christmas tree.”

“Uh...!?”

Karuizawa, still clinging to her lingering regrets, remained still, gazing at the spot where the tree had been.

They were supposed to decorate the tree on the 24th and take a commemorative photo together while the ornaments sparkled.

Having dug her own grave yet again, Satō pulled at her own cheek.

“Well, there's always next year, right?”

“Yeah... Yeah, that's true.”

Next year. It was impossible for Karuizawa to think about something a year ahead at this time.

Even tomorrow's prospects were unclear, shrouded in darkness.

While Karuizawa kept her gaze fixed, Satō repeatedly glanced around their surroundings.

She wanted Karuizawa to cheer up—that was her top priority. But Satō also had another goal in mind when she readily agreed to hang out with her: a chance encounter with Ayanokōji.

If they hadn't resolved their issue yet, it'd be difficult for them to intentionally meet up. So, she decided to leave it up to fate.

Thankfully, they had already arranged to meet up tomorrow, but it wouldn't hurt for it to happen even sooner.

She thought that, as long as Ayanokōji could cheer her up, it wouldn't matter if he was her boyfriend.

All that remained was for the two of them to meet up spontaneously in the midst of their shared time together.

In that scenario, Satō hoped to smoothly facilitate their reconciliation, creating an ideal outcome.

However, it was always tricky to meet up when they actually wanted to.

Satō thought to herself, if Ayanokōji knew that she was hanging out with Karuizawa today, he may have wanted to avoid showing his face.

The evidence was right in front of her—Karuizawa didn't even show a hint of trying to find her boyfriend.

It didn't seem like malice, but rather an act of consideration so as not to interfere with their day out.

If a chance encounter seemed unlikely, then it'd be up to Satō to stay strong.

“Come on, let's forget about all the unpleasant stuff and have fun!”

In a do-or-die spirit, Satō firmly grabbed Karuizawa's shoulders.

Seeing Satō's eyes full of determination to encourage her friend, Karuizawa reflected upon herself.

She had called out her best friend to express her gratitude, yet she'd ended up worrying her once again.

At this point, it would be unclear why she even invited her in the first place.

“That's true.”

Karuizawa decided to put on a brave face, at least for now.

She was a truly good friend—her best friend—whom she met after fleeing to this school.

While treasuring the warmth of their friendship, she held out her hand.

Satō didn’t initially grasp the meaning behind it, but she quickly understood her intentions upon seeing Karuizawa's smile.

She grabbed the offered hand back, and the two held hands.

Their fingers were still cold, so they laughed it off as they compared their frigid hands to each other.

It wasn't the first time they held hands in the spur of the moment.

It also wasn't the first time they reluctantly went along with it, feeling somewhat embarrassed on the inside.

Even now, there was a feeling of shyness between them.

Yet, their feelings were connected.

To an outsider, it may seem childish, or they might fantasize about some kind of romantic feelings between the two.

But they were just best friends, wanting to hold hands simply because they wanted to show their connection.

No more, no less.

There was a certainty between the two that they wouldn't be bothered by the noise around them just for today.

“He, he, he. I will make you forget about everything.”

“Ah, how scary!”

A world just for the two of them.

Karuizawa and Satō decided to spend the whole day enjoying themselves at Keyaki Mall.

5.3

We left Keyaki Mall, strolled leisurely along the school route, and returned back to the mall's vicinity, taking our time as we walked along a road with a view of the sea.

It wasn't unusual for three boys to casually walk together during winter break, and that scenario wouldn't attract attention under normal circumstances.

However, adding a conspicuous presence like Ryūen, a strategist Katsuragi, and the oddity of myself, we carried some risk of standing out.

Even so, Ryūen didn't choose to be anonymous, refusing means such as indoor facilities or phones.

Considering the content of the special exam, it was somewhat reckless.

Any observer's evaluation would greatly depend on whether they deemed this group's meeting as carelessness or an intentional act.

"Can I assume that the discussion is over? We're just going around in circles now."

As we neared the spot where we had met up, Katsuragi, who had stopped walking first, checked in with us.

We couldn't figure out the number or content of the special exams, and he wouldn't permit Ryūen's request for a match against Sakayanagi.

Continuing to waste time like this wouldn't be meaningful.

"Yeah, maybe you're right. It's fine then."

Without looking back, Ryūen slightly raised his left hand and conveyed his agreement.

"I owe you a lot, Ayanokōji. If you have any problems, feel free to consult me. There are things I can help you with besides class competitions."

I nodded my head in gratitude at his unexpected consideration, and Katsuragi turned his back and started walking ahead.

Well, I should get going too.

“I'm going to stop by Keyaki Mall now. What will you do? If you want us to hold hands and go on a date, I might consider it.”

Ryūen grinned and gently held out his left hand in a welcoming gesture.

Shopping together with just Ryūen would be much more eye-catching than we had expected.

Above all, Kei and Satō were likely to be at the mall at this time.

“Well then, I'll be off.”

Accompanying Ryūen on a hand-holding date to the Keyaki Mall wasn’t part of my plan, so it was time to return home.

There was no sign of him stopping me, so I started walking.

“Our match will be in the third year. Don't forget that.”

As I moved farther away from Keyaki Mall, those were the last words Ryūen said to me.

I didn't forget, but whether it would come true was a different story.

Even so… just a short walk had left me feeling strangely tired.

Feeling more exhausted than after sweating for an hour in the gym wasn’t just my imagination.

Having lost sight of both Katsuragi and Ryūen, I continued walking.

I returned to the dormitory and, as initially planned, holed up for the day.

But before that, I had to clear up something that had been bothering me.

After walking for several tens of seconds, I stopped as I sensed someone approaching.

I stood right in front of a vending machine that was installed along the exterior wall of Keyaki Mall.

Looking at the displayed items, to a third party, it would seem like I was just considering buying a drink.

I directed my gaze between the foliage that was likely put out by the employees as the store opened.

“What are you doing in a place like that?”

“Eh!?”

I called out to Yamamura, who was hiding in a shaded blind spot.

“You've been following me for about 10 minutes, right? Earlier, you seemed to be hiding behind a tree on the other side of the road.”

It was easy to hide with the thick-trunked trees planted along the tree-lined road.

It was quite impressive that she managed to follow Ryūen and his group without being noticed.

“No, not at all...”

Yamamura tried to answer deceptively but was quick to give up, perhaps due to my accurate answer.

“How... did you know?”

“How did I?”

At first, I thought nothing of it, but if it was the old me, I probably wouldn't have cared about Yamamura's presence.

Now that we had spent time with each other on the school trip, she was already in my consciousness.

It was like a single image. At first glance, you saw only Shape A or Composition A, but once you know that changing your perspective would reveal Shape B or Composition B, your brain will recognize the image as B.

This might've been similar.

From just being a female student in Class A, she was now Yamamura Miki. That was all. I knew I was being followed and that my conversations were being overheard, but I didn't stop her.

Yamamura was a student from Class A and a friend of Sakayanagi.

If I had reported her stealthy actions to Ryūen and his group, it would've been seen as taking sides.

Of course, whether or not I took sides was up to me, but I didn't think it was the best strategy for the moment.

"You can relax. There were no signs of Ryūen or Katsuragi noticing you."

"Really? I felt like Ryūen-kun was trying to lure me out..."

It seemed that Yamamura's intuition was right. He didn't stay in one place and deliberately moved around conspicuous locations. Perhaps he was waiting for his prey to be trapped.

It didn't seem like Yamamura was just accidentally drawn into such a lure.

"Then why not just tell me without making me ask if they found out or not?"

Yamamura was probably convinced that no one had noticed her. Otherwise, she wouldn't have looked so surprised when I found her.

"It seems that you've been tailing not just today, but yesterday as well."

She didn't confirm, but her silence spoke volumes.

Despite being closely watched, Yamamura skillfully tailgated them.

On the other hand, Ryūen probably had no choice but to give up the chase, seeing no results from his schemes.

Even after parting with me, there were no signs of Ryūen following me.

That was probably why I felt comfortable enough to call out to Yamamura.

“I was honestly hesitant whether to call you out or not, but since we were in the same group during the school trip, I thought I might as well greet you.”

To me, who knew of her existence, not calling out to Yamamura would’ve felt like ignoring her.

It was a strange feeling to ignore a familiar face in this unpopular place.

In fact, Yamamura thought that she’d go unnoticed, and I thought she would’ve wanted to be ignored.

“You're not going to ask why I was following you?”

The final exam was coming up, and Ryūen wanted to fight Sakayanagi. As for Sakayanagi, she would want to know his every move and scheme, so it couldn't hurt to gather information.

“There's no need to ask that.”

“*Is that so?*”

“And after this, I have no intention of reporting you to Ryūen, so you can rest assured.”

I added that, thinking Yamamura probably wouldn't be reassured by mere words that those two hadn't noticed.

“But you all seemed very familiar with each other. At the very least, you don't recognize him as an enemy, do you? If you turn that around, wouldn’t that make you an ally of Ryūen-kun?”

Yamamura's questioning tone was mixed with doubt.

“Unfortunately, I'm not Ryūen's ally. That's not to say I'm an ally of Class A either. Anyway, I have no intention of divulging that we met here to anyone. You can trust me on that.”

“Really?”

I was about to nod to dispel her anxiety, but a faint sound of footsteps stopped my head from moving.

Immediately after, dry applause rang out several times, slowly repeated.

“You're amazing, Ayanokōji. How did you find the rat?”

Yamamura was no longer looking at me—her gaze was fixed on Ryūen.

Ryūen, who was supposed to have disappeared, reappeared now of all times... *I see.*

“I guess Sakayanagi asked you to gather information about me?”

“It's not like that...”

Yamamura denied it, but she couldn't hide her poor acting skills.

“Kuku. It's a good thing I decided to follow Ayanokōji just in case. Even if you’re sensitive to being watched, you would let your guard down if there's no one following, isn't that right?”

He was correct. I was confident that I would notice his or anybody else’s presence if they were obviously tailing me, but it seemed that Ryūen had already taken that into account.

From where we split up, there were only two paths for me to take: one which went straight to Keyaki Mall, or the other that led to either the school or dormitory. In practice, Ryūen disappeared into Keyaki Mall.

If he started following me at a distance after waiting for time to pass, there was a high probability that he would naturally catch up with me. No matter how sensitive I was, if no one was tailing me, there was no way to prevent being tracked.

The reason for his remarks that kept me from going to Keyaki Mall was to narrow down my route choices.

Moreover—

As I watched Katsuragi come back from the front, I felt even more apologetic to Yamamura.

“So there was a connection between Yamamura and Sakayanagi.”

Katsuragi, who seemed to have been scouting, was surprised by Yamamura's presence.

He pretended to go home and was looking for people lurking around.

“I apologize, Ayanokōji. I just got word from Ryūen a few minutes ago and came back.”

If Ryūen was going to track me anyway, involving Katsuragi would increase the probability of success. That was Ryūen's plan.

He had kept it a secret from his ally so as not to arouse suspicion.

“Is it surprising that this girl has a connection with Sakayanagi?”

“Yes, it is. At least while I was a member, I've never seen her have any relationship with Sakayanagi. I think she's just one of many reconnaissance units.”

This was something only an insider like Katsuragi could understand.

Yamamura was clearly struggling more than she had a while ago.

“Even though I went through all this trouble, I only caught a small fish. I thought Hashimoto might be up to something... Or maybe it's precisely because you're trusted by Sakayanagi that you were assigned this task?”

Ryūen's sharp gaze, full of suspicion, pierced through Yamamura.

As she didn't expect to be surrounded like this, her expression couldn't hide her anxiety.

Unexpectedly, this expression helped answer any question Ryūen may have had.

“Anyway, your ability to notice things is quite impressive, Ayanokōji. But your role today is over.”

He lost interest in me and told us that frightened Yamamura was his only target now.

“If Sakayanagi thinks she can beat me just by snooping around, she's easy to read.”

Even if I didn't find Yamamura this time, and Yamamura was able to continuously collect information, whether it was able to pass as useful info to Sakayanagi was another matter.

If there was contact that you wanted to keep hidden, it was naturally not done outdoors.

A room belonging to a trustworthy friend, a karaoke room, or a restroom, if the individuals were of the same gender, would work. It would be easy to proceed secretively, depending on the purpose.

However, there was also an unavoidable aspect for Sakayanagi.

Information was needed, and Ryūen was supposed to investigate Class A in the same way.

However, unlike Ryūen, who could gather information by himself, it was difficult for Sakayanagi.

She couldn't gather information without using students like Yamamura, Kamuro, and Hashimoto.

“Being investigated doesn't feel good, does it?”

“Are you in a position to say that? You're watching Sakayanagi in the same way, aren't you?”

It seemed that it wasn't a one-way surveillance from Sakayanagi's side.

Already, they seemed to be watching each other in preparation for the final exams.

“So, do you want to try another move? I'm willing to listen if you have a brilliant idea, Katsuragi.”

Ryūen suggested an attack on Sakayanagi, but Katsuragi denied it.

“I have no intention of making a big move. Monitoring Sakayanagi is the only hand we can play right now.”

Katsuragi seemed to think that keeping their distance and simply having a staring contest was the best strategy.

“Don't forget that the final showdown should take place in the special exam, not outside.”

“Sheesh. You're stubborn.”

Ryūen and Katsuragi's basic policies were almost polar opposites, but Ryūen listened to Katsuragi's words with a smile.

“Why don't you guys stick around with us for a bit?”

“Drop it.”

“Huh? Drop it? It would be such a waste not to grill her now that we caught her.”

“Are you planning on threatening her? It should be enough that you've figured out Yamamura's involvement. You should go.”

As he said that, Katsuragi gestured for Yamamura to leave immediately.

“Ex-excuse me…”

Wanting to escape the uncomfortable atmosphere, Yamamura hurriedly tried to leave.

“Wait.”

“Huh!?”

However, Ryūen called out to stop her, leaving her petrified as if she was a frog facing a snake.

“We'll keep the fact that we noticed you a secret.”

“Why…?”

“Because we feel sorry for you. It goes without saying what would happen if we reported that we found you.”

“That's...”

“You weren't found by us, huh? If we don't report it, your value won't be lost. Well, whether you believe me or not, it's up to you.”

While she was in a tight spot, Ryūen said that, as if dropping a lifeline.

“If you can't keep quiet about it, then tell her this: if you want information, come visit me alone in my room anytime you want. That's only if you and that girl have the courage to do so.”

Yamamura nodded slightly and began to quietly leave the scene.

It seemed like she had planned to return via Keyaki Mall as she headed in that direction.

When Yamamura was far enough away, Katsuragi approached Ryūen.

“Ryūen—you bastard.”

“What?”

“This hobby of yours isn't something to be praised.”

“Huh?”

“I won't say you shouldn't be interested in the opposite sex. But Sakayanagi is a child. You can't lay your hands on her.”

Thinking he was being serious, he warned him against doing anything outrageous.

It was an interpretation of Ryūen saying to visit the room.

That was just Ryūen's joke, but Katsuragi probably didn't understand it.

“There are plenty of girls in this school. Don't rush into anything.”

“What kind of nonsense are you saying? Do you think I'd be excited by such a cheeky brat? It's obviously just a provocation.”

“Huh? No, but just now you said to visit your room alone. That's what it means, right?”

While shaking his head, Ryūen tossed a fundamental argument at Katsuragi.

“You're right. She’s not my taste at all, but Sakayanagi’s technically our age too.”

He contradicted himself by saying that it was fine to touch people of the same age, but not Sakayanagi.

Katsuragi, who hadn’t noticed this, froze, lost in thought for a while.

Finally, he picked up on the meaning of Ryūen's words and began to speak.

“...You're right. No, but at her size, she doesn't look like we’re the same age at all. She's even smaller than my sister, so it's really—”

While recognizing her as a formidable enemy, Katsuragi was also a brother. He probably let his protectiveness get ahead of him, not wanting her to be seen as a sexual object because of his younger sister that he hadn't seen in a while.

One thing was for sure: if Sakayanagi heard these two talk, she’d be angry.

They clearly treated her like a child (though, only in appearance).

“For women, it’s best for them to be normal in everything. Neither flashy nor plain and neither big nor small—that’s my taste.”

Though I didn't want to know, he seemed to prefer very ordinary women.

It wasn't just an arbitrary preference—it sounded like a conclusion that came from experiencing both the bitter and sweet.

I don't know about his high school life, but during middle school, he seemed to be quite into women.

“I'm relieved that you haven't reached the level of falling for her.”

On the other hand, Katsuragi seemed to feel reassured by something completely irrelevant.

“Well? Do you still have some business with me, Ayanokōji?”

“Using me for your own convenience and then saying such harsh things is quite unfair, isn't it?”

“It's your fault for being used. If you want to blame something, blame your own wild intuition.”

Indeed, there was no point in holding a grudge about being tricked here.

It was just difficult to use this experience as a lesson for the future.

Tailing someone without actually following them closely.

Even if the same method was used again, it would be difficult to prevent.

Being cautious without feeling someone's presence was just restricting one's own actions.

However, keeping in mind that I might be followed every time would be even more stressful.

There’s no point in staying here.

Besides, there's still something I want to talk to Yamamura about, and I might be able to catch up with her now.

“Weren't you going home?”

I was asked as soon as I started walking towards Keyaki Mall.

“There are countless routes inside the mall. I don't want to be chased around by you anymore today.”

Informing him that, with multiple escape routes, I could avoid him, Ryūen snorted.

5.4

Since I entered Keyaki Mall, what should I do about Yamamura?

She might've already returned to the dormitory through another exit...

I tried to think, putting myself in Yamamura's position—what would I do if I were her?

Undoubtedly, she must've been struggling with whether to report her failure of being noticed to Sakayanagi or not.

During times of mental instability, people would seek a place to rest.

If I exclude the option of going straight back to the dormitory and assume that she's still in Keyaki Mall, where would she be?

Yamamura wasn't fond of crowds and disliked contact with others.

Busy streets and stores could be ruled out right away.

Karaoke rooms could be used alone, but there was always a hurdle for solo singing.

A toilet stall was a relatively high possibility, but I also didn't think she would cause inconvenience to others by making it unusable.

So, then—

A while ago, she was between the outdoor vending machine and the indoor plants.

Near the rest area, there were also several vending machines installed in a secluded spot.

If it was around there, it was inconspicuous and not crowded.

Perhaps due to the time, there was no one in the rest area's vicinity.

Naturally, there were no other people at the vending machines in the back either.

I cautiously approached and peeked around the blind spot of the vending machine.

“Wha—!?”

Upon finding Yamamura sitting next to the vending machine with a mini bottled tea in each hand, she dropped one of them in surprise. Fortunately, the cap was on, so it was fine.

“I can't believe you’re really here.”

Although I narrowed it down, I still wasn't completely sure…

I picked up the rolling bottle and handed it to Yamamura.

“H-h-how did you know I was here…”

She hurriedly searched her own pockets.

“No, I don't have a GPS or anything like that.”

“But, if not that, then how…? D-did you track my phone's location…?”

“I didn't do that either.”

It was a bizarre delusion, but perhaps she was so surprised that she wanted to believe it.

Yamamura stood up, peeked out from behind the vending machine, and surveyed the area.

“Ryūen and Katsuragi aren't here.”

“R-really…? Umm, is there still something you need from me?”

“I didn't get a chance to apologize earlier. I'm sorry, Yamamura. If I hadn't called out to you, you wouldn't have been found.”

If that hadn't happened, there would be no need for her to worry about this between vending machines.

“It was my fault that you found me… Please don't worry about it.”

She kindly covered for me without openly blaming me.

“Did you report to Sakayanagi that they found you?”

“Yes, I did. I think my role is over now.”

To my surprise, she casually replied.

She seemed to be at a loss because of Ryūen's sweet whispers…

If she had already reported it, there would be no need to delve deeper into that matter.

As for me, I still had things left to do for Yamamura.

“I'll make it up to you somehow.”

“…Huh?”

During the school trip, it wouldn't have been surprising if Yamamura and Kitō were watching and following Ryūen since they were in the same group.

It was highly likely that Sakayanagi simply ordered them to keep an eye on him.

Even if it wasn't directed by Sakayanagi, keeping a close eye on Ryūen would be natural for them since they were in the same group.

Yamamura was always concerned about Ichinose’s class’s every single move.

However, this case was completely different, and the surprise was shown by Katsuragi.

The fact that Sakayanagi might’ve treasured Yamamura and used her as a spy—Ryūen's analysis of Sakayanagi's class strength had advanced slightly after obtaining this information.

From now on, Ryūen's approach with Yamamura would undoubtedly escalate.

If I hadn't noticed her presence and carelessly called out to her, the likelihood of Ryūen and Katsuragi capturing Yamamura would still have been high. There was no need to repeat who bore the responsibility.

“Making amends or something like that isn’t necessary. It has nothing to do with you, who's from a different class.”

While I understood Yamamura's point, I still had my own thoughts.

At this stage, it wasn't something that could be explained to anyone, so I thought of another reason.

“It just makes me feel uncomfortable. No matter how you look at it, you only suffer from this.”

“But... it's wrong to follow someone around, to begin with, right?”

It seemed that Yamamura felt guilty about that.

So maybe that was why Yamamura didn't show any signs of dissatisfaction towards me either.

“Really, don't worry about it anymore.”

It looked difficult to get a positive response from Yamamura here. Rather, it might’ve only confused her more if I stayed too long.

“Understood. I'll be there to help if you have any troubles. I'm not sure if I can be useful, but feel free to ask me.”

By saying this, I should be able to get Yamamura to accept without any pressure.

Regardless of whether she was in trouble or not, it would be Yamamura's decision to keep in contact.

“In that case, yes, I understand.”

Yamamura nodded, accepting my suggestion.

“Well, I'm going to go now.”

“...Take care.”

Yamamura probably intended to stay in that spot for a while and didn't attempt to move away from the vending machine.

I tried to leave the scene after saying goodbye to Yamamura, but—

I accidentally found Kei and Satō walking towards us in the direction I turned around.

Reflexively hiding, I crouched down in the vending machine’s shadow with Yamamura behind me.

“Ah, Ayanokōji-kun...!?”

Feeling guilty about Yamamura's puzzled look, I quietly placed my index finger on my lips to signal to be silent.

With that, she seemed to understand my intent and quickly fell silent.

“Hey, where should we go next!?”

“Well~”

The cheerful exchange between the two reached my ears, and they were getting closer.

They probably wouldn't detect us with just a brief glance.

However, that would only be the case if they didn't need to use the vending machine.

No matter how much we were hidden behind the vending machine, we would be exposed if they came to the front.

“Hey, how about taking a break? Want something to drink?”

Apparently, Satō had suggested the worst possible outcome.

“Hm...”

Kei hesitated.

If we were to be found afterward, hiding would have been counterproductive.

Being close together with someone of the opposite sex in the narrow space between vending machines.

It would be difficult to make an excuse that nothing was going on.

“Yeah, maybe we should just take a break for a bit.”

“That's a good idea. You are just recovering from being sick, after all.”

I was prepared for the worst, but it seemed they had no plans to use the vending machine.

It appeared their intention was to rest on the bench nearby rather than using the vending machine.

However, that didn't mean the problem was solved.

There was only one exit, and as long as Kei and Satō were sitting on the bench, we couldn't leave.

“Thank you. I'm sorry for making you worry.”

“No, it's not a big deal. I mean, helping each other out when we get sick is normal, right?”

“Yeah, if you ever collapse, I'll take care of you, Maya-chan.”

“Thanks. I'd appreciate it.”

“I feel like I'm always being supported by you.”

“R-really?”

“Do you remember when we weren't as close as we are now, and you confronted me about Kiyotaka? You know, right after we became second-year students?”

“I think I said something like, 'When did you start liking Ayanokōji-kun, Karuizawa-san? Answer without dodging the question...' or something like that.”

While blushing and feeling embarrassed about reminiscing, Satō covered her face with her hands.

“Yes, that's it. You hit the nail on the head and wouldn't let me escape.”

The two of them talked in normal voices, but their conversation was clearly audible in the quiet area.

Yamamura silently looked up at me.

I slightly raised a hand to signal an apology for having her witness something she didn’t want to hear.

There was no need to forcibly listen if she didn't want to.

Even though it might’ve been a little difficult, if you covered your ears with both hands, you wouldn't be able to hear it.

However, surprisingly, Yamamura seemed to be enjoying herself.

In an “it doesn't bother me” kind of way, she silently listened to the conversation.

Yamamura should be responsible for collecting information about someone at the behest of Sakayanagi every day.

If so, eavesdropping would be an everyday routine.

One or two stealth missions might be fun, like playing detective for everyone, but there weren't many people who didn't feel guilty about eavesdropping on conversations they didn't want to hear.

I thought Yamamura might’ve also been fed up with her role, but apparently, that wasn't the case.

With her natural ability to blend in, she was very comfortable in this situation.

The two talked for a while, but eventually, the break came to an end.

“Shall we go soon?”

“Are you okay now?”

“Yeah. It's my first time going out in a while, so it would be a waste not to have fun.”

“Right. But, make sure you make up with Ayanokōji-kun, okay?”

“Y-yeah. I'll do my best...!”

Those were the last words I heard from them as they slowly moved away.

At times like this, there was a fear that the two might unexpectedly return or look back. I thought I should tell Yamamura to stay for a while, but before I made a move, Yamamura silently stopped me with her hand.

It seemed like she thought that was enough, and she moved almost simultaneously with me.

“They're gone, I think.”

“Yeah.”

First, Yamamura stepped out from behind the vending machine and checked the surroundings, making sure there were no problems before signaling for me to do the same.

“You're quite efficient, aren't you?”

“...Is that so? It's just what I always do...”

After softly clearing her throat, Yamamura said something unexpected.

“Will you properly make up with Karuizawa-san?”

“Why are you saying something like Satō?”

“I was just curious. She's your girlfriend, right? I didn't know you two were fighting.”

“So even information collection specialists have things they don't know.”

“Are you teasing me?”

“Look who's talking.”

As I said that, Yamamura looked surprised for a moment, but then she slightly relaxed the corners of her mouth.

“You're a strange person, Ayanokōji-kun. It feels odd.”

“I get that a lot.”

“Is that true? Or is it a joke?”

“Who knows.”

Although she still seemed hesitant, Yamamura's calm way of speaking was easy to understand and wasn’t unpleasant. Perhaps it was because there were parts that overlapped with me, such as her consistently low tension.

“By the way... what about the question I asked earlier?”

“You didn't forget?”

“I remember it clearly.”

Surprisingly, Yamamura had a rather pushy side to her, or perhaps one of the walls between us had been removed.

“I'll make up with her properly. It's already planned.”

“I'm glad to hear that.”

Despite having no involvement in the matter and no connection with Karuizawa, she seemed somehow happy.

“You don't have to report this to Sakayanagi.”

“I can't promise that.”

“Harsh.”

After taking a breath, Yamamura took out her cell phone and looked at the dark screen. After hesitating a bit, she turned to face me.

“About the incident with Ryūen-kun earlier... I actually haven't reported it yet.”

“Is it about finding him?”

“Yes... I apologize for lying. I just wanted you to go home as soon as possible...”

“I see.”

“I understand that I need to report it. But... I'm probably afraid of being cut off. As someone without any other merits, that was the one thing I was good at.... If it becomes clear that I can't even do that... I'm useless to the class.”

It wasn't about academic ability or physical ability. Yamamura was simply unable to recognize her own self-worth.

“I don't mind if you blame me, but that's not the case.”

It was probably Yamamura's fault, but the fact that she was caught was important for Sakayanagi to know to make future decisions. This would inevitably weaken her function as a spy in the future.

“Should I not keep quiet about it...?”

“Do you believe Ryūen's words?”

“For now, clinging to that is the only way for me to survive...”

“I understand how you feel, but you should report it honestly.”

“But until it is revealed, I can maintain the current situation. He might really keep quiet. Ryūen-kun may be expelled by Sakayanagi-san, and everything may get swept under the rug... *I don't know.*”

Postponing the exposure of her failure. Imagining a choice to be saved without basis.

“That's the worst choice. Ryūen is just taking advantage of the cracks in your heart, and if necessary, he will definitely expose this fact. Even if you manage to get him expelled, there's a risk of him leaving a parting gift.”

For Ryūen, the results of finding Yamamura weren’t that great. However, if he didn't report that Yamamura was found, he could use that information to devise a strategy.

It wouldn't just end with her removal from her role.

“Don't be easily used.”

“But...”

“I don't want you to be expelled. Please take this as advice for that reason.”

“Why? I have no relation to you.”

“We were in the same group on the school trip. Isn't that enough of a relationship?”

“...I am...”

Yamamura clenched both hands tightly and brought them close to her eyes.

Then, when she opened her eyes wide, she took out her cell phone and typed a message.

['I've been caught by Ryūen-kun and Katsuragi-kun. I'll tell you the details by call.']

After showing the text to me, she sent it to Sakayanagi.

“I thought I might run away again if I hesitated.”

It seemed that she chose a way to cut off the path of retreat by reporting it on the spot.

“Ah, umm, I'm going to... excuse myself now...!”

Having suddenly become aware of her situation, Yamamura hurriedly uttered those words.

“She turned out to be easier to talk to than I’d imagined.”

That was my immediate impression of Yamamura after parting ways with her.

I told her myself, but I genuinely didn’t want her to be expelled.

Sakayanagi likely wouldn’t punish Yamamura for being exposed, but it’d be best to keep an eye on the situation, just in case.

“Ah, right… I should at least inform Horikita.”

Making a phone call would be a hassle, so it’d be best to summarize the key issues and send a message.

Also, Kei and Satō are enjoying themselves at Keyaki Mall. I should head out so I don’t run into them and cause them trouble.

Thus, I decided to leave the mall.

5.5

In the evening, I performed the ceremony of unpacking the products that arrived from my online shopping.

I got my hands on a yogurt maker for 3000 yen.

I skimmed through the thin instruction manual and mastered how to use the machine. It was finally in my possession.

Then, I finished what I needed to do and bought the necessary ingredients—milk and yogurt.

“Alright, let's do this.”

I hadn't thought about it much, but making yogurt was incredibly simple.

First, I took out 100 ml from a one-liter milk carton. I could drink the milk I took out, or use it for cooking. This time, I decided to drink it.

Then I added 100 grams of yogurt to the empty space in the carton.

Now, the milk carton had a ratio of 9:1 milk to yogurt. All I had to do was set it in the yogurt maker.

The timer was set to 9 hours, so once the time was up, all the milk inside the carton would turn into yogurt.

One might argue to just buy yogurt the usual way, but the true value was in doing this for the next batch and in the long run.

The next morning, I'd eat the 1000 grams of yogurt I made, but the important thing was to save 100 grams.

By buying just milk and mixing it in, I could apparently continue ‘planting’ more yogurt.

The power of lactobacilli was amazing.

I could feel it as I started to make it, even though I knew of its function in theory.

But I had only just turned the switch on, so what could I say?

Of course, if I could do this indefinitely, it wouldn't be a hassle.

The milk was fermented by lactobacilli to turn into yogurt, but it was inevitable that the lactobacilli would weaken over time.

As a result, the solidification weakened, so to avoid this, more time was required for fermentation. The strength of the initial bacteria was lost.

I planned to be cautious about hygiene when starting, but there were unavoidable factors such as airborne bacteria, which weakened the work of lactobacilli.

In the end, for a better deal, I should probably finish with three or four batches at most.

I'd just have to gain experience making yogurt and get a feel for it.

That was part of the fun of making my own yogurt.

When I set the timer, it was approaching 9 p.m.

This meant it would be ready at 6 a.m.

“Well then.”

I picked up my phone, which was charging on the bed.

It was about time to contact Kei, or so I thought...

I tried to call Kei from my call history, but my phone rang instead.

I thought for a moment that Kei had gotten impatient and called me, but it didn't seem like it.

“Hello?”

“Errr— H-hi, good evening.”

“It's unusual for you to call, Satō.”

I remembered exchanging contact information with her a long time ago, after last year's sports festival.

“Um, well, there's something I really want to confirm with you.”

“What is it?”

“...It's about Kei-chan.”

As a best friend, I could understand why she’d be worried.

Perhaps she wanted to figure out the emotions I held without telling Kei.

“About Kei? What do you mean?”

On purpose, I decided not to answer directly and instead threw a curveball.

“You've been fighting lately... haven't you?”

“Did you hear that?”

“Well, I guess. It's more like, ‘I figured it out from the flow of the conversation.’”

Instead of saying that she had been explicitly asked for advice, she claimed to have noticed something unnatural while talking with Kei.

“It's almost the end of the year... You're going to make up, right?”

Rather than doubting whether we would meet, she was more concerned about what would happen when we did meet.

Feeling the unease, she must’ve been acting out of concern for Kei's well-being.

She might not have been considering the impact of this phone call on the other party, but for now, I wanted to appreciate the feelings she had for her best friend.

“I was just about to contact Kei just now about the promise.”

“Is that so? That means... you're going to make up with her, right?”

“Of course, that's the plan. Unless Kei has other plans and can't make it.”

Even though we had made a prior appointment, she hadn't confirmed it at all.

It was only natural that you couldn’t force a meeting by imposing only your convenience.

Of course, since I hadn't received any information stating otherwise, I believed that there should be no problem fulfilling the promise.

On the other side of the phone, Satō gulped. A soundless voice faintly reached my ears.

“I'm glad! Yeah, that's good! I'm getting in the way, so I'll hang up now!”

Deciding that any further conversation would just make Kei more anxious, she tried to hang up.

“Wait a minute. There's something I want to tell you.”

“What is it?”

Satō became cheerful after knowing I would contact Kei later.

Being able to support someone whilst putting their feelings and themselves second was a sign of a genuinely strong heart.

That was why I could delve a little deeper into the matter.

“Of course, as a boyfriend, I'm supposed to protect Kei. But that's not enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“You never know when, or where, or what kind of problems will come. It's not just about love, is it? Troubles can arise from tangled friendships, and there's a risk of expulsion due to the school's unique rules. Just like how you felt uneasy about Kei and me, human relationships can break down at any time, and any place. Even if you feel absolutely secure, it can change to insecurity the moment a crack appears.”

“That's—”

For Satō as well, it would be an undeniable fact.

When Satō acknowledged the relationship between Kei and me, she must’ve felt relieved at the same time.

Ayanokōji would protect Kei and cherish her—she must have had that kind of baseless confidence.

However, she panicked at one unexpected situation and felt anxious.

That was why, despite the risks, she made this phone call.

“You had to support her as a friend—no, as a best friend. Of course, this was based on the premise that you acknowledged Kei as such.”

“That's obvious!”

Without a moment's delay, Satō declared that she would protect Kei.

“Then that's fine. But in return, I’ll guarantee the opposite as well.”

“…The opposite?”

“If you can't protect Kei, I will protect Kei.”

“Can I trust you…? Is that okay?”

“Of course.”

Our true intentions, essence, and real feelings didn't matter.

It was better to make Satō think that way—to make an invisible contract.

Even if I abandoned Kei, the chances of Satō devotedly continuing her help would increase.

If Satō were to be expelled or something, there would be no way for her to know if I would continue to protect Kei afterward. There would be no grudge even if I went back on my promise.

However, Kei currently had an important role to play in maintaining Horikita's class.

“Today, I was told by Kei that she wanted to meet with you. She wanted to say thank you.”

“Ah, I see.”

“Thank you.”

“No, no need to thank me. If you two get along well, that's all I need.”

“Alright. Then please hear tomorrow's report from Kei.”

“I'll prepare myself for the lovey-dovey story.”

After finishing the call, I felt a subtle change in my emotions within the empty room.

Manipulating others with my own words.

That is, for me, classified as 'fun' behavior.

It didn't matter if the words were true or false.

The fact that I even found the other’s attempts to manipulate me 'fun.'

I even wanted to welcome being deceived unknowingly.

To know and learn about people. To be taught.

Many more people—or perhaps, bigger and unknown, giant opponents.

If I could control and master such people, I couldn't help but think it would be even more enjoyable.

But still, Satō had improved her skills little by little.

Even in just one phone call, I could see her growth.

“Well—”

I was a little late for our promised time, but I decided to call Kei.

Chapter 6 - Remaining Time

I HAD A DISAGREEMENT with Kei over something related to Ichinose.

I intentionally minimized contact and kept my distance for quite some time.

Unable to meet Kei on Christmas due to an unexpected accident, the flu, I realized it was already the end of the year—December 29th.

Our meeting time was set for a leisurely three o'clock in the afternoon.

Until then, I spent an ordinary day off in my room with nothing to do.

I watched TV, read books, surfed the internet, and listened to music.

I thought it would be boring, but I found fulfillment in the ordinary.

Finally, with 20 minutes left until the promised time, I decided to leave the dormitory.

We were to meet at the entrance of Keyaki Mall, but I thought we could run into each other by chance.

However, there was no sign of Kei in the dormitory lobby or outside.

I thought about it again in my head.

What does it mean for me to be in a relationship?

What is love in the first place?

Among the several definitions of 'relationship' in the dictionary, the one that applied to us right now was 'dating as a couple.'

It was easy to understand and could be taken literally.

Meanwhile, when I looked up 'love' in the dictionary, it said, "the emotion of affection a man and a woman have for each other."

Affection. Emotion. Have I been able to learn about love over time?

That was the first point to consider.

I had learned a lot of emotions in this school.

Classes, conversations with friends, talks with teachers, shopping, playing.

With that, I learned what was interesting, not interesting, fun, not fun, delicious, not delicious, and many more.

Through my relationship with Kei, I learned a lot about what lovers experience and go through.

Conversations, dates, and acts of intimacy that could only be done as a couple.

I could probably say that I had taken all the actions that would be considered model answers.

So, could I say that I've learned the feeling of love?

The answer was probably different. It wasn’t the same as learning emotions.

My heart hadn’t been swayed at all—from before I started dating Kei until now.

That was something I'd asked myself over and over on a daily basis.

I didn't know the answer, but I had a hunch.

It was that I saw Kei as a vehicle to learn about love. I prioritized experiences that could only be done as a couple. In other words, I left that emotion behind when I moved ahead to the next step before my subconscious had caught up.

Of course, I didn't regret it. I learned a lot from Kei.

However, the time to decide how long to continue this relationship approached.

Kei was the student who carried the most darkness within Horikita’s class.

Even if she tried being strong, she had a dependent nature. And I took advantage of that and brought her into *my* control.

But I couldn't achieve my goal while leaving this intense dependency in place.

Now that my policy had changed dramatically, her breaking free from dependency was essential.

That was why I have gained the right to learn something new.

I wondered whether or not there was hesitation in parting with Kei.

If I felt hesitant to let her go, then maybe it could really be called love.

There were nearly five minutes left until the promised time, but Kei was already waiting there. She was looking down and hadn't noticed me yet.

Considering the time, it wouldn't be strange for her to start looking around for me.

Maybe she was afraid that she might not be able to see me when she lifted her head.

Or perhaps she had some resistance to meeting me face to face.

“You're early.”

I approached her, but not to surprise her too much, I left some distance between us and called out to her.

“Ah—”

Reacting to my voice, Kei raised her head.

We were supposed to go on a date today since we couldn't have one on Christmas together, but she didn't look excited. Maybe she was just so anxious she couldn't help it.

At the very least, I couldn't see any feelings of disgust, disappointment, or loss of interest in me.

“It's been a while...”

“Yeah. In the sense that we're alone like this, it's been about three weeks.”

By the time we finished exchanging small talk, we were closely facing each other.

There seemed to be a wedge between me and Kei at that moment. Until now, we used to be so close that we would practically be touching each other. Those three weeks apart left an awkward atmosphere between us.

“Are you feeling completely better now?”

“Yeah. Did you hear from someone?”

“Last night, I got a call from Satō, worrying for you. I heard it then.”

“I see...”

Our feelings were still nowhere near the usual and remained somewhat distant. Even though we're in a relationship and have many secrets between us, this was how much a person's appearance could change when they're filled with anxiety.

“Let's go inside for now.”

“Yeah...”

It was cold outside in winter. I decided to take Kei inside Keyaki Mall first.

“What do you want to do?”

“Originally, we were planning on seeing the Christmas tree here first.”

“Yeah...”

The Christmas tree had already been removed, leaving only a large empty space.

The next time it'd be lively and decorated again would be next year's Halloween or Christmas.

“It's too bad we couldn't see it.”

“Yeah...”

Since we met up and started to move, Kei had been distant and only repeatedly said ‘Yeah.’

Indeed, that was to be expected.

After all, the reason for our current separation laid with me.

It'd be normal to object to going out with someone of the opposite sex while having a lover.

Moreover, if I objectively looked at my own situation, what I did could be taken as cheating, and there was no helping it.

Kei probably didn’t have the courage to open such a danger-emitting door herself.

“For now, I want to apologize for the misunderstanding that occurred regarding Ichinose. I want to stand before you, bring my hands together, and bow deeply.”

“...Kiyotaka...”

“It's natural for you to feel angry and worried. To be clear, there's no fault on your part at all.”

“No, that's not true... I've said some harsh things too...”

“That isn’t true. I think you endured it quite well.”

Without berating me, she only expressed her rightful dissatisfaction.

“I really wanted to apologize much earlier, but it ended up being delayed.”

While apologizing, I took out a box that I had hidden in my pocket beforehand.

“What's this...?”

“It's late, but it's a Christmas present. Please accept it.”

Kei slowly reached out her hand, then pulled it back. Still not completely rid of her anxiety, she showed a frightened reaction.

I touched her stiff hand and gently closed her fingers around the box.

Then I took the coat she had been holding and urged her to open it.

“Can I open it?”

“Of course.”

She gathered her resolve, and while she pressed down on the bottom of the box with her left hand, she removed the lid.

What came out of the box was a shiny necklace. She stared at it intently and raised her face in surprise.

“Did I tell you, Kiyotaka, that I wanted this...!?”

“I didn't need to hear it directly. I saw that you had searched for it many times on your phone. You looked at a lot of other things too, but this felt the most special.”

Among the jewelry I'd seen, some were more expensive than this, but considering our position as students, it'd be hard to imagine her asking for something overly extravagant.

First of all, I thought it was definitely the right choice...

Kei still stood frozen, holding the necklace.

“Could it be that I was wrong?”

If that was the case, it would be a blunder caused by my selfish actions.

However, Kei denied it, shaking her head vigorously left and right and clutching the necklace.

“No, you're correct...!”

“I see. That's good.”

“This... isn't a dream... is it!?”

A joyful Kei, without caring about the possibility that someone might be nearby, started crying on the spot.

With this, I could judge that Kei's dependence on me had reached its peak at the moment.

Even if she was forced to take unspeakable actions she would most likely carry them out.

I didn’t end the relationship here.

That was because, even if I cut off Kei at this moment, it wouldn’t lead to a fundamental solution.

“Kiyotaka?”

As I was lost in thought, Kei looked up at me with her puzzled, moist eyes.

“You're staying tonight, right?”

With a beaming smile, Kei wrapped herself around my arm.

“Ah, I thought maybe... I wasn’t any good anymore...!”

“Will you accept me?”

“Of course, isn't it obvious...?”

With the necklace still in her hand, tears welled up in Kei's eyes and began to overflow.

“So, it's really okay to… go back to the way things were?”

“Yes, back to the way things were.”

“It's really, really okay to trust you, right?”

“You can trust me.”

To Kei, who repeatedly sought confirmation, I embraced her and conveyed my unwavering answer.

“I'm so glad! I'm so glad!”

“We couldn't celebrate Christmas together, but let's definitely spend your birthday together.”

“Yes, yes!”

Kei's birthday was March 8th.

If things went smoothly, it would be before the final exams.

Nothing would change until then.

Just like before, I'd be by her side to support and protect her if she needed it.

That was the fate of a parasitized host.

She put on the necklace and shyly wrapped her arms around me.

“It's been a while… hasn't it?”

“It has. Where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere is fine. As long as I'm with you, anywhere is fine.”

There was nothing more she could wish for. She answered like that and drew her body closer to mine.

“From today on, can I come to your room again?”

“It's more difficult to find a reason to refuse.”

“How about taking a bath? Can I join you?”

“Of course.”

“Hehehehe.”

After she happily relaxed her cheeks, she wiped the tears overflowing from the corner of her eyes with the tip of her fingers.

The restoration of my relationship with her.

It was a joyful action.

Yet, why did my heart not even twitch?

Shouldn't I be more overjoyed, trembling and rejoicing together?

I don't know.

“I'm glad we made up.”

Fabricated words.

With those words, Kei felt joy and happiness.

There was no sadness in not knowing such feelings.

If I didn’t understand, I could repeatedly try until I did.

If it didn't work with Kei, I’d try with someone else.

By having more relationships, eventually, I'd be able to learn about love.

I might come across myself abandoned and crying in pain.

Desire arose.

An endless curiosity pushed me on.

This was what it meant not to know.

There was still infinite room for learning.

“Would you like to go to karaoke after so long?”

For now, I should continue to focus on building a relationship with Kei.

To avoid making her uneasy again due to the silence, I suggested that.

“Wow, it's rare for you to suggest karaoke.”

Looking back, I went to karaoke quite often, but I rarely thought about voluntarily singing, so as she said, it might’ve been rare.

“Recently, I've been hearing more hit songs on TV.”

Kei was a good way for me to check whether or not I was good enough to go out with other students for future karaoke sessions without embarrassing myself.

She raised her hand to show her agreement and answered with a smile, so the two of us started walking.

On the way, I noticed a vending machine in the break area.

Maybe even today, Yamamura was sitting between those vending machines.

“...What's wrong?”

When I stopped my feet, she tilted her head and looked at the vending machines, following my gaze.

“Are you thirsty?”

“That's not it.”

I wondered what Yamamura was told after reporting to Sakayanagi.

Was she relieved of her duty, or was she watching someone else unrelated to Ryūen?

“Oh, right. Can I contact Maya-chan?”

I consented, and to avoid sending messages while walking, I sat her down on a nearby bench.

“You want to sit next to me?”

“No, I'm going to take a look at the vending machine. There might be new interesting products.”

“Got it!”

Kei happily swayed her body as she began chatting with Satō. It seemed like she was reporting that we had made up and thanked her again. In the meantime, I decided to head toward the vending machines

in the back. Even though I thought it was unlikely that she'd be there, I still wanted to make sure.

When I peeked between the vending machines…

"Wha!?"

Unexpectedly… she was there. It was the same scene as before—she was sitting down and holding a plastic bottle in her hand. The only difference was a partially filled eco-bag placed on the ground.

"Here we meet again. Are you always here?"

"Not always… just sometimes," she replied, glancing away guiltily.

"What's that?"

"Uh? Ah, this? This is a hand towel I bought as a reward for myself."

"A reward?"

"…Please don't worry about it. You seem to have made up with Karuizawa-san."

"Did you overhear that?"

"Yes. I'm good at catching such things."

She was being vague, but she meant that she was good at eavesdropping.

"I think you should leave soon. Even if it looks like you're excited about a new product, it feels a little strange when you think over it calmly."

It seemed like she had picked up on the entire conversation.

I wanted to ask her about Sakayanagi's reaction, but it was related to the class situation, so she wouldn't easily answer me. On the contrary, even if I asked, I might cause her more trouble.

"See you later."

"…Yes."

I left the area since it might’ve made it seem like I was talking to a vending machine. When I returned to the bench, just in time, Kei seemed to have wrapped up her conversation with Satō. It turned out to be the right decision to end the conversation sooner.

“Did something happen?”

“Nothing really. Let's go.”

“Alright!”

Kei stood up energetically and approached me again, linking her arm with mine.

Kei's mood had returned to normal to an unbelievable extent. It felt as if her dependency had increased even more than before.

She wanted to be together during meals, baths, and even when sleeping.

Her strong desire not to let go of me, even for a moment, was conveyed through our intertwining fingers.

Parasites burrowed deep, deep inside, to the point where they couldn’t escape on their own.

Without fear of being absorbed, they ventured forth.

Thus, within the year, my relationship had grown even beyond what it was before, and we welcomed New Year as lovers.

On a side note, the image of her happily humming while leaving the room to join the New Year's gathering with her friends was still burned into my memory.

6.1

On my days off, I go to Keyaki Mall. Perhaps with friends, my lover, or alone.

The facility was packed with the only source of entertainment in our school lives and provided endless fun without growing tiresome, but it tended to consume one's private points.

Keeping a membership to the gym and only commuting between it and the dormitory would’ve been efficient, but that wasn't possible.

Eating out with somebody, going to karaoke, or even impulsively picking up attractive items—the battle against temptation continued.

Therefore, sometimes I wanted to spend time without using any private points.

Staying cooped up in my room was an option, but I wanted to reserve that for difficult situations.

With such reasoning, there weren't many options left.

Putting on my uniform for the first time in ten days, I left the dormitory.

I headed to school during my winter break; my goal was the library.

Shortly before winter break, I was on my way towards the bookstore when a person's back briefly caught my attention.

That was the reason why I decided to go to the library. I didn't know whether or not she was there now.

While the school was closed for three days, it reopened today, January 4th.

Despite it being earlier than 11 a.m., I wasn't the only one headed to school; there were also students sweating during their club activities.

Setting foot inside the campus, I heard students' energetic voices coming out of nowhere.

On the way to the library, I encountered Sakagami-sensei.

“Happy New Year,” I told him while nodding, as ignoring him completely would've been impossible.

“Ah, Happy New Year to you too,” came a greeting from Sakagami-sensei. He greeted me even though he may have felt a slight sense of awkwardness towards me since I wasn’t taking part in any club activities.

He tried to pass by, but then he called out from behind.

“You seem to have improved your academic ability quite a bit lately. But while you’ve made progress, Sudō-kun's growth in particular has been truly remarkable.”

“That’s true. Sudō has been working really hard,”

“He’s shown an incredible growth rate since he enrolled. He was constantly causing troublesome incidents before. Among the staff, he’s now a great topic of conversation,” he added.

It was excellent news. Since Sudō had stood out for his bad behavior, he was probably always under the teachers' watchful eyes.

But why did he bring it up now?

“Now from Class D to Class B, you’re even on the verge of reaching Class A.”

Sakagami-sensei gently touched the edge of his glasses.

Since the first time I recognized him as Ryūen’s homeroom teacher, the atmosphere around him had somehow changed.

The behavior that others found repulsive had become less pronounced than before.

I didn't think it was like that during the uninhabited island exam in the summer…

Chabashira-sensei, along with Mashima-sensei and Hoshinomiya-sensei, often had opportunities to talk. Perhaps because they were of the same year.

On the other hand, I hardly had any contact with Sakagami-sensei, so maybe my impression of him had changed due to the long absence.

“To be honest, I didn't expect your class to grow this much,” Sakagami-sensei said—a compliment that seemed genuine.

Immediately after that, Sakagami-sensei's gaze sharpened behind the lenses of his glasses.

“Was it you who changed the class known as ‘defective’?”

“No way. I haven't done anything special. Isn't it the result of the whole class, starting with our leader Horikita, working hard?”

Although I entered with a greater denial rather than modesty, it was unclear how much it resonated with Sakagami-sensei.

The three homeroom teachers that belonged to the same year knew to some extent that I was a student from a special environment.

It wouldn't be strange if Sakagami-sensei shared that knowledge, and even if he didn’t, it wouldn't be surprising if he understood it from the atmosphere or his intuition.

“Certainly, things like Sudō-kun's attitude and achievements in studying can't be forced... Well, that's fine. Regardless of individual abilities, if the class is really gaining power, you’ll have to cooperate sooner or later, whether you like it or not.”

I guess I'll have to show my abilities when that time comes.

“Are you going to the library now?”

“You guessed it.”

“At this time, there are limited places that non-club students can enter. Besides, I know that you're a student who frequently goes to the library.”

Certainly, I visited the library quite often, but I wasn’t aware that Sakagami-sensei knew about it.

I'd never seen Sakagami-sensei at the library before. If so, I'd have to think about how he indirectly knew.

"Can teachers view the students' lending history?"

"Lending history? Only the librarian can do that. It would be a violation of privacy if a teacher arbitrarily viewed it."

"Then how did you know that I was a student who goes to the library?"

"That… you might find out when you go to the library. I have a staff meeting for the third term now, so please excuse me."

Sakagami-sensei, who seemed to have avoided directly answering, said that and walked away.

The words' implications bothered me, but I couldn't stop the retreating teacher, so I went to the library as planned.

When I opened the door and stepped inside, the room was engulfed in silence.

Originally, this place was supposed to be quiet, but it was different when people were present.

A complete silence spread where no one was present.

There was no sign of the librarian, who was often seated at the reception desk.

Is she away from her seat on some errand?

The door wasn't locked, so I didn't think entering was a problem, but I was a little hesitant.

I thought about waiting at the entrance for a while, but she'd come back eventually.

Without any particular thought, I bowed slightly in the empty space and started browsing the books.

I didn't know what I wanted to read or borrow yet; if I picked something up and it felt right, I'd go for it.

“Happy New Year, Ayanokōji-kun.”

As I was browsing for a book to borrow, I heard a voice from the other side of the bookshelf.

I went around to see who it was, but it seemed that the other person was trying to do the same, so we ended up passing each other. However, I caught a glimpse of their side profile.

And then, realizing that we had switched places, they hurried back.

“I went the wrong way, huh?”

“Seems so.”

It was Hiyori Shiina, who I hadn't seen in a while since chatting with her at the school festival.

She used to be in and out of the library quite frequently—a true bookworm—but she had disappeared for some time.

I heard that she was back to her old routine recently, and it seemed that was indeed the case.

“Happy New Year. It's been a while since we last met in the library.”

“Yes, it has. Have you been well?”

“I have. And you?”

“I caught a cold at the end of the year. Fortunately, it wasn't the flu that's been going around, so I recovered after a couple of days.”

We briefly shared updates about our lives before moving on to talk about books.

“Since we're here, if it's not a bother, I might borrow one of your recommendations.”

“Really? That makes me happy.”

Though there was no advantage in choosing someone else's book to read, she gladly accepted.

“I know that there's a reason you choose the books you do, so I'm sure it'll be good.”

“Then please allow me to guide your choice.”

Far from being bothered by my one-sided request, she happily clasped her hands together.

“First off, what kind of genre are you in the mood for?”

“Well, I've been spacing out a lot during the holidays, so maybe a mystery to get my brain going?”

“A mystery it is.”

Without showing any signs of distress, Hiyori began to walk, gesturing for me to follow.

It seemed she had a firm grasp on that particular genre as well.

“Have you read 'The Glass Key'?”

She quickly picked out a book and asked me so as we walked through the library together.

Dashiell Hammett, huh? It's a masterpiece that's been selected as one of the top 100 best detective novels of all time.

“Unfortunately, I read that about two years ago.”

“Not unfortunate at all, but rather impressive. It'll be more challenging to find something for you.”

Saying that, she continued to recommend classic mystery novels from the past.

I could see Hiyori's approach of starting with more famous works.

“By the way… this isn’t related to mystery novels… but have you read any of Kaminai Tsushi's works?”

“Kaminai Tsushi? No, I don't recognize the author's name, so I probably haven't read it.”

Though I was relatively knowledgeable about books, there were still far more authors I didn't know than those I did.

But if I read a book, I would at least remember the author's name.

“It can't be helped. It’s a completely unknown author, and they’ve never sold anything back then or now.”

Hiyori laughed somewhat amusingly as she answered.

I wondered if she might’ve recommended them to me too, but after confirming it, the conversation went back to mystery novels without her bringing it up again.

“Have you read 'The Secret of the Two-Wheeled Carriage'? It's Fergus Hume's debut work.”

“I haven't read it.”

“Well, no one's borrowing it right now, so it might be a good opportunity to do so.”

After picking out three more books, including the one with Hiyori's help, we moved to the front desk where the librarian had returned.

We exchanged New Year's greetings, and Hiyori swiftly checked out the books.

“If you’d like, please come visit again, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“I think I'll come by a few more times before the third term starts. Hiyori, you're staying in the library, right?”

“There's not much else to do since we have so many days off.”

“Don't you go to Keyaki Mall with friends or something?”

“Not really.”

As I recalled, I hadn't seen Hiyori hanging out with friends during our regular school life. Of course, I'd seen her interacting with classmates for various reasons, but...

It was possible that she might’ve had fewer friends than I thought.

6.2

Back in the hallway, Hiyori hurriedly followed after me.

Although it was a short distance, she was still slightly out of breath.

“Here—”

After catching her breath, Hiyori showed me a paper bag.

It could be inferred that it contained a book from its shape.

However, it probably wasn’t from the library.

Hiyori took out the book with her slender fingers and held it out to me.

“This is one of my favorite books. Would you mind reading it if you have the chance?”

There was a book cover on it, but I had an idea of what it was.

“Is this, by any chance, the author you mentioned earlier?”

“I guess it's easy to figure out, huh?”

A book by an unknown author introduced out of the blue, disregarding genre.

Considering the situation, it was relatively easy to guess.

“In the case that you had already read it, I didn't think I could’ve easily given it to you as a present.”

There was a difference in how much joy an unread book versus an already read one could bring as a present, after all.

The statement must have been made with such considerations in mind.

“If you only want to read it, you can borrow it from the library. But if it's a work I really like or one I'm particularly fond of, I want to have it on hand.”

“So you went out of your way to buy it with your own money.”

“Also… this book isn't available in the library.”

That meant it wasn’t even possible to borrow it.

I could ask the librarian to get it, but looking at Hiyori's situation, I could tell that this book wasn't something that would appeal to everyone.

Perhaps she personally liked it but didn't think it was worth promoting.

“Are you sure I can have it?”

Even for just one book, this kind of paperback wasn't a cheap purchase for a student.

“Yes. Actually, this is the third time I've bought this book. The first time was when I was in junior high, and I still have it in my room. The second one was when I entered this school.”

And the third one was bought to be a gift for me.

“I think I understand your tastes pretty well, so I'm confident that you'll be happy with it.”

“I feel bad making you go through the trouble.”

I couldn't keep her holding it out forever, so I took it with my hands.

But then a little question arose.

“Did you perhaps carry this around with you until you met me?”

I asked since I hadn't told her that I’d be here today.

“I would’ve come right away if you had just told me.”

“Well, yes. But… it's only been a few days, so it's not a big deal.”

“Well then… see you later.”

I wondered if the somewhat reluctant look on her face was just my imagination.

6.3

I saw Hiyori returning to the library and headed to the entrance to leave the school.

Perhaps because it was lunchtime, I could see some club members here and there.

As I arrived at the entrance, I spotted two classmates deeply engaged in conversation.

“Hey, Ayanokōji? Why are you at school?”

The first to notice me was Sudō, still wearing his basketball gear.

On the other hand, Yōsuke was putting on the sleeves of his soccer uniform.

“Happy New Year. I just ran into Sudō-kun by chance. We were talking about eating lunch together.”

“This is an unusual pairing.”

“Really? Our combo is quite common lately, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

I didn't think they were originally close friends, but it seemed they've become close enough to have lunch together. Maybe Sudō's growth brought him more in tune with Yōsuke.

“But is it okay for us to have lunch without Onodera-san?”

“It seems like she’s had a cold since yesterday, so she'll be taking the day off from club activities.”

Moreover, it appeared that not only the two of them, but Onodera also participated in this routine.

It was a relationship only possible for students in club activities.

“Ayanokōji-kun, are you coming back from the library?”

Looking at the few books in my hand, Yōsuke asked as he seemed to have associated them with the library.

After confirming, we naturally started walking towards the convenience store under Sudō's lead.

“It seems like the cafeteria is closed during winter break, huh?”

“Yeah, we usually either bring food from home or buy it from the convenience store.”

Apparently, after purchasing food, they’d head back to school to eat it.

While they often ate outside on a bench during spring and fall, it wasn’t preferable at this time of the year.

However, after listening to their conversation, it seemed there were a few places like a heated cafeteria available so that the club members wouldn't have trouble finding a place to eat.

“Speaking of which, it’s been snowing intermittently, hasn't it?”

“It's annoying. The weather’s been unstable for about two weeks now, right?”

“When it's this cold, our bodies don't move well either, so I hope it warms up soon.”

Conversations continued that were specific to their club activities, which I, as a non-member, couldn’t participate in.

However, I wasn’t alienated. I simply listened to this pair converse naturally. It was comforting.

“By the way, Kiyotaka-kun, is everything alright with the Karuizawa-san matter? It seems like you're having a hard time.”

“Impressive. So you've heard about it after all, huh?”

“I could tell something was off about her since before winter break. You'd realize it if you saw her in the classroom.”

“What do you mean ‘is everything alright’? Oh, did you guys finally break up?”

Sudō cut right into the conversation, making Yōsuke chuckle. But Yōsuke assumed it was incorrect, so he quickly rejected the notion.

“I don't think that's what happened. It's just that there might be some trouble going on?”

It seemed that even Yōsuke's information only went up until the time around Christmas.

“The problem has already been resolved. It has been normal since the end of the year.”

“Oh, that's good to hear.”

“Yeah, you didn't break up, huh?”

Sudō seemed disappointed while folding his hands behind his head.

“Were you hoping they would break up?”

“No, it's not like that. It was just a joke. I'm still jealous because I don't have a girlfriend. Sorry about that.”

He denied the remark—one that seemed to celebrate others' misfortune—and apologized.

Spring hadn't come for Sudō yet, but there were signs that it was approaching.

“No progress with Onodera?”

“Hey, don't say unnecessary things. You'll make Hirata misunderstand.”

As soon as her name was mentioned, Sudō panicked, but Yōsuke just watched him with a warm gaze.

“I think Yōsuke probably understands.”

“...Seriously?”

He thought Yōsuke hadn't noticed the subtle relationship at all.

“I know Onodera-san has been paying attention to you for a while now.”

He was more sensitive to his classmates' gaze and actions than most people.

It wasn’t surprising that he was aware of it, but he probably wouldn't say anything unnecessary.

“So, what about it?”

“Well... Onodera and I are just friends.”

He pursed his lips and denied it as if he hadn’t developed romantic feelings for her yet, or perhaps it had just started to bud.

I wondered if he still had lingering feelings for Horikita, but it didn't seem like it was a major issue.

At any rate, he continued to behave as if he wouldn't take advantage of Onodera's feelings for him.

After stopping by the convenience store, the three of us returned to the school, feeling the cold on our skin.

When we headed to the cafeteria, it was quite crowded with upper and lower classmen alike, and we saw many students belonging to clubs.

Even those who didn't participate in clubs like me could enter, so there were probably students who came just to have lunch with friends.

As our kōhais entered the cafeteria, they occasionally greeted Sudō and Yōsuke.

“You two really feel like senpais now, huh?”

“We're already getting close to the end of our second year. Once the third term is over, we'll be in our third year. It doesn’t really feel like it though.”

Sudō bit into his rice ball. The salmon peeked out from between the seaweed and white rice.

“Something strange happened the other day. A girl in our same year asked me a lot of weird questions.”

Muttering, Sudō seemed to remember something.

“Weird questions like?”

“Stuff like when did I start studying and why I haven't studied until now. She seemed to want to know the reason for my academic improvement in the OAA.”

“You have the highest growth rate in academics, after all. She must’ve been curious about it.”

Even for us, who were in the same class, it was quite a sight.

It must’ve felt like seeing some kind of magic for the other classes.

“Wouldn't you have been fine with a barrage of questions from a girl?”

“Well, not really. She was cute on the outside, but she was constantly very combative and stuck-up. All I wanted was for her to let me go before my club activities started.”

It didn't seem like there was much hope for a new romance.

“By the way, who was that?”

“I don't remember... It's not like I know every girl's name.”

Sudō, who had stuffed the entire rice ball into his mouth in about three bites, answered while chewing.

“Just in case, do you want to check who it was? We might meet her again.”

Waving his hand dismissively, Sudō denied Yōsuke, who was probably about to open his phone to check the OAA.

“It's fine. If it was a girl who liked me, it would be a different story, but there's no way that was it.”

Sudō didn't even seem to want to remember the name, as the whole experience was quite painful for him.

“You’re starting to attract attention for something other than your athletic ability.”

“If that means they're scared of me, I don't mind,” he said.

Without being arrogant, Sudō clenched his fist and gathered his fighting spirit.

“I'm just getting started.”

He seemed unsatisfied with the present situation and determined to surprise those around him even more.

6.4

“I need to piss.”

He finished the water in his paper cup, stood up, put his hands in both pockets, and left his seat.

Watching Sudō leave, Yōsuke began to talk about recent events.

“I've heard from the first-year basketball team members, regardless of gender, that although he’s strict, he’s admired as a very caring senpai. When he joined the team last year, his goal was just to improve his own skills, so the third-years are quite surprised at the change.”

Yōsuke, who has a wide range of acquaintances, seemed to know the unseen side of Sudō as well.

“With his basketball skills and academic success, girls won't be able to leave him alone.”

“Just between us, I've even been asked by a female kōhai for Sudō-kun's contact information.”

“Wouldn't Sudō be crying tears of joy over that?”

Being popular with girls was supposed to be one of Sudō's lifelong ambitions. However, Yōsuke showed a slightly bitter and complicated smile.

“When I asked him for permission just in case, he told me to refuse because they must be making fun of him. He didn't seem to care at all.”

It seemed that Sudō hadn't noticed that he was beginning to become more popular, including with Onodera. Having no such experiences before, he most likely couldn't feel it.

“Spring may arrive for him a little later then.”

“It might.”

As Yōsuke smiled at this situation, he looked down at the book I was holding.

“I was a little curious, but there’s only one with a book cover, right?”

Because the library-issued books may have had transparent protective films on them, this one book clearly stood out. That fact seemed to bother Yōsuke a bit.

“This was given to me earlier. There's a girl named Shiina Hiyori in Ryūen's class, right?”

“Yeah. Now that you mention it, I've seen her with you a few times... She gave it to you?”

“She recommended it, saying it was interesting, and our shared love of books made our tastes align.”

“Is that so...”

Yōsuke, who had been calm throughout, furrowed his brow slightly, showing a hint of dissatisfaction.

“What's wrong?”

“No, it's nothing.”

Although Yōsuke answered this way, he couldn't help but keep a somewhat troubled expression. Our conversation abruptly stopped, leaving a silence. I thought about changing the subject.

“Speaking of clubs, how long do you typically continue them? As a third year, you've got to think about entrance exams, right?”

Yōsuke answered, slightly perplexed by the irrelevant question.

“Well, there's no specific date, but I think many people quit around June. If they need to focus on their studies, that's what I'd expect. But if they prioritize their club activities, some continue until summer or later.”

I knew that deciding whether to go on to college and how much time to set aside for exams depended on those factors, but June seemed earlier than I had expected.

“What about you, Yōsuke? Have you thought about it?”

“I'm not sure. There's no guarantee that I can graduate from Class A, and I think my parents want me to go to college. So, after confirming that, I think it'll be around June.”

In this school, it was basically impossible to communicate with those who lived off-campus. However, there were some exceptions.

One of these exceptions was regarding further education or employment.

Even when it came to further education, there were many factors that students alone couldn’t decide. Such as which university to attend, whether to go to a vocational school, and how to cover the costs.

Most students would want to consult their parents when it came to finding a job.

In such cases, discussions about further education were held under the school's supervision.

As a student who didn't wish to pursue higher education, this system and rule didn't apply to me, but for those who wanted to, it was an inevitable part of the process.

However, this system could only be used after the third term of the second year.

The reason was that, by deciding on a desired school, it was possible to avoid unnecessary studying in the third year and beyond.

By deciding the level of the university and the department for the exam, you could set a goal.

If there was a high-level university a student aspired to attend, the announcement of acceptance for the general entrance exam was from February to March, before graduating from this school.

The question then was, would they graduate from Class A?

This school had the power to fulfill the wishes of those who graduated from Class A. Should they decide to go to college, the school

could change the result for those who failed to get into their desired university.

However, this was only for being accepted, and whether or not a student could advance to graduation was left up to that individual's ability.

To put it bluntly, a student with middle school level academic ability would not be able to advance properly even if they entered the University of Tokyo.

There were problems post entering the university, but this was just an easy-to-understand example.

There was also the possibility of graduating from Class A and being accepted on your own, without the school overturning the result.

In that case, there were some things the school could provide, but there were two main benefits.

One was to cover the university expenses.

This was for those who had the ability to pass the entrance exam but couldn’t afford the tuition.

This benefit could be used if you wanted to go to university but didn’t want to, or couldn’t, take out loans.

However, it only covered tuition, not living expenses, and only during the standard four-year period until graduation.

It was impossible to ask for additional payments if you took a year off.

The other option was post-graduation. It was still possible to leverage graduating from Class A.

In other words, you could use a strategy that didn't rely on the Class A privileges for college.

In extreme cases, you could use the privileges after graduating from a low-level university. You could forcibly slide into a top-notch company where graduating from college was a prerequisite.

However, that was just getting a job. Whether you could acquire the skills to work at that company was another question.

Most importantly, it was a tightrope walk.

No matter how much ANHS provided, if you couldn’t pass with a 1% fail rate, you'd be left with regrets.

“Ayanokōji-kun, are you going to college?”

“*I don't know*. I haven't decided on my career path yet. It may seem late, but I might go to college, or I might find a job. It's something only God knows.”

“You don't need to rush. I believe you can handle most things well.”

It was nice to be appreciated like that, but unfortunately, I didn't have any options.

While talking about our career paths, there was something unusual about Yōsuke.

Then, after our conversation paused for a moment, Yōsuke brought it up.

“...Are you close with Shiina-san?”

It seemed that his concerns hadn't gone away, even though we had dropped the conversation once.

“Hiyori? I'm not sure. We might be close as fellow book lovers at least. Anything bothering you about her?”

When I asked directly, Yōsuke finally revealed what had been bothering him.

“I noticed you calling her by her first name, Ayanokōji-kun, so I was curious. It's the first time I've heard you do that with someone outside our class.”

It was indeed a rare case.

“Since when?”

“Since when? I'm not really sure. I don't have a clear recollection of it.”

I realized I had been calling Hiyori by her first name without even realizing it.

Thinking back, it seemed that I had been calling her that since shortly after we first met.

However, in everyday life, the brain couldn't grasp a specific time.

“There wasn't really a big trigger, huh?”

“That's right. There wasn't really any deep reason. I guess I just started calling her that without really noticing.”

“I see…”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, it's not really a problem, you know. Generally, it's a good thing that you have a lot of close friends.”

Generally. In other words, it’s different when it’s outside that general understanding.

However, Yōsuke didn't try to continue that conversation any longer, so I didn't push it either.

We both quietly waited for Sudō to return.

6.5

Sudō and Yōsuke, who both worked hard during their club activities since the beginning of their first year, continued to achieve results.

The flow of time was mysterious. Those two will have retired from their club activities by this season next year.

I remembered a little of the conversation I had with Kiryūin at the end of the year.

Throughout my school life, there were no major regrets. However, sometimes I wondered about an alternative future if I had been in a club.

Regardless of whether I was serious or not, if I had worked together with those who shared my passion for basketball or soccer, my school life might've been more glamorous.

Though it was easy to imagine, the probability of actually embarking on that path must've been close to zero.

Unfamiliar with socializing, the world of club activities was too high of a hurdle for me, who couldn't make friends quickly.

I'll read the books I borrowed and the ones Hiyori gave me on the way home.

As I was on my way home from school, I was interrupted.

"Please wait."

"Hm?"

I was stopped by a female student, with a polite but forceful voice.

Turning around, she was standing there, her long scarf waving slightly in the wind.

"I have something to talk to you about."

Normally, one would be puzzled when approached by someone they had no connection with.

In fact, I encountered such a situation several times last year.

I couldn't help but appreciate Nagumo's invention of the OAA system in times like these.

It was easier to match names to faces, and you could also learn their surface-level abilities.

The person who appeared in front of me was a student from Class 2-A, which Sakayanagi belonged to.

Her name was Morishita Ai. The OAA was as follows:

Academic Abilities – B+

Physical Abilities – C+

Adaptability – B+

Social Contribution – B

Overall Ability – B

In other words, she was a so-called “honors student” with an easy-to-understand description. The data showed that she was a person who could handle everything better than average. She was similar to Sanada, whom I met the other day, but there were many students like him in class A.

“You're Ayanokōji Kiyotaka, right?”

“Yeah.”

Morishita, who approached me, seemed to be aware of me, which was understandable.

Huh? Did she just call me by my full name without any honorifics? I don't mind being referred to without any respect by younger or older people, but it was a bit surprising considering her polite tone of voice.

Before I could say anything, Morishita continued.

“It's too conspicuous here. Let's change the place a bit.”

The school, the dormitory, Keyaki Mall… passing through these places to go anywhere stands out. If there was someone looking for you, it would be an optimal place for an ambush.

“Let’s go somewhere else, please.”

Without waiting for my answer, Morishita turned her back to me and began walking.

I hadn't intended to say whether I would follow her or not, but I guess that was fine.

It was winter break, and I had enough time to leisurely enjoy such unexpected encounters.

“This is our first meeting, right?”

“Yes. We haven't spoken before.”

Morishita, who answered without looking back, was polite in her speech but somewhat overbearing.

She turned away from the main road, towards the dormitory, and stopped at a side street. This area was deserted, probably due to the cold weather.

“So? What do you want to talk about?”

I wondered what kind of story would pop up early in the new year.

“I haven't decided.”

“You haven't decided?”

As concerned as I was about listening to her story, her answer made the whole situation feel somewhat anticlimactic.

“I haven't decided on the content of the conversation, but I've been wanting to talk to you for some time now, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka.”

...So it wasn't just my imagination after all. She called me by my full name and dropped the honorifics.

But the rest of her speech was polite, which made her assertiveness stand out even more.

I didn't know if this was just for me or if she was the same with other students, but it was hard to point that out. *I'll try to ignore it from here.*

Recently, it seemed like I had a strange connection with students from other classes.

“Is it strange that I approached you?”

“Well, yeah. I haven't had any contact with you before.”

“That's true.”

“Moreover, when it's from the opposite sex, various strange assumptions can be made.”

I deliberately made a statement that hinted at romance to see what kind of reaction she would show.

I thought she might become agitated, but she was calm, showing only a small sign of distress.

She quickly determined the direction she wanted to take and began to speak.

“This isn't the first time I've approached someone I'm not close with.”

“Huh?”

“The day before yesterday, I talked to Sudō Ken, and yesterday, I talked to Kōenji Rokusuke.”

‘Don't get me wrong,’ she seemed to say, as she held out her hand, palm up, to me.

“I learned that talking one-on-one with someone of the opposite sex can lead to misunderstandings, so I thought I'd let you know.”

She put it into words, which allowed me to clearly rule it out. I was grateful for that.

I also learned that I wasn’t the only one being called by my full name without honorifics.

However, the mention of Sudō's name fit the conversation earlier.

‘A girl from the same year asked me all sorts of weird questions,’ said the puzzled Sudō. She was probably Morishita of Class A.

While her appearance was certainly cute, I could easily understand why she had denied any involvement in romance.

Her gaze, clearly directed at me, was different.

“During this winter break, I was driven by the desire to learn more about your class.”

In simpler terms, perhaps she wanted to scout a rival class.

How should I judge her attitude, which seemingly had no intentions of hiding anything?

It was hard to believe they were Sakayanagi’s instructions.

Even if they were approaching students like Sudō, there would be no merit in sending an oddball like Morishita to me.

Or was the idea to send someone with a quirky personality like her?

I considered various possibilities, but the conclusion I reached was different.

Morishita's own judgment, her own thoughts.

That seemed to be the most accurate conclusion for now.

“Kōenji Rokusuke asked as well, so I'll let you know. This is all my own decision.”

Immediately after, Morishita added that it was indeed her own judgment.

“I see. I thought all the students in Class A worked under Sakayanagi's instructions alone.”

For now, I decided to trust Morishita's words and proceeded with the conversation.

“I can't say for certain. I haven't shared my thoughts with anyone else.”

Using a peculiar expression, Morishita continued the conversation.

“Though it's true that many students in Class A are on guard against Class B, just like how your class, led by yourself, has been aiming to take down Class A. I found that interesting.”

“Class B's evaluation has risen quite a bit. If you really want to dig for more information, shouldn't you contact the leader, Horikita? I can give you her contact details if you need them.”

I took out my phone and pulled up Horikita's address.

However, Morishita rejected it with her hand and began to speak, looking in an unclear direction.

“At first, I thought so too. However, the evaluations of those around me have changed. Now there are people who think you are involved in the improvement of Class B.”

So, she acted alone and approached me.

“A student who deviates from their OAA stands out.”

The special exam held at the end of the second term had a significant impact since the accuracy of the test’s answered questions was made public. Sanada and this highly capable Morishita had their eyes newly opened to me.

Comparing the results to my OAA, the contradiction was obvious and couldn’t be ignored.

Even if I told her that I had guessed the correct answers, she probably wouldn't believe me.

If this contact was instructed by Sakayanagi, it felt too sloppy, too rough, and too narrowly focused.

“So? Have you gotten any results by directly confronting? Is there something I should answer?”

I tried to show a welcoming stance to her confrontation, but she refused with her hand again.

“There’s been some results. You are indeed a considerable threat, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka.”

“...Did you find something that made you think so?”

“Based on my analysis, yes.”

Apparently quite satisfied at this point, Morishita nodded contentedly.

My first impression of her was that she was somewhat of a ‘weirdo.’

“I'll excuse myself. There are still many people to investigate.”

It seemed that there were many intriguing people in Horikita's class.

“Alright, good luck.”

She must have approached Sudō and the others similarly.

Although I hadn't seen the scene, I could easily imagine it.

Morishita returned to the dormitory, but it would be troublesome if I chased after her and caused a misunderstanding.

I decided to breathe in the cold air for a while and go home after some time had passed.

6.6

After returning home, I immediately picked up the book I brought home with my chilled hands.

Which one should I read first...?

After thinking for a moment, I decided it would probably be best to start with the book Hiyori gifted me, as we might discuss it when I visit the library in the following days.

The book itself wasn't very old, having been published about 15 years ago.

I was curious about why Hiyori liked it, so I looked up the author's background, but it seemed to be a relatively unknown author with a devoted following for their interesting works.

It might've been a hidden masterpiece that Hiyori, a book lover, noticed.

She liked it enough to want to keep a copy for herself.

A new book was released every three years or so.

If it suited my taste, I'd try reading another one next time.

"Hmm...?"

As I was about to start reading, I noticed a bookmark had been included.

While that in of itself wasn't a big deal, the pattern on the bookmark piqued my interest.

When shopping at Keyaki Mall, sometimes you could get free bookmarks during campaigns, with limited illustrations or patterns depending on the time of year.

The bookmark I picked up featured a Christmas theme with a fir tree and snow.

It was the same one that came with the books I bought at the bookstore before Christmas.

Considering they changed the bookmarks right after Christmas, it was likely that the book was purchased before then.

If I had been making her carry it every day since then, I would feel sorry for her.

Though she said it was only a few days ago, the actual purchase date may have been a bit earlier.

“I might have received quite a heavy favor after all.”

Of course, I couldn't jump to conclusions.

She may have just given it to me as a fellow book lover.

I decided not to think too deeply about it for now, but it was only natural to feel good about a gesture like that if she saw me as a close friend.

What can I do as thanks right now?

What would help Hiyori the most?

Before starting the book, I decided to ponder this, sitting on my bed.

Epilogue - Changing Relationships

ONLY TWO DAYS of winter break remained.

My relationship with Kei was back to the way it used to be… From Kei's point of view, it's been restored more than ever before.

Sudō's initial one-sided dislike for Yōsuke, as a classmate, had changed for the better. The break also led to unexpected encounters with Sakayanagi and her classmates.

Furthermore, Ryūen and Katsuragi had already started preparing for the start of the third term. I found evidence of Ichinose's change and newfound mental stability too—a good sign for her worried class.

Overall, it seemed like a fulfilling winter break.

However, there was one point of contention.

I felt that there was something left unfinished during this break.

The book I received as a present from Hiyori.

I wondered what I could do in return for receiving it.

After several days of agonizing, I arrived at one conclusion.

However, in order to carry out that conclusion, it was necessary to make some prior arrangements.

I had recently caused a lot of anxiety for Kei with Ichinose and that whole situation.

Rekindling an awkward atmosphere here wouldn't be ideal.

I had to repay her without causing any misunderstandings.

So, what was this repayment?

The hint laid in what I felt shortly after my entrance to the school in the past.

"Kiyotaka! Are you good? This is only for today, okay?!"

Hugging me from behind, Kei yelled with her pajamas still on as I was about to leave the room.

“I know. That's why I properly explained it, right?”

“Yeah, but... Even though I heard the reason why... I still feel anxious!”

I urged her to let me go and turned around; she hugged me from the front this time.

“Make sure you come back by tonight, okay?”

“If you're that worried, you should have just cleared the condition I set, right?”

“There's no way I can do that. Just looking at printed words is hard enough for me with textbooks alone. Besides, our conversation would never be on the same wavelength.”

Well, that was probably true.

Trying to force it wouldn’t likely lead to an enjoyable result for either of us.

“Then give me a kiss!”

“Where did that 'then' come from?”

As I countered her, Kei had already closed her eyes and faced her lips towards me.

As I met her wish honestly, she smiled mischievously and cutely waved her hand.

“Take care.”

Her angry expression from just five seconds ago seemed like a lie as she now wore a happy smile.

While Kei was seeing me off, I left the room.

E.1

With no hesitation, I got on the elevator, stepped out of the dormitory, and immediately opened my cell phone.

Hiyori would likely be contacting me soon.

It would have been better to check before leaving the room, but I wanted to avoid causing Kei any more worry.

As expected, since I couldn't pick up my phone, I had a missed call and a message.

It seemed that she went out for a walk earlier than I'd planned.

Impressed by her typical punctuality, I decided to catch up.

I found her wandering aimlessly, her back facing me, in a location close to the main gate, away from Keyaki Mall.

"Did you find anything?"

"Good morning. Unfortunately, I didn't find anything special. But, the weather's lovely, isn't it?"

Though the temperature was still quite low, it was a clear day, and most of the accumulated snow had melted.

"Thank you for inviting me today."

"You'll waste the precious winter break if you're cooped up in the library every day."

I'd heard from the librarian that Hiyori, who rarely hung out with friends, spent her time in the library until curfew whenever it was open.

She stayed there, alone, all day until the library closed.

Believing it would be lonesome for her to enter the third term alone, I invited her out.

Of course, I understood that this was a routine that sufficiently satisfied Hiyori. I might be scolded for my unnecessary concern.

Inviting her out like this might make her feel pressured... in other words, it might've felt like I was forcing her to act as a friend.

"Why did you call out to me?"

That was why I had to be honest.

"I just felt like inviting you."

As another person, I simply wanted to invite her out, that was all.

Hiyori, of course, had the right to refuse if she thought I wasn't enough for her.

"I wanted to thank you for the book, and that was where it all started. But just giving a gift or thanking you in words wasn't enough. I wanted to spend a day together where you could enjoy yourself."

Though my words might have sounded a bit cheesy, I hoped she understood what I was trying to convey.

"I'm happy to hear that."

I could feel the gratitude and apologetic reaction from her gentle words.

The clever Hiyori might've interpreted that I invited her out of pity for her situation.

No matter how much I denied it with my words, her prejudice wouldn't be easily wiped away.

But, she accepted the invitation and came out with me. That was why she was here.

From now on, I just need to show her using my actions.

Normally, when the two of us were together, we didn't take the initiative.

Most of the time, we let the other students with us take the lead and experienced various things with them.

But today was different.

I decided to be the one to escort Hiyori.

However, there was only so much we could do and places we could go within the school grounds.

“Um, was Karuizawa-san okay with this? I mean, is she okay with you going out alone with another girl?”

People usually considered this when they spoke to the opposite gender, regardless of the situation.

It wasn’t just me, but a common question that people with partners hear.

‘Would you be okay with Kei going out alone with another boy?’ That was the question.

Of course, it wasn’t something I always had to think about.

Only those who feared the influence of spending time with others would bring this up.

I had already anticipated that Hiyori was this kind of person.

“At first, she insisted on coming along. But I thought it wouldn't be fun if she was just there to monitor me, and it would be rude to you.”

“How did you persuade her?”

“I told her to read a book to have a common topic of conversation.”

When I told her that, Hiyori's eyes widened and she showed a welcoming smile.

“You can guess how that went from her absence.”

“Ah... I see. That makes sense.”

Yesterday, she gave up on reading the first page of the book and fell down on the spot.

“That's how I properly got permission. Of course, she complained until the last minute.”

Knowing that I hadn't kept silent, Hiyori smiled with relief.

E.2

“It seems like you're being quite ostentatious early in the new year.”

As we were about to arrive at Keyaki Mall, a female student who found us discussing typical library experiences called out to us. It was Kamuro Masumi, who we didn't usually interact with much.

For some reason, she seemed to be looking at us with a disgusted expression.

As Kamuro approached, Hiyori slightly bowed her head in greeting, but was ignored, as Kamuro unilaterally started talking to us.

“I just saw you on a date with Karuizawa at the end of the year. Did you start going out with a different girl as soon as the new year began?”

Apparently, the gaze directed at me was one of contempt.

If you only saw this scene, it might’ve been unavoidable to be perceived that way.

“They’re totally different types of girls. What were you thinking?”

“Um, good morning, Kamuro-san.”

“Shiina, right? I didn't think you and Ayanokōji were this close.”

Unless we explained the reason properly, the misunderstanding would continue indefinitely.

“Today, he invited me to hang out as a friend.”

“I also got permission from Kei.”

I thought this would persuade her a little, but her expression remained stern.

“Even if that's true, it doesn't change the fact that it looks abnormal from the outside.”

Since the circumstances weren’t clear from an outside perspective, that statement was also valid.

“But if that's the case, wouldn’t it be impossible for boys and girls to hang out together?”

“There’s an atmosphere, you know. Even if you look from afar, you can feel that it isn’t normal.”

That interpretation might’ve been Kamuro's own thoughts, but it wasn’t necessarily wrong.

Among the female students, Hiyori was highly evaluated by me.

Although she didn't show it much, she was knowledgeable, shared the same reading hobby, and wasn’t very talkative. In other words, she was one of the people with whom I could easily connect with.

On the other hand, it was also predictable that Hiyori saw me in a similar light.

If that was the case, it was natural to assume that our relationship went deeper than a normal friendship.

“I'll do my best to be careful not to cause any misunderstandings.”

“That would be wise.”

“Did you come all the way here just to warn us about that?”

“I’ll get to the point now. There’s something else I want to confirm with you.”

Without even offering a New Year's greeting, Kamuro closed the distance even further.

“It's a bit of an intrusive conversation, is that okay?”

Just in case, she asked if it was okay to continue in Hiyori's presence through eye contact.

Hiyori didn't seem to mind, so I let her proceed with the conversation.

“It's fine. If you have something to say, say it.”

“Well then, I’ll ask without holding back. What was your intention with your recent actions?”

“Actions? What are you talking about?”

“Don't play dumb. I'm aware that you've been snooping around Class A recently.”

“Me, snooping around Class A?”

I had no recollection of that. Snooping around Class A?

I genuinely felt puzzled, but one interaction came to mind that could be interpreted that way.

“Could it be about Morishita?”

“Oh, so you do remember? Someone saw you and Morishita deep in conversation.”

In that case, it might’ve been the moment when I was just called out.

It wouldn't be surprising if someone had witnessed that from afar.

“Morishita-san?”

Not recognizing the name, Hiyori muttered curiously beside me.

She might not even realize that Morishita was in the same year.

“You didn’t know? There's a student named Morishita Ai in Class A.”

“I think I've heard the name before, but I've never spoken to her.”

“She doesn't usually talk to people outside her class. Suspicious, right?”

“Is that so? I didn't notice...”

She said that she talked to Sudō and Kōenji, among others.

Although her use of my full name without honorifics bothered me a bit, she didn't seem shy.

“You weren't trying to probe Class A?”

“I didn't intend to. You're free to believe me or not.”

Without trying to hide it, Kamuro stated outright that she didn't easily believe me.

“I never thought Kamuro would be the type to act in Class A’s interests.”

“If it weren't for you, I probably wouldn't care that much.”

“Really?”

“You're the only one who can influence Sakayanagi.”

I couldn't have imagined such a claim back when I first met Kamuro. I always thought she hated Sakayanagi.

She had discovered her shoplifting and, using it as leverage, made Kamuro her pawn.

Initially, she should’ve been irritated with Sakayanagi's approach.

There was a gap in the image I had of her.

“Eating from the same pot for a year changes things, huh?”

“Don't make assumptions. I still don't like Sakayanagi, but I have to think about the class at least. If your existence has a positive effect, I'll leave it be, but if it doesn't, I'll need to take action.”

It was fair to say that she had developed some degree of camaraderie.

“Speaking of which, you seem to know quite a bit, Shiina.”

“What do you mean?”

“You listened to my conversation with Ayanokōji without a change in your expression, right?”

“What was it? Sorry, I wasn't listening too seriously.”

“...Huh?”

“It's a conversation between you and Ayanokōji-kun, so I was just spacing out while looking at the scenery. Did you guys talk about anything special?”

As Hiyori tilted her head curiously, Kamuro sighed in exasperation.

“Not really. It's nothing.”

She must’ve judged that it was an excessive reaction and that she was overthinking.

Perhaps she had intended to purposely lead the conversation in that direction to probe Shiina's response, but it seemed her assumption was off.

Hiyori, who was sitting next to her, should’ve heard the conversation properly and understood the situation.

However, she was a person who could put on a natural display without letting the other person realize it.

“I know you're not normal.”

“That's a rough way to say it.”

“It's the truth, isn't it? Otherwise, you wouldn't have made that girl Sakura drop out of school without a second thought.”

It seemed she was also talking about the unanimous special exam we had taken. Kamuro seemed to possess information that only the people within the class were supposed to know.

“Today, I'm going to ask you—”

As she began to say that, Kamuro's gaze shifted for a moment.

“Oh, look. What an unusual pair~”

Just when her persistent interrogation was about to begin, Hashimoto appeared with a carefree attitude, alongside Kitō, who lined up next to him.

I didn't miss the sudden change in Kamuro's expression.

It was like the face you’d make when you've run into someone you didn't like.

However, if she was going to question me continuously in such a public setting, she should’ve taken into account the possibility of running into Hashimoto.

In that case, there might’ve been another meaning behind the momentary change of expression, but more than that, my eyes were drawn to Kitō's flashy, full-fledged outfit.

As he declared that he aspired to be a fashion designer, his sense of style was different from that of the general public.

I couldn't tell whether that was a good or a bad thing since I had no confidence in my own sense of fashion.

“When I saw Ayanokōji surrounded by beautiful women, the flames of jealousy just ignited.”

“Are you kidding me?”

Kamuro, clearly angry, stepped up to confront Hashimoto.

“Both Shiina-chan and Kamuro-chan, huh? Ayanokōji has quite the discerning eye. Right, Kitō?”

Though he asked Kitō for his agreement, Kitō didn't show any reaction.

“Us two guys were just about to go out by ourselves, but would you mind if we join you?”

“Who would? I'm going home.”

Kamuro, enraged, tried to leave the scene, but was stopped by Hashimoto as he grabbed her arm and whispered something in her ear.

She immediately pushed him away to create some distance between them, but she didn't move her feet.

“It's not like you two are on a date, right? Ayanokōji has a girlfriend.”

I nodded, thinking that it couldn't be helped. The conversation would inevitably develop in a similar way to the one with Kamuro.

“Then there's no problem with us joining and making a group of five, right?”

“I don't have a particular reason to object if Hiyori’s okay with it.”

“It sounds fun. I've hardly ever spoken with Kamuro-san and the others.”

Without showing any signs of reluctance, Hiyori answered.

I wasn't the type to actively start conversations, but I thought it wasn't bad to have fun with a large group like this.

I wasn't particularly close friends with Hashimoto and the others, but it wouldn't be bad to build a bond with such diverse students.

“Since we didn't have any specific plans, should we leave it up to Hashimoto?”

“If you'll leave it to me, I can decide.”

Hashimoto readily agreed, perhaps used to leading a group.

E.3

Lately, I'd been interacting more and more with students from other classes, such as Ryūen, Katsuragi, Ichinose, and Shiranami.

Today, I was even spending time with Class A students, like Kamuro.

And they weren't just ordinary students; they were close to Sakayanagi and held executive-like positions.

"Good morning, Hashimoto-senpai, Kamuro-senpai, Kitō-senpai."

"Good morning."

"Ah, thank you!"

As we approached Keyaki Mall, there were many first-year students greeting us.

"You're popular."

"It's not unusual for us Class A students."

They kept close ties with their first-year kōhais, and they knew each other by their names and faces.

"I don't get that impression from Sakayanagi."

"Princess is special. The kōhais can't just casually greet her. She's like a flower on a high peak."

So that was why she always got envious glances from the kōhais.

"So where are we heading?"

"Hmm? Let's see. Do you want to avoid conspicuous places, Ayanokōji? Or not?"

"I don't like unnecessarily standing out."

"Right. So karaoke would be the typical choice, but—"

As Hashimoto casually checked my expression, Kamuro shot him a piercing glare.

“Rejected.”

“Ah, figures.”

With that one word, Hashimoto gave up on karaoke and started thinking about other options.

“Kamuro-san, do you not like karaoke?”

“It doesn't matter. Don't ask me why.”

As Hiyori walked alongside Kamuro, she asked about karaoke but received no answer, only a curt dismissal. Amid the situation, Kitō and I were walking in the back.

“—Tone-deaf.”

“Kitō!”

Kitō merely muttered, but Kamuro picked up on his voice and turned towards him with a furious expression.

“What, can't sing, huh?”

Indeed, it seemed that people who were aware of their tone-deafness tended to dislike karaoke.

That would explain why Kamuro didn't want to talk about the reason.

“Quiet.”

“...Kamuro also has the ears of a demon, huh?”

Whether he was reflecting on it or not, Kitō added yet another potentially angering comment in an even quieter voice.

“I heard that too. And don't go saying unnecessary things to Ayanokōji.”

“It's within the bounds of not causing problems.”

Whether they got along well or not was difficult to determine, but it seemed they had a close relationship.

“Come on, let's take it easy, Kamuro-chan. We're not going to karaoke anyway.”

Kitō placed his hand on my shoulder and signaled me to slow down my pace slightly. He then opened his mouth when he was at a distance where Kamuro's sharp ears wouldn't reach.

“Hashimoto and Kamuro are causing trouble.”

“Ah, no, I don't really mind. Shiina’s happily laughing, so it's fine.”

“As long as that's the case.”

While Kitō typically wore a scary expression, after he showed a different side to himself during the school trip, I wasn’t surprised. Rather, he was also a student with a rational way of thinking.

“The way you deal with things is different from when it was with Ryūen. Is it because you still don't recognize me as an enemy?”

“I don't just snap at everyone. Even if they’re an enemy, as long as they have an appropriate attitude, I'll treat them with at least basic courtesy.”

Even when dealing with an enemy, he wouldn't always take a harsh stance.

“Hey, Shiina-chan. There's something I wanted to ask you, is that okay?”

“What is it?”

“I was just wondering what kind of relationship you have with Ayanokōji.”

“As I told Kamuro-san, we're good friends.”

“So it's okay to say that you're currently free, right?”

“Free?”

“Like, you don't have a boyfriend.”

“Are you planning on hitting on her in this situation?”

“It's fine, isn't it? We're both single. Or would *you* rather be my girlfriend, Kamuro-chan?”

As he showed such a light-hearted attitude, she approached him and delivered an unreserved kick to his behind.

“Ouch!”

Hashimoto jumped and clutched his butt, apologizing with his hands together.

“Sorry for showing you such a stupid farce.”

Watching their exchange from behind, Kitō apologized despite having nothing to apologize for.

“Honestly, I had the impression that there were more uptight students in Class A. Surprisingly, that's not the case.”

“Hashimoto has a knack for being a mood maker, for better or worse.”

With his usual scary face and ambiguous choice of words, I couldn't tell if he was praising him or not.

E.4

By leaving the escorting to Hashimoto, I learned something new.

No matter how novel the proposal, it wouldn't be realized unless the participants agreed.

Hashimoto made several suggestions besides karaoke, but Kamuro shot them all down.

In the end, all Kamuro agreed on was a chat at a café.

It was the only plan left for a group that had ran out of things to do.

“Is this really okay, Kamuro-chan? We've invited these two rare guests.”

“Then why don't you go without me? I've already told you several times.”

During Hashimoto's proposals’ ceaseless rejections, Kamuro indeed stated numerous times that they could go without her.

“There's no way we can exclude you.”

“I think this is nice too. It's rather calming, and I like it.”

“Wow, Shiina-chan is such a good girl, and cute too.”

Hashimoto seemed to be fond of Shiina as he quickly took a seat next to her.

On the other hand, I sat down next to Kitō.

“I have to say, Ayanokōji, you're quite something too. Normally, people get nervous sitting next to Kitō.”

“I already know he's a good guy.”

Is it the experience from the school trip that's helping? It even feels somewhat comforting.

“I agree with you, Ayanokōji-kun. Kitō-kun doesn't seem like a bad person.”

“Where exactly are your eyes then?”

“It's true. These two are some rare specimens.”

“Really?”

Hiyori looked intently at Kitō to confirm it.

Following her gaze, Kitō stared back at Hiyori, but it didn't seem to make her nervous.

In fact, he couldn't stand her gaze and looked away.

“He's a good guy after all.”

“That's a misunderstanding. I’m not a good person.”

His eyes darted to me, almost as if he wanted to glare and make sure I didn't get the wrong idea.

“Don't misunderstand,” he stressed with his own words.

“Well, Ayanokōji, it's about time you tell us.”

So far, Hashimoto had been acting carefree, but now he rested his elbow on the table and tilted his arm, holding his cup like a microphone.

Kamuro, who had been slouching while looking elsewhere, straightened up at those words.

The reason they approached us was to ask me something.

I assumed that much, but what did he want to know?

“...So, do you plan to ditch Karuizawa and switch to Shiina? Since you're dating Shiina, it must mean something like that, right? Huh?”

Like a reporter grilling a celebrity, Hashimoto aggressively pushed his cup closer. Kamuro stopped his reaching arm.

“Hashimoto.”

“Huh? What's up, Kamuro-chan? I'm going to ask him everything right now—”

“If you're just going to beat around the bush, I'll get straight to the point.”

She strongly implied that she didn't want to continue with this troublesome small talk.

“You're scary, Kamuro-chan, but that's also what's appealing about you— Ouch!”

Suddenly, Hashimoto groaned in pain, his face contorted in agony. Panicking, he crouched down and held his leg. It seemed he'd been kicked under the table.

“That was merciless...!”

“It was an accident.”

Without any concern, Kamuro looked away and responded. After enduring the pain for a while, Hashimoto brought up the topic.

“We, or rather, Class A, is really curious about you.”

“Why?”

“Don't you know? You're good at studying, seem to be athletic, and you're quite popular with Ichinose. You can even talk to Ryūen without fear. On top of all that, you seem to be on good terms with the princess—that's not normal.”

During winter break alone, a large number of people witnessed my relationships with those around me.

Considering Hashimoto's questioning and the previous investigation, it seemed reasonable.

“The reason for the rise to Class B and the true leader behind Horikita's efforts—it's you, right?”

Kamuro and Kitō ceased movement, and only their gazes turned toward me. Considering Kamuro's actions and words, this situation mustn’t have been a coincidence.

Although Hashimoto's actions seemed spontaneous, it was probably calculated in advance.

Drawn by the seeds I had sown, rumors circulated from reconnaissance, speculation, and information. Regardless if it was true or not, the rumors circulated this way, revealing new details.

I anticipated having to deal with this line of questioning, but I thought it would be brought up in the future. If so, from now on, let's provide water to the seeds.

“The true leader, huh? What if that were true?”

Hashimoto whistled and said, “I thought you'd either quickly play dumb or deny it, but you're admitting it?”

“I'm not admitting anything. I'm just curious as to what you'd do if it were true.”

“That's something we'll find out after we have confirmation.”

“Confirmation, huh? Well, then maybe it's better if I admit to being the true leader, as you’ve hoped, Hashimoto.”

As I responded, Hashimoto lowered his raised smile and gave a bitter one instead.

“That's a difficult answer.”

Hashimoto's questioning likely expected one of these reactions: to be flustered at hitting the mark, to confidently admit it, or to firmly deny it.

He must have been confident that doubt would turn into conviction with any of these reactions.

In that case, taking an ambiguous stance would be more difficult for Hashimoto to handle.

I neither confirmed nor denied it. Rather, I was in a position where I didn't mind admitting it if I had to.

By doing so, it was difficult to ascertain any certainty.

In fact, right now, I was gradually distancing myself from Horikita's shadow.

If I decided on my own that I was the true leader and acted on that belief, I would trip up in future battles.

“What do you think, Kamuro-chan?”

“Almost certain, but not quite.”

“How about you, Kitō?”

Unlike Kamuro, who answered immediately, Kitō didn't say anything. Despite that, he didn't take his eyes off me.

“I might need to correct myself. Saying that you're the true leader might be an exaggeration, but I have no doubt that you’re the hidden driving force behind leading your class to Class B.”

“It's up to you and Class A to make a judgment, Hashimoto.”

“Shiina-chan, what do you think about Ayanokōji?”

“Me?”

“Yes, I'd like to hear your opinion on this matter as well.”

“Hashimoto-kun, I wonder what you want from this conversation.”

“Eh? What do you mean?”

“Keeping track of Ayanokōji-kun's existence—and what you plan to do in the future.”

“...You hit the nail on the head.”

From that single comment, Hashimoto—who was originally only concerned about her appearances—seemed to have reassessed Shiina.

“What do you mean, Hashimoto?”

Hashimoto remained silent as Kamuro asked, not understanding the meaning behind Shiina's inquiry.

“A little while ago, Kamuro and I were talking about how to graduate from Class A. The most solid way is to build up 20 million for yourself, but that’s not easy. Moreover, relying on new systems like the class transfer ticket isn't feasible since their validity is too short.”

“That's true.”

“It's important to keep an eye on classes that seem to be winning. If you flatter them, they might pick you up. But even if you just do one or two favors for a class, will they pay you 20 million to back you up?”

“Of course not, unless you have a really strict contract.”

“That's right. So how do you think we should increase our chances of graduating from Class A? Cooperate with our classmates? Knock down our rivals? No, that's not it.”

“Steal strong opponents from other classes, right?”

Before Hashimoto could answer, Hiyori muttered the conclusion.

“Wow, you’re on point.”

Ignoring the flattering Hashimoto, Kamuro and Kitō's gazes met. Their unconscious behavior showed that they had realized how mentally quick Shiina Hiyori was.

There were countless students with high academic abilities in the OAA.

However, whether they were capable in areas other than academics could only be seen through interacting with them.

“Even if you can't accumulate 20 million points yourself, the collective will of the class can reach that goal. Like how Ryūen-kun lured Katsuragi-kun, if Class A also recruits excellent personnel from other classes, Class A would be stronger, and we could also weaken the power of our rivals.”

Hashimoto, who generously applauded, elaborated on how it was the right answer.

“Show us, Ayanokōji. If you prove your strength to us in Class A, we'll use our class points to recruit you. That way, you'll be in a better position than you are now, right?”

Hashimoto's offer was tempting, but couldn't be completely dismissed as a lie.

However, there were several reasons why I couldn't judge it to be true.

“Headhunting, huh? But do you really think Sakayanagi will welcome Ayanokōji?”

With that, Kamuro confirmed that Sakayanagi probably wouldn’t be welcoming.

“I understand that you have your own ideas about the princess, but I think there's a chance.”

“On what grounds?”

“I could share my thoughts, but first, let's see what Ayanokōji thinks.”

Instead of answering Kamuro's question, Hashimoto checked my thoughts.

“If she’s going to pull me into Class A, it's more than a great proposal.”

“That's what I mean. If Class A is inviting you, would you accept? Even if it's just hypothetical, let's hear it.”

“I'd positively consider it if I was offered an invitation to Class A.”

As I showed signs of accepting the invitation, Hashimoto assumingly pulled back.

“Okay, no problem with confirming your intentions. Then we can move on to the next stage.”

As the conversation continued, Hashimoto laughed more happily than anyone else in the room. However, one of his classmates stood up, pulling her chair out.

“I won't be involved in your rampage, so see you later.”

“Ah, hey, Kamuro-chan, are you leaving?”

“You won't listen to anything I say, right?”

“If you're talking about the promise the other day, I'm sorry.”

Although he hurriedly tried to stop her, Kamuro quickly left the café.

“Aah… Was it a bit too much?”

When he checked with the quietly observing Kitō, he silently nodded in agreement.

“I'll call her back, so just wait a moment.”

Scratching his head, Hashimoto hurriedly chased after Kamuro.

“You all are interesting people. It's really fun.”

Hiyori, who had been watching, narrowed her eyes and smiled.

“…Really?”

Kitō, who never expected her to have fun, retorted.

After Hashimoto brought back a sullen Kamuro, the focus shifted to some small talk rather than returning to me.

Hiyori didn’t particularly stand out, rather, she participated in the conversation. And with Hashimoto's support, the enjoyable time continued.

E.5

We parted ways with Hashimoto and the other two Class A students before going to the bookstore after the café.

Judging from their hurried state, Sakayanagi may have called them.

On the way back from the bookstore, we exchanged various thoughts.

“It's been a really fun day.”

Hiyori, walking a little ahead of me at dusk, smiled as she remembered what had happened earlier.

“I didn't expect Kitō-kun to be so talkative.”

“So talkative?”

Looking back, I thought he only muttered something five or six times…

“I also learned a lot about Kamuro-san and Hashimoto-kun.”

“It's good that you were satisfied. After all, I couldn't do much.”

“That's not true. You went to the bookstore with me, didn't you? That alone was very enjoyable.”

“Is that so? Well, if you're happy, then I guess everything’s fine.”

I still hadn't improved much in terms of planning things out while considering my partner's feelings.

This was something that would have to be done through shared experiences, regardless of gender.

Before I knew it, our conversation had dwindled, and we had fallen into silence.

Hiyori's footsteps had grown slower than before, and I wondered if she was deep in thought.

We walked along the tree-lined street and were just about halfway to the dormitory.

“Um… Ayanokōji-kun. Can you please listen without getting angry?”

Hiyori, who had been smiling happily just moments ago, seemed to be slightly nervous.

“I don't think there's anything to be angry about, so I'll listen without getting upset.”

“The book I gave you as a present the other day… It was written by my father.”

“By your…? I see. So, the author's name might be his real name?”

“That's amazing. You figured it out?”

“It wouldn't be strange if I noticed the author's unusual name when I found out it was a relative.”

“Shiina Katsumi. My father's name.”

“So, the bookworm girl's roots are from her father.”

I might’ve caught a glimpse of the background that created the literary girl.

“Until now, I haven't told anyone that my father’s a writer. I didn't have any friends who shared the same hobby, but… it's not just that. I wanted you to know about it.”

That was what Hiyori told me.

Although it wasn't something to hide, it wasn't something she had to go out of her way to talk about either.

Why did she bring up such a topic now?

“What do you think will happen in the upcoming battles? Of course, I know it's difficult to predict, but I’d like to hear your opinion if possible.”

“Ryūen's and Sakayanagi's battle will probably have a significant impact on their future. Assuming that the class points will remain similar until the end of the school year, if Sakayanagi wins, Class A will be at a significant advantage. However, if Ryūen wins, that advantage may

disappear. Their movements are more noteworthy than those of Horikita's class or Ichinose's class.”

This much speculation could be done by anyone.

In order to express an opinion beyond that, I had to think about what would happen in the future.

“Most students probably think that Sakayanagi's class has the advantage.”

“That's right. They’ve been maintaining Class A for nearly two years, and they’ve never lost a significant amount of class points. There are a few people in our class who are already frightened by the final exams.”

If they lose, Ryūen's class's chance of graduating from Class A would become extremely difficult.

“Without knowing the content of the special exam, we can only judge based on the leaders' and classmates’ strength and compatibility, but I think Ryūen has a good chance of winning.”

In fact, that was what I considered to be the most ideal.

It didn't matter which way the battle between Horikita and Ichinose goes, but if Ryūen loses, Hiyori's class would lose its chance of success and fall out of the race.

“—That's true.”

As a member of the class, Hiyori must’ve felt it as well.

Sakayanagi's class was strong. That was why the loss would be immeasurable if they were defeated.

“I'm sorry for asking something like this.”

“Don't worry. I'm glad to know that you also care about your class.”

When I told her so, she was a little embarrassed.

“Our classes may be different and we may be competing, but let's definitely graduate together, alright?”

Unlike her usual self, Hiyori ran and stood in front of me.

Then, while still looking embarrassed, she turned around and spoke those thoughts.

It was unclear which class would graduate as Class A.

However, this didn't necessarily mean that we had to always be rivals and bear resentment towards other classes.

Whether someone graduated as Class C or Class D, they'd want to face graduation with a smile together with their friends, best friends, and lovers.

"Yeah, that's right."

When I responded with my agreement, Hiyori softly smiled with joy.

Winter break was coming to an end.

A cold wind was blowing.

From now on, it would only get colder as the end of the month approached.

...And so, the third term was about to begin.

Postscript

It's become quite a warm season, hasn't it? This is Shogo Kinugasa.

I think people sometimes awaken various interests and hobbies. A little while ago, I started cooking, and to make my dishes more delicious, I've been expanding my repertoire and tirelessly experimenting. I even got carried away and bought my own personal knife. I didn't have any hobbies other than watching baseball before.

I was impressed that I could still acquire a new hobby at this age, but in the meantime, another change occurred in my hobbies...

To keep up with my child's growth, I had to buy bigger blocks and stuffed toys, which inevitably led to more frequent visits to toy stores. Unexpectedly, I developed an interest in Plarail trains. I didn't know anything about trains, but I thought, “Huh? It's actually surprisingly fun just to move them around?” That became a reason to buy more toys, collect rails, create original courses, run trains in parallel, and buy remote-controlled trains... I also became interested in Mini 4WD, Nerf, and board games... It's no good. There are too many things that caught my attention.

The toys were supposed to be bought only for my child's sake, but at some point, I started buying them for my own enjoyment.

My latest favorite is a toy called Bottleman, which launches bottle caps. The memory of being totally into a toy called Beadaman (the predecessor of Bottleman?) in the past resurfaced, and I started collecting them. Although I'm more of a minimalist and didn't have much of a collecting habit, I never thought it would come to this... But I wonder if the reason I think Beadaman was overwhelmingly more interesting is because I've grown up now.

Personally, I want to try out Lego, which I admired when I was little, but I can't take the final step to buy it, fearing that I'll really be hooked if I do.

Someone stop me! (Or give me a push!)

Okay. Let me talk a little about the current status of my work.

Finally, the second term and winter break are ending, and from the next volume, we will be entering the third term arc.

Unlike the somewhat lengthy second term, I expect the third term to be about the same length as the first-year third term arc, or perhaps just a little shorter.

Well everyone, during this hot season, please be careful of heatstroke and such.

Let us meet again when it starts to cool down.

Hiyori Shiina's Short Story - What I Want You To Know

RIGHT AFTER I SAW off Ayanokōji-kun and returned to my seat, I remembered something I had forgotten about in the excitement of our reunion. I reached out to the bag that was placed near my feet.

I took out the item I intended to give and, with a slight bow to the librarian, I hurried into the hallway.

Hearing the sound of the door opening and closing, I wanted to run up to Ayanokōji-kun and call out to him, but I was slightly out of breath and couldn't speak immediately.

"Here—"

Somehow squeezing out a voice, I offered him the book I had been holding tightly.

But immediately afterward, I thought he might not have understood what this was, so I took it out of the bag.

"This is one of my favorite books. Would you mind reading it if you have the chance?"

"Is this, by any chance, the author you mentioned earlier?"

I had intended to keep the title of the book a secret as I handed it to him, but Ayanokōji-kun guessed it right away.

"I guess it's easy to figure out, huh?"

The nodding Ayanokōji-kun might've been confused about me, who suddenly tried to give him the book.

"In the case that you had already read it, I didn't think I could've easily given it to you as a present."

That was why. I went on to explain why I took such actions.

“If you only want to read it, you can borrow it from the library. But if it's a work I really like or one I'm particularly fond of, I want to have it on hand.”

“So you went out of your way to buy it with your own money.”

“Also... this book isn't available in the library.”

A completely private book written by a family member.

I couldn’t ask the school to put it on the shelf.

“Are you sure I can have it?”

“Yes. Actually, this is the third time I've bought this book. The first time was when I was in junior high, and I still have it in my room. The second one was when I entered this school.”

To my surprise, I answered in such a quick and almost embarrassingly fast manner.

“I think I understand your tastes pretty well, so I'm confident that you'll be happy with it.”

Ayanokōji-kun finished accepting the book and left the library.

“I feel bad making you go through the trouble.”

I was anxious whether he would accept it, but when Ayanokōji-kun took it from me, I felt relieved. However, his words that struck the core of my heart caused my pulse to race.

“Did you perhaps carry this around with you until you met me?”

I had carried it around with me every day until I met him. His suspicion, that had hit right on the mark, only increased my nervousness.

“I would’ve come right away if you had just told me.”

“Well, yes. But... it's only been a few days, so it's not a big deal.”

Trying my best to keep calm, I explained and asked him not to worry about it.

As our conversation continued, I felt like I couldn't bear to show him more of my pathetic side any longer.

“Well then… see you later.”

Rather than my lingering emotions, my feelings of not wanting to show my pathetic self won, and I returned to the library as if I ran away. As I closed the door and took a deep breath, the librarian looked at me while smiling.

“That's youth, huh?”

Whether they had heard my conversation with Ayanokōji-kun or not, I couldn't tell.

Either way—there was no doubt that they had seen me in a very embarrassing situation.

“It's not like that,” I gently denied before returning to my seat.

The familiar silence of the library enveloped me once more.

That day, however, felt strangely lonely.

Masumi Kamuro's Short Story - It's Because I Hate It

I WAS ASKED BY that guy Hashimoto to create contact with Ayanokōji.

This morning, while I stood by, ready to leave at any moment, I received a call.

I got a report that Ayanokōji had been spotted leaving the dorms.

Most of the surveillance targets were the ones Sakayanagi specified, but this Ayanokōji was someone that part of the class had been independently monitoring.

It wasn't anything special.

Class A was always keeping their eyes on a lot of students.

Who was connected to who, who got along well and who didn't. Even useless information was gathered.

That was why there weren't too many students who paid attention to Ayanokōji's monitoring.

From an outsider's perspective, he was just one of the many targets of surveillance.

Hence, even if I desired this information, it shouldn't raise any suspicions.

Winter break would soon be over, and the limit for seeing it as a hassle and procrastinating was approaching.

Besides, for the last few days, Karuizawa had been clinging onto Ayanokōji, and I had been continuously unable to make contact.

I quickly left the dorm and headed for the location indicated by the latest sighting.

And sure enough, I easily found the back of the person I was looking for.

“Tsk.”

I inadvertently clicked my tongue. I thought it was just Ayanokōji, but it seemed I was wrong.

If I turned back now and missed this opportunity, the next time might already occur in the third term.

If Hashimoto called me by my first name again because I avoided contact, I'd get goosebumps…

“…If it isn’t Karuizawa, I’ll manage… somehow.”

I had no other choice but to forcefully use this chance to break through.

“It seems like you're being quite ostentatious early in the new year.”

With blatant disgust, I called out to Ayanokōji and approached him.

“I just saw you on a date with Karuizawa at the end of the year. Did you start going out with a different girl as soon as the new year began?”

It was an unobtrusive reason to speak up, since we hardly ever interacted.

Well, even if I had no business with Ayanokōji, I despised guys who cheated on multiple women.

“They’re totally different types of girls. What were you thinking?”

I couldn't help but feel irritated when I saw a man who couldn't value someone.

Since I truly despised him, there was no way Ayanokōji could perceive my true intention for making contact.

Today, I aimed to just vent my emotions by digging into this guy.

I had to gauge whether he would be a threat to Class A or not.

By doing so, I would fulfill my promise with Hashimoto and get rid of his unnecessary usage of my first name.

I don't really have to do this... What am I even doing getting so worked up...

While harboring such cold feelings, I first directed my gaze with the intention of sending Shiina back.

Miki Yamamura's Short Story - The One Who Can Find Me

RYŪEN-KUN, KATSURAGI-KUN AND Ayanokōji-kun were circling around Keyaki Mall.

I spotted the three of them and quietly followed behind.

If I could gather any useful information, I'd report it to Sakayanagi-san.

Since she would handle examining the content, all I needed to do was to remember it.

Hidden in the shadows of a vending machine, I held my breath and closely listened in.

"I'm going to stop by Keyaki Mall now. What will you do? If you want us to hold hands and go on a date, I might consider it."

It was the domineering, typical Ryūen-kun.

The conversation they'd been having up until now was far more intense and intriguing than I'd imagined.

The contents of the three's conversation mentioned a few things, such as noticing the groundwork for the special exam in the third term, but what surprised me the most was Ayanokōji-kun's presence and the high opinion the other two had for him.

He had been an elusive figure since the school trip, and I was wondering who he really was.

Unfortunately, I didn't know what they had spoken about immediately after they met up, but could they have perhaps touched on that topic?

"Well then, I'll be off."

"Our match will be in the third year. Don't forget that."

Even while parting, Ryūen-kun was wary of Ayanokōji-kun and recognized him as a formidable opponent.

Even though I wanted to gather more information, I assessed that this was the right time to pull back.

Having a weak presence was my unique ability, but even that had its limits.

However, I wasn't worried. I slid my body into a position where I could be at ease.

All that was left was to erase my presence to the limit.

That was how I had always been prior to coming to this school.

No one could find me. No one would find me.

See, just by staying quiet, I won't be found by anyone this time either—

“What are you doing in a place like that?”

Closely above my head, there was Ayanokōji-kun, looking down at me with those always unchanging, colorless eyes.

“Eh!?”

Who is he talking to?

Me? There's no way.

There's no way anyone would see me.

But, I was made to realize immediately afterwards.

This person was… someone who could find me.

Arisu Sakayanagi's Short Story - Emotional Control

I HAD A RENEWED realization in the snowy landscape that humans were indeed interesting creatures.

"Never could I have imagined verbalizing it."

Being swayed by uncontrollable emotions. The surprise of discovering such a part of myself.

Falling in love with the opposite sex.

In my life experiences so far, I thought that was something that would come much further later.

The reason was simple. I understood that I couldn't be attracted to an existence inferior to me.

In short, I couldn't feel attraction in 99% of the world.

At the same time, I began to think.

Did I then admit that Ayanokōji-kun was superior to me?

"No—is what I would like to say, but I must recognize his abilities."

However, this didn't mean that I had admitted defeat on the same grounds.

He was different. Neither a genius nor an ordinary person. He was a third existence that couldn't be classified into just two categories.

For now, I decided to reach such a conclusion.

The reason for my conclusion was simple—because I realized that I was in love with him.

I didn't harbor fondness for 99% of humans.

However, I don't think I'd harbor fondness for even the 1% who were superior to me.

Although I had not met anyone like that yet, towards that 1% of geniuses, I would probably hold jealousy, a sense of rivalry towards them, rather than romantic feelings.

Because it was easy to imagine myself like this, this emotion held meaning.

As always, he asked with his unfathomable, dark gaze.

“Can you turn that emotion from a weakness into a strength?”

Don't worry. Right now, more than anything else, I passionately wish to fight against you.

While being grateful to have met you as an adversary, I will now face the battles ahead without hesitation.

To defeat neither a genius nor an ordinary person, but a created third existence.

Even in my long life to come, I would rarely come across such an interesting battle like this one.

I will defeat Ayanokōji-kun and prove my own talent.

And on top of that, I want to know how I will feel about Ayanokōji-kun.

Will I lose all my interest, or will I realize that this feeling is genuine?

Or will I harbor a new, entirely different feeling that I cannot yet understand?

It was fun to be at the mercy of uncontrollable emotions.

Surely Ayanokōji-kun too was indulging in the same feelings through his current pseudo-romance.

In the snowy dark night, as I held the heat welled up within me to my chest, I smiled all by myself.