

衣笠影悟
KINUGASA SYOUGO
トモセシュンサク
TOMOSESHUNSAKU

2年生編

3

ようこそ実力至上
Welcome to the Classroom of the Second-year
主義の教室へ

Table of Contents

Classroom of the Elite - Second Year, Volume 3

Prologue: The Monologue of Nanase Tsubasa

Chapter 1: Different Strategies Amidst Different People

Chapter 2: The Curtain Rises on the Uninhabited Island Exam

Chapter 3: Travel Companion

Chapter 4: What it Means to Like Someone

Chapter 5: The Invisible Enemy

Chapter 6: The Aloof Wunderkind of Class 2-D

Chapter 7: The First-Years Start to Move

Chapter 8: True Colors Revealed

Epilogue: The Seeds of Unrest

Afterword

Sakayanagi Arisu SS: An Enjoyable Moment

Nanase Tsubasa SS: Unfathomable

Horikita Suzune SS: A Brief Farewell

Nanase Tsubasa Tapestry SS: What Could Be Seen From that Back

Translator's Notes



3

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

TMBN



"Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"I see that you chose a rather cute swimsuit.
Is there a reason for that?"

"A reason? From what I've seen of
Beach Flags on TV,
girls usually compete wearing
swimsuits like this, right?
I thought it'd be strange if I took
part in a school swimsuit.
Have I misunderstood something?"

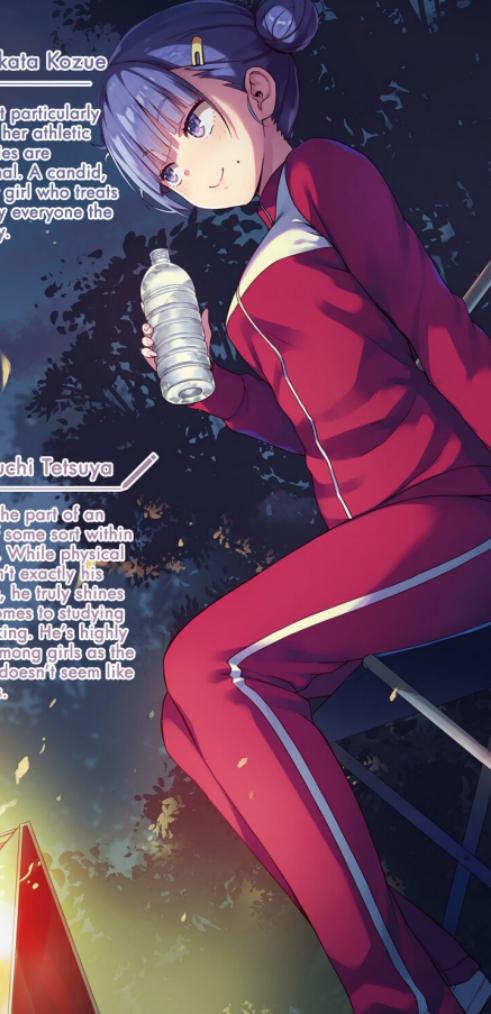
Andō Sayo

A tall, large-statured member of the volleyball club. She's highly athletic and holds a great deal of confidence in her physical abilities. Truth be told, however, she's a maiden who has fallen in love with Shibata.



Minamikata Kozue

While not particularly studious, her athletic capabilities are exceptional. A candid, forthright girl who treats absolutely everyone the same way.



Hamaguchi Tetsuya

He plays the part of an advisor of some sort within Class 2-C. While physical activity isn't exactly his cup of tea, he truly shines when it comes to studying and speaking. He's highly popular among girls as the type who doesn't seem like other guys.





"How curious~! To think you'd start shaking in fear of a girl younger than you. But, well, I think it's best you cherish that wonderful feeling, Kushida-senpai~."

"Ah!!! Let go of me!"

"Now why would I do that~?"

"You freak!
You're not normal...!"

Prologue: The Monologue of Nanase Tsubasa

I can still vividly remember the shock I felt that day.
Of the cruel reality that presented itself to me without warning.
The light of the evening sun shining throughout the old apartment.
A long, large shadow slowly swinging from side to side like the pendulum
of a grandfather clock.

Despite looking straight at it, I couldn't understand a thing.
That warm hand that would caress my head.
That gentle smile that healed my soul.
That sincere gaze that taught me admiration.

That silent, blank expression that brought me to the edge of despair.

A strong, gentle person who worked harder than anybody else without
ever giving up.

In no way is it right for such a person to forever remain unable to grasp
hold of their dream.

Of course, I am well aware that I'm contradicting myself here.

But I can't forgive.

It's difficult for one to fight while burdened with feelings of guilt.

Therefore, they assert their legitimacy and fight under the banner of their own brand of ‘justice’ instead.

And as long as they have that justice... As long as they cling onto that very conviction, they can continue to fight.

But I, with my own fragile heart, simply cannot support such a ‘justice’.

And that’s why, 『I』 will.^[1]

That way... I can retain the will to defeat Ayanokōji Kiyotaka for real.

To send him back to the place he’s meant to be.

Because, if I don’t, there will surely be a second or even third victim that follows.

And that alone must be avoided, no matter the cost.

Ayanokōji Kiyotaka stood before me, his eyes fixed in my direction.

If there’s ever a place or time for me to end all of this— It’s right here. Right now.

And then, I can finally move on to the next step.

After all, my true objective lies far beyond defeating him.

Chapter 1: Different Strategies Amidst Different People

July 20th. A sprawling deserted island of everlasting summer. A wide, crystal-clear ocean beneath a high, blue sky.

It had been decided that this would be where the students would be spending their next two weeks.

On a cloudless night, the view of the stars dotting the sky would probably be enough to take one's breath away.

Chatting with friends, sitting shoulder to shoulder with that special someone always on your mind.

Sitting around a fire, dancing, making merry; A page taken straight out of the book of youth.

Given such youthful fantasies, one might be tempted to think that this was the beginning of a grand summer vacation envied by everyone.

However, for the students of Advanced Nurturing High School, this uninhabited island would be the location of a major exam.

“This is a much bigger island than the last one, just like Mashima-sensei said it'd be.”

Hirata Yōsuke spoke up from right beside me.

Indeed, in terms of size, this island was considerably larger than the one we went to one year ago.

Furthermore, the exam held thereupon was scaled up accordingly as well.

“We'll only have to stay there for two weeks, but some students might end up having to retire at some point.”

“Yeah, I think there's a high chance that something unexpected might end up happening. Securing water will probably be our first priority.”

We could feel the heat and humidity even from onboard the ship.

The red heat blazing down from the summer sun was scorching the sandy beaches of the island.

On this day, late into the month of July, the temperatures were recorded at nearly 40 degrees Celsius. Yōsuke's concerns were right on the money; We would need to avoid being negligent and stay cautious of heatstroke and dehydration.

As the ship drew closer to the island, the full extent of the situation at hand started to become clearer and clearer.

"I wonder if people used to live here?"

"Maybe."

A well-maintained harbor had gradually come into view, exuding a completely different aura than that of the rest of the island.

Instead of circling around the island's perimeter, the ship seemed to be heading straight for one of the ports.

The countdown until the beginning of the special exam was drawing closer. Despite his soft expression, Yōsuke's hands were clenched onto the deck's railing. Over the course of these next two weeks, the entire student body would be undergoing massive changes. Classes would rise and fall, certain students would face expulsion, and none of it would be unexpected in the slightest. It was entirely possible that we might find ourselves in a completely different environment next semester. And for Yōsuke, who yearns for peace, that would be anything but desirable.

It wouldn't be strange if he had been subconsciously bottling up his strength inside himself as a result.

Finally, an announcement was broadcast throughout the ship for the students to prepare to disembark.

"Have you resolved yourself, Yōsuke?"

As danger encroached upon the tranquility and peace that he strove to protect, I chose to pose him a question, my tone strong and serious.

Although he felt anxious, Yōsuke fixed his gaze on my own and nodded his head a single time.

“I’ll put forth every effort so I have no regrets. That’s the only thing I can do for the class.”

It wasn’t like he wanted someone to get expelled. Not at all.

It’s just, there was simply no way that our class could avoid taking any casualties this time.

So with that in mind, he and I set off to leave the deck.

1.1

July 19th, the day before we landed on the island. 12:36 PM.

The Saint Venus, a 12-story luxury liner, was pushing south-southwest upon the sea.

On the relatively unpopular aft deck of the ship, my girlfriend, Karuizawa Kei, signaled me over with a wave of her hand.

After making sure that there was nobody else around, we stood beside one another and stared out at the sea.

“Such an amazing view, huh...?”

The illumination of the sun on the water’s surface made it sparkle like a studded jewel.

Kei fondly looked out at the ocean, a sense of romance encased in her gaze.

“Didn’t you already see it last year?”

“I mean, I saw a bit of it, but like, the view just wasn’t as important as hanging out with my friends onboard the ship and all.”

She confided in me, slightly embarrassed.

Well, this was understandable. For many students, that was their first time on board a luxury liner.

Rather than sit back and take in the scenery, it’s only natural to want to be with friends and explore the ship.

The ship we were on this year, The Saint Venus, was said to be the third-largest Japanese-registered ship on the ocean with a carrying capacity of over 700 passengers.

Starting from the front desk in the 5th-floor entrance lobby, the upper floors came equipped with a movie theater, pool, gym, cafes, restaurants, a public bath with a panoramic view, and even a game corner. In terms of quality, the facilities were as good, if not better than they were last year. It would probably take more than a day or two to fully enjoy them all.

Needless to say, there was also a doctor's office and sickbay, as well as a system to handle any unforeseen circumstances that may occur.

"So anyway like, is it really okay for us to be on a date together out in the open like this...?"

Kei looked around restlessly, seemingly unable to settle her nerves.

"While I can't guarantee that nobody will see us, we should be fine for the time being."

The mess hall had opened up at 11:00 AM today, with the first-years being the first to eat their lunch. They ate early due to a briefing session held for them at noon. The second and third-years, on the other hand, began lunch an hour later. As such, the majority of students should still be feasting on a luxurious banquet right about now.

This period of time before our own briefing session at 1:00 PM was probably one of the few rare moments when the two of us could be alone together.

"There are so many students this year... Maybe that's why they want to explain things to us before we get on the island?"

"That might be part of it, but that's most likely not the only reason."

At a little over an hour, the estimated duration of the briefing session was quite a bit longer than last year. They probably didn't want to hold the explanation out on the beach out of consideration of the scorching heat. If the school had us listen to a long-winded explanation while exposed to direct sunlight, a fair number of students would inevitably collapse from heatstroke. It was probably a matter of safety instead of efficiency.

“It still kinda doesn’t feel real...”

“Well, it’s not every day that you get the chance to go on a cruise ship like this. It’s understandable that things might feel somewhat surreal.”

I responded both calmly and objectively, but Kei simply sighed in exasperation.

“Not that... I’m talking ‘bout how it doesn’t feel real that I’m goin’ out with you. You’re so smart, and yet you totally miss the mark about this kinda stuff, huh?”

Kei and I had started dating as of spring break this year.

Even though several months had already passed, we still hadn’t gone on any real dates together. A normal high school couple would walk to and from school or hang out together after class every day, but due to the fact that we were hiding our relationship, our dates happened far less frequently than other couples.

Even when the two of us managed to find the time to be alone together, we had no choice but to meet up in secret like this.

It seemed fair to say that opportunities to develop our relationship were truly few and far between.

“How about you, Kiyotaka? Does it feel real to you?”

“Well, I wonder. I’d say it does and it doesn’t.”

“The heck?”

That Kei and I had become boyfriend and girlfriend was an unshakable fact.

However, there still hadn’t been any visible developments in our relationship.

“I just never imagined that the two of us would get to meet up in secret outside like this.”

“Well, I guess.”

Kei let out a sigh as she gazed upon the distant horizon.

“Depending on what we’re told about the special exam in the upcoming briefing session, there might be a few things I’ll need you to do for me.”

“Alright. Only if it’s something I’m capable of though.”

Telling her this had been my primary motive for calling her out here in the first place. That said, since we were free to use our cell phones until the end of the day today, it would’ve been easier to convey the necessary details over the phone instead. Essentially, there was no need for me to go out of my way to risk meeting up like this. Physically meeting up together just because we’re dating was truly a different, interesting experience.

A little while after that, an announcement was broadcast throughout the ship that the first-year briefing session had come to a close.

“Sounds like the first-years are done. We can’t go together, so I’ll head off first.”

Knowing it’d draw suspicion if the two of us were seen walking together, Kei took the initiative and left the deck alone.

Shortly thereafter, it was time for the second-year students to switch places with the first-years and gather at the movie theater.

Upon entering, we were informed that there was no assigned seating, so we were free to sit wherever we wanted.

There were those who took a seat at random and those who sat together with all of their closest friends, but the ones who stood out the most were those who were clustered in their small groups. It made complete sense, though. After all, they were comrades who’d be fighting together as one throughout the next two weeks. As such, it would simply be more efficient for them to listen to the briefing as a group so they could share their thoughts with one another as it went on.

Since I was a solo participant, I weaved my way through the various groups and found a place to sit in a small opening amongst them.

Of course, the seat I chose was not in the front, but near the back where it was less conspicuous.

“...Ugh. Why the hell are you sitting here?”

As one might expect, these seats would be highly sought after by any solo student with a similar mindset to my own.

Consequently, the person sitting in the seat beside mine was none other than Class 2-B's Ibuki Mio.

"You didn't sit there on purpose, right?"

"Not at all."

She and I had ended up in the same place simply because we had both followed the same train of thought.

"I'm goin' somewhere else, so don't you dare follow me, got it?"

She stood up and began to take her distance, seemingly unable to stomach the thought of being next to me.

While I had no intention of stopping her, many of the remaining seats had already started to fill up.

Be it to the left or right, there were already large groups of people idly chatting amongst themselves throughout the entire theater.

Ibuki paused, having noticed this as well.

There was nowhere left for a lone student to escape to anymore. As a last resort, she looked to sit down in the seat one away from me, but moments before she could, Class 2-A's Kitō Hayato plopped himself down, taking away her chance.

Ibuki openly glowered at him, but Kitō paid it no mind and simply folded his arms.

At this point, she had two choices: return to the seat next to me or go sit amongst the masses.

After weighing her options, she reluctantly chose to sit back down in her original seat, forced to listen to the briefing while sandwiched between Kitō and myself.

But... no matter how much she hated sitting here, she seemed to hate the thought of being mixed in with the groups even more.

Otherwise, despite being a girl, she wouldn't have gone through all the trouble of taking on the special exam alone.

In any case, I decided to put the matter with Ibuki aside and focus on the briefing, turning my attention to what was happening at the front of the theater.

“Now then, everyone, I'll be explaining the rules for the uninhabited island special exam.”

Just like last year, the one in charge of the explanation was Class 2-A's homeroom teacher, Mashima-sensei.

He stood in front of the screen and began to speak with microphone in hand.

“Starting tomorrow, your stay on the island will last for the next two weeks. The fundamental idea of the exam is the same as it was last year, in that you'll be expected to live autonomously during your time on the island. In the event that a student is found to be unable to continue due to an injury or illness, or to have taken part in a serious violation of the rules, they will be unilaterally and forcibly retired from the exam. I'm sure the fact that you were supposed to form small groups of up to three people is still fresh in your mind. However, once the exam is underway and a certain condition is met, the size restriction will be lifted and small groups will be allowed to work together, raising the maximum group size to six. Furthermore, in the event that all members of a given group should retire, the students will be disqualified and their rankings will be finalized accordingly.”

The students of the five lowest-ranked groups in the school would find themselves subject to expulsion. However, the expulsion could be nullified by paying a fixed number of private points. A one-person group would need to pay six million points, while a three-person group would only need to pay two million per person. Essentially, the more people a group had, the less each member would have to pay. That said, only those who could afford to pay their dues would be saved. Since the students with deep pockets were inevitably few in number, this system wasn't all that relevant to the majority of students.

Additionally, for the bottom three groups, a large number of class points would be deducted from the classes of each group member. So not only would the students at fault be expelled, but they'd leave behind a great burden for their remaining classmates as well.

At this point, the dire necessity of avoiding the bottom five ranks had probably already taken precedence over anything else for every group.

"While I know you're all excited to spend the next two weeks on the island, there are still a few crucial things you'll need to know first."

Indeed. We still hadn't been told how our 'rankings' would be determined so far.

"Each group will be fighting to earn 'points' to determine their rank."

With this, the theater's massive screen turned on, attracting the attention of the nearly 160 students present.

Uninhabited Island Special Exam – Overview

- For two weeks, groups will compete with each other to earn points in a survival exam.
- In the event that all members of a group retire during the exam, the group in question will be immediately disqualified.

(All points earned prior to disqualification will be invalidated and the group's ranking will be finalized immediately.)

In other words, no matter how many points a group managed to earn, if everyone in the group ended up retiring, all their efforts would've been for naught. While earning points was undoubtedly important, sticking around until the end of the exam took on a much higher priority.

A map of the uninhabited island that we would be landing on tomorrow was shown along with the overview. There were horizontal and vertical lines drawn over the island like a grid, evenly dividing it into cells.



“There are two ways to score points. The first is via the ‘Basic Movement’ rule, whereby you will be directed to go to one of the 100 cells on the map in specified intervals. For example, let’s say that your starting position is D9 where the port is located, and area C8 has been designated as your destination. The first three groups to arrive at area C8 will receive an ‘Early Bird Bonus’, with the first receiving 10 points, the second receiving 5 points, and the third receiving 3 points. Furthermore, everybody who arrives at the area within the fixed interval will receive an individual ‘Arrival Bonus’ of 1 point. Therefore, should a three-person group arrive first, they would receive the 10-point Early Bird Bonus in addition to the 3 points they would get for the Arrival Bonus, for a collective total of 13 points. In the case of a two-person group, they would only receive 2 points for the Arrival Bonus, for a total of 12.”

It was more than possible that some groups might do something reckless in their pursuit of the top spot. However, the competition would be taking place on an uninhabited island, not in the middle of a city. It was safe to assume that the rough island paths would present many obstacles, so there was a good chance that something unexpected might cause injury. No matter how quickly a group may rack up points, they would be immediately disqualified once the entire group retires. Their points would be forfeit and all their efforts would go down the drain.

“The designated area for the Basic Movement rule will change three times a day on the first and last day of the exam, on the remaining twelve days, however, it’ll change four times a day. The targeted time intervals will be from 7:00 AM to 9:00 AM and 9:00 AM to 11:00 AM. Then, after a two-hour break, from 1:00 PM to 3:00 PM and 3:00 PM to 5:00 PM.”

We would earn points by reaching designated areas within fixed two-hour periods. Given that the last interval ended at 5:00 PM, the school was probably being considerate of the risks that would come with having us move around after dark.

“Please also keep in mind that, should a group fail to reach a designated area three times in a row, they will lose one point. Additionally, should it happen four times in a row, this penalty will extend to two points and further increase to three points for the fifth. As the number of consecutive misses continues to increase, so will the counter for the penalty. However, should the group break the chain, the counter will reset to 0, and the penalty will restart from 1 point should the group fail to reach the designated areas three times in a row again.”

This meant that, depending on the situation, groups might repeatedly exhaust their stamina and fail to reach the designated area in time, constantly hemorrhaging points in the process.

Conversely, let’s say a group tries to coast through the exam by pitching camp at the starting area and only dedicates their time to earning points from the designated areas that pop up nearby... A strategy like this would be effectively useless. In which case, if no other groups ended up retiring, they would probably sink to the bottom of the standings, subjecting themselves to expulsion and a penalty for their classes.

“When it comes to whether or not a group has missed a designated area, you’ll be safe as long as a single member of your group manages to get there in time. Therefore, it isn’t necessary for every member of a group to reach a given area. Of course, the Arrival Bonus will still only be awarded based on the number of people who do.”

Mashima-sensei’s words caused a bit of a stir amongst the students.

As an example, if only one person from a group of three were to reach a designated area, the group as a whole would get a one-point Arrival Bonus and avoid the penalty. In short, simply having more people would put a group at an overwhelming advantage when it comes to earning points. Even if they cleared areas at the same rate, those who were participating alone or in groups of two would find themselves falling behind whether they liked it or not.

“There is one caveat to this, however. The Early Bird Bonus given to the first three groups will only be given if nobody in the group has retired and all of its members arrive at the area. Furthermore, the arrival time of the last group member will be used to decide the rankings for the bonus.”

This seemed like a reasonable rule. If only one person was needed to secure the Early Bird Bonus, it would allow groups to game the system by only sending their physically capable members to the areas. Alternatively, it would allow groups to split up and scatter their members across the island to cover more ground and wait for new areas to appear. If something like that were to happen, groups with fewer members probably wouldn’t stand a chance. Thanks to this caveat, solo groups had an opportunity to come out on top, albeit a small one.

But, even with this rule in place, there was still no refuting the fact that having more people was overwhelmingly more advantageous.

“Of the 100 areas on the map, some are clearly inaccessible. For instance, B1, C1, F10, and G10 all lie entirely within the ocean, and as such, these areas will never be chosen for the Basic Movement rule.”

As Mashima-sensei spoke, several of the unreachable areas of the on-screen map were shaded red and discarded.

“There are also certain restrictions in place that help decide how designated areas will be chosen. Three out of four times a day, the next designated area will be within two cells laterally or one cell diagonally of the previously designated area.”

With this in place, traveling between the different areas within the time limit didn’t seem like it would be all that difficult.

Since you’d have two hours to reach the next area, a group could reasonably make the journey with plenty of time to spare.

However, the designated area would be changing four times a day, not three.

In other words, there was one interval when the restriction wouldn’t apply.

“There is an exception to this restriction, however. Of the four new area selections that happen per day, one will shift to a completely random, unknown location. As an example, it’s possible for the designated area to randomly shift from D2 to D9. That said, this random designation will never occur twice in a row. The same applies should the random designation happen during the fourth and final interval of a given day, as it then wouldn’t be chosen for the first interval on the day after.”

While it was only once a day, the fact that the designated area’s next location was unknown was a big deal.

Moving from the northernmost part of the island all the way to the deepest part of the south simply wouldn’t be possible within two hours.

No matter how much energy a group might have, they’d be forced to give up on trying to get there in time.

If a group were to try and chase after a distant area, they might exhaust their stamina or get into an accident of some sort that would prevent them from traveling for a while. As such, they might fail to arrive at the next designated area in time, and potentially even miss the next area after that. It then stood to reason that they would not only miss three areas in a row, but possibly even fail to reach any new areas that would be designated later on.

In a situation like that, forget scoring more points. Maintaining those on hand would already be hard enough.

This was a truly frightening possibility that all of us would need to bear in mind.

Would it be better to push forward recklessly and set out for each new designated area, or try to avoid taking risks and move conservatively, fully prepared to miss out on arriving on time every once in a while? Either way, groups would need to be flexible, adapting their plans based on the abilities of their members.

“Also, while the same area will never be designated twice in a row, it’s entirely possible for it to designate D2, then D3, and then D2 again. Furthermore, if a group is already present in an area when it gets designated, they’ll receive the one-point Arrival Bonus for each member present, but won’t be eligible for the Early Bird Bonus. Please make sure to keep that in mind.”

In short, if a group had their sights set on getting the Early Bird Bonus, moving around needlessly could be risky.

In order to get the next Early Bird Bonus, a group would be left with only two choices: wait within the previously designated area, or move out of the range the next area would be restricted to. However, in the latter case, they would still face the risk of ending up in a randomly designated area.

“That should be everything you need to know about the Basic Movement rule. An overview will be shown on the screen.”

The Basic Movement Rule – Overview

- A new designated area will be announced four times a day. (On the first and last day of the exam, there will only be three with no random designation.)

- The target intervals are 7:00 AM to 9:00 AM, 9:00 AM to 11:00 AM, 1:00 PM to 3:00 PM, and 3:00 PM to 5:00 PM.

- Three times a day, the site of the next designated area will be within two cells laterally or one cell diagonally of the previous area.
- Once a day, the next designated area will be randomly selected out of all accessible areas on the map. (Random designation will never occur twice in a row.)
- The first three groups to arrive at a designated area will receive an Early Bird Bonus based on their arrival order, with the first getting 10 points, the second getting 5 points, and the third getting 3 points.
 - ※ The time in which all members of a group have arrived in the area will be used to determine the ranking of the bonus.
- Everyone who arrives at the designated area within the time interval will receive an Arrival Bonus of one point.
- In the event that a group is already present in the next designated area when it gets selected, they will receive the one-point Arrival Bonus, but will not be eligible for the Early Bird Bonus.
- Groups will be penalized should they fail to arrive at the designated area three times in a row. Points will continue to be deducted based on the number of consecutive misses. (However, once the group breaks the chain of misses, the penalty counter will be reset to zero.)

The overview displayed on the screen went just as Mashima-sensei had explained.

“Before I get started with explaining the second way to score points, there’s something I’d like for all of you to take a look at.”

At that, Mashima-sensei looked over toward Hoshinomiya-sensei, the homeroom teacher of Class 2-C, who came up on stage and handed him something.

He then raised it up in the air to show us what appeared to be a digital wristwatch.

“Starting tomorrow, all students will be required to wear one of these watches until the end of the exam. You will also be provided with a tablet

that pairs with the watch, but I'll get to that a bit later.”

An enlarged image of the watch and details about its functionalities appeared on the screen.

“Your watch will be an indispensable tool for you, not only for telling the time but also for earning points. This is because the watch is what will be calculating all of the bonuses provided by the Basic Movement rule. Moreover, it also comes equipped with a variety of useful features, such as notifications for when you enter a designated area within the interval. Since the watch can be prone to a slight time lag at times, it's possible that your points might not be awarded if you arrive at the last moment or leave the area immediately after getting there, so keep that in mind. Make sure to check for the notification to see if the points have been awarded properly or not.”

All in all, nothing would ever be possible without the watch.

“Additionally, the school will continuously monitor the wearer's body temperature, heart rate, blood pressure, blood oxygen level, sleep cycle, stress levels, and so on. If any of these go beyond a prescribed level, it will sound off a ‘Warning Alert’.”

Mashima-sensei temporarily handed the microphone to Hoshinomiya-sensei and began to put on the watch. It didn't seem like someone could put it on by themselves, because a staff member had to come out and use a special tool to fasten it onto his wrist.

Before long, Mashima-sensei finished putting on the watch and the different metrics he mentioned earlier, such as the heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature were shown in real-time on the screen.

From the look of it, the school was capable of monitoring the health and wellbeing of every student all at once.

“I'll give you all an example. Now this is hypothetical, but let's say my body temperature rises above 38 degrees Celsius.”

Shortly after he said that, a high-pitched alert began emanating from the watch.

“This is the Warning Alert. Since the sound is only meant to be a warning, it's automatically configured to stop ringing after five seconds.”

After five seconds, the high-pitched noise stopped.

“However, if any of the metrics continue to stay beyond the prescribed level, the Warning Alert will sound off again ten minutes later.”

As a test, the second Warning Alert went off, the sound a bit louder than the first one.

Once again, the alert stopped after five seconds.

“That was the second Warning Alert. Should the issue persist for yet another five minutes, then—”

The blaring sound of the third alert echoed across the room. It was easily the loudest noise to come from the watch so far.

“Instead of a ‘Warning Alert’, this final alert is known as an ‘Emergency Alert’. Should this happen, you’ll have 24 hours to undergo a medical checkup back at the starting area. If you disregard the emergency or fail to show up in time, you’ll be penalized with retirement or other potential punishments depending on the situation. Unlike the previous two alerts, the Emergency Alert will sound off continuously unless you manually disable it. Should it go off for longer than five minutes, a faculty member and medical personnel will come rushing to your location based on the watch’s GPS.”

The idea here was that help would be on the way in the event that a student was grievously injured, immobilized, or unconscious. Naturally, it was of the utmost importance that the alert didn’t sound off unless absolutely required.

“As you must have seen earlier, special tools are required to fasten and unfasten the watch from your wrist to prevent dishonest practices during the exam. With the way it’s configured, the watch will automatically stop tallying points should it be forcibly removed in any way, shape, or form.”

Essentially, this prevented groups from cheating when one of their members fell sick or something. For instance, it would stop someone from taking off their watch and having someone else score points in their place.

“Additionally, should your watch get physically damaged by a strong impact or malfunction for some reason while still under normal operating conditions, the point-scoring functionality will be disabled. Should this

happen, you'll have to return to the starting area to have your watch swapped out for a new one.”

While you wouldn't be penalized if your watch happened to break or malfunction, it was still quite painful that you'd have to go without earning points. On top of that, it also sucked that you had to go all the way back to the starting area to get it replaced.

“Alright, now that you all have an understanding of the watch itself, let's revisit the Basic Movement rule for a moment. During the exam, not every group will be directed to the same designated areas. Each watch comes pre-programmed with one of twelve different ‘Tables’. Tables are better explained with an example, so let's say that this watch I'm wearing here uses Table A, and the first three designated areas I'm given are D8, D7, and C6. On the other hand, let's say that Hoshinomiya-sensei has a watch that uses Table B. The first three areas she'd be given would be completely different, such as D10, E9, and F8 or something like that. In other words, from the first day of the exam to the last, every single designated area you're given has been decided internally since before the exam even started.”

This was something I had been wondering about ever since I first heard the term ‘designated area’.

If the entire exam was just the entire student body heading to the same destination over and over, it would devolve into nothing more than a race to see which group could make it through the same track the fastest.

However, with twelve different tracks, things were extremely different.

While those in Table A would still be competing with the rest of Table A, their next designated area might overlap with those in Table B or C from time to time. As such, several different competitions would always be taking place at the same time.

After three days, the groups would probably be scattered all throughout the uninhabited island.

“Needless to say, every member of a group will be assigned to the same table. In the event that you form a large group during the exam, any new members will be reassigned to the main group's table, so there shouldn't be a problem even if the groups originally had two different tables.”

In another light, the existence of twelve distinct tables made it virtually impossible to earn points through the Basic Movement rule by working together with groups assigned to another table.

I looked down at my left arm and envisioned a watch being fastened onto it. If the watch I was given had been tampered with, Tsukishiro could have it break or malfunction to interfere with my ability to score points. That said, he wouldn't be able to do that very many times.

If it happened once or twice, it could be passed off as a coincidence. But if it continued happening three or four times without any visible reason as to why, it would undoubtedly raise suspicions. I felt like if it happened at all, it would only be once or twice at most. While I'd probably have to give up on competing for the top spot, I should still be able to avoid sinking down to the bottom as long as I managed to stockpile a solid number of points.

So, while I'd definitely have to keep this in mind, it didn't seem like I needed to be particularly vigilant about it.

Watch Overview

- The school will continuously monitor the health and wellbeing of all students via a specially provided wristwatch.
- If any physical or digital abnormalities are detected in the watch, all further point acquisitions will be disabled and a checkup will be required.
- Provides the user with alerts regarding any health abnormalities. A Warning Alert can be disregarded, but in the event of an Emergency Alert, the user must return to the starting area. (Failure to return to the starting area within 24 hours may result in retirement.)
- The watch comes pre-programmed with one of twelve different Tables. The order in which designated areas are assigned differs between each Table.
- If an Emergency Alert goes off for at least five minutes without being disabled by the user, a medical team will be dispatched to the user's location. (In the event of a dire emergency such as cardiac arrest or a sharp drop in blood pressure, the team will come immediately.)

Earning points with the Basic Movement rule would be possible for essentially anybody in good health, but physical abilities such as speed and stamina would have a huge influence on who ended up with the valuable Early Bird Bonuses. In that sense, students who weren't confident in their physical abilities would probably have a slim chance of coming out on top overall.

In other words, the second way to earn points most likely had to do with students using their heads instead.

"Next, I'll explain the second way to earn points. Simply put, you can earn points by completing 'Tasks' set up throughout the island. These Tasks will be held in a variety of different places and can take place at any time between 7:00 AM and 5:00 PM. They'll be spread out amongst the 100 different cells of the map, but more than one Task can appear within the same area. Let's start off with some examples."

An example of a Task appeared on the screen.

It looked like a red dot, showing up somewhere within the C3 area.

"These red dots mark the location of a Task, and they can only be seen on the tablet you're provided with. As students, you won't be able to predict when or where one of these identifying red dots will appear, nor can you predict what kind of Task will show up next. You'll only know for sure once you see one on your tablet."

Task:『Math Test』- Classification: Academic Ability

Participation Deadline: Groups must register within one hour of the Task's appearance.

Number of Participants Per Group: One.

Registration Limit: Further entry will be closed once a total of ten groups have registered.

Win Condition: Participants will be ranked based on how many points they can score within a stipulated time period. (The subject matter of the test

will differ depending on the school year of the participant, but the overall difficulty level will be scaled to the same standard.)

Rewards: 1st place – 5 points, 2nd place – 3 points, 3rd place – 1 point. Additionally, all award-winners will be given one day's worth of provisions.

Task:『Shot Put』- Classification: Physical Ability

Participation Deadline: Groups must register within 30 minutes of the Task's appearance.

Number of Participants Per Group: Three. (Groups with four or more members must select at most three to participate.)

Registration Limit: Further entry will be closed once a total of six groups have registered.

Win Condition: Participants will be ranked based on the aggregate distance thrown by all three group members.

Rewards: 1st place – 10 points, 2nd place – 5 points, 3rd place – 3 points. All participants will receive one free prize of their choice.

Task:『Fishing』- Classification: Other

Participation Deadline: Groups must register within two hours of the Task's appearance.

Number of Participants Per Group: Two. (Groups with three or more members must select at most two to participate.)

Registration Limit: Further entry will be closed once a total of eight groups have registered.

Win Condition: The participant who catches the largest fish within one hour will win.

Rewards: 1st place – 15 points.

“Tasks will all be split up into three general categories, with 40% being centered around Academic Ability, 30% around Physical Ability, and 30% Other. The Tasks that fall into this Other category are fairly diverse, with some requiring finer skills and others relying simply on luck alone, so do try to keep that in mind going forward. Of course, it’s also possible for the same Task to show up more than once.”

While I had been curious about what the school would come up with for the second method, I never thought they’d go this far with it.

With this, non-physical skills would also play a large part in the outcome of the exam.

The proportions they set were all perfectly balanced as well, with only 30% of all Tasks classified under Physical Ability.

“School faculty or exam managerial staff will always be on standby at the Task location. If you want to participate, they’ll help finalize your registration with your watch and tablet.”

Whether it be Basic Movement or Tasks, the notion of the exam being tougher for groups with fewer people seemed to apply across the board.

“On your tablets, you’ll be able to see where the Task will be held along with all of the information you can see up here on the screen right now. Also, make sure you don’t forget that any information about a given Task will only disappear from your tablets once the Task has concluded.”

Put simply, there was a chance that a Task might still show up on our tablets even though it was already in progress. Or, in other words, it was possible to go through all the effort of traveling to a Task location, only to find that you were too late and there was no longer any room left for you to participate.

“Starting on the fourth day of the exam, some Tasks will begin to provide a different reward: the ability to increase the maximum size of your group. If your group takes first place, you’ll unlock three additional spots. Second place will then unlock two, and third place will unlock one. For a solo group to increase its size to six, they would have to take both first and second place at least one time each. A three-person group, on the other hand, would only

need to take first place a single time. Once a large group has reached the 6-man size limit, they won't be allowed to register for these Tasks anymore."

While we had heard the term 'large group' used countless times by now, we apparently had to earn the right to form them via Tasks. Even though you wouldn't earn any points or provisions for winning, increasing the number of people in your group was a boon all of its own.

"Should you manage to satisfy the conditions required to increase the maximum size of your group, you just need to initiate a 'Main Link' request with your watch when you want to take in another group. After that, the other group just needs to initiate a 'Pair Link' request with their own watch and bring the two watches into physical contact with each other to begin with the link approval process. It should take about ten seconds, during which you'll still be allowed to cancel."

So this was what Mashima-sensei meant back when he said that any new members would be reassigned to the main group's table.

"All that being said, Tasks that grant permission to increase the size of your group will be limited in number. Chances are that only about 20 to 30% of all groups will end up earning the right to do so. Using these two methods, you will compete for points, the results of which will be reflected in your overall rankings. Oh, and I forgot to mention this, but when two groups link up, their points will be averaged together."

While it would be possible to help out struggling students by bringing them into your group, you would be taking on a proportionate amount of risk in doing so. If a one-person group had 30 points and a five-person group had 120 points, their average after joining up together would be 75 points. The average would always be lower as long as the two groups didn't have the same number of points upon entering into the agreement.

However, since increasing the maximum size of your group would turn into an overwhelming advantage as the exam went forward, a temporarily lower score wouldn't be that big a deal.

Nevertheless, for students who were on their own, this just made it all the more difficult for them to merge with other groups.

With the points you'd be giving up, there didn't seem to be any merit in pulling somebody into your group unless they were an incredibly exceptional student.

Task Overview

- Tasks may appear at any time from 7:00 AM to 5:00 PM. (On the first day of the exam, they'll appear starting at 10:00 AM and on the final day of the exam, they'll stop appearing at 3:00 PM.)
- Tasks are split up into three general categories, and it's possible for the same Task to show up more than once. The category distributions are as follows: 40% Academic Ability, 30% Physical Ability, and 30% Other.
- Task appearance time is unpredictable. In order to find out the current status of a given Task, groups must physically travel to the Task location.
- Depending on the Task, successful top-ranking participants will be awarded points, provisions, or even the ability to increase maximum group size.

In any case, from everything I had heard so far, the uninhabited island exam seemed fairly simple.

It essentially just boiled down to racking up points through the Basic Movement rule and Tasks.

“Next, I’d like to welcome our school’s Acting Director, who has a few words he’d like to share with everyone.”

With that, Mashima-sensei surrendered the microphone to Tsukishiro, who had already come up on stage.

He slowly surveyed the second-years in the audience, his usual faint smile stretched across his face.

“I am Tsukishiro, your Acting Director. This uninhabited island exam is proving to be the most unprecedented, largest-scale special exam yet. So,

while it's only natural that you should think to brace yourselves, I ask that you make sure not to lose sight of what it means to be a student."

As he addressed the crowded theater, his eyes momentarily stopped, locked in my direction for a fraction of a second.

A slight pause that went unnoticed by the rest of the students.

"I have just a few words of caution for you all. As both your guardian and protector, the school strives to ensure your safety and wellbeing to the greatest extent possible. But even so, it simply isn't possible for us to keep tabs on everything that happens while you're on the island. There's a rather... sensitive matter that seems to happen all too often these days due to the differences between boys and girls."

The several school faculty members listening on the sidelines seemed a little shaken by the fact that Tsukishiro had broached such a topic.

"In the event of sexual misconduct, the school will not hesitate to impose severe penalties, including immediate expulsion. Furthermore, if we judge that it was done with malicious intent, we will also report the matter to the police. Please be sure to remember this."

While he didn't state it outright, he was essentially telling us to keep it in our pants.

Expulsion was already a big enough deal on its own, but with police being thrown in on top of that, it should serve as more than enough of a deterrent.

"Oh, and one more thing. As your stay on the island gets longer, tension and bitterness can understandably begin to build up. The shortage of food and water can, at times, lead to altercations between students. When it comes to such disputes— my personal policy is to look the other way, at least to a certain extent."

His words brought forth a strong reaction, not from the students in the audience, but the faculty members around him.

Tsukishiro's policy didn't seem to line up with the school's.

Mashima-sensei drew close and whispered something into Tsukishiro's ear.

If I had to guess, Mashima-sensei was probably telling him not to say something so self-serving.

After listening to everything Mashima had to say, Tsukishiro politely motioned for him to step down.

“Just now, I was told to retract what I said about condoning disputes that arise between students.”

Tsukishiro openly spoke of what Mashima-sensei had just told him.

“However, I won’t be doing that. If I must put forward a reason, it’s because it’s virtually impossible for there to be no friction between students. Trouble is bound to present itself where it must, after all.”

Upon hearing this, Mashima-sensei’s expression turned dark.

“Of course, though I say I condone it, that doesn’t mean I endorse it. I’m simply looking past the occasional dispute. The school will still mercilessly intervene in matters it deems severe enough. With the school’s rules in mind, acts such as looting or using another student’s belongings without express consent will never go unpunished. In some cases, students will face immediate retirement, while in others, expulsion may not be off the table.”

In short, although we were free, he was by no means granting us the freedom to do whatever we wanted.

The Acting Director’s personal warning had probably put the students on-edge all over again.

However, his warning could also be taken as a challenge to me at the same time.

“This is all I have for you. I hope you all conduct yourselves in a manner befitting students of our Advanced Nurturing High School.”

With his brief speech finished, Tsukishiro returned the microphone to Mashima-sensei.

“Thank you very much, Acting Director Tsukishiro. As the final part of today’s briefing, I’d like to take a moment to talk about the food, tools, and other things you’ll need during your time on the island. I’ll start out by

explaining the special type of points you'll need to make purchases while on the island.”

Microphone in hand, Mashima-sensei instructed several staff members to push a huge cart out on stage, filled with all sorts of different goods and provisions.

“Everybody will be given a base of 5000 points. You’re free to use them to buy whatever you’d like from what you see up here. And, students who have a ‘Head Start’ card will receive an additional 2500 points on top of that.”

As he spoke, staff began distributing a thick manual to the audience, starting from the front row.

It seemed to be a catalog detailing the goods available for purchase this time around.

Offering such a large amount of merchandise would call for quite a lot of funding. At a cursory glance, there were products from both major manufacturers and ones I had never heard of before, all seemingly provided to the school under the terms of some sort of sponsorship. As the school was under the direct control of the government, it followed that this exam might double as some form of manufacturer’s test.

“All of the products up for sale are listed in the Uninhabited Island Survival Manual being distributed to you right now. You can discuss amongst your group about what you want to buy, or just decide on your own, the choice is up to you. Purchases can be made from now until 6:00 AM tomorrow, but you can also choose to save some points for later. You’ll be allowed to make additional purchases at a shop located at the port in the starting area. However, making purchases on the island will cost twice as much, so please keep that in mind.”

You could save some points to buy necessities like food or water in the event of an emergency, but double the price was by no means cheap.

“There will be free-to-use toilets and showers back at the starting area and, as of the second day, there will also be a place where we provide potable water. Try to make good use of these resources if you ever happen to be in

the area. However, you won't be allowed to take any water back with you; You'll be required to drink it all on-site."

For most students, it would be reassuring to have a secure place to stop by if the need arose.

"Beyond that, we'll also distribute free amenities, such as toothbrushes, shirts, and underwear. That way, if you ever run out, just go back to the starting area and we'll provide you with as much as you need."

Other essentials, such as portable toilets, bug spray, sunscreen, and feminine hygiene products, would apparently also be distributed.

To start out, I chose to take a closer look at the listed merchandise and prices in the manual they gave us. From tents, fishing poles, and walkie-talkies to basic food and water, the selection of items available to us had grown significantly since last year. And, as expected, there was no shortage of recreational products either, with things like stylish swimsuits, beach balls, and pool rings. Some items even offered a daily rental system, providing students with the opportunity to get their hands on something at an affordable cost, albeit temporarily.

Fun and games aside, with a two-week stay on an uninhabited island, securing a reliable source of both food and water took precedence above all.

This held especially true for drinking water, which cost 100 points for 500ml, 150 points for a liter, and 250 points for two liters. At double the price, it would be extremely expensive to buy later on.

There was also an in-bottle water purifier available. Drinking river water straight from the source would be dangerous, so one would normally need to sterilize it by boiling it first. But instead of going through all that hassle, you could use one of these purifiers to filter out over 99.9% of all E. Coli, Echinococcus, and other such bacteria and microbes present in the water, making it completely safe to drink. The price, however, was 4000 points; So high that a solo student couldn't dream of affording one. For a group of three, a single purifier could filter about 150 liters of water, so just one would be more than enough. Of course, no matter how well it's filtered, many students would probably still hold reservations about drinking river water, and there was no proof that it was completely risk-free either. Furthermore, if by any

chance it were to break or get lost, it would be nothing more than a waste of points.

As for the bags and backpacks needed to carry equipment while on the island, there were options ranging from as small as 20 liters to as large as 80, and from the look of it, the size had no effect on the cost. While the larger ones would be more convenient since they could carry more, the corresponding weight would be that much heavier, so you'd need to choose carefully. Plus, if you went with a bag that didn't fit your body type, it would add on an extra layer of physical strain.

Meats, fish, and other perishables were also available for purchase, but they came at high prices and would be difficult to preserve for longer periods of time. Even if you used a cooler with some ice in it, you'd probably only be able to extend the shelf life by about a day. As a result, it seemed like canned goods were the way to go.

In that regard, there was a wide selection, ranging from staples like yakitori and luncheon meats to other items like gomoku vegetables, kinpira gobo, corn, and pork miso soup. They were all a fair bit cheaper than the more portable alternatives as well. However, since it would also take some time to eat, portable options would probably be better for those who wanted to cover ground more quickly.

A single person tent cost 1000 points, a two-to-three person tent cost 1500, and the one for six people, the largest option available, cost 2500. Altogether, this meant that the more people you had, the more cost-effective your options would be. That being said, buying a large tent right from the start would entail plenty of risks. It wasn't set in stone that you'd get to link up with another group, and the weight of having to carry the larger tent around with you wasn't something to make light of either.

Plus, it was strictly prohibited for boys and girls to sleep in the same tent.

In other words, even if you had a six-person tent, there was no getting around the fact that you'd have to split up the two sexes somehow.

Mashima-sensei spoke up once again, providing further insight as the students perused their manuals.

“When it comes to whether or not a group can share some of their food or provisions with others, the decision is left entirely up to you. The school is fine with you doing whatever you want with what you have while on the island.”

It sounded like we were being given permission to share food with groups in need. While there was no need to help those from other grades, you might as well lend a hand to those from your own when you can. This held especially true for your own classmates, in which case it would definitely be worthwhile to help out if possible. Though, there was no guarantee that we’d be provided with anywhere near enough food to go around sharing it as we pleased.

“Later, you’ll all be given a special tablet along with your watch. Your tablet will be an essential tool for monitoring basic information, so be sure to charge it whenever you’re at the starting area or one of the Task locations. Now, I’ll provide you with an overview of what your tablets can do.”

Tablet Overview

- A small tablet will be issued to every student.
- Provides a digital map of the island, allowing real-time verification of any active designated area and the user’s current location.
- Provides information about nearby Task locations, prospective rewards, and so on.
- Allows confirmation of the current standings of the top and bottom groups. This will become available starting on the fourth day of the exam and last until the end of the twelfth day. (Users will only be shown a point breakdown of the top ten groups, bottom ten groups, and their own group.)
- The GPS searching feature will be unlocked from the sixth day onward, allowing the user to find the physical location of any student on the island. (However, each search will cost the user 1 point.)
- Displays any notification messages from the school in the event that an exam-wide issue has taken place.

- Should the tablet's battery run out, it can be charged at the starting area or one of many designated charging locations. (Total battery life is estimated at around eight hours of continuous application use.)

While it was nice that you didn't have to worry about charging the tablet, the battery level would still drop even if you weren't actively using it. As such, it'd probably just be safer to buy a portable charger. Losing the ability to check your whereabouts due to a dead battery would be fatal. Besides, even though you could charge it at one of the various charging locations, you'd be giving up on any potential opportunities elsewhere while you waited for it to charge.

Next was the part allowing us to confirm the standings of the top and bottom groups. This seemed like an extremely helpful feature for keeping tabs on how the top groups were faring and finding out who was falling behind, but... You'd probably be better off not getting too attached to it.

The fact that it wouldn't be available for the first three days and the last two days should always be kept in mind.

On top of all that, we were apparently also being given the ability to search for anybody's exact location from the sixth day onward. Chances were that it would be used primarily as a means to help groups merge up with each other or help locate the occasional lost group member. That said, the cost that came along with it meant that it couldn't be used any more than necessary.

"In order to let you see how much you can fit in the different backpacks and check out some of the other products, we've prepared a hands-on demonstration in the other room. Feel free to come up front and take a look as well. The exhibition will be open until the date changes over at midnight tonight."

With that, the briefing session seemed to be over, with Mashima-sensei finally turning off the microphone.

The students began to gather up near the front, eager to get a closer look at some of the products displayed on stage.

I sat and watched as this happened, wondering what exactly I should be doing. On one hand, I wanted to go take a look at the products myself, but on the other, I didn't have the courage to squeeze myself into the crowd.

Ibuki seemed to be going through the same dilemma, as she was idly staring at the front of the theater.

Having somehow noticed that I was checking up on her, she turned to face me with a glare in her eyes.

“What.”

“How do I put it? I was just thinking that our personalities can be troublesome sometimes. It's difficult for us to mix in with that crowd.”

“Hah? I ain't like you. I could do it if I wanted.”

She seemed displeased about being lumped in together with me.

With newfound determination, Ibuki stood up and left, pushing her way into the crowd of students. From the next seat over, Kitō didn't seem to pay this any mind, as he just sat quietly while flipping through the manual.

For Kitō, a solitary combatant just like Ibuki and me, selecting the right provisions would be crucial.

I could remember being impressed by the way he held his own against Sudō on the court during last year's end-of-term exam. He had played an excellent match, especially so considering his opponent was someone who spent his time training in the basketball club every day. That alone helped highlight the extent of his physical, athletic prowess.

He was not someone to be taken lightly, regardless of whether or not he planned on linking up with another group later on.

“Graaaaaagh!”

A loud wailing grunt could be heard coming from up at the front of the theater. The culprit was none other than Class 2-B's Ishizaki. He was struggling to stand up straight with one of the largest-sized backpacks strapped to his back.

“What in the world is he doing?”

I overheard one of the students seated nearby as they asked one of their friends about it.

“Seems like he’s trying to carry a whole lot of water in that backpack or somethin’.”

He had apparently come up with some sort of strategy to carry a lot of water at once, but, well, water is heavy. Drinking water was an undoubtedly valuable resource, but it just wasn’t a good idea to try and carry so much with you at once. While we wouldn’t be climbing mountains or anything, weight was still a definite enemy here. It was important to try and travel as light as possible so as not to overload yourself by even a single gram.

In other words, water, an indispensable necessity, was something we’d need to restock constantly. We had no choice but to make use of rainwater, seawater, or whatever other water sources we could find on-site, or earn it as a reward for completing a Task.

Alternatively, with a sufficiently well-organized group, another option could be to designate someone to haul the team’s water. It would be a fairly solid strategy if your group planned on staying in one place for an extended period of time. Ultimately, the things you would need would change depending on how you planned to tackle the exam.

There was simply no clear-cut answer here.

I took a moment to mentally break down the rules of the special exam and reorganize the key points from scratch.

For the next two weeks, we’d be living on an uninhabited island and competing with the rest of the school to earn points and determine our rankings. It was important to note that, no matter how many points a group piled up, they’d be immediately disqualified if every member retires. The ten highest and lowest-ranked groups would be revealed on the fourth day of the exam. And finally, starting on the sixth day, you could spend one point to find out the current location of any student on the island.

It was time to come to a decision and pick out what I’d be bringing along with me.

Uninhabited Island Exam (Second-Year)

Exam Overview

- Survive for up to 2 weeks on an uninhabited island.
- Because of the variety of skills needed, groups with higher overall ability will have an advantage, but the value of cooperation and cohesion mustn't be ignored.

Rewards

1st Place Group

300 Class Points, 1,000,000 Private Points, 1 Protection Point

2nd Place Group

200 Class Points, 500,000 Private Points

3rd Place Group

100 Class Points, 250,000 Private Points

Top 50% of Groups (1st-3rd Place Included)

50,000 Private Points

Top 70% of Groups (1st-3rd Place Included)

25,000 Private Points

* The class points earned by the top three groups will be transferred from the classes of the bottom three groups. Class points will be evenly distributed to each class present in the group, regardless of group composition (Rounded Up).

Penalties

Students in the five lowest-ranked groups will be subject to expulsion. Should a student receive this penalty, it can be waived by paying a lump sum of 6 million private points.

- The 6 million point bail will be divided evenly amongst all members of the group.
- Students will not be allowed to transfer private points after the exam has begun, so they must make sure that they have the necessary points on hand before embarkation.

Distributed Cards

Basic Card Summary

Head Start	Provides the cardholder with 50% more points for provisions and supplies at the start of the exam.
Stimulus	Doubles the private points earned by the cardholder throughout the exam.
Half Off	Upon receiving a penalty, reduces the private points to be paid by half. Only applicable to the cardholder.
Free Ride	Allows the cardholder to designate a group at the start of the exam. The cardholder earns half of the private points earned by the group as a bonus. Joining the aforementioned group nullifies the effect of the card.
Insurance	Grants the cardholder a one-day reprieve to recover in the event of disqualification due to ill health. Disqualification due to dishonest means invalidates the effect of the card.

Special Card Summary

More People	Allows the cardholder to become the 7th member of a group, irrespective of the ratio of boys and girls already present in the group. Only to be used after the start of the exam.
Nullify	Reduces the private points to be paid upon receiving a penalty to zero. Only applicable to the cardholder.
Trial	Grants the cardholder the right to increase class points provided as a reward from the exam by 50%. However, should the cardholder's group not place within the top 30% of groups, the group will be subject to a penalty. The additional class points will be provided by the school.

Chapter 2:

The Curtain Rises on the Uninhabited Island Exam

8:40 AM. The cruise ship slowly pulled up to the dock.

That is, the uninhabited island special exam was finally about to begin.

There would be a grand total of 157 different groups participating, with sizes ranging anywhere from one to four members.

As a breakdown, there were 36 first-year exclusive four-person groups, 81 three-person groups, 32 two-person groups, and 8 solo groups. And in the end, five of them would be gone.

Tensions began to rise as my classmates gathered together, and once everyone was present, we all headed off to the ship's gangway. Since we weren't instructed to form an orderly line or anything, the school seemed to be tacitly allowing us to chat amongst ourselves as we awaited further instruction. That is, as long as we stayed together as a class.

The starting area for all groups was area D9. Since there wouldn't be any randomly designated areas on the first and last day, the next area would be within two cells laterally or one cell diagonally from here for a total of 12 potential options.

However, the area two cells to the south, theoretical D11, didn't exist, so truth be told, there were really only 11 options.

This first day could be thought of as an opportunity to familiarize ourselves with a new environment when we didn't even know our left from right yet.

After a brief announcement, we waited for our turn to disembark the ship, bags and backpacks in hand after receiving them not too long ago.

For my provisions, I ended up choosing a tent, two liters of water, three 500ml water bottles, 12 portable meals, a flashlight, a portable battery charger, a pot, a lighter, and a set of paper cups, for a cumulative total of 4960 points. Altogether, there was still plenty of free space left in my

backpack, even after adding in all of the free essentials. So, even if I won additional provisions later on by clearing Tasks, I wouldn't have to worry about not having the space to carry them around.

According to the announcement, we would be disembarking in the same order as yesterday's briefing sessions, with the first-year students getting off before the rest of us.

It seemed like the first-years would finish getting off the ship by around 9:00 AM, the time when the first designated area was to be announced.

It made sense to think that this had been arranged to give the first-years a slight advantage.

On the other hand, it put the second and third-year students at a disadvantage, albeit only once.

Furthermore, since Class A was also the first to disembark, Class D would be put at an even greater disadvantage.

The total difference would only be an initial 15 to 30 minutes or so, but factoring in our limited travel time, it would still be a fairly sizable setback.

“Good morning. Did you sleep well yesterday?”

As I waited, I was approached from behind by Horikita, who was carrying a backpack of her own.

“Well, more or less. How about you? Are you feeling sick at all?”

“I see you’re still patronizing me about what happened last year.”

“I’m not patronizing you. Just messing with you is all.”

She looked at me with an expression of annoyance, wordlessly telling me that there wasn’t any difference.

“You’re awfully chipper even though such a serious special exam is about to start.”

“There’s no use getting worked up at this point. It’d just be a waste of energy. For that matter, have you heard about the third-year boy who got sick?”

“Yes, I have. I’m just glad that it didn’t happen to one of our classmates.”

If you fell sick before the start of the exam, you'd be forced to retire without even getting to step foot on the island. In this case, the retired third-year would have to stay in the doctor's office or sickbay until his health improved. And even after recovery, he would be stuck on the ship, unable to do anything but pray for his group to pull through. Fortunately, he had been part of a group of three, so the fact that he had avoided getting kicked out of the school altogether on the very first day was a silver lining to an otherwise terrible mess. Although, for the students of the other school years, having one of the bottom slots get filled sooner rather than later was probably exactly what they'd want.

By now, the first-years were almost finished and it would soon be the second-years' turn to get off the ship. The clock struck 9:00 AM and with it, my watch sounded off the first alert of the exam.

As if in unison, practically every student pulled out their tablet and began to check the details, myself included. After all, if we did so once we were off the ship, we'd lose out on time.

The first area I would be heading to was... D7. Just two cells north of the starting area.

I inclined my tablet's screen in Horikita's direction, prompting her to tell me her own designated area.

"Mine is F9. Looks like the two of us have different Tables."

"Seems like it."

Since we all started from the same place, it was possible that both our areas might overlap somewhat even if we didn't have the same Table, but it looked like Horikita and I would be going in two completely different directions.

There were a total of 12 Tables. If the resulting 12 designated areas were all guaranteed to be different during every interval, you would essentially be competing against the same 13 or so groups the entire exam. In reality, however, it would be safe to expect designated areas to overlap between Tables fairly often.

In any case, even if you weren't setting your sights on the top three groups, it would still be important to begin piling up points, one point at a time.

Furthermore, it'd be best to try and avoid getting caught off guard by any randomly designated areas that might pop up all of a sudden.

"I won't worry about you anymore, then. At least try to manage a decently high ranking."

"As much as I'd love to do that, it'd be pretty funny if I were the only one in the class to get expelled from all this."

I responded as I put my tablet back into my backpack.

"That... would be troublesome."

For her to say that she would be troubled without me was a bit shocking.

"I lent you some points just the other day. I'd be mad if I didn't get any back."

"...That's what you're worried about?"

She made a show out of tilting her head to the side in confusion, as if to ask what other reason there possibly could have been for her to worry.

"I know you have that contract with Kushida-san, so I can't blame you for being troubled for money, but man up and do something about it."

"That almost hurts to hear."

If I ran into a sudden, urgent expense, I might not be able to come up with the money in time. I hadn't even been able to raise the funds to protect Kei from expulsion without help.

"You better not push yourself too hard, Horikita. A solitary girl like you has a tough fight ahead of her. You should look to join up with another group or find yourself an opportunity to bring someone into yours as soon as possible."

"Thanks for your most exceptional advice then."

She sounded a bit suspicious, but it didn't seem like she was that worried.

Horikita was leagues ahead of where she was a year ago; As she was now, she should be more than capable of identifying her own limitations.

“Speaking of which, the conditions for merging groups certainly seem strict, so we’ll need to pay attention to that.”

“The point averaging, huh.”

The longer it took to merge with another group, the more problematic it would become to average the points together.

However, if you managed to max out your group size early on, you’d reap the benefits all the way until the very end of the exam. Earning six points just for reaching a single designated area would be huge, and you could even get seven if your group had the ‘More People’ card. Compare this to a solo group who would have to toil over every single point, and the difference was clear as day.

From the moment they were off the ship, the first-year students quickly set off without the slightest hesitation. And since there weren’t any Tasks yet, the second and third-year students would most likely do the same, choosing to head toward their first designated area once they were finally off the ship.

When I finally stepped foot in the harbor, I decided to stand back and take a look at the general flow of things instead of rushing off to my destination.

I needed to make sure to set aside about an hour and a half for traveling, but there shouldn’t be any problem with waiting around for about 30 minutes as long as I kept track of time. If you didn’t have your sights set on getting the Early Bird Bonus, there was no difference in how many points you’d earn for arriving after an hour or so.

“There don’t seem to be any second-year groups in a hurry or anything. Well, it’s not a very good idea to compete for this first designated area anyway. Even if they rushed to try and catch up, they’d still be over 10 minutes behind the first-years in the lead. Closing a gap like that would use up a lot of stamina, don’t you think?”

Having come off the ship herself, Horikita approached me yet again.

“Given the disadvantage, it’s only natural that people would want to take it slow at first.”

As they disembarked right after Class 1-D, students from Class 2-A might have a slight chance of catching up in time, but it didn't seem like they were going out of their way to do that.

"Anyway, it's really hot, isn't it...? I'm glad I thought ahead to get a hat. Are you fine without one?"

"I don't have enough points left to buy one. I'll figure something out."

While Horikita and I were chatting, a young man gallantly strode past us. From the brief look I managed to get of his smiling face, he gave off the impression that he would be enjoying these two grueling weeks to the utmost extent possible.

"Kōenji... Do you really think that guy will take this special exam seriously?"

"Who knows... While he's agreed to my bet, there's no telling what he'll do."

"It's a coin flip. That is, whether he'll really take action or not."

Kōenji had promised Horikita that, if he didn't take first place in this special exam, he would cooperate during the next. But, this promise wasn't really held up by anything. There was no compelling force, no binding agreement put in place, so if he didn't want to keep his word, that would be it.

However, Horikita was gradually becoming more and more recognized as the leader of our class, so if Kōenji chose to betray her trust, he could rest assured that none of our classmates would lift a finger to help him when faced with a difficult exam in the future.

An outcome like that wouldn't be very desirable, even for somebody like Kōenji...

I was personally looking forward to witnessing Kōenji's performance during this special exam.

"Let's friggin' goooo! I've got my sights set on numbah one, baby!"

Not too far from us, a lone male student broke into a full-on sprint straight toward the sandy beach: Class 2-B's Ishizaki. He was shouting loudly, but

Nishino, his group member, was just trailing behind him, not really making any effort to run and chase after him like he wanted. And then there was Tsube, who was watching the two of them from the rear with an awkward smile on her face.

“Oi, hurry up Nishino! You too Tsube!”

“It’s super hot so don’t go askin’ for the impossible! I mean, like, we can’t even catch up to the first-years anymore. Sheesh.”

“Well, uhm, at least it’s good that Ishizaki-kun is motivated, yeah?”

Tsube looked at Nishino with a somewhat exasperated expression as she tried to smooth things out between the two of them.

I had heard that Nishino was fairly isolated from the rest of her class, but it seemed like Tsube was making an active effort to try and get close to her.

“If we give up, then it’s all over! The first-years might get careless and slip up, you never know!”

“You seriously wanna go after ‘em? Forget that. It’s like, such a total waste of energy.”

“Woah woah, c’mon, don’t be like that!”

Both Nishino and Tsube stood in stark contrast to Ishizaki, who was practically bursting with energy.

“How ‘bout you just go ahead without us then?”

“We won’t get the Early Bird Bonus if we do that though! Besides... it’d suck if we got split up or somethin’.”

Right now, the only thing you could check on your tablet was your own current location. Even amongst members of the same group, it would only be possible to find out where somebody else was once the GPS searching feature unlocked on the sixth day.

If you got separated from your group before then, you’d have a hard time meeting up with them again.

Seemingly unaware that I had been watching the whole exchange, Ishizaki reluctantly gave in and went back to Nishino and Tsube to match their pace.

I could understand his impatience, but there was no need to be in such a hurry straight from the get-go.

“Found you!”

All of a sudden, a firm, almost angry, voice called out to us.

The owner of said voice approached us, fiercely glaring at Horikita.

“What do you want?”

“Want? I don’t ‘want’ anything. Just makin’ sure you know I’m never gonna lose to you...!”

Having apparently approached Horikita just to say that, Ibuki turned on her heel and set off to the north all by herself.

“Good grief... I wonder if she properly understands just how difficult this exam is?”

“She seemed quite motivated. It must be nice to have a rival.”

At my light teasing, Horikita forced out a deep sigh.

“I don’t see myself as her rival at all though? Well whatever, she’s going north and I’ll be going east, so it seems we’ve got different Tables too. There’s that at least.”

After all, if they had the same Table, they might bump into each other every now and again.

One of the few benefits of being alone had to do with the designated area’s Early Bird Bonus. Since you didn’t have to rely on anyone else, the only thing limiting your potential was your own two feet.

“Well, it’s about time for me to get going.”

With that, Horikita made sure her hat was snug on her head and set off to the east. Though, not long after she started walking, she stopped and looked back in my direction for some reason. Just as I thought there might be something she had forgotten to mention, she looked away and set off once again.

After watching a fair number of students head out, I realized that I hadn’t seen any third-year students pass by yet even though they should’ve started

getting off the ship already. As such, I decided to turn around and check on what was happening.

As I did so, I saw a fair number of third-year students walking in my direction. Even from a distance, I could tell that every single one of them was calm and composed, significantly more so than the first and second-years had been.

From the numbers, it seemed like students from Class 3-B had just about finished disembarking, so I took a moment to try and catch a glimpse of Nagumo. However, I couldn't find him anywhere.

As I continued to look for him, the third-year students who were walking toward me eventually caught up and began to pass by.

“You’re still here, Ayanokōji?”

Hearing someone address me, I gave up on my search and returned my attention to the third-years nearby.

“Good morning, Kiryūin-senpai. Is there anything strange about that? I’d imagine that many groups would choose to refine their strategies here at the starting area.”

“But you’re alone, right? You should be fine to think it over while you walk.”

She expressed her doubts about my decision to stay at the starting area.

While I already knew she wasn’t an ordinary person, she really had a keen eye for detail.

“If there’s something you wanna know, I can help explain it to you.”

“Thanks, but it’s fine. After all, you’re a third-year student, Kiryūin-senpai. A direct competitor to second-year students such as myself.”

Upon politely declining her offer, she didn’t say anything more on the matter, simply choosing to meet my gaze with her own instead.

“There’s something... enchanting about seeing the entire student body scatter throughout the uninhabited island. Though there are more than 400 of us, we’re nothing but insignificant specks of dust in comparison.”

Kiryūin spoke casually, watching as the various groups of students began to disperse throughout the island.

Despite being a third-year student, she was also among those who chose to tackle the exam alone.

While this exam wasn't exactly going to be a walk in the park, she didn't seem even the slightest bit anxious or restless about it.

In fact, she seemed to give off the faint impression that she was looking forward to it.

"By the way, what's your first designated area?"

"D7."

"Hoh? Sounds like we've got the same destination then. At least for this first one."

Kiryūin looked at me happily, letting show a white, toothy smile.

"Please don't be too hard on me, then."

"Right back at you. Well, I'm gonna head out. You wanna come along?"

"No, but thanks for the offer. I doubt I'd be able to keep up with you, Senpai."

"I guess we'll find out if that's true or not soon enough."

Leaving me with that, Kiryūin walked off toward the sandy beach all by herself.

I continued to linger around the area for a little bit longer, but ultimately never caught sight of Nagumo.

And just like that, a few minutes after Kiryūin left, I set off as well.

For the time being, I'd leisurely make my way to my first designated area.

One of the most important parts of this exam was making sure not to miss out on the easy points that came with reaching the designated areas. You could earn 5 to 10 points all at once if you succeeded at Tasks or got your hands on an Early Bird Bonus, but that would require a good mix of physical ability, academic ability, and luck when facing competitors. Therefore, I felt

pretty confident that the true core of all of this came down to stockpiling points, one point at a time.

So with that in mind, I once again pulled out my tablet and opened up the map.

As a whole, the map was divided up into 100 different areas, with each area running 500 meters vertically and 700 meters horizontally.

For my first move, I needed to go from area D9 to the edge of D7. Since I was already near the center of D9, I needed to walk about 750 meters in a straight line.

At a standard pace of about 80 meters per minute, it'd be very easy to cover. At that rate, without taking any external factors into account, I should be able to reach the designated area in around nine minutes. But, as one would imagine, there was a fair chance that the path ahead would neither be flat nor straight. Faced with such a thick forest, I could run into steep slopes or cliffs that make it impossible to proceed. And as a result, the journey as a whole would probably take several times longer than usual. The highest point of the island was about 300 meters above sea level, so a decent amount of uphill travel was to be expected. Furthermore, as time went on, the weight of your backpack and gradual wear and tear on your stamina would get in the way of your ability to keep moving forward.

So, even if everything went smoothly, it was probably better for me to expect this to take about three times as long, or around 30 minutes. And if the path ahead was particularly treacherous, it could easily take over an hour.

With the exception of the first and last day, there would be four designated area shifts per day. As such, there was a decent chance that I might end up taking the same path several times over the course of the exam. It'd probably serve me well to keep my past movements in mind, along with how long it had taken me to move from place to place.



2.1

Before long, the flat, even ground gave way to a dense thicket of trees.

And just like that, I reminisced about the island from last year's exam as I entered the forest.

I hadn't really noticed it last year because I had been moving together with my classmates, but it wasn't exactly easy to make it through the forest like this. Unsurprisingly, it was difficult to keep moving in a straight line, and getting a proper foothold on the forest floor was much more challenging than expected. The presence of such a huge harbor seemed to indicate that the

island hadn't always been uninhabited, but even so, that very well could've been something of the distant past.

From time to time, I would spot gigantic webs stretched between the trees, presumably spun by spiders several centimeters in size. Students who were afraid of insects would definitely have a hellish journey awaiting them. It reminded me of the wildlife advisory notice that had been included in our manuals.

It was impossible to go to your destination by traveling in a simple straight line, but on the other hand, taking a detour would cause you to lose all sense of direction, no questions asked. If you didn't have some sort of tool to help you find your way, it'd be difficult to reach your designated area. The only reason the trip wasn't already down-right impossible was due to the tablet I was holding right now.

While on the island, being able to confirm your own location at any time would be an indispensable asset.

As long as you moved with your GPS in hand, the path ahead would always be open to you.

Although, even without the tablet, the probability of getting lost during this first interval was quite low.

I could see several groups in front of me fumbling about as they made the trek forward.

And since I could also hear voices talking behind me, it seemed reasonable to think that essentially everyone nearby was taking the same route to this first destination. So as long as you followed after the students in the lead, the risks of injury or running into a swarm of insects or something would go down accordingly.

Few groups would have the courage to recklessly plunge their way into an unexplored forest right off the bat.

Those who had given up on the first area's Early Bird Bonus were simply moving along as though they were in the middle of a field trip.

After a while, I caught sight of Haruka, Airi, and Akito, who had stopped to look at their tablets together. From the look of it, they were talking

amongst themselves as they confirmed their surroundings.

As I began to draw closer, I could hear them exchange views with each other about their next designated area.

“You guys talking about what to do next?”

I called out to insert myself into their conversation, to which the three of them nodded their heads all at once.

“Our first area was D8, so like, we’re done already, yeah?”

The edge of area D8 came not too long after stepping foot into the forest, so it seems they had already managed to earn their points earlier. I didn’t really feel the need to ask about how many they had earned, since it was nearly guaranteed to be only the three-point Arrival Bonus.

“It’s pretty hot, and there isn’t any shade out on the beach, so we came here to speculate about the next area.”

As a whole, you’d certainly be better off trying to account for where the next designated area might appear at.

“What area do you have, Kiyotaka?”

“D7; One cell north from here.”

“That so? A buncha students have already gone up ahead, but, well, one point is one point I guess.”

“If we had the same Table, we could have traveled together...”

Airi muttered to herself quietly, seemingly disappointed.

Even though we were split up into different groups, this exam still had a surprising variety of ways for students to work with each other.

There were even several rules that facilitated this, such as the ability to share food or lend and borrow equipment to each other. Plus, if two groups had the same Table, they’d essentially have the same destination, so it would definitely be easy for them to stick together.

Of course, there were downsides to this as well. The more groups there were working together, the more difficult it’d be for them to keep pace with one another. Furthermore, each group would have their own opinions and

goals, inevitably leading to increased competition for Task participation. This could easily become a major source of conflict if the groups didn't come up with some sort of contingency plan in case there was only one more space left for a Task.

In this particular case, you could say that it was fortunate that we didn't have the same Table. It was absolutely critical that I avoid working together with people that might hold me back, so this had effectively spared me the trouble of having to turn them down.

"There are twelve Tables, so the odds weren't great from the start. In any case, for now I think I should get to my designated area sooner rather than later."

"Yeah. We've gotta get moving to our next area sometime soon anyway, so go ahead."

"It kinda sucks though. I hope we can meet up again somewhere when we've all got more time to spare."

Haruka bid me farewell with Airi waving goodbye from behind her. And with that, I turned my back to the three of them and continued my journey to area D7.

After about 30 more minutes of walking, I finally arrived at my first designated area, causing my watch to sound off a few times.

I took a look at the notification on the watch, which said that I had been given an Arrival Bonus of one point.

I also noticed that I was given the option to adjust the notification volume, but I chose to leave it as-is for now. Just to make sure everything was working properly, I took out my tablet and found a matching record for the bonus in the point transaction history.

Since each area didn't seem all that big when viewed on the map, it almost felt like you'd always find yourself running into other students. But once you were actually out on the island, it gave off a completely different impression.

Even if there really were students scattered around you, it'd be difficult to catch sight of them because of all the trees.

Although I couldn't see anyone around right now, I felt fairly certain that a good number of students were in the area somewhere.

In which case, they had probably gone in deeper, opting to move closer to the area's center to make it easier to head out to the next designated area and gather information.

I searched for a clearing in the forest with this assumption in mind, and before long, my field of vision suddenly opened up.

Sure enough, a large number of students had gathered together in the same place. The race to the next designated area would be a competition between students of all school years, so it's understandable that they'd look to raise their chances of winning, even if only slightly. Furthermore, the only way to find out who had the same Table as you was to come and take a look first-hand.

By going through this process a few times, you could get a rough idea of who your direct rivals were.

I took a quick headcount, for a total of 29 people present, myself included. As far as I could tell, it felt safe to assume that there were more students elsewhere in the area.

“Good morning to you, Ayanokōji-senpai.”

As I took note of the names and faces of everyone present, a female student noticed my presence and approached with a greeting: Nanase Tsubasa of Class 1-D. Her fellow group members, Amasawa and Hōsen, were nowhere to be seen, prompting me to wonder if they were out exploring nearby or had come up with a strategy of some sort and left the area already.

“What happened to the other two? Aren't groups supposed to stick together for the most part? Seems better to do it that way to me at least. Especially at first.”

I put forward a question, interested in seeing how she would respond.

“They said they'd scout out the area and then we all split up. So I decided to come check how many other groups were here.”

Apparently, she had chosen to do the same thing that I had.

Since I had arrived late, she probably had a better grasp of the competition than I did.

There were still many things I didn't know about Nanase. For the time being, I felt pretty confident that nothing good would come out of lingering around here any more than necessary.

"I think I'm going to leave. It can't hurt to take a look around."

"Indeed! You're all alone, so please be careful Senpai. Goodbye, then."

She readily set me loose and walked over to where a cluster of first-year students had gathered.

With my brief exchange with Nanase finished, I left. After walking for a bit, I found a place to sit, set down my backpack, and took out my tablet. I wanted to avoid wasting energy if at all possible.

In total, it had taken me about 50 minutes to reach the designated area. Since there was a break, the next area would be announced in slightly over 3 hours. Tasks, on the other hand, would start showing up very soon.

I patiently watched the clock; Waiting until it was finally 10:00 AM.

And then, I promptly began to comb through the locations, details, and rewards of the various Tasks that popped up on the map.

I'd have to decide between waiting for the next designated area and trying to go for a Task based on what I found.

To start out, there were a total of 14 different Tasks. One of which had appeared in the upper left corner of area D7, the area I was currently in. This was by far the closest. I could see several of the students within my field of vision immediately head off toward the northwest, probably intending to check out the details of the Task as they walked.

The Task in question was called 'Fire Starter'. 5 points would be awarded to the first group that managed to start a fire using a specially-provided tool. There was no reward for second place or below.

Another Task, albeit slightly farther away, had appeared in the central part of area E7 called 'English Test'. It had a participation limit of two people per

group, with first-place receiving 5 points, second place 3 points, and third place 1 point.

More students seemed to be headed that way than for the Fire Starter Task.

Starting a fire wasn't going to be easy, especially for anyone who hadn't actually done so before. Rather than trying to tackle it, it made far more sense to try their hand at English that they were already familiar with.

There was also a 'Geography Test' task in area D8, but only one group went in that direction.

The reason that there was such a difference between this Task and the English Test could be primarily attributed to the area in which it had appeared.

Area D8 had a large number of students with another Table. And even though it was only one cell to the south, it would still take time to get there. You'd hardly have a chance of beating the students who were already close by.

While there was a 60-minute registration deadline, it would probably hit max capacity long before that.

Heading toward the Task at area C6 was yet another option, albeit the furthest away of those I had considered so far.

It was called 'Grip Strength Measurement', and seemed to be split up based on gender. Furthermore, it had a longer registration deadline of 120 minutes.

It seemed like a perfectly reasonable option, but I had to keep in mind that those who weren't able to register for the Fire Starter Task would probably choose to head over to it instead. Plus, if the next designated area appeared off to the east, I'd have to travel a considerable distance from C6 to get there.

Speaking of distance, the furthest of the 14 Tasks was all the way in area G3, a Task called 'Trivia Test'. It was a high-value Task that one person from each group could participate in, where first place would be awarded with 10 points. Even though the registration deadline was 180 minutes, there was still a chance that you'd run out of time before you could get there. And, if you

went to G3, there was a high probability that you'd have to give up on reaching your next designated area, so you couldn't make the journey without giving it a lot of thought first.

However, if everything went smoothly, you could effortlessly earn 10 points with this Task alone.

“What an interesting exam.”

In a sense, we were free to choose whatever option we wanted.

There were a full three hours until the next designated area would be announced. I got up from where I was sitting, having ultimately decided to head for the Grip Strength Measurement Task in area C6. The students who had gone to see if they could participate in the Fire Starter Task would inevitably waste a little time, so this was my chance to steal a march on them.

As I walked, I began to carefully look over each of the Tasks I didn't plan on participating in, all for the sake of memorizing everything about the different locations and types of Tasks that might appear.



2.2

“Yoo~hoo~ Ayanokōji-kun!”

I arrived at the C6 Task site after about 40 minutes of walking, only to find Class 2-C's homeroom teacher, Hoshinomiya-sensei, lying in wait inside a tent in an attempt to escape the scorching heat of the sun.

Furthermore, nearly 20 students from all three school years could be seen in the surrounding area.

“You came all the way here, but unfortunately, registration closed up about five minutes ago.”

Other than Hoshinomiya-sensei, there was a second adult who I had never seen before in the process of explaining the Task to the gathered students.

“So it seems.”

With that being the case, there was no point in me staying here any longer. I tried to leave, not really wanting to be around Hoshinomiya-sensei any more than necessary, but she grabbed me by the arm just as I turned to go.

“Oh don’t be in such a hurry! Feel free to sit back and watch for a while~.”

“Don’t you think it’s wrong for a teacher to encroach on a student’s time just for their own convenience?”

“Awh, c’mon~ Don’t exaggerate! You’ll have oodles of time after this~.”

As a teacher, she should be fully aware of the true nature of this exam, where a split-second judgment could very well mean the difference between a win and a loss, but... she still didn’t seem to have any intention of letting me go.

“My last designated area was D7, so it’s more than possible that my next will be here in area C6. If that happens, will you take responsibility for causing me to lose out on the Early Bird Bonus?”

At that, Hoshinomiya-sensei hurriedly let go of my arm and took a few paces back to distance herself.

“C-cruel! Don’t be like that Ayanokōji-kun, teasing is a no-no~ I just wanted to chat a lil’ bit, that’s all. It’s like, I’ve been feelin’ pretty grumpy recently, so how ‘bout you sit back and hear me out?”

While she had let go of my arm, it didn’t seem like she wanted our conversation to end yet.

I reluctantly decided to keep her company and listen to her, at least for a little while.

“It’s been since the end-of-term exam, yeah? Since we’ve talked one-on-one like this, that is.”

“That’s true.”

Given that she had witnessed me competing firsthand back then, along with my recent perfect score in mathematics, it wasn't difficult to imagine that she was now more wary of me than ever before.

"Anywho, you've been attracting a lotta attention recently, you know? I didn't think you were the type that liked standing out."

"I don't."

"Then why'd you get that perfect score in math? I mean like, I think it's pretty weird that you just went and got 'em all right. There was even a problem that I wouldn't have been able to get."

From the perspective of someone who potentially saw herself as Chabashira's rival, it made sense that she didn't really like the way things had played out, but for some reason, it felt as though she was taking all of that out on me.

"Are you sure? I think there are plenty of students capable of solving that sort of problem, though."

"Are there? Hmm... Are you like, guessing? Even if I assume you're right here, I'd expect them to be like, Class A or B students at least. And what class are you in again, Ayanokōji-kun? A... B... C... Oh that's right, Class D. Just say it out loud with me, 'Class D'. This might sound rude or something, but the first thing that comes to mind for me when I say it is a laughable place chock full of problem children, filled to the brim with nothing but defects. And yet you wanna tell me that there are kids with outrageous specs like you mixed in with all that?"

"While I don't know about me, I think there are plenty of outstanding students in Class 2-D. Moreover, if you take a look at Class 1-D, there are plenty of outstanding students there too, don't you think?"

I wasn't particularly informed about the third-year students, so I didn't say anything about them, just to be safe.

"Uh... That's true and all, but like... the school's policies have changed a bit since last year, yeah?"

Even though she asked me this, there was no way that I'd know the answer to that.

In the midst of our pointless conversation, the Grip Strength Measurement Task began in front of us, with a third-year student named Oshio being the first on deck. They seemed to be going in the order in which they had registered for the Task. And, among all the participants was my fellow classmate, Sudō. His group members, Ike and Hondō, were nowhere to be seen, suggesting that he had probably split off and rushed here on his own to secure a spot in the Task.

“I’ll agree that there are some outstanding Class D kids out there, sure, but I don’t think they’re good enough to keep their class together or anything. When it comes to you though, I get the impression that you’ve influenced your surroundings.”

I’ve influenced my surroundings, is it? It shouldn’t come off that way though, at least not from an outsider’s perspective.

From the sound of it, she was awfully familiar with the circumstances at play on my side of things.

It was probably fair to assume that she had gathered a solid amount of information at some point without me noticing.

“Anyway, I’ve really like, lost my cool here. This is the first time I’ve ever had a class go and drop down to Class C like this. I dunno how to say it exactly. I mean, there always used to be an order to things. Class A would compete with Class B while Class C and Class D went at each other, you feel me~?”

If what she was saying was true, then this ‘order’ was now certainly a thing of the past.

“I really thought that this class would be the one to reach Class A, but... well...”

She openly voiced her dissatisfaction about the current state of Class 2-C.

“Isn’t it your duty as the homeroom teacher to do something about that?”

“What a cruel thing to say~!”

She covered her ears with her hands, unwilling to listen to anything more on the matter.

She was like an adult who hadn't finished growing up yet, or more precisely, a woman who had never truly graduated from her years as a student.

"Ah! Me, me! You know what, Sensei's got a totally revolutionary idea for you! Just like how Katsuragi-kun transferred to Class 2-B, Ayanokōji-kun can transfer over to my class! How 'bout it?"

This wasn't revolutionary at all. It was the kind of idea that even the likes of Ishizaki could come up with.

"I was wondering where you were going with this. You've really put forward something outlandish, haven't you?"

"You'll aim for Class A together with us, right? Right?"

She reached out for my arm again as she spoke. Her movements were those of a woman who saw physical contact with the opposite sex as her own personal weapon, but just before she touched my wrist, she faltered.

Having recalled my earlier warning, she pulled back her hand and shook her head a few times so as to keep herself in check.

"I wouldn't be able to come up with 20 million points even if I saved up until the day I graduate. Furthermore, as things are now, even if I found a way to prepare such a large number of points, there's no way to tell which class will be Class A in the end. So don't you think it would be wiser to wait until the final moment and see how things play out instead?"

Not to mention, you'd be hard-pressed to find students interested in transferring to her class given that it had just recently dropped down to Class C.

"Y-you don't have to say it so impartially..."

If you somehow managed to secure the right to transfer classes, it went without saying that you wouldn't use it until you were right on the verge of graduating.

That is, unless you happened to get poached free-of-charge by one of the other classes like Katsuragi. Although... virtually none of the worthwhile students would jump at the opportunity to demote to one of the lower classes, so that was bound to end up failing as well. Even on the off chance that

someone agreed to go through with it, whether or not that single person would be enough to raise the class all the way to Class A was yet another matter.

All of a sudden, the various groups of students in front of us began to swell with excitement as a new first-place result came in.

Oshio, having apparently just been knocked down to second place, had a disgruntled expression on his face.

“Sudō-kun has changed an awful lot, don’tcha think? I wonder who’s responsible.”

“Just for the record, it wasn’t me.”

While I might have played a key part in it, Sudō’s growth could be predominantly attributed to Horikita.

Shortly afterward, everyone finished having their grip measured, but in the end, nobody was able to beat Sudō’s first-place score.

And with that, Sudō’s group earned five additional points, for a likely total of eight. Compared to the measly one point I had earned in the same time frame, the difference was worlds apart.

As soon as the competition came to an end, the various students began to disperse; No doubt headed from Task to Task like a flock of migratory birds.

“Then, I should get going as well.”

Since she had lost her excuse to keep me here, Hoshinomiya relented and sent me on my way.

“There are two weeks until the end of the exam. I’m prolly gonna get sent around the island a lot, so maybe we’ll meet each other again~.”

I didn’t want to see her again if at all possible. With that thought in mind, I left the Task site.



2.3

Afterward, I made my way to two other new Task sites that showed up, but in both cases, other groups had already registered for all the spots before I arrived, so I ultimately never got a chance to participate. When the clock struck 1:00 PM, I went to my second designated area, B7, earning nothing but the one-point Arrival Bonus. Come 3:00 PM, my third was announced as D7 once again, the same as my first. I had arrived there not too long ago now, once again earning nothing but the Arrival Bonus.

I had traveled back and forth and received 2 whole points for my efforts. However, with a cumulative total of only 3 points for the first day, I felt

pretty confident that I was one of the lowest-ranked groups out there.

Even so, there was absolutely no reason to be discouraged. It was only the first day of the exam and the various groups hadn't spread all throughout the island just yet. As such, competition was going to be fierce no matter what. Even if I forced myself to pick up the pace, that didn't change the fact that it was difficult to rack up points on my own and the drain on my supply of drinking water would be intense as well.

The day's three Basic Movement intervals were over, and now it was time to prepare for tomorrow.

"Senpai."

I ran into Nanase a second time, the two of us crossing paths in a place similar to the one she and I had met at this morning.

"Second time today huh?"

"Indeed. What a coincidence."

She seemed to be taking action on her own again as there was no sign of Hōsen or Amasawa anywhere.

"How did it go for you today?"

"I did what I could and earned 3 points. You?"

"Well, when it comes to designated areas, the three of us earned 8 points. I didn't manage to make it to the second area in time, but I took first place in a Task instead, so we're at 13 points altogether."

"Sounds like you're off to a good start."

She hadn't arrived at one of the designated areas, but that wasn't a very big deal. In groups of two or more, as long as somebody stepped foot in the designated area, it wouldn't count as a 'miss'. At the end of the day, if you're scoring a large number of points for the time you spend elsewhere, just as Nanase did, you'd still come out ahead.

"Well then, Senpai, if you'll excuse me."

After a brief conversation that almost felt closer to a status report, the two of us parted ways.

It was just before 5:00 PM. I began to walk through the forest, looking to decide where I'd be camping for the night. If I pitched my tent somewhere in the sunlight, the temperature inside would increase rapidly.

Even after the sun goes down, there'd still be a chance that the heat hadn't dissipated yet.

As such, it was probably best to try and find a place that wasn't under direct sunlight.

I went east, eventually stopping somewhere near the edge of E7.

Between all the students, school faculty members, and exam managerial staff, there should be over 500 people on the island. But without designated areas or Tasks, you never really ran into other people all that often. In a way, that served as proof for just how dense the forest truly was.

Because of the heat and humidity, I chose to set up camp in a relatively open area. I took my two liter bottle out of my backpack and poured the water into a paper cup. Drinking straight from the bottle would do nothing to prevent the bacteria inside my mouth from contaminating the rest of the water. With high temperatures like these, letting the bacteria grow from inside the bottle could lead to serious health hazards. There was just no reason to put your health on the line because of something so trivial. Having said that, once opened, bottled water didn't have that long of a shelf life anyway. If I wanted to drink the water while it was still in its best condition, I'd have to get through it all by the end of the day today. Though, that wasn't really an option here with the future as uncertain as it was.

For the first day or two, it shouldn't be that difficult to get by with all the food and water you bought at the start of the exam. But once your food reserves ran dry, the situation would gradually start to deteriorate. Of course, there was always the option of registering for Tasks for the participation rewards that you would get regardless of whether you won or not. However, from what I had seen on my tablet, there weren't very many Tasks that fit under that category. Furthermore, there wasn't a doubt in my mind that the ones that did would be far more contested than usual.

I turned on my tablet to reflect on this. There had been a total 68 Tasks held throughout the day today.

While I had no idea if students actually managed to participate in them, there were 14 Tasks that provided all participants with a certain amount of mineral water.

At a rate of roughly one in five Tasks overall, this was by no means a reliable number of opportunities.

The interesting thing about all of this, however, were the Tasks that were essentially just competitions disguised as student relief measures.

The order in which students arrived at these competitive relief Tasks was directly related to the amount of relief they'd receive, with the student that arrived first receiving 2 liters of water, the second 1.5 liters, and the third 1 liter. Everyone else from fourth to thirtieth would receive 500ml.

That being said, they wouldn't receive very many points, with first place earning 3 points, second place 2 points, and third place 1 point.

But even so, they were still extremely important, providing students with a reliable, unbiased supply of water.

And— it was certainly worth noting that these competitive relief Tasks accounted for 8 of the 14 Tasks that provided students with water. So on the first day, not only were there 8 Tasks with identical terms and conditions, but their physical locations and registration timeframes had all been very evenly distributed as well. If these Tasks continued to show up from the second day onward, then...

Well, as long as you could consistently get there in time, you shouldn't have to worry very much about water.

After finishing off one of my portable meals, brushing my teeth, and going to the restroom, I decided to go lie down inside my tent to avoid wasting energy and prepare for the day ahead.

Starting tomorrow, I'd get serious, redoubling my efforts to earn points and essential resources.



2.4

I went to bed early, but I woke up in the middle of the night and sat myself up.

From what I could see through the gap in the mesh fabric of my tent, the world outside was veiled in total darkness, so much so that you couldn't even see an inch in front of you.

The only things I could hear were the buzzing of insects and the occasional sound of something running through the grass.

When it came to camping deep within the forest, the entire experience was a battle against solitude.

It was probably a fairly harsh environment for a lone girl like Horikita or Ibuki.

Just to go to the bathroom, they'd have to dedicate time and effort to assemble an improvised toilet outside somewhere.

I sat in my tent, quietly holding my breath.

For me, the harshest thing about this was that... Acting Director Tsukishiro would undoubtedly come after me at some point, looking to have me expelled from the school.

If his plan was to come at me head-on, he would need to have me drop down to the bottom five groups somehow.

However, that strategy would be far too unrealistic.

The student was in nearly complete control over whether they'd earn points or not. Even though everyone was doing what they could to survive, I probably wouldn't have to worry about placing in the bottom five as long as I stayed diligent about my area movements and Tasks. With that being the case, the Acting Director would most likely come at me with a different, more indirect strategy.

There was a chance he might try to make me lose out on points by making my watch break or malfunction, but an approach like that didn't seem very practical. Though, it was also possible that he might have put some sort of system in place to prevent me from scoring points altogether. If both my watch and tablet had been tampered with, then I'd have to consider the possibility that the points currently reflected on my tablet might not really be there at all.

Of course, if the discrepancy between my watch and the school's internal logs was large enough, I'd voice the issue with the school, and I don't exactly think that's something Tsukishiro would want. Hypothetically speaking, even if he had me lose out on three day's worth of points, I would still be able to recover from it. If his plan was that careless, Mashima-sensei and other involved parties would start to suspect something. Instead of carrying out such a half-assed strategy, it made more sense that he'd try coming at me from another angle.

So, looking at it from Tsukishiro's point of view, what would be the best way to get me expelled from the school?

Well, if I could make use of the White Room student, then I'd probably have them force my retirement through illness or injury. After all, with something serious like a broken arm, the school would instantly deem you unfit to continue with the exam.

In other words, I'd have them launch an attack on me here in the vast, unmonitored forest.

It would be a straightforward, surefire way to get me expelled.

It would be difficult for the school to tell whether or not my injuries had been caused by another human.

As someone from the White Room myself, I felt pretty confident that the enforcer had the skills to make it all seem like an accident.

Chapter 3: Travel Companion

I woke up at 6:30 the next morning. From the way the dazzling sunshine lit up the inside of my tent, I could tell that it was a bright sunny day without even needing to go outside.

A world of green spread out before my eyes as I emerged from my tent in the sweltering heat.

“Seems like choosing somewhere out of the direct sunlight was the right choice after all.”

Even though I had walked a little further to find a good spot, setting up my tent in a consistently shady place had been the smart thing to do.

After a quick breakfast of one of my portable meals and some water, I packed up my tent and waited for 7:00 AM.

Most students should already be awake by now and waiting for the exam to begin for the day. Designated areas would be my top priority, but I’d consider changing focus if a Task showed up somewhere nearby. That is, depending on the details and rewards.

Then, at 7 o’clock, a notification was sent to my watch.

I set my tablet on my lap and powered it on before refreshing the map.

My current location was area D7. So where would I be traveling today?

The area highlighted on my map was— E8.

The location closest to where I had chosen to set up camp for the night.

Put another way, I was in an ideal position to go after the Early Bird Bonus this time.

Without wasting even a second, I immediately set off.

I had spent the first day sitting back and taking a look at the situation, but from today onward, I would gradually begin to pick up the pace.

Before too long, I stepped foot into area E8 and received a confirmation notification on my watch.

As my entire group had arrived, I was given the full 10 point reward for a first-place finish.

In one fell swoop, I managed to recover from yesterday's deficit. You could even say that things were going a little too well.

Since I had the time, it'd be best if I could lock in some Task wins as well, but...

There were no Tasks that a solo group could register for in the surrounding area, with the closest one all the way over in B8. Given the time it would take to go there and back, I felt that I should probably just pass up on the opportunity for now.

Since I didn't know when some other Task might show up, I'd just keep an eye on the map as I waited for my next move.



3.1

The designated area announced at 9:00 AM was area E6.

I arrived a bit slower than I had for the last area, as I received a 5-point reward notification for coming in second place.

And at 1:00 PM, after the two-hour break, the third designated area was area F7.

Even though I started a bit off to the southwest, my success streak continued, racking up an additional 5 points for another second-place finish.

Most of the Tasks that showed up along the way required at least two people to participate. I felt pretty sure that a fair number of students went to them too, something I was grateful for as someone who moved alone.

I had gotten 23 points so far today, for a total of 26 when combined with the 3 I earned yesterday.

While this was certainly good progress, a group of three would have at least 18 points as long as they had been steadily piling up Arrival Bonuses. Even though I was on a hot streak, the difference was almost negligible.

If I lost pace even slightly, I'd begin falling behind again. I may have gotten second place twice, but put another way, that just meant that I had missed out on first place twice. There may very well be some unknown, powerful opponent who had the same Table.

For the time being, I decided to head back to area E6 and wait for a Task that I could participate in to appear.

So far, all three of the designated areas today had been normally selected.

In other words, the upcoming fourth and final area of the day would be the first randomly designated area of the exam.

“Ayanokōji-senpai, it seems we meet again.”

As I sat down to take a break, Nanase showed up on her own again.

There had been six designated areas so far. And throughout those six, I had crossed paths with Nanase three times now.

“By any chance, do you think that we might share the same Table?”

“Maybe.”

Since we had been running into each other so often, it wouldn't be that strange if our tables overlapped with each other.

Though at the end of the day, it didn't really matter to me if we had the same Table or not. The thing I was concerned about was the fact that we were running into each other so much. For argument's sake, even if she and I had been going to the same destination, the probability of meeting face-to-face like we have been shouldn't be this high. Not only would our routes be different, but our time spent traveling and staying in the different areas would

be as well. I hadn't noticed anything that would lead me to think she had been following me, so I guess you could say that it had been nothing more than a coincidence, but was that really the case...?

Without any further evidence, figuring out whether or not she actually shared a Table with me would be impossible. Nanase was in a group together with Amasawa and Hōsen. This meant that, by entrusting her fellow group members with arriving at the designated areas, she wouldn't be penalized for missing them. While the group wouldn't be able to get any Early Bird Bonuses, they could still steadily pile up points, two points at a time.

I could theoretically find out something by paying attention to the alerts she might get on her watch, but there was a chance that she had muted that already.

Our last two encounters hadn't gone on very long, so I thought that she'd leave immediately this time around as well, but instead, she paused for a moment and looked at me.

"Um, Ayanokōji-senpai, there's a favor I'd like to ask of you."

"A favor?"

"If it's not too much trouble, would you perhaps allow me to accompany you for a while?"

"Accompany me? What do you mean by that?"

No matter how incredibly likely it was that she and I had the same Table, the special exam had been set up in such a way that made it essentially impossible for students of different school years to collaborate. Neither party stood to gain anything from it.

"To tell you the truth, a slight issue came up as my group was talking last night. Both Hōsen-kun and Amasawa-san felt that we would be better off if we all acted independently, so everything more or less fell apart."

Even though they were all part of the same group, there wasn't any rule stating that they had to work together.

Of course, there were many advantages to working together as a unit, but independent action was another viable strategy for students who didn't have any problems with working alone.

“I’ve crossed paths with you a total of three times now, Senpai. From what I’ve seen from our encounters, I believe that you’ve managed to reach the designated area faster than me. That is of course, except for the first time. I fear that if I’m on my own, it won’t be long before I start to fall behind the designated areas.”

“Don’t you think it’s possible that I just happened to be faster than you these last two times?”

“That may be so indeed, but either way, I’ve still recognized you as a step above someone as inexperienced as myself.”

Although her words sung me praises, it didn’t seem like these were her true feelings at all.

“I don’t think it’s a very wise idea to travel together with someone in a different school year.”

“You’re saying that due to the influence it would have on Early Bird Bonuses and the increased competition for Tasks, correct?”

“There would be a conflict of interest if we came across a Task that only had room for one more group.”

“I would be perfectly fine with taking the back seat in that regard, Ayanokōji-senpai. I would only step foot into the designated area after you’ve checked to make sure you’ve received your points and Bonuses. That way, it shouldn’t place you at a disadvantage. As for Tasks, I’ll just defer to you should there only be one space remaining.”

So she had no problem with abandoning the valuable Tasks and Early Bird Bonuses?

There was absolutely no physical way I’d recommend doing that.

“You’d ultimately lose points by doing that, Nanase.”

“This is my first uninhabited island exam, and you’ve already proven the extent of your physical abilities during your fight with Hōsen-kun. It would be immensely helpful to me if I could have you choose a suitable route for us to take.”

While she said it would help, it didn't seem like she really needed it given how she had moved around the island on her own today without any issue.

There was really no reason for her to take on the risk of traveling together with me.

"Even if we assume that I'm going to choose the most suitable route, would you be able to keep pace with me? Sometimes the path I choose might even be dangerous. Would you really be able to do it?"

I already knew the answer to this question and yet I chose to ask anyway.

After all, I figured that her response may help reveal the reason behind her strange behavior.

However, her response was different from what I had expected.

"I'm fairly confident in my stamina. ... You're not uncertain because you think I might hold you back, it's more that you're not able to trust me, isn't it?"

Nanase had previously teamed up with Hōsen and Amasawa to try and force my expulsion.

In that regard, I was certainly a fair ways off from trusting her.

But even if I turned her down here, she was free to follow after me if she wanted to. I didn't exactly have much of a choice when it came to that.

Though, if she began awkwardly tailing after me from a distance, it would seem unnatural if we were seen by a third party. It wouldn't be impossible for me to give her the slip or anything, but doing that would just be a waste of energy. After all, we would inevitably cross paths again at some point if we both had the same Table.

That being the case, I felt like it'd just be less of a hassle in the long run to fold and allow her to tag along.

"Alright. If that's what you want, then go ahead."

"Thank you very much."

After letting show a delighted smile, Nanase bowed to me deeply.

“We just have to make sure you and I really have the same Table. We on the same page?”

“Indeed! The notion that we’ve just coincidentally shared some of the same designated areas is certainly feasible, so further investigation is the natural first step. What do we do for now though? It seems we still have some time until the next designation happens.”

It was only half-past one in the afternoon, so we still had more than an hour to spare.

“True... Oh, on that note, some Tasks just showed up.”

Several new Tasks appeared on my tablet.

I looked over the Tasks in the surrounding area and quickly decided where to go.

Then, I showed her the screen and pointed at the Task we’d be heading for as I began to explain our next steps.

“It looks like there’s a quiz-type Task right under area F8. We’ll go there.”

“It’s fairly close by too!”

“Yeah. After we’re done there, if the next designated area shows up too far away from us, I think we’ll give up on trying to get there in time.”

Since reaching the next area might not be very practical, I wanted to rack up points by clearing Tasks instead.

“Understood. Please lead the way.”

In truth, I wanted to head for the ‘Football Juggling’ Task that appeared in area E5, but the route and distance made it much more difficult to reach than area F8.

In any case, I first wanted to find out exactly what Nanase was capable of.



3.2

“We should be able to see it any time now.”

“Right!”

We crossed over into area F8 with our sights set on reaching the Task, tablets in hand to confirm our location as we pushed forward.

“By the way Senpai, this Task we’re looking to take on seems rather challenging, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Well, it’s a quiz, so it’s true that there can be a lot to cover.”

The ‘Quiz’ Task took on a format where the genre of its questions would be chosen from several different options.

While it would be an easy Task to participate in because it was entirely multiple-choice, it would probably be difficult to win if you didn’t have a solid grounding in both liberal arts and sciences. Participation would be done as a group, and up to 12 groups could participate. Put simply, the larger the size of your group, the more minds you’d have to work with and the greater your advantage would be.

“That said, I should have a decent enough chance depending on the genre they choose.”

“That may be so, but... you actually wanted to go after the Task in area E5, didn’t you Senpai?”

I had deliberately changed my route to try and accommodate her, but it sounded like she had seen through me.

“I’ll admit that I considered it, but it was honestly fifty-fifty. It’s nothing you need to worry about.”

“I’m glad to hear that. However, I’m simply here to accompany you, so please don’t make any concessions for my sake, okay?”

“You don’t need to remind me. Besides, the quiz is better when it comes to rewards anyway.”

The ‘Quiz’ Task gave 8 points for first place, 4 points for second, and 2 for third. Furthermore, you’d receive a bonus based on the number of people in your group who took part, allowing you to choose from a list of provisions to receive food or water.

It was an ideal way to replenish what you had consumed over the past two days.

Before long, the Task site came into view, and from the look of it, a decent number of people had already gathered there.

“Yo! Ayanokōji! There’s only three spots left! Get in before it’s too late!”

Having noticed my arrival, my classmate Sudō shouted out as he beckoned me over.

“Seems he’s right. Let’s hurry.”

Nanase nodded in response, and together, we ran over to the Task and completed the registration process.

We weren’t given any more information about the genre of the quiz, leaving us to wonder what kind of questions would show up.

At this point, we were effectively on standby until a twelfth group showed up or the registration deadline passed in around 30 minutes.

Ike was sitting down a bit away from the registration desk, waiting for the quiz to begin, but overall he seemed a little out of it.

He was clearly somewhat bored and disinterested, and Hondō seemed to be having a hard time striking up a conversation with him, so he was just off killing time by himself. You could say that the greatest strength of Sudō’s group was the enhanced teamwork that came from their close friendship, but it wasn’t clear how well that was really working out for them.

“Is everything going well on your end?”

I tried pitching a question to Sudō, the only one who really seemed willing to talk right now.

“I’m doin’ aight’ on points. Took third in one of our designated areas today, and first in two Tasks so far as well.”

“I wasn’t able to participate myself, but I watched you place first in that Grip Strength Measurement Task yesterday. By a large margin too.”

“Hell, you were gonna join in too!? If that happened you wouldda prolly given me a run for my money, so lucky me eh?”

Sudō made a show of wiping imaginary sweat from his brow in a slightly exaggerated manner.

“What about your group? Any problems there?”

“Well, I guess we’re runnin’ outta water faster than expected... Kinda feels like I mighta been runnin’ around too much.”

Apparently, the side effects of going all-out these first two days had finally caught up to him.

“But ya know, we can get that stuff back from doin’ Tasks, so I’d say we’re doin’ okay.”

With that said, however, Sudō’s expression took on a more difficult undertone.

“Though, well, Ike’s been kinda out of it.”

“Why?”

“Dunno… He was acting kinda strange before the exam, but he’s just glossed over it all by sayin’ nothing’s wrong.”

What happened with Shinohara had apparently left a lasting impact on Ike’s mental state.

The uninhabited island exam was already well underway, with the second day more than half-finished.

And meanwhile, the girl Ike was smitten for, Shinohara, was spending her time together with his rival, Komiya.

So in that light, it made sense that he couldn’t stop himself from worrying about it.

“I get that you’re worried, but a Task is a Task. If the three of you come together and give it your best, it shouldn’t be hard to come out on top.”

“Oh yeah, speakin’ of which Ayanokōji, you’re on your own right? Will you be alright on the quiz?”

“Well, it depends on whether or not they choose a genre I’m good at.”

Without responding, Sudō noticed Nanase standing beside me and turned his attention over to her.

“Hey come to think of it… You’re a first-year, yeah? What’s your name again…?”

Sudō had taken part in the fight with Hōsen a few months back, so it was only natural that Nanase would look familiar to him.

“It’s Nanase, Sudō-senpai.”

Instead of ogling the pretty girl in front of him, Sudō took on an extremely serious expression.

“...Ey Ayanokōji, c’mere a sec.”

He suddenly wrapped his arm around my neck and pulled me aside, taking some distance away from Nanase.

“Looks to me like you came here with her, but you know she’s an enemy right? The hell are you doing?”

“She just asked if she could tag along with me since there’s a good chance that we have the same Table.”

“Wha? Even if you got the same Table what’s the point in doin’ that? That chick is workin’ together with Hōsen to get you kicked outta here right? This shit ain’t safe man.”

It seemed like, in his own unique way, Sudō was genuinely worried about me.

“You might be right.”

However, I wasn’t naive enough to think she was accompanying me for no reason.

“You’ve got no sense of danger do you... Well, I get you’re all calm like this cuz you know you’ll get through it, but... If you run into trouble make sure you let me know aight?”

I nodded in response to Sudō’s sentiment, and while he wasn’t entirely satisfied, he seemed willing enough to back down.

“If she was givin’ you a hard time, I was gonna have her buzz off, but if yer sayin’ it’s fine, then I guess I’ll leave it be.”

Just as he said that, the last group finished registering and preparations for the beginning of the quiz went underway.

“We can talk more afterward. A Task is a Task, just like you said, so let’s do our best.”

At that, Sudō went back over to Ike and Hondō. Each of the 12 participating groups then took out their registered tablet and readied themselves for the upcoming questions. And when the time finally came, the quiz genre was displayed on our screens.

『Quiz Genre・Anime』

Huh? Anime?

Before my mind had a chance to fully comprehend the words that showed up on my tablet, the first question began.

『Question 1: Which of the following is the correct title of the Thirteenth episode of TV Anime Mobile Samurai Bombdam?』

1)『Farewell Bombdam』 2)『Burn! Bombdam』 3)『Shouting Bombdam』 4)
『A Bombdam's Tears』

“...What the hell is this?”

I spoke involuntarily, the words practically escaping from my mouth.

It obviously had something to do with anime given the genre and question, but beyond that, I hadn't the slightest clue as to what the correct answer was.

“Forreal!? This is uber-mega-easy!”

From nearby, Hondō shouted out in excitement, clasping his tablet tightly as he selected the answer.

Easy? This question was easy?

Bombdam... Bombdam... What in the world did that even mean?

The genre definitely fell way outside of my area of expertise, but even so, I was the one who had gotten myself into this, so I was going to put forth every effort to see it through.

I just needed to stay calm. Since there were four possible options, there was a 25% chance that I'd answer correctly even if I chose at random.

If I were to attempt to make a guess, unlike titles 1 through 3, title 4 was the only one that had the word 'Bombdam' come at the beginning. Perhaps that was some sort of hint? I decided to take a stab at it and go with the fourth option. Not long after I did, the time limit was reached and the correct answer was displayed.

『Correct Answer: Option 2 – ‘Burn! Bombdam’』

My attempt at reasoning had been futile, my answer, incorrect.

I focused my attention on the second question, feeling a faint sense of dizziness as I stood under the scorching summer sun.

『Question 2: Which of the following artists sang the opening theme of TV Anime Dashu Sea Chicken?』^[2]

But reality was cruel.

I was once again confronted with the fact I knew nothing of the chosen genre.

Naturally, the second question was completely beyond me as well. And this time, each of the four options looked effectively identical.

And at that, I came to realize that participating any further would be nothing more than a waste of time.

I proceeded to select answers at random, hoping that by some kind of miracle I'd manage to select the correct ones.

After spending the next ten minutes answering the rest of the questions, I silently closed my tablet.

Of the 20 questions on the quiz, the number I had gotten right was 4, for a correct answer rate of 20% overall. In other words, I had done worse than average. Unsurprisingly, the group that took first place was Sudō's group, with an astonishing 95% correct. After all, Ike and Hondō seemed fairly reliable when it came to these kinds of questions. It wasn't just straightforward academic and physical prowess that could prove useful, but miscellaneous knowledge as well. This all helped support what Chabashira had told us back before the exam had even started.

“Those questions were all pretty challenging, huh?”

With 5 correct answers, Nanase’s accuracy rate was just about the same as mine.

Essentially, it seemed safe to say that she knew nearly nothing about anime. And from a look at everyone else’s scores, it seemed like most of the other groups had the same experience with the quiz as we did.

“We freakin’ did it Kanji!”

As a member of the winning group, Sudō put his hand up, looking to celebrate by sharing a high-five with his teammates.

“Yay...”

Ike gave a dispirited response and just barely touched hands with his teammates. Seeing this firsthand, I felt somewhat concerned, unsure if I should talk to Sudō about what Ike was going through.

While this was my second time running into him, there was no guarantee that we would meet again after this. If Ike were to find out that Shinohara and Komiya had begun dating or had otherwise gotten close to each other during the exam, he probably wouldn’t take it very well.

However— Was Sudō really the right person to try and support Ike right now? To that end, I had my reservations. In an academic, physical, and even mental sense, Sudō had no doubt matured from the person he used to be. But, whether or not he was capable of providing someone with delicate emotional support was a different story entirely.

“Is something the matter?”

Nanase asked me curiously.

After all, with the Task finished, there was no reason to stick around any longer.

“Is something wrong with Sudō-senpai’s group?”

As she had been watching closely for a while now, Nanase got right to the heart of the matter.

“As an uninvolved third-party, what does their group look like to you, Nanase? Well, I ask that, but I guess it’d be hard for you to conclude

anything since you've never met any of them other than Sudō before."

"Indeed. Then could you perhaps fill me in and tell me a bit about them?"

"Off on Sudō's left is Ike Kanji, and to his right is Hondō Ryōtarō. They're the type of people who do stupid things and end up standing out in a bad way... or, well, I guess it might be better to say that they're the type of people who easily get carried away. But, at the same time, they both really add a lot to the class atmosphere."

This definitely felt like an oversimplification.

Though, I probably wasn't mistaken either, but I'd keep that to myself.

"They aren't a studious bunch by any means so their group leaves a lot to be desired, but Sudō has plenty of physical strength and Ike has the right skills and experience to camp out on an uninhabited island. And Hondō... Well, Hondō's a lively guy."

It wasn't a bad group of people to be with if the goal was just to get through the exam and enjoy yourself along the way.

"Ike-senpai and Hondō-senpai, is it? They add a lot to the atmosphere...? From what I can tell, that doesn't really seem to be the case for Ike-senpai; Could he be sick perhaps?"

Despite having never met face-to-face, Nanase was still able to perceive that something was wrong.

Based on the vibe he gave off right now, she was certainly correct in that he didn't look like someone who added to the atmosphere at all.

"It's true that he's usually livening things up in class. While he seems to be in a bit of a funk right now, he should at least be fine physically."

"So that's what Ayanokōji-senpai is worried about..."

After everything that had been said so far, Nanase had probably gotten a sense for it as well.

"Well, it is what it is. It's troublesome, but I can't always worry about the affairs of others. In the quiz, instead of placing in the top three, I placed all the way down at the bottom. They on the other hand took first. Composition aside, the group that racks up more points is the better one."

Put simply, I was getting a bit ahead of myself by worrying about Sudō's group when they were currently ahead of me in terms of overall score.

"That's just the nature of this special exam, isn't it? As long as you play to your strengths, you'll still stand a fighting chance. In that respect, it really puts into perspective just how much effort the school has put into all of this. After all, not only did they rent out this entire island, they also crafted such a large-scale competition that highlights the different strengths and weaknesses of the students."

This may sound rude, but there simply weren't many opportunities for students like Ike and Hondō to play an active role back in the classroom.

A student's duty primarily consisted of studying and sports, so it followed that those who struggled with both would eventually find themselves left in the dust.

In this exam, however, other aspects had a chance to take center stage as well. I had previously been concerned about the lack of balance in Sudō's group, but they seemed like they were going to be just fine.

And because of that, Ike's mental health was the only thing left standing in their way, which was a really tricky problem to solve...

If he were in prime condition, this exam could've been his chance to become a dark horse and overturn his negative reputation.

Be that as it may—I cast a sidelong glance at the adults in the process of dismantling the Task site. While this school was clearly different from an ordinary high school, the sheer cost of such a large cruise ship, all the various equipment, labor, and everything else that had gone into a single special exam was unimaginable. Last year's island had been impressive, but this time the school had gone above and beyond.

Not only was the budget on a completely different level, but the content was as well. Last year, we were told to work together as a class, but this time around, we had been told to split up into a bunch of small groups and scurry to and fro throughout this vast, no-man's island. As such, minor, petty disputes between fellow students had the potential to blow up into something major and unprecedented.

Additionally, matters of injury and illness were now incredibly pivotal. While a couple of scratches or a low fever probably wouldn't pose too much of a problem, there was a dire need to keep in mind the possibility of a bone fracture, or potentially something even worse than that.

Until the two-week exam has safely reached its conclusion, the school faculty members probably won't have the luxury of relaxing either.

"Let's get going."

Rather than stand around here, we'd be better off heading toward the next designated area or looking for another Task to take part in.

"Senpai, may I say something before we depart?"

Just as I began to start walking, Nanase inserted herself in front of me and looked up to meet my eyes.

"Once again, just to reiterate, please disregard my presence and choose what you truly believe to be the most ideal route. Okay, Ayanokōji-senpai?"

This uninhabited island exam was such that, even if you took first every once in a while, that wouldn't be enough to secure yourself the win. Coming out on top overall would be difficult if you didn't steadily rack up victories throughout the entirety of the long, two-week battle. And, this said nothing of the fact that larger groups had an inherent advantage. If you were on your own, that just meant you had to work harder to score more points than others.

"I'll say this one more time as well. I'm not letting your presence influence my decisions, so stop worrying about it."

By this point, I had already come to a decision about my approach to this.

An approach that looked to unravel the rules of the exam and the thought processes of those around me.

If letting her accompany me was going to get in the way of that, I wouldn't have allowed it in the first place.

"I'm relieved to hear you say that. Please take care of me moving forward."

After checking my watch, I took out my tablet.

It was just about time for the fourth Basic Movement designation. It would be the last of the day, as well as the first randomly designated area of the exam. When the time came, I checked the map and found that I had gotten area I7.

If we wanted to take the shortest path, we would have to cross over a mountain range.

Having said that, if I chose to prioritize safety and take a detour, it would take quite a while to get there.

However, this was where it got tricky, because this wasn't an area we needed to get to.

“Shall we depart?”

“Before that, Nanase, I want to see your tablet.”

“Ah, that's right. We still haven't confirmed whether or not we have the same Table.”

While I was expecting her to at least be somewhat reluctant, Nanase pulled her tablet out of her backpack and showed me the map without hiding anything. And sure enough, her next destination was marked as I7, just the same as me.

“It seems I have the same Table as Senpai after all.”

“I guess so.”

I couldn't discount the possibility that our areas might have coincidentally overlapped across different Tables, but given everything else that had happened so far, it seemed reasonable enough to conclude that our Tables were the same.

“With that out the way, let's move on. Will we be going over the mountain range?”

“No, I'm not going to go out of my way for the Arrival Bonus this time. Tasks appeared in both G8 and G9, so I'm thinking of finishing off the day by heading to those instead.”

Both Tasks were centered around academic concepts, with the first being called ‘Math Problems’ and the second ‘English Problems’.

I felt pretty confident that I'd do well in them. That is, as long as I managed to make it there in time to register.

“Then, which will we be pitching camp at today?”

“Well... The first area tomorrow will be centered around area I7. If we get too close, we might accidentally start out in the next designated area. I'd like to avoid that if possible.”

Just to be sure, it felt like it would probably be safest to stick to area H9.

“Once we’re done with the Tasks, I think we’ll head to H9 to set up camp.”

After hearing out my explanation, Nanase nodded along in agreement without a single complaint.

“Oi Ayanokōji! Didja just say you’re gonna set up camp in H9?”

Sudō was just about to set out after wrapping up with the Task when he called out to me.

“Is there something wrong with that?”

“No, it’s just that our next designated area happens to be H9. Where you goin’ after this?”

“For now we’re going to G8 and G9 for the Math and English Tasks.”

“Ugh, yeah, we’re gonna be avoidin’ those for sure.”

Sudō muttered while scratching his head, as if he was saying something obvious.

While it was a little further away, Sudō’s group would most likely be headed to the Task that appeared over in area E9 instead.

“If ya want, how ‘bout we all meet up after an’ camp together? Should be more fun with friends. I’d also like to hear whatcha think ‘bout our strategies so far and see if you’ve got any suggestions.”

This was an unexpected proposal, but not a bad one. Moreover, I should probably praise him for his progressive attitude. Not to mention, the problem with Ike had been bothering me for a while as well.

With a coincidental get-together like this, Ike probably wouldn't feel like I had any ulterior motives in reaching out to him.

"It'll prolly be hard to find each other in the forest, so how 'bout we meet up on the beach in G9 instead?"

Since it'd be easier to find each other on the beach, that was probably the better choice.

"That sounds good. When should we look to meet?"

"Since we'll all be close by, how 'bout 5:30?"

In which case, we'd probably be able to meet up without running into any problems after we all finished up with our Tasks.

"Alright. See you on the beach in G9 at 5:30."

With that, Sudō and his friends set off in the other direction, looking to take on a different Task than us.

Well, it'd be unreasonable to ask them to participate in an English or Math Task.

It was only natural that they would look to challenge Tasks that suited them.

"Turns out that we'll be spending the night with them today. Do you have any problems with that, Nanase?"

She'd be spending the night with four older guys, so it would make sense for her to be at least a little bit hesitant.

Although, I guess it was probably better than having to spend the night camping alone with me.

"It's fine. I actually think it'll be a good chance to get to know everyone."

I was glad to see that she seemed open to the idea.

3.3

Later, at around 5:30 PM, Nanase and I were waiting together on the beach when Sudō's group finally showed up, coming from the direction of

their designated area.

“How’d it go?”

“Ehhh... Not so great. After we split, a buncha new Tasks popped up so we ended up goin’ for three of ‘em. We took third place in one, but the other two had so many people that we couldn’t even register.”

Sudō clicked his tongue in frustration, slightly short on breath. Nanase and I hadn’t made it to our Tasks in time to register either, so there were clearly quite a few students still in the surrounding area.

“The second day only just ended, so don’t overwork yourselves.”

Although they had been racking up points like crazy, there was no denying that they were moving a little too quickly, something that Sudō had even admitted himself. It was commendable that Sudō, brimming with confidence in his power and stamina, was able to drag Ike along given his ambitionless, sullen demeanor, but they probably wouldn’t be able to maintain that pace forever.

Hondō, in particular, was gasping for air as if he had just braved his way through the depths of hell. There was no way that he was okay with something so strenuous, but from the fact that he hadn’t vented even a single complaint, it was probably safe to assume that he had simply resigned himself, devoting whatever energy he could to follow along instead.

“First things first, let’s find a place to camp. How ‘bout it, Kanji?”

Sudō looked to Ike for a suggestion, prompting the absentminded boy to point off toward the forest.

“Let’s go back to H9 for now. We passed by a clearing earlier. That should be good enough.”

At Ike’s listless reply, the five of us set off.

“I really don’t get the impression that Ike-senpai is the life of the party that you made him out to be, Ayanokōji-senpai.”

“He has a lot going on.”

“A lot...?”

“I don’t feel comfortable talking about it when it’s not my place to do so. If you really want to know, you should ask him yourself.”

“You’re right. I’ll try asking him when I get the chance.”

Nanase responded cheerfully. That said, whether or not Ike would answer her honestly was a different matter.

After following Ike for about twenty minutes, we arrived at a clearing in the forest.

It was a solid campsite; So much so that there wouldn’t be much of a problem even if three or four groups decided to pitch tents here.

“Welp, let’s get these tents set up pronto and get some grub. I’m starving.”

Sudō patted his belly as he spoke, understandably famished after all the moving around he had done today.

At that, both he and Hondō looked over at Ike with eyes full of expectation.

The reason for this was obvious, given the fishing rod sticking out of the back of Ike’s backpack. However, Ike simply stood there without taking notice of their expectant gazes, absentminded as ever.

“Oi Kanji. Ain’tcha gonna go fishin’ tonight?”

Sudō pressed him more directly this time, his expectations soaring high due to their close proximity to the ocean.

“Eh? Oh, uh, well... it’s already kinda late and I’m pretty tired, so yeah. Sorry.”

If he had planned on going fishing, he probably would’ve stayed on the beach back when we all met up.

Well that, or maybe he just didn’t have the drive to exert himself so much.

“Well, I guess it can’t be helped then.”

Although Sudō looked disappointed, he backed down rather quickly, not wanting to force the issue.

Ike shook his head from side to side so as to keep himself from zoning out again before beginning to set up his tent.

“Seems like his mind is somewhere else.”

Even Nanase, who knew nothing of the situation, was able to see through him. So in that light, saying that he seemed distracted almost seemed like an understatement.



3.4

By the time we finished eating dinner, the sun had already set into the night. It was just around 8:00 PM, and we were all freely passing the time on our own. This ‘freedom’ came with limitations, however, as it wouldn’t

exactly be a wise choice to go on a stroll through the surrounding forest in the dark like this. There were mosquitos upon mosquitos out there, so we were essentially forced to stay cooped up in our tents.

Given that, we naturally began conversing through the mesh fabric of our protective barriers.

Nanase, Ike, and I all had our tents set up in a row. Hondō's tent was set up directly across from Nanase's with Sudō's right beside it.

"So Nanase-chan's in Class D, huh? I never wouldda guessed."

Hondō seemed pretty happy to be talking with a girl, seeing as he was the one asking Nanase the most questions out of all of us.

"No no. I'm really not a very capable person... Class D seems like an appropriate place for me."

"Eh? No way. If anything, we're the incapable ones here, ain't that right guys?"

Hondō burst out in laughter alone, amused by his joke, but Sudō's expression remained rigid. He was laying down on his back, staring at the roof of his tent without even trying to join in on the conversation. And while I couldn't see what Ike was doing, he didn't seem to be genuinely engaged with the conversation either since he wasn't doing much more than passively comment on what was being said from time to time.

"The atmosphere feels down in the dumps. Kanji, Ken, what's with you guys?"

"Nothin' really. But lemme warn ya Ryōtarō... Nanase ain't trustworthy."

"Wha? Why's that?"

Hondō pressed his face up against the mesh screen of his tent and stared straight at Sudō, shocked about what his peer was saying about such a cute underclassman.

"No reason, really. Just stating a fact."

"And what's that supposed to mean!?"

"It's okay Hondō-senpai. I did something rather rude to Sudō-senpai in the past, that's all."

“Rude? So it’s not cuz he tried to touch you inappropriately or somethin’?”

“You think I’d do somethin’ like that?”

Even though he had somehow come up with the idea himself, Hondō immediately realized the flaw in his logic after hearing Sudō’s response.

“Well, it is true that you’ve always been devoted to Horikita. But like, what the hell happened then?”

“It’s not somethin’ you need to know about.”

Sudō shifted around so that his back was turned to the entrance. Hōsen Kazuomi of Class 1-D had done something truly unforgivable to the girl Sudō loved. And, the one who had colluded with him was none other than Nanase herself. From Sudō’s perspective, as someone who knew all the details, it made perfect sense for him to be wary of her. If Horikita were here, she probably would’ve said the same thing. Hondō probably wasn’t fully satisfied, but since Nanase herself said it was fine, he didn’t really have the right to keep pressing Sudō about it.

“Well, alright then I guess... But Kanji’s been pretty out of it this whole time.”

“O-oh, uh, I... same old same old, ya know?”

Ike began to panic, having suddenly become the topic of the conversation.

“‘Same old same old’ my ass. This is a good chance so I’ll just come out and say it: something’s been up with you since before the exam even began.”

“Sudō took the words right out of my mouth. You’ve been really out of it man.”

Sudō readjusted his posture to face toward us once again, clearly interested in where the conversation was headed.

“What’re you guys saying? L-look, there’s this whole uninhabited island exam, and like... I mean, I’m just under a lot of stress cuz there’s a chance I might get expelled. That’s all.”

“Stress? Yeah right. Weren’t you super pumped back when we first heard about this exam?”

Ike had plenty of camping experience, and he even played an active, important role during last year's island exam. His close friends were well aware of this too, so there was no way they'd let him get out of this with an excuse like that.

“Well, erm... That's uh, but like...”

Hearing as Ike incoherently struggled to put together a response, Nanase looked over at his tent and spoke.

“Even though we've only just met, I also got the impression that you were rather lacking in spirit.”

“What do you think Ayanokōji?”

Hondō asked me for my opinion, prompting me to break my silence.

Given the flow of the conversation so far, it'd probably be the most natural to just be honest and agree with them.

“It's been on my mind since we first met up earlier today.”

“See? All four of us managed to pick up on it.”

Ike had been pushed into a corner, left only to stammer as he tried to come up with a solid excuse.

“Earlier, Ayanokōji-senpai told me that you and Hondō-senpai are the type of people who add a lot to the class' atmosphere. But, so far, it just seems to me like your mind is somewhere else entirely... Is something troubling you, Ike-senpai?”

In all likelihood, Ike was probably shocked that Nanase's words had hit the nail right on the head even though she knew nothing about what had happened.

“Uhm, how do I put it...”

Ike frantically tried to find the right words.

“C'mon, if you're bothered by something just come out with it.”

“It's prolly not a big deal anyway.”

Despite being two of his closest friends, they both seemed to think that Ike's troubles would end up being trivial.

And because of that, they just wanted him to come out with it already.

However, their approach only seemed to make Ike more reluctant to speak.

“Just forget about it...”

“Could you two please hold off and give him a moment?”

After hearing Ike’s dejected response, Nanase quietly whispered to Sudō and Hondō.

For a moment, Sudō seemed indignant and offended, upset that Nanase had even asked, but once he took a look at Ike’s troubled expression, he realized that his friend might be going through something worse than he had been making it out to be.

“There’s no need for us to hold off, Nanase-chan. In the end it’s probably nothin’ big.”

“No. It might be a bit too early to say that Ryōtarō. Let’s try waitin’.”

“Eh? A-ah... Well I guess we can try.”

Reading the room had never been one of Sudō’s strong points. From the look of it, however, he had gradually picked up on how to pay attention to his surroundings and notice the subtle nuances of a situation. This was probably yet another byproduct of Horikita’s teachings over the last year.

The four of us quietly watched over Ike, making sure not to make him feel pressured to speak. Of course, it wouldn’t be easy for Ike to speak in a situation like this, but at the same time, he wouldn’t be able to turn tail and run away. We simply needed to wait for him to feel ready on his own.

Eventually, after about ten minutes of silence, Ike made up his mind and began to open up.

“To be honest... There’s... a girl I’ve had my eye on for a while now.”

Surprised, Sudō and Hondō turned and looked at each other through the screens of their tents.

Hondō then became very animated, excited about the sudden emergence of such an interesting topic.

“What!? Who!? Who is it!?”

“Let’s wait until Ike-senpai feels ready to tell us himself.”

Nanase gently intervened, looking to stop Hondō from hounding Ike with questions.

It was difficult to imagine that his current mental state had come about simply because he had a crush on someone. To that end, there had to be something else that had happened afterward to make him turn out like this. Nanase probably understood this as well.

“H-hey but like, you’ve gotta dive in head-first with this kinda stuff!”

“How about you calm down and wait to hear what Ike-senpai has to say? Instead of worrying about who he likes, don’t you think that it’s more important to find out how it relates to the matter at hand? Or am I wrong?”

Nanase’s words were calm, yet firm, bringing Hondō screeching to a halt.

“I-I guess you’re right.”

Upon being rebuked by his underclassman, Hondō seemed to realize that he was being tactless and awkwardly scratched at the back of his head.

“The girl I like...”

Once Ike began to speak, the two boys definitely let their imaginations run wild.

Was she in our school year? A senpai? Or was she one of the new students?

And, if she was in our school year, was she a classmate?

Popular, attractive girls like Kushida or Ichinose were no doubt the first to come to mind.

“The girl I like is... uhm... Sh-Shinohara... Shinohara Satsuki.”

When they finally heard the name, for a moment it seemed like Sudō and Hondō were genuinely unable to process it.

After all, to them, Ike and Shinohara must seem like nothing more than classmates who butt heads with each other.

She wasn't exactly the best-looking girl out there either, so their confusion was perfectly understandable, given how much Ike had boasted about his plans to go out with a cute girl.

"B-but Kanji, like... You're on bad terms with Shinohara right? You're always talkin' about how crazy ugly she is."

Hondō asked, unable to stop himself from pointing out what seemed to be the most glaring problem with the idea.

"It's not like I've been conscious of her from the start or anything. Hell, I hated her at first. But... I dunno why, but at some point I started caring about her and, well... I guess I didn't wanna admit it to myself, so just went along pretending that I hadn't fallen for her."

He probably wasn't lying when he said this. It was a natural scene for those of us who were forced to listen to Ike and Shinohara's daily bickering sessions back in the classroom.

"I mean, if you like Shinohara, then why don't you just go confess to her?"

Sudō offered a blunt, somewhat crude suggestion, but Ike replied with a tone of despair.

"It's just not that simple. Not anymore."

"Did something happen, Ike-senpai?"

"Shinohara is in a group together with Komiya right now. That guy... probably likes her too."

At this point, Hondō and Sudō finally began to get a grasp of what was happening.

"Plus, well... it seems like she sees him as someone special as well."

A boy and a girl who were conscious of each other, working together in the same group to get through all of this. This exam was a crucial battle with our futures at the school hanging in the balance, so the conditions were perfect for the formation of close bonds and strong feelings that weren't there before.

“I... I only realized that I was fallin’ in love with Shinohara a little while ago... So when this exam came around, I wanted to group up with her more than anything. But I just couldn’t be freaking honest about it so we started fightin’ like we always do... It’s pathetic... This whole time, I’ve just been searching for her...”

Ike had been distracted for a while now; His eyes had been searching, chasing after a glimpse of Shinohara’s shadow.

“Maybe I just got the wrong idea at some point, thinking she liked me somehow even though we argue so much... I’m such a loser. Even now I’ve got no idea what I shouldda done differently.”

There would always be times when you wonder if the feelings you have are mutual, just as Ike had. But even so, it was impossible for anybody to truly know the feelings of the other party.

This was something I had experienced firsthand back when I confessed to Kei.

“Can’t you just be honest with her, Ike-senpai? I don’t necessarily think that’d be a bad thing.”

Nanase shared her thoughts after hearing out what Ike had to say.

“But... Shinohara’s together with that Komiya guy while I’m here in the friendzone.”

“I’m not so certain about that. This is just a guess, but... don’t you think Shinohara-senpai has just been waiting for you to draw the line?”

“Draw the line...?”

“From what I’ve been told, you’re someone who’s always bright and cheerful to everyone. Someone who often speaks what’s on your mind. Of course, I’m sure that Shinohara-senpai has a high opinion of you in this regard as well. That said, don’t you think she might wish she could be someone a little more special to you?”

He often freely spoke what was on his mind, or put in other words, he often spoke without thinking.

“Don’t you think maybe she wants you to be more upfront about your feelings?”

It was already a well-established fact that Ike had feelings for Shinohara.

And at the same time, I felt pretty confident that Shinohara had feelings for Ike as well.

Yet, Ike constantly argued with her, sometimes even going so far as to make fun of her. He treated her no differently than one of his male friends.

However, that alone probably wasn’t enough for her, just like Nanase said.

“I...”

“Ike-senpai, would you be happy if the girl you liked never took you seriously? There’s nothing wrong with trying to hide your embarrassment, but you won’t get anywhere if you don’t convey your feelings to her. Wouldn’t you want her to look at you a little more seriously as well?”

You could gain new insight by looking at it from the other person’s perspective.

How would it make you feel if the special someone who was always on your mind constantly spoke ill of you, day-in and day-out?

“...Dammit.”

Ike hung his head and held his face in his hands. Right now, he was probably recalling memories of how he had treated Shinohara in the past and putting himself in her shoes, doing his best to understand how his actions had made her feel. Or no, given his reaction, he had probably already understood.

“Feeling troubled about this isn’t a bad thing, per se, but you’re currently in the midst of a special exam where your future here is at stake. You wouldn’t be the only one expelled either; Your actions could very well drag Sudō-senpai and Hondō-senpai down along with you. I fully understand the feeling of wanting to go chasing after Shinohara-senpai, I do, but you should focus on fighting for survival first.”

Before I knew it, everyone present had been mesmerized by Nanase’s words.

After all, she had responded to Ike's woes far more sincerely than even his own best friends, but that wasn't the only reason.

"If you can't meet... If you can never reunite with someone you care about... then you'll never ever be able to let them know you love them again...!"

There was no need to look at her expression. Just the sound of her voice alone was more than enough to make it clear.

"Y-you, why are you crying?"

Despite his lasting distrust of Nanase, Sudō spoke up in a panic.

"Ike-senpai, you don't have the time to be feeling caught up in your troubles, wouldn't you agree?"

Sudō's question went unanswered as Nanase posed Ike one of her own, completely disregarding the fact that tears were streaming down her own face.

"... Yeah. I've gotta get through this exam safely first right?"

Nanase's words, the words of a here-before stranger and underclassman, had touched Ike's heart more than any of us could've expected.

"Ken, Ryōtarō, I'm sorry guys. I... I've prolly troubled you two a heck of a lot these past two days, haven't I?"

Ike expressed his remorse, to which Sudō—

"No, you haven't... Eh, well, maybe just a lil' bit."

He wasn't able to get himself to say that there hadn't been any problems, but that was probably for the best.

"To be honest, I'm still anxious about Shinohara. But... that won't matter anyway if I don't get through the exam first. All my worrying, all this time I've spent, everything woulda been in vain if we don't pass."

"Eyy, attaboy Kanji!"

Hondō agreed, shouting out so as to rally everyone's spirit.

Sometimes friends could be a nuisance, but in other cases they could be truly irreplaceable.

I felt like this was my lesson, my takeaway from what had happened tonight.

And as for the tears Nanase had shed, my gut was telling me that it hadn't been a mere performance, nor had it been the result of her getting caught up in the atmosphere.

Chapter 4: What it Means to Like Someone

It was just after 6:00 in the morning, right about when the inside of my tent began to heat up, when I heard a voice coming from outside.

“Uhm, Ayanokōji-senpai, are you awake yet?”

“Please wait a second, I’ll be right out.”

I emerged from within my tent, responding to Nanase’s call.

“I’m sorry to bother you so early in the morning.”

“I was already awake so it’s fine. We need to start tidying up and get ready to head out soon anyway. What’s up?”

I took a look around at the other tents and noticed that nobody else had woken up yet, so I kept my voice to a whisper.

“It’s about Ike-senpai. Do you think I said a little too much last night...?”

“Well, rather than having said too much... To me it felt more like you just called it like it was.”

While I did think that she had gotten a bit too involved in his personal matters, it seemed like she had more or less reflected on it.

“Thanks to you, Ike’s managed to get back on his feet. Or, I guess it’s more like he’s managed to finally take a stand. I think he appreciates what you’ve done for him.”

“You think so?”

I nodded immediately, but she still seemed somewhat unconvinced.

“I feel like Ike-senpai is in a sort-of precarious position right now. I’m afraid that yesterday’s discussion might backfire and cause him to act recklessly... That’s why I’m not sure if we should split off from them right away.”

“It’s not that I don’t understand how you feel, but...”

While I was also worried about Ike's mental state, traveling together with them would come with great risks of its own. Our groups each had completely different Tables, so there was no way to predict where our designated areas would be.

Depending on this next designation, we might have to head off in entirely different directions.

Given that, I found myself wondering whether her feelings were genuine or perhaps something more artificial.

If it was the latter, was she simply looking to keep me from going to the designated areas?

No, a move like that felt far too weak and short-sighted.

At some level, I couldn't exactly dismiss the idea that she might hold me back, but...

"It's no good, huh... I thought so. If we split up with them, it would probably be impossible to meet back up again."

"Well, let's see..."

I wouldn't say it was the best idea out there, but I guess it wouldn't be entirely impossible to implement.

There would still be ways to keep an eye on Sudō's group and stay on top of our own affairs at the same time.

"It's extreme, but as far as meeting back up with them is concerned, it shouldn't be that difficult. It's just a matter of deciding on a meeting place in advance. Even if it's a long distance away, as long as we have the stamina left to walk, it should still be possible."

Be it designated areas or Tasks, the day's obligations always came to an end by the time 5:00 PM came around.

In other words, we were basically free to do whatever and go wherever we wanted from 5:00 PM to 7:00 AM the next day.

"That's true and all, but..."

Of course, whether or not this was actually the correct course of action was another story altogether.

The further away our designated areas were from each other, the tougher it would be to decide on a suitable meeting place.

“In any case, we should probably wait and see what designated area they get first.”

If their route was completely different from ours, then it’d be for the best to give up on the idea sooner rather than later.

After packing up camp and eating breakfast, 7:00 AM came around and with it the announcement of the first designated area of the day.

“H7, huh?”

I wouldn’t say it was the worst outcome, but it certainly wasn’t ideal by any stretch of the imagination.

It wasn’t clear whether we’d be able to make it there within the next two hours or not.

However, if we didn’t make it there in time, it would be our second missed area in a row.

In which case, if the next area ended up being randomly designated and showed up somewhere off to the west of the mountain range, we’d really be in a pinch.

“It would be quite troublesome if the randomly designated area were to happen at 9:00.”

Under the assumption that everything went smoothly for these next two hours, we’d probably only reach I7 or I8 at the very most.

Of course, it’s not like it would be impossible to reach H7 in two hours, but...

Getting Nanase involved in something so drastic would come with an equivalent amount of risk.

“We can always choose to conserve energy and miss the area for a second time.”

The point reduction penalty only began once a group had missed three area designations in a row.

So in that sense, even if we didn't make it to H7, we should still be fine...

That being said, should the situation turn dire, we could very well be subject to the mercy of our destination, forever unable to find our way to the designated area in time.

“Sudō, what designated area did you get?”

“We got I8 so if you two are goin' the same way we can head out together. I'm fired up so let's get this done!”

While our destinations were different, our routes would, for the most part, be the same.

However, this turn of events was far from convenient. In fact, I felt more inclined to call it unfortunate instead.

Thanks to this, I would be prevented from taking any extreme measures.

If we were to go all out trying to get there, Ike and Hondō would certainly not be able to match our pace.

“We're heading in the same direction again, so how about we stick together until we have to split up?”

I figured we might as well travel together with them since we probably wouldn't reach our area before the time limit anyway.

After all, Ike's situation was still a concern, and we'd at least be able to collaborate should something happen along the way.

“Sure thing. You down, Kanji?”

“A-ah, of course.”

Ike looked somewhat flustered as he responded, the memories of last night's conversation probably still fresh in his mind.

Nanase's presence, that of a stranger, had helped to spur Ike forward.

And while this had been an unfortunate beginning to the third day, there at least seemed to be some upsides to it working out the way it had.

Under normal circumstances, Ike would crack jokes and try to smooth-talk Nanase, prattling off about how cute she was or something, but that wasn't the case here at all. It would be undeniably outrageous if he acted that

way after everything he said about Shinohara just last night. However, given that Ike was exactly the type of person who did undeniably outrageous things from time to time, the fact that he was showing restraint now may very well be proof that he was beginning to change.

“Well, anyway. I guess I’ll lead, so you all can just follow me.”

With that, Ike rolled his shoulders, stretching them both out in their full range of motion before taking up the lead and setting out. He had gotten much more lively ever since we started traveling together with them. After all, a false show of courage wasn’t all that different from the real thing.

“You don’t seem to be enjoying this very much, Ayanokōji-senpai. Your expression is quite stiff.”

“It’s nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Is that so?”

While it was true that I was somewhat bothered about our designated area, I felt pretty confident that I hadn’t let it show on my expression.

“There’s no use worryin’ ‘bout that. Ayanokōji’s always got that sorta look on his face.”

Sudō chimed in, having heard what we were saying from over his shoulder.

I wasn’t sure if I should be thankful for his support or offended by it.

“Well there’s your answer.”

I had slightly mixed feelings about it, but in the end I just went along with Sudō’s explanation.

Sudō let show a mischievous grin before heading up to the front and striking up a conversation with Ike.

“You’re still thinking about Ike-senpai, aren’t you Ayanokōji-senpai?”

“You’re reading too far into it. I’m glad to see that he’s grown up a bit, but honestly outside of that I’m not sure what you’re referring to.”

“...Is that so?”

Since there was a chance that Ike and Sudō might overhear what we were saying, I cut our conversation short.

As he was now, Ike was certainly more energetic than he had been yesterday, so it wasn't incorrect to say that he had grown up in a mental sense. In that respect, the response I had given Nanase technically hadn't been a lie at all.

However— Most of this ‘growth’ was superficial. This was nothing more than the first step of his journey of change. Depending on the situation, his progress may stagnate, or possibly even go through a major regression.

People are not so simple that they can change just because they want to, a truth that Nanase also appeared to be well aware of. And to that end, she wanted to have me understand it as well. From off to the side, I could tell that her gaze was fixed on Ike as he walked in front of us, and upon seeing this, I couldn't help but wonder to what extent her thoughts were really about Ike.

From just ahead of us, Ike and the others raised their voices in surprise.

A wild bird had suddenly spread its wings from further within the forest and took off into the open sky.

It was the type of special, firsthand look at nature that we'd probably only get to experience on an uninhabited island like this.

At any rate, if I wanted to find out the truth about Nanase, my only real option seemed to be traveling together with her, at least for the foreseeable future.



4.1

It was nearly 9:00 AM, and we were currently in the southeast corner of area I8. The path ahead was rugged, but Nanase's breathing wasn't labored in the slightest. It seemed like she wouldn't have any problems keeping up if I picked up the pace a bit. Sudō's group had been together with us until just a few minutes ago, but the moment we arrived at I8, they ran off to take part in a Task that had appeared back in I9.

“For now, let’s head over to J9.”

“This is to lower the chances of being in the next designated area at nine o’clock, correct?”

“Yeah.”

From our current location, we should be able to reach J9 in only a few minutes.

We pressed onward, arriving in J9 just three minutes short of 9:00 AM, our eyes glued to our tablets as we stepped foot into the area.

For the three short minutes we had, we sat down on the ground and took a break as we waited for the second designated area to be announced.

From where she was seated, Nanase peered at the screen of my tablet. Seconds later, the clock struck nine.

“Senpai...”

Upon seeing the next area, Nanase looked up at me. It was the second random designation of the exam, but it wasn’t that far away at area J5. It would be a tricky journey if we went through the forest, so we could just head all the way east and travel north along the beach instead.

Even if there were students on our Table who had successfully made it to area H7, it would take them a lot of time to navigate through the forest.

We had more distance to cover, but there was a chance we could surpass our competition in one fell swoop.

When it came to random designations, the fact of the matter was that there was no way to tell where they would pop up.

In this case, we were lucky that it had turned up within a reasonable range.

We immediately resumed our journey without exchanging another word.

It had been tacitly understood that we would take a path straight to the beach.

Not even twenty minutes later, we stepped foot on the sand in the northeast corner of I8, and from there, we pushed north along the shore.

As we traveled, we passed through area J6, where we encountered several adults in the middle of setting something up.

I cast them a sidelong glance as we passed through, then opened up my tablet to find that a Task had just appeared here.

“Beach Flags Showdown, huh?”

Beach Flags is a sporting event that was originally designed for lifeguards to train various skills essential to their practice, such as running speed and reflexes. A perfect fit for the sandy coastline.^[3]

They were apparently looking for eight boys and eight girls, who would be participating separately.

Since only one person would be allowed to participate per group, the Task needed a total of eight different groups per gender.

Only the first place group would receive rewards, earning 6 points along with the ability to choose an additional reward out of several provided options.

Outside of that, every group would receive a 500ml water bottle as a prize just for participating.

Usually, new Tasks would be announced via the map on our tablets, but if you just so happened to be passing by while one was being set up, you’d be able to learn about it ahead of time. You’d get to register for the Task before any other group, but subsequently, you wouldn’t be able to discern what type of Task it was going to be until it started. Of course, if it was something straightforward, you could probably figure it out just by looking at what was being set up, but if it was some sort of academic test, that would be almost impossible.

This Task, however, had a registration deadline of one hour. If we registered for it now, we’d be stuck in the nearby area, effectively casting aside any chance we had of earning an Early Bird Bonus by reaching our designated area.

For that reason, I decided that we would look the other way for the time being and prioritize reaching our designated area instead.

Not too long after, just as I began to feel like we had arrived in area J5, a notification showed up on my watch.

“We did it Senpai.”

In total, it had taken us about an hour to get here. Under normal circumstances, taking a full hour to reach a designated area would only net you the Arrival Bonus. However, I was apparently lucky enough to have been the first group to get here, whereas Nanase had secured herself the one-point Arrival Bonus, so we both came out ahead. Whether or not she would get the Early Bird Bonus as well depended entirely on Amasawa and Hōsen, but I had no way of knowing about that.

Since we had dealt with our designated area, our next step was to go back to area J6 and register for the Beach Flags Task.

The two of us went back the way we came, our sights set on earning accumulating as many points as we could.

We were met with something unexpected when we arrived back at the Task site, however. A long line of students, both boys and girls, had already formed at the registration point. The area had been empty back when we passed by earlier, so just where did all of these people come from?

“If we’re lucky, we might be able to take up the last spot?”

“Perhaps. Maybe J6 is the designated area for another Table?”

“Perhaps...”

“Let’s go check it out for the time being.”

“Right!”



4.2

We entered area J6 and approached the Beach Flags Task site.

It looked like there were already more than eight boys participating, but there was no way to say for sure just yet.

Since only one person per group was allowed to participate, I probably still had a chance.

A male third-year student noticed us as we drew closer.

His name was Kiriyma, the vice president of the student council. Up until a few seconds ago, he seemed to be enjoying himself as he chatted with

his friends. However, his demeanor changed entirely the moment he caught sight of us, as he immediately rushed over to the staff member in charge of the Task and began to talk to them about something.

While I was put off by his strange show of behavior, I simply approached the staff member myself and let them know I was looking to participate.

Unfortunately, I was told that the student just ahead of me had apparently filled up the last spot in the boys' category, making it impossible for me to participate. I watched as Kiriyama and the other boys who had registered left to go change their clothes in the makeshift changing rooms that the staff members had set up.

The girls, on the other hand, only had seven entries, so there was still one more spot available.

"If Senpai can't participate then I'll sit this one out as well. I wouldn't want to keep you waiting."

"It's okay, I wanted to take a break anyway. You should participate."

"But..."

"Since you're surrendering all of the Early Bird Bonuses to me, the gap between our points is only going to get wider. I'm not saying anything about whether you'll win or not, but you should just go for it if you think you stand a chance."

There were still about ten minutes left until the registration deadline, but if Nanase entered, the Task would reach maximum capacity.

In other words, she could immediately compete in the Task without wasting any time.

"Thank you very much. Well... I suppose I'll go sign up then."

If she had a decent chance of stealing away points from students of other school years, then she should take full advantage of it. Given that she was the one who had asked to accompany me, she wasn't really in a position to make willful decisions here. But even so, this was still a Task that she should be firm about participating in.

A tent had been set up a bit off to the side for people to take refuge from the direct sunlight, so I moved over to it once Nanase left to change clothes.

There were a variety of different swimsuits available for the Task for both boys and girls. One might go so far as to say that the competition truly began from the moment you decided on which one you would wear. Although, since there wasn't going to be any swimming, it probably wouldn't make that much of a difference no matter which one you went with.

One by one, the boys began to emerge from the makeshift changing rooms, donned in their chosen swimwear. For the most part, they were all wearing standard loose-fitting swim trunks, with the only real difference between them being the pattern print of the fabric. The various students on standby began to cheer and hollar as their friends came out into the open.

I decided to take a closer look at the strange lineup of students who had assembled here. Each of the eight boys were third-year students. Similarly, on the girls' side of things, there were seven third-years. Nanase, the sole first-year student, had only just barely managed to slip her way in.

As a rule, only one person could participate per group, which meant that there were at least fifteen different groups of third-years gathered here right now. Regardless of whether they were here because of a nearby designated area or because of this Task alone, the fact that there weren't any students from other school years present was undeniably abnormal.

Given that, Vice President Kiriyma was certainly worth paying attention to. If a large number of people were all moving together just to ensure that he would take the win, then...

I stood back and thought this over, and before long, everything was ready for the boys to begin their matches. The format of the competition was the average bracketed tournament, where students would compete against each other in one-on-one matches in order to decide who would advance to the next round. Winning three straight matches would net you the first place spot. Therefore, I should be able to see if the competition had been fixed for Kiriyma by watching the intensity of the other third-years.

After all, the intensity of the matches would help dictate whether they were serious about winning or not.

From the very first match, however, the competition was unexpectedly fierce, with Kiriayama pitted against one of his very own classmates. The two boys arose from face down on the ground and broke into a sprint at practically the same time. It was so neck-and-neck that they were both in the air as they dove for the flag. You could even say that it all came down to the length of their arms. In the end, Kiriayama seized the flag, and with it, the win.

It wasn't just that first match either. Time and time again, the third-years faced off, burning with determination to come out on top. It really didn't seem like they were deliberately throwing for Kiriayama's sake, or anyone else's for that matter.

They could be taking it seriously because I was watching, but that probably wasn't the case here.

Kiriayama wasn't 'that' wary of me, and even if he was, it was immensely unlikely that he'd be able to convince everyone else to follow along.

In which case, what was the explanation for the crowd of third-year students currently spread out before me?

It was possible that something beyond my expectations was happening here.

Just as the boys' matches were getting into full swing, the girls began to show up in their new change of clothes.

Five of them had chosen the usual school regulation swimsuit. Nanase, meanwhile, had chosen an option that was far more bold and daring.

It seemed like they were on standby, free to do as they wanted until the boys finished.

Given that, I approached Nanase and called out to her.

"Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

She looked over at me curiously, in the midst of doing warm-up exercises in a blue-green bikini.

"I see that you chose a rather cute swimsuit. Is there a reason for that?"

If she wanted to keep things simple, then a standard school swimsuit would've probably been more than enough.

"A reason? From what I've seen of Beach Flags on TV, girls usually compete wearing swimsuits like this, right? I thought it'd be strange if I took part in a school swimsuit. Have I misunderstood something?"

Well, if we're talking about what's shown on TV, then she wasn't exactly wrong.

After all, Beach Flags is one of the most popular recreational activities for people that come to the beach.

At that, Nanase turned her attention to the ongoing matches as she continued with her warm-up exercises.

The final match ultimately drew to a close with a splendid victory for Kiriyama. This was only to be expected from someone who was trying to take down Nagumo. His skills seemed to be an accurate representation of his B+ Physical Ability rating in the OAA app as well.

The girls' category was up next, meaning that Nanase would be participating soon. In fact, her name was called for the very first match, so she immediately went and took her position prone on the field. Her opponent was a third-year girl named Tomioka, who had a decent C+ Physical Ability rating. Nanase, on the other hand, was one step above that with a B+. That being said, a higher Physical Ability rating wouldn't necessarily guarantee victory.

Overall Ability would certainly have a part to play here, and furthermore, everybody comes with their own unique strengths and weaknesses.

Whether or not a student had prior experience with Beach Flags would also be important, but I felt pretty confident in thinking that it mostly came down to running speed and reflexes. This begged the question: Who was truly better between them? At the sound of the pistol, Nanase nimbly arose from the ground, kicked off from the sand, and burst toward the flag in one swift motion.

Tomioka lost before she even had the chance to put up a fight, left only to stare at the open sky with a dumbfounded expression.

The timing of the blank was usually unpredictable, but in Nanase's case, she had responded in perfect sync with the sound of the gun.

That alone served as definitive proof that her reflexes were several magnitudes faster than Tomioka's.

The six remaining competitors who had been watching from the sidelines had probably gotten a sense of just how formidable Nanase was as well. After the next three matches, the four semi-finalists were chosen, and Nanase's speed and reflexes seemed to be a head above the rest.

However, that was by no means reason for her to be careless. Between negligence, pride, and an assortment of other factors, there were plenty of things that may dull her reflexes, no matter how amazing they may be. And, no matter how much confidence she may place in her running ability, if she were to get her foot caught in the sand and tripped, it would all be over.

But at the end of the day, results rarely betray the favored outcome.

Nanase won her second match by another large margin, and was now one step away from snatching up the competition.

"She's a tough one."

Kiriyama voiced his candid impression of Nanase as he spectated the matches.

Of course, these words were not meant for me, but for his fellow group members.

The other semifinal match went by and before long, the final matchup was decided. Nanase would be going up against a girl named Tokunaga, and this time, her opponent was someone with an identical B+ Physical Ability rating. Tokunaga had won her last two matches decisively, much in the same way that Nanase had. The final match had become a proper showdown between two worthy competitors.

Up until this point, the onlooking crowd had been fairly rowdy, but everyone quieted down as the two girls took their positions and waited for the signal.

The staff member fired off the pistol for the last time, the sound echoing out across the beach. And with it, the two girls burst into action, arising from

the sand simultaneously. The opening movement was truly evenly matched, but the similarity between them only went that far.

Not only did Nanase take the first step after getting up, but she propelled herself forward with a strength far superior to that of Tokunaga. And then, after a short sprint, she dove, cleanly wrenching the flag out of the sand as she did.

Tokunaga had been skilled enough to make it all the way to the final match, and given that she also had a flawless opening, she must've realized the difference between herself and Nanase. A difference so apparent that she couldn't even feel resentful about it, left only to smile bitterly with traces of astonishment in her expression. In the end, she asked Nanase for a handshake, paying due respect to the victor two years her junior.

After leaving to wash off all the sand from her body and swimsuit, Nanase returned with her participatory bottle of water in hand.

After fighting three fierce battles in this sweltering heat, a cold drink of water was probably just what her body needed.

“That was a landslide victory.”

With the competition finished, I went to Nanase's side and spoke up to her as she rested.

“Thank you very much. I managed to get through it somehow.”

Her shoulders were moving up and down to some extent and she was definitely at least somewhat short on breath, but overall, I got the impression that she hadn't really put forth that much effort. In fact, it seemed to me that she had won with strength and energy to spare. In a contest between a first-year student and a third-year student, it may seem at first glance that the first-year is at a disadvantage. Generally speaking, however, girls reach the full potential of their physical capabilities at a relatively earlier age. As a result, there was probably no real difference in the athletic capabilities of a girl at 15 or 16 and a girl at 18. The primary factor influencing the outcome would have to be prior experience in the sport at hand, but in the case of Beach Flags, that wasn't something that many teenage girls would have.

No— was there even any point in trying to analyze it like this? The fact of the matter was that Nanase Tsubasa's true Physical Ability rating was higher than what the OAA reflected. We had been told that the incoming first-year students would have their ratings evaluated based on their performances during their third year of middle school, but we were already well into the start of summer.

It had already been so long since the start of the year, and yet Nanase was still maintaining a B+ rating.

To me it seemed like she was more than capable of getting an A- rating or even an A, but...

“U-uhm, Ayanokōji-senpai?”

“Hm?”

“Seeing you stare at me so closely like that, it's... well, it's a little unsettling, you know...?”

She looked away from me, a somewhat uncomfortable expression on her face.

“Ah... Yeah. Sorry.”

It'd probably be fine to continue thinking about this once Nanase changed her clothes.

With the Task finished, Kiriyama and the other third-year students immediately began preparing to pull out. It was probably safe to assume that they would be headed off to their next designated area or another Task site.

At that, Kiriyama approached me for the first time since we showed up here.

“Ayanokōji, don't say anything unnecessary.”

He said nothing further, simply turning his gaze toward the distant shoreline behind me.

I looked over my shoulder, curious about what he meant, only to catch sight of several figures moving together along the sandbar.

I immediately understood what Kiriyama meant.

At some point, Nagumo, the student council president, had started messing about with some other third-year students in the ocean not too far away from the Task site.



He must've realized that I was looking at him too as he proceeded to call out to me, subtly beckoning for me to come over.

"I'll say it again just to be sure: Don't get in my way, got it?"

"I understand."

Together with the rest of his friends, Kiriyama headed off toward the forest, leaving the beach behind.

"Nanase, I'm going to go talk with a senpai for a bit, so take your time getting dressed."

"I will, thank you."

I couldn't exactly ignore Nagumo, so I figured that I might as well go talk with him, at least for a bit.

Besides, there was something I was curious about myself.

"From what I saw, it didn't look like you were able to participate in that Task."

"Aren't we the same in that regard? Or did you just come here because of a nearby designated area?"

"Hmm, who knows?"

Nagumo smirked dismissively, evading the question.

"How about you come take a swim with us?"

"As much as I'd love to take you up on that offer, I didn't have enough points left over to rent a swimsuit like you did, President Nagumo."

It wasn't just Nagumo either. Asahina and several other third-year students had also rented swimsuits.

They had even gone so far as to rent a beach ball to play with at the same time, so it seemed like they had quite a bit to spare.

"You seem awfully composed, playing on the beach like this. I thought you'd be fighting tooth and nail to rack up points like the rest of us."

"Well it's important to take breaks, right? Besides... the real event starts tomorrow."

Tomorrow, that is, the fourth day of the exam.

The day when the top ten groups and bottom ten groups would be announced on our tablets.

“If it turns out that a first or second-year group has managed to sneak into the top three, I’ll take action accordingly. First and second-years have no right to stand on the winners’ podium. You’re no exception either, so keep that in mind.”

In short, this meant that Nagumo had a strategy of some sort to prevent himself from losing.

Provided, of course, that he wasn’t lying.

“Thank you very much for your considerate advice.”

At the end of the day, Nagumo was the leader of Class 3-A, the class that stood at the apex of the entire school.

Moreover, he was the current president of the student council. Given his position, his words were most likely not just mere lip service.

“However, I’m in a group alone. Rather than being at the top of the list, my name may very well show up at the bottom.”

“In that case, you’d better group up with someone as soon as possible. Horikita-senpai would probably be fairly disappointed if you self-destructed and got yourself expelled.”

“Nagumo. Come over here for a sec?”

From a bit behind me, a third-year student named Masuwaka called out to Nagumo.

Nagumo lightly raised his hand in response and proceeded to walk out of the ocean, headed over to where Masuwaka had motioned for them to talk.

They had already been plenty close enough to have a conversation, but I guess they didn’t want me to overhear anything.

At some point, Asahina stopped playing around in the ocean to take a look at what was happening, and after making sure that Nagumo was an adequate distance away, she approached me.

“Heyo. Word is that you’re working alone?”

“Well. You probably heard me earlier, but I’ve got a tough fight ahead of me.”

“That so...? Maybe that’s for the best though. If Miyabi were to start goin’ after you... things’d prolly get pretty dicey for ya, yeah? So here’s some advice. While you’ve got the chance, go meet up with as many groups as possible and——”

“Asahina, it’s time. Let’s get going.”

Just as she was about to whisper something into my ear, Nagumo came back, causing her to swallow her words.

“W-well, good luck.”

“Thanks.”

While she had stopped mid-sentence, I could more or less infer what she was going for.

Nagumo Miyabi had a strategy that only he himself would be able to implement.

A strategy that, if executed, would certainly make the fight ahead even more unsparing due to the peculiar nature of the exam.

That said, whether or not he would actually use that strategy against me was yet another question.

After all, as of right now, I was but a harmless existence that had no chance of taking up one of the top spots.



4.3

Our third designated area of the day was H5.

We wouldn't be able to get there by walking along the beach, but it was a relatively decent location, all things considered.

"It's a fair distance away, but we should easily be able to make it there without too much difficulty."

"We should be able to manage it in an hour or so."

Of course, if we wanted to go for the Early Bird Bonus, we'd need to move at a faster pace than we had this morning.

However, even if we did, we'd probably only get a single point at most.

It was the type of situation that made me want to escape to a nearby Task instead, but most of the available Tasks were currently concentrated on the west side of the island. Since we were in the east, we didn't really have very many options available to us.

Given that, would it be better for us to rush to H5 to try and get the Early Bird Bonus, or just take it slow and settle for the one-point Arrival Bonus instead?

It had already been three days since we first stepped foot on this island; it was time to make a decision.

“Nanase, how much water do you have?”

“I used up the last of what I had on hand this morning. All I have left is the bottle I was given from participating in the Task earlier.”

We seemed to be in a similar spot, as I only had a single 500ml bottle left as well.

Even though we were being conservative with our water consumption, if we kept having to travel long distances like this, we'd surely run out by the end of the day.

In other words, there was a very real prospect of water shortage.

I had bought 3.5 liters of water back when the exam began. Even if the other groups were being conservative with their water consumption like us, they'd probably start running out by today or tomorrow. It was unclear what overall percentage of groups this would apply to, but for the most part, things would be difficult moving forward.

“This is our first major hurdle.”

“We'll need to obtain fresh water somehow, won't we Senpai?”

If I were on my own, I'd opt to reach all four designated areas and clear nearby Tasks in the downtime. And after finishing up with everything for the day, I'd just return to the starting area to rehydrate and prepare for the next. This was one of the main strategies that I had been considering, but it'd be hard to execute with Nanase tagging along with me. She'd definitely go along

with it if I explained it to her, but if she were to fall ill because of that, she'd have to retire from the exam.

Though, I wasn't exactly obligated to pay heed to an enemy underclassmen.

For the time being, I just kept walking toward our next destination.

"Ayanokōji-senpai, why did you decide to take part in the exam alone?"

"I don't have many friends, so I couldn't find anyone to group up with."

"That doesn't seem to be the case to me."

"I'm not lying. There really aren't very many people I'd be willing to call a friend."

"Even so, I'm sure you could've at least found someone."

"Are you really that curious?"

"Yes. Because no matter how you look at it, acting independently puts you at a complete disadvantage, wouldn't you agree?"

Nanase, who had been trailing behind me this whole time, quickly ran forward to keep pace beside me.

Then, she looked at me, trying what she could to ascertain my true intentions.

"Back when you faced off against Hōsen-kun, your movements were different from those of a normal high school student, Ayanokōji-senpai."

"If you managed to notice something like that, then you're not exactly a normal high school student either, Nanase."

Nanase seemed a bit troubled by my immediate response and let show a somewhat forced smile.

She then lightly scratched at her cheek before softly conceding with an 'I guess you're right'.

I could've taken the opportunity to press her on this if I wanted to, but it would've been entirely up to her if she would answer honestly or not.

If she gave me some half-baked lie, I'd be able to see through it, but I didn't think she'd make a mistake like that.

“It’s true that acting independently comes with many disadvantages. It shouldn’t be impossible for me to join up with another group during the exam, but if I don’t have a decent number of points when the time comes, I’d just end up causing trouble for the other group.”

“Understandably so. After all, your score would be averaged together with theirs, regardless of how many people their group might have.”

“But, it seems fairly misguided to complain. The school recommended that we form groups from the very beginning, so those of us who decided otherwise aren’t in any position to complain.”

Regardless of whether you specifically decided not to form a group or couldn’t find one to join, it was still ultimately your own decision. Therefore, even if the rules put you at a disadvantage and got you expelled, you’d only be reaping what you yourself had sown.

“Even so, it’s not like it’s impossible for me to win either. If I were to join a group that was struggling to accumulate enough points, there’s a chance that my presence might bring forth unexpected synergies.”

“So you chose to fight on your own in order to bring forth these synergies...? Is that what you’re saying, Ayanokōji-senpai?”

“Well, I’m not sure. I was just talking in a general sense. Despite your misconception, you still shouldn’t discount the possibility that I simply struggled to find a group to join.”

“Fufu, that’s true. You certainly seem a bit inarticulate at times.”

Despite her usual reservation, Nanase spoke her mind.

“Have you always been like that?”

“For the most part, aren’t people with my sort of disposition usually like this from the start?”

“I don’t think so at all. Things happen that can cause someone with a gloomy disposition to become bright and spirited, and in the same vein, someone with a spirited disposition may become gloomy. That can happen, right?”

While I could understand what she was trying to say, I had doubts about how much a person's core nature was truly capable of change.

"I hear you say that a naturally gloomy person can change, but I can't help but feel like it would be forced."

"Yet, though it may be forced, the fact that they can act cheerful is amazing in its own right."

"...True."

If I were suddenly told to adopt a bright, amiable persona, I wouldn't be confident in my ability to see it through to the end.

Of course, I could temporarily put on an act in front of people I didn't usually interact with, but if you asked me if I could do that in front of my classmates, then the answer would be a resounding no.

"I don't think I'd be able to do it. On that note, have you changed since you were in middle school, Nanase?"

I managed to bring up the topic of middle school without it sounding too sudden.

After all, somebody from the White Room certainly would've never attended middle school.

Nanase paused to mull my question over for a brief moment.

"I wonder. I don't feel like I've changed very much since back then, but I probably have a little."

In other words, there was something that made her think she had changed, even if only slightly.

"In what way?"

"In the past—I get the sense that I used to smile more."

So for her, the direction of change had been from 'light' to 'dark'.

"I also get the sense that I talk and go out with others far less often than I did back then."

Was she telling the truth, or was this merely a lie she'd spun?

"After all, an incident took place that I believe changed me forever..."

I found myself somewhat reluctant to ask what that ‘incident’ was. She was the one who had initiated this conversation, and it felt as though she had been subtly trying to bait me into mentioning it, so I decided not to pry any further.

Nanase patiently waited for me to say something, but at some point, she slowed her pace until she was trailing behind me once again. I took note of this, and opted to change the topic.

“By the way, how’s your group fairing, Nanase? Are you guys doing alright on points?”

“Yes. Between Hōsen-kun and Amasawa-san, we’ve been earning quite a few from Tasks recently. I’m not sure which of the two has been contributing more, but either way, they appear to be doing more than me.”

If she was telling the truth, then her group was doing fairly well for itself.

Depending on what Amasawa and Hōsen had been doing, there was a possibility that they were earning Early Bird Bonuses as well, though that was just conjecture on my part.

“Conversely, I might be in a risky spot.”

While I had been steadily racking up points, it was safe to assume that I was gradually sinking down toward the bottom ranks.

A three-man group doing the same thing that I was would easily overtake my score.

“Let’s do our best moving forward, Senpai.”

“Right.”

Before anything else, we needed to safely arrive at our next designated area.

With that as our goal, the two of us proceeded to forge our way through the untamed forest.



4.4

1:55 PM. We arrived at our designated area, H5, in just under an hour.

Although we only received a single point for our efforts, it was still an important step in the right direction.

We had an hour until the next designation, so I wanted to go for a Task if at all possible.

Earlier, most of the available Tasks had been concentrated on the western half of the island, but now they were slowly beginning to pop up over here on the east.

“Can you keep going?”

I posed Nanase a question, watching her sit down as soon as we arrived to take a drink of water.

“Ah, yes!”

While it was praiseworthy that she was able to keep up with me, there was no way that she wasn’t exhausted right now.

“You should take it easy and rest here.”

“But...”

She seemed to be worried that I’d leave and abandon her.

“I’d say something if I wasn’t happy with having you accompany me. I’m not just going to disappear. Moreover, if you push yourself too far now, it’s only going to make it tougher for you to keep up later, right? Although there won’t be another random designation today, we may need to run for the next area if I decide to go for the Early Bird Bonus. I won’t be able to slow down and wait for you if it comes to that.”

Despite her frustrated expression, Nanase eventually acknowledged the limits of her endurance and nodded in agreement.

I felt sorry for her, but this would allow me to move without any restrictions, albeit only temporarily.

If I moved fast enough, I could probably make it to two or three of the Tasks sites in the nearby area, though whether or not I’d be able to participate in them was another matter.

Here in area H5, a ‘History Test’ Task would be starting soon, so I set off to go take part. The first-place group would only receive five points, but if you won, you’d get additional food provisions, so I wanted to make sure I got there in time.

Participation would be limited to only eight groups, which wasn’t a lot, so it’d be best if I moved quickly.

Shortly after setting off, I managed to catch sight of two three-person groups racing against each other through the sea of trees, and from what it looked like, they were headed toward the History Task just like I was.

Fortunately, they didn't see me, so after slightly adjusting my route, I began to run as well. After all, if I took my time walking, they would beat me to the Task site.

Without stopping, I advanced through the forest and eventually arrived at the Task site, only to find that a decent number of people had already assembled there.

There was an adult present with a tablet in hand, though they weren't a teacher from the school. I promptly called out to them.

"Could I register for the Task?"

"Yes. You'll be the seventh group."

Once I finished registering, the two groups I had seen earlier came running this way.

Of which, the first student to draw close was Hashimoto, a fellow second-year.

He noticed my presence but was far more interested in calling out to the staff member.

"Can we still register!?"

Hashimoto shouted, sweat dripping as though he had just finished running a marathon.

"You would be the final group, but—"

The staff shifted their sights to the students drawing close behind.

Apart from Kamuro, who took up the lead, the next three were all first-years from the other group.

Hashimoto's third group member, however, was lagging quite a ways behind the rest.

This Task was one that allowed you to work together with the rest of your group, but naturally, the staff on duty wasn't going to wait for any members that hadn't arrived yet. Making excuses about how close they were wouldn't fly either, even if they were only 30 seconds away.

If this group of first-years were to slip in while Hashimoto waited for his last group member, they would snatch away his spot.

Therefore, once Kamuro got close enough, Hashimoto—

“We’re the only ones participating, just me and her.”

—chose to cut off their last member and register as just the two of them.

The three first-years collapsed to the ground in frustration. It must’ve been truly demoralizing to have put in so much effort to get here only to have it bear no fruit.

Hashimoto, on the other hand, seemed content with this outcome even though he had missed the chance for his entire group to participate. When it came to Tasks that allow you to participate as a group, the more people you had, the better off you’d be. That being said, there was a world of difference between being able to participate as a group and not being able to participate at all.

“S-sorry, I, I co- I couldn’t make it in time...!”

Once she finally arrived, Ninomiya sputtered out an apology as she gasped for breath, but naturally, her fellow group members didn’t seem to hold it against her.

Ninomiya had an A- rating in Academic Ability, which was not to be made light of. Her Physical Ability rating, however, was a D-.

“In any case, good work getting here, Masumi-chan.”

“Oh shut it. Don’t talk to me... It’s hot and I’m all sweaty now, this sucks...!”

Kamuro, who was doing what she could to get her breathing under control, kept at a distance, waving Hashimoto away as he approached her. Her dismissal prompted him to turn toward me instead.

“Come to think of it, this is the first time we’ve run into you this exam, Ayanokōji. So you’re in the area too, eh...? To think you’re going at it alone too, brave stuff there. You doing alright on points?”

“In all honesty, I wouldn’t be shocked if I placed in the bottom ten.”

“Stop pulling my leg. There’s no way a guy who doesn’t think he’s gonna win would choose to take on the exam alone.”

I honestly wasn’t in that great of a spot right now, but I didn’t really feel like showing him my tablet to prove it.

“I hear what you’re saying, but when you end up showing up in the top ten tomorrow... what then?”

He faced me with an inquisitive, somewhat tentative look in his eyes, but there was absolutely no way something like that was going to happen.

“Well whatever, I’m just glad this isn’t a math test. We wouldn’t stand a chance against a genius like you.”

“Alright everyone, the Task will now begin.”

“Whoops, looks like that’s enough chatter.”

Since the last group had registered, the Task began immediately.

By actively seeking out and participating in Tasks, you’d often find yourself pitted against students from your own school year, much like how I was now. However, I had no intention of easing up on them.

Besides, basically every question on the Test was four-option multiple choice, so even if I were to get a relatively high score, I could just say that I had gotten lucky after guessing at random.

Although my attention was focused on my tablet, I would occasionally catch glimpses of Hashimoto peering in my direction with a probing look in his eyes.

He had been suspicious of me from fairly early on compared to most people, so this was understandable.

At this point, I began to tackle the twenty test questions. Honestly, if you were to ask me whether I was good or bad at history as a subject, I’d be inclined to go with the latter. This was because, in the White Room, there wasn’t a particularly strong focus on teaching us history. Be that as it may, I was still familiar enough with the subject to have a grasp of the basics.

Since each question only had four choices, I was able to answer them all correctly without any difficulties.

After a short wait, the results were tallied and the final scores for each group were announced.

I took first place with a full 100 points, second place went to a group of third-year students with 80 points, and third went to Hashimoto and Kamuro with 70.

Once I received my points and food provisions, I immediately set off toward my next destination. But, Hashimoto followed close behind and quickly caught up with me.

“You really kicked my ass back there. To think you were good at history as well.”

“I was surprised too. I got lucky on several questions since they were multiple choice.”

“So it was just pure luck, huh? I find that hard to believe.”

“Well, if you don’t believe me then there’s nothing I can do about that. I’m in a hurry right now, sorry.”

“Which Task are you going for next?”

“I was planning on going for the chemistry Task. What about you?”

I watched as he shot a look back at Kamuro who was following from behind. In all probability, his group had been thinking of doing the same thing.

“What a shame. We’ll be going in different directions.”

Hashimoto was a cunning person. Instead of trying for the same Task as an opponent who was certain to take first place, he would rather shift his sights elsewhere to have a better chance of winning, even if it would take a little longer to get there.

In truth, however, he probably wanted to challenge the same Task as me in order to find out what I was really capable of.

Upon hearing what Hashimoto said, Kamuro let show a look of blatant disgust and reluctance.

After all, having to go to a different Task would use up a lot more stamina.

“See you later, Ayanokōji.”

With Kamuro in tow, Hashimoto ran off, heading toward one of the other Tasks nearby. If he was following Sakayanagi’s instructions, then sooner or later, they would probably join up with Ichinose’s group and form a six-member team.



4.5

Following the history Task, I participated in the chemistry Task and took first place again, racking up an additional five points.

And thanks to that, with only one designated area left to go for the third day, I had accumulated a total of 48 points.

A three-man group that had only been earning Arrival Bonuses, that is, a group that had foregone any Early Bird Bonuses and Tasks, would have a cumulative total of 30 points.

Since there was no way for me to know what the group rankings were like yet, I could only speculate about how well I was doing.

Just before 3:00 PM, I reunited with Nanase. Shortly thereafter, the last designated area of the day was revealed: area I4.

“Are you feeling better?”

“Thanks to your concern earlier, my energy has recovered completely. I’m prepared for anything you might throw at me.”

This was the last thing on our list for the day, so since she was up for it, I figured that we might as well go full steam ahead.

After deciding on a route, we swiftly began to move, our sights set on the Early Bird Bonus.

We walked together in silence for a bit, but our surroundings were vastly different from before.

“You know, I must say... There’s no decent path forward around here at all, is there?”

“Yeah. When I looked at the map, I thought that this part of the island would be easier to traverse than the D or E areas, but I suppose that was overly optimistic.”

Although the forest wasn’t so dense that the canopy above completely blotted out the sun, the ground below was still rough and difficult to get a proper foothold on. The path was such that, if you wanted to push forward in a specific direction, you’d have to constantly veer to the left and right to do so since it wasn’t possible to move in a straight line.

The students who set foot on this part of the island would probably have a pretty hard time with it.

Any attempts at hastily running through would come at the risk of having your foot get caught on something. Worse case scenario, you might even sustain an injury.

“Uhm, Senpai, how do you plan to go about securing more water?”

While I had taken consecutive first place victories in both the history and chemistry Tasks, water wasn't given out as a reward for either of them.

As such, my only remaining supply of drinking water was a single 500ml bottle.

“If you feel that water takes precedence over reaching our designated area, then how about we go to the Task in H3 instead?”

In area H3, a Task had shown up with roughly 50 minutes left until the registration deadline. Not only did it reward groups with points, but potable water as well. Furthermore, it was an entire two liter bottle.

“It'll probably be hotly contested.”

We discussed the idea, but I continued pushing forward without stopping.

Soon, other groups would start to run low on water, just like the two of us.

“Even if we can get water from the Tasks, the opportunities to do so are quite limited.”

On the first day of the exam, 68 Tasks had been held throughout the island.

On the second day, this number went up to 100. And as of today, the third day, there had already been 94.

Although the number of Tasks was increasing day by day, it still wasn't even close to the number of groups out there.

There would be nothing to complain about if it were possible for every group to win once per day. But even if you included the Tasks that rewarded the top three groups, there just weren't enough. After all, many Tasks only offered rewards to the group that came in first place.

Of course, it didn't help that a particularly skilled group could snatch up first place three or four times in a single day either.

Given all of that, it wouldn't be unusual if there were already groups out there that had exhausted their supply of drinking water.

If that happened to your group, you'd be forced to return to the starting area and compete within what was effectively an established safety zone.

You wouldn't be able to earn points normally since you wouldn't be reaching most of your designated areas, and the Tasks that appeared in the nearby area would become incredibly competitive. Forced to fight a losing battle, your situation would only continue to get worse as your points slowly dwindled away.

The closer one's designated area got to the northeast corner of the island, the less control they would have over their ability to immediately rehydrate themselves.

“You have something in mind, don’t you Senpai?”

Nanase drew closer so as to walk side-by-side with me as she asked, her eyes peering over in my direction.

“What makes you think that?”

“The fact that you don’t seem very concerned about our impending lack of water.”

“Maybe I’m just thinking of leaving it up to chance.”

“T-that would be a bit of a problem for me...”

Nanase made a difficult expression, thrown for a bit of a loop by my joke.

“I originally planned on going back to the starting area in the event of an emergency.”

“Our current circumstances don’t really allow us to do that, right? It would take several hours to return to the harbor from here. And it would be even slower if we chose to do so at night.”

Naturally, it wasn't a strategy that could be utilized from anywhere on the island.

The farther away you were from the starting area, the greater the strain would be on your time and stamina.

“Even so, it’s still a strategy I’ve considered implementing.”

“Water is an absolute necessity, but if you do that way, you might end up getting hurt. I don’t think it’s a very wise idea, not by any stretch of the imagination.”

Her concerns here were definitely justified.

“And yet, you’re telling me this dangerous idea is the only one you’ve been considering, Ayanokōji-senpai?”

“If you look at the rules of this special exam, it’s clear that the only method to get more water is to purchase it at double the price back at the starting area or win it by completing a Task.”

“That… Yes, I suppose you’re right about that.”

“And between those two methods, the only truly reliable method of getting safe, potable water is to buy it with points.”

“Safe, potable water huh…?”

“Outside of that, you’d have to rely on natural sources of some sort, be it seawater, rainwater, or river water. This is allegedly an uninhabited island, but we weren’t really informed about the island’s history. If people used to live here, then it’s possible that the water has been contaminated.”

Of course, it was hard to imagine that the school would have us come here if that were the case, but there was no way to be sure.

“As a one-man group, if I were to get sick, I’d be done for. I’m not going to do anything that would put me at risk.”

“Forcing yourself to move across the island at night is already more than risky enough.”

“If it fails, then that’s that.”

“…So you’re saying that, if it’s you, you won’t fail?”

In any case, it was meaningless to continue talking about this at this point.

After all, from the moment I allowed Nanase to accompany me, I no longer had any intention of going through with the idea.

“It’s a bit late to be bringing this up now, but I do have a way to utilize seawater or river water. If necessary, we can sterilize our own drinking water

by boiling it in a pot that I've prepared.”

Upon hearing this, she let out a sigh of relief with her hand on her chest.

After walking together for a while longer, Nanase eventually caught sight of the flowing river and hurriedly took out her tablet.

“Uhm, Senpai, it seems we've gone off course. We need to go further to the east.”

We were supposed to be heading toward area I4, but we were currently moving toward the center of area H4 instead.

If we wanted to get to I4 as quickly as possible, then we would need to go east, just as Nanase had said.

“It's fine. We aren't aiming for the Early Bird Bonus this time.”

“Eh—?”

Though she had her doubts about what was driving my decision, Nanase followed along.

Eventually, we arrived near the center of area H4, where we encountered Sakagami-sensei, hard at work setting up a Task site.

It seemed that my predictions so far were right after all. The site was exactly where I had thought it'd be.

“Hello.”

“Oh... Ayanokōji?”

Although Sakagami-sensei looked surprised when I called out to him, it went without saying that somebody would have to set up a Task before it officially started, so there was always a possibility of coming across students early like this.

“Is it alright if we're the first ones to sign up, Sakagami-sensei?”

“Yes.”

“This is great Senpai. We're lucky to have found another Task before it showed on our tablets.”

“Lucky indeed.”

Sakagami-sensei didn't seem to have the time to talk with us, and quickly got back to the construction of the site.

After waiting for a few minutes, the clock struck 3:30.

"Well then, you can register for the Task now."

As soon as I heard this, I immediately approached Sakagami-sensei and reasserted my intention to participate.

Nanase promptly followed suit after I finished the registration process on my tablet.

"Though, I wonder what type of Task this is?"

Just as Nanase was about to open up the map to try and answer the question herself, Sakagami-sensei spoke.

"This is a Task where you earn water according to the order in which you arrive, a race, essentially. Ayanokōji, having come in first, will receive 2 liters of water and three points. As you came in second, Nanase, you'll receive 1.5 liters of water and two points."

"That means— We've already cleared the Task haven't we? ...What a surprise."

Sakagami-sensei went and retrieved the water we had won and presented it to each of us.

"Luck is also an extension of your abilities, you two. Be proud."

"...We are truly fortunate."

Nanase seemed somewhat embarrassed as she bowed her head and accepted the water.

"With this, we won't have to think about drinking water. Well, at least for a while."

"Say... Could I perhaps confirm something with you?"

Not long after we left the Task site, I looked back at Nanase who had stopped to ask me something.

"What is it?"

“If I’m not mistaken, I believe that you’re someone who can aim much higher, Ayanokōji-senpai. Be it designated areas or Tasks, I’m sure you’re capable of scoring quite a large number of points.”

She was looking to confirm what had been weighing on her mind as we traveled together these past two days.

“I never planned on exerting myself during the early stages of the exam. Since I’m on my own, it would all be over if I were to get sick or injured due to negligence.”

“But, with the way things are going now, aren’t you afraid that you’ll just continue to fall behind the other groups? No matter what, time efficiency is important. It isn’t something that you can work to overcome in a single day.”

She was saying that tirelessly working to rack up points was the only real approach available.

And as an approach, it was a steadfast one that the more prominent groups would undoubtedly look to implement.

“Let’s just say that this is only one part of my strategy.”

“A strategy… that involves deliberately holding yourself back when it comes to earning points?”

I nodded and set off walking again. This wasn’t something that I wanted to go into more detail about with her.

Even though we were traveling together, that didn’t change the fact that our different school years made us natural enemies. Moreover, there were many mysteries surrounding her as well.

“Anyway, there’s still a chance for us to get the Early Bird Bonus at the designated area. Let’s hurry.”

“Y-yes.”

Nanase hurriedly scrambled to catch up with me as I left, and together, we quickly made our way to area I4.



4.6

Our streak of good luck didn't last long. We arrived at area I4, but as one might expect, we didn't receive the Early Bird Bonus. We weren't fortunate enough to come across any prospective Tasks either.

Although there was still plenty to be desired, the curtain fell on the third day of the exam.

“Should we keep walking toward the riverside?”

“Yeah. The terrain around here isn't the best, and there aren't many suitable places to spend the night either. Let's keep going.”

“Okay!”

We cut a path south through the forest, pushing forward with our sights set on the river’s edge.

After twenty minutes, we finally reached our destination.

“Want to camp somewhere around here?”

“That’s fine with me.”

Just as the two of us came to an agreement, I heard a voice somewhere off in the distance.

“Heeey-! Ayanokōji-!”

A familiar voice, coming from a certain someone who was calling out to me from the other side of the river.

It was Ike, who was standing there with a bunch of dead branches in his arms.

“Ayanokōji-! Nanase-! I thought it was you two-! So this is where you guys’ve been-!”

He drew closer to the river, smiling with his pearly whites on full display.

“What an amazing coincidence-! Are you camping around here tonight, Ike-senpai-!?”

We were forced to raise our voices as we spoke, futilely trying to drown out the sound of the river running in between us. After shouting back and forth like this for a bit, Ike finally sent the signal for us to just join him on the other side. At his instruction, Nanase and I went upstream along the river.

Before long, we came upon a land bridge near the south side of H4 and met up with him.

Sudō and Hondō were also present, having come over after hearing our voices.

“Hold up, what was your last designated area today, you two...?”

“I4.”

Sudō exchanged glances with his fellow group members, surprised by my response. Apparently, their last area of the day had been I4 as well.

“Man, what’re the odds!”

This morning, we had all started out in the same location, and surprisingly, we ended the day in the same place as well. Although, given that I had run into Sudō several times now, there could be some sort of built-in tendency for our Tables to lead us to the same places despite being different.

At this point, we all decided to camp together again, just like we had yesterday.

Since we were free for the rest of the day, we all went and did our own thing for a bit.

Of course, we still worked together when necessary since we were all part of the same campsite.

I told Nanase that I was going for a stroll and went off into the forest on my own. I didn’t have a particularly deep reason for doing this or anything, but if I had to come up with one, it would be to take a look around the area for other students. After all, with the exception of Nanase’s group, I still hadn’t come across any others that seemed to have the same Table as me.

I returned to the campsite around half an hour later, just in time to watch Ike light the campfire he had been working on.

“You’re quite resourceful.”

“Well, you gotta do whatcha can to help out. You know how we were like, told beforehand that we’d be doin’ an exam out on an island this time? I reckon most people went and looked up how to handle this kinda stuff ahead of time cuz of that.”

With his eyes fixed on the campfire in front of him, Ike continued.

“But, well, there’s a difference between knowledge and experience, right? How should I put it... If you could do something just cuz you knew about it, nothing would be hard at all.”

It’s true that you can’t always replicate something just by reading a couple of articles or watching a video about it.

You'd only be able to find out what you're capable of by trying it out for yourself.

"Ah, there you are, Ayanokōji-senpai."

"What's up?"

"You were gone for a while, so I went to look for you."

Nanase turned her gaze over toward the forest as she spoke.

From the sound of it, we had just missed each other when I came back.

"Alrighty guys, I think it's about time we had some grub."

"Okay."

Ike had a broad grin on his face as he went to retrieve a bucket from over by his tent.

And then, he proudly showed us what was inside.

"Wow, amazing...!"

The bucket contained several fish that Ike had apparently caught at some point.

"I had some time to kill back when my group was by the ocean, so I took the opportunity to catch a few. Let's chow down!"

In somewhat of a hurry, Ike started preparing dinner.

At a glance, he seemed to be carrying on in good spirits, but it was obvious that he was just pretending.

However, he seemed to be taking on the uninhabited island exam with a far more level head than I thought he would, so for now, I guess there was nothing to worry about.

"Something smells really good over here—"

A group of three that happened to be passing through the area approached us, perhaps drawn in by the appetizing scent of the fish Ike was grilling. We were camping out in the open since we were next to the river, so it wasn't surprising that they had seen us.

What was completely unexpected, however, was the identity of one of the three students in the group.

“Ah-!”

A girl, the second one to approach us, unintentionally let her voice slip and cried out upon making eye contact with me.

“What wrong, Karuizawa-san?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just, like, shocked ‘bout them grilling fish is all.”

She spoke, trying what she could to cover up her surprise about coincidentally meeting up with me like this.

The exam had only gone on for three days when I had my first encounter with Kei, but even so, she seemed to be doing fine so far.

Her two fellow group members were from Class 2-A.

Their names were Shimazaki Ikkei and Fukuyama Shinobu, and they were both very academically gifted students. While, as a whole, their group was rather lacking when it came to physical strength and endurance, they certainly had the potential to claim the top spot in any written test-based Tasks they managed to register for.

“Hey, why don’t we camp here too? I think Ike-kun’d be willing to treat us.”

“Haah!? Why should I treat you!?”

“C’mon, it’s not like you’ll run outta fish.”

“There’ll be less for us if you guys eat them! No way!”

Ike didn’t really like Kei in the first place, so he blatantly refused.

However, Sudō pulled him aside and muttered a few words into his ear.

“Dude, what’s the harm? She might know somethin’ ‘bout Shinohara.”

Upon hearing that, Ike went silent.

He still hadn’t been able to meet Shinohara on the island yet.

And since Kei was a classmate, it was reasonable to assume that she’d remember if she had seen Shinohara somewhere before.

“I-it can’t be helped! I guess I’ll just have to prepare for three more people!”

“For real? Sweet! It’s a good thing I tried asking.”

Kei was only half-joking when she brought up the idea, but somehow, it led to her camping together with us.

That said, preparing food would take time.

It would probably be a while before Ike would finish grilling the additional fish.

I announced that I’d be going into the forest for a bit, with Kei doing the same not too long afterward.

Of course, we didn’t go in so far that we could get lost; just enough to make sure the others wouldn’t be able to see or hear us. We met at a fairly large tree and sat down together with our backs up against the trunk.



"You seem to be doing alright."

Kei's group had secured 37 points over these past three days.

At least for now, they weren't doing all that badly.

"I'm just relying on the other two, mostly. How about you, Kiyotaka?"

"I'm doing well, all things considered."

"Well, since it's you we're talking about, you'll be fine for sure."

Kei let out a noise as she stretched.

"Anywho, I just wish this exam would end already... I can't believe we've still got 11 more days of this."

Considering the number of days we had remaining, there was no denying that we were still in the early phase of the exam.

"By the way, has anything happened these past few days?"

"You mean [that person] you told me about, right? Hmm, nope, nothing comes to mind."

Before the special exam started, I asked Kei to go check on a certain something for me.

I did this in consideration of the possibility that the White Room student would try and come in contact with Kei.

However, it didn't seem like anything had happened so far.

"Just in case, I've noted down everybody I've come in contact with on my tablet."

She opened up the notepad app on her tablet and showed me a list of all the different students and groups she'd interacted with over the past three days.

It primarily consisted of second-years, with essentially no contact with first or third-years.

As expected, they wouldn't let themselves get caught that easily.

"By. The. Way."

"Hm?"

She suddenly leaned in very close to my face and peered into my eyes.

“I heard that first-year girl back at the campsite has been traveling around with you, Kiyotaka.”

“Word travels fast, it seems.”

“When I asked Ike-kun, he told me immediately though? Wait, that’s not the point here!”

Even I, who was ignorant when it came to love, understood that a girlfriend would be concerned if they were to find out that their boyfriend had been willingly traveling together with another girl. Even if I were to list out a bunch of reasons behind the decision, I was fairly confident that I wouldn’t be able to convince her.

I could talk of how Nanase might be involved in the expulsion plan against me or how she might have a connection to the White Room, but...

For Kei, things like that wouldn’t matter at all.

At the end of the day, she would still be extremely upset and uncomfortable with the fact that I was working together with another girl.

I drew in close to her face as I squeezed her hand in mine.

“Are you worried? That I’m spending all this time alone with another girl?”

“Wait wait wait, w-what? I’m not, like, worried or a... Of course I’m worried!”

Kei tried acting tough at first, but she quickly dropped the act and confessed.

“I’m just traveling together with Nanase in order to successfully get through the special exam. That’s it.”

“...Really?”

“Yeah. It goes without saying that I have no other intentions with her.”

“I believe you, but, but still like, when I think of you being alone with another girl... I hate it.”

Even though there was nothing between Nanase and me, as my girlfriend, it was only natural for Kei to feel anxious about it.

In this situation, no amount of smooth-talking would be able to ease her heart.

“Kei.”

When I called out her name, she turned and looked at me, her lips ever-so-slightly tapered into a defiant pout.

I took full advantage of this opening to lean in and pressed my lips into hers, smothering the pout away.

They must have only touched for less than a second.

The sensation of her lips, my first kiss, was far softer than I had imagined.

“Hu...h?”

A muddled noise leaked out from her mouth, her mind still processing what had happened.

In truth, I’d have liked to enjoy the moment for a while longer, but we were currently in the midst of a special exam on an uninhabited island.

It wouldn’t be surprising if somebody were to pass by while we were sitting here.

“Wa? Huh? I, J-just now... a k-kiss? ...Eh? Eh!?”

“Have faith in me and wait for now, okay?”

At this, Kei absentmindedly nodded her head like a mechanical doll.

If she was distraught about the fact that I was traveling together with Nanase, then the fastest way to get around it was to give her something more intense to think about instead.

“The others may start to suspect something if we’re gone too long. You should head back.”

With that, I decided to have Kei, who was still in a daze, head back to the campsite.



Chapter 5: The Invisible Enemy

It was just before 5:00 AM, around the time when the morning sun began to rise into the sky.

While most students would probably still be asleep, I woke up to a strange sound coming from outside my tent.

It was a sound so subtle, so indistinct that, for a moment, I thought I might just be hearing things.

I poked my head out of my tent to investigate further. And, although it was faint, I could definitely still hear it.

A few seconds later, Nanase peeked her head out of her tent as well, having apparently been woken up by the sound, just as I had.

“Can you hear something?”

“Yes... it’s faint, but I can hear an electronic noise of some sort.”

Perhaps due to its low proximity, the sound was so soft to the point that it almost blended in with the surroundings.

It was possible for it to be an alarm coming from a tablet, but this particular sound had been going on for far too long for that to be the case.

“Do you think it might be an Emergency Alert?”

“It’s definitely possible.”

I emerged from my tent before once again straining my ears to analyze the sound.

It sounded similar to what Mashima-sensei had played for us during his explanation back on the cruise ship.

But from what I could hear, there was a slight echo to it, perhaps because it was coming from so deep within the forest.

“It doesn’t sound like it’s going to stop any time soon, does it?”

It had already been over a minute since I first noticed the sound. Warning Alerts were set up to go off twice, but both times they would be cut off after only five seconds. The only alert set to go off continuously like this was the Emergency Alert.

“If I’m not mistaken, after five minutes—”

“The school will locate you through the GPS in your watch and send help to your position?”

If they were in a situation where they couldn’t afford to turn off the alert, then they could be in quite a precarious position.

“Couldn’t we go find them before the school arrives?”

“Why would we do that? Although it’s not pitch black outside anymore, the visibility is still poor. And if we’re careless, we might run into danger ourselves.”

“Do you need a reason to go help someone?”

She pierced me with eyes that were far too sincere to be described as angry.

I could tell that, no matter what I chose to do, she wouldn’t back down, even if it meant going off to help on her own.

“If we’re going to take action, it’d be better to have more people on board. Let’s wake up Sudō and the others.”

“Right.”

We decided to wake up Sudō, Ike, and Hondō, who were still asleep in their tents.

After coercing the three of them, all still half-asleep, out of their tents, we explained the situation and began to form a plan.

Our field of vision would be fairly limited inside the dim forest ahead of us, and without a light of some sort, it would be tricky to find a proper foothold on the rough terrain. As such, we would have to carefully light the path ahead of us as we pushed forward.

Between the five of us, we had a total of three flashlights. Nanase and I both had one, and so did Sudō’s group.

It wasn't enough, but we'd have to make do with what we had.

Other than that, we also decided to take a tablet with us to ensure that we didn't get lost.

"Well, I guess I'll lead the way."

Spurred on by the circumstances at play, Ike volunteered to take the lead. Although, he didn't exactly seem very enthusiastic about it.

"I'm sorry, but could you please refrain?"

"Eh? W-why?"

"Given that it's still fairly dark out, I cannot allow a technically unreliable person to take the lead. The job should be left to someone with good crisis management skills and the discernment to select an optimal route."

"Well, but ya know... Outta all of us, I think I'm prolly the best one to—"

"Ayanokōji-senpai, could I ask you to lead us? I'd be willing to follow your judgment without hesitation."

Nanase cut Ike off, asking me to pave the way without even bothering to hear out his justification. After all, given the circumstances, every second counted.

Coming up with some sort of excuse to try and convince him would be nothing but a waste of time.

"Nanase, Ike, and I will each take a flashlight. Nanase will be behind me, followed by Sudō and Hondō. Ike, I'll have you take up the rear."

With our formation decided upon, I immediately began walking toward the source of the alert.

"No...? Ah, I mean, that's not a problem, but... Are you sure you'll be alright, Ayanokōji?"

Just like that, Ike had been left in the dust, unable to fully come to grips with what was happening.

"Don't worry 'bout that. Just hurry up and follow along Kanji. Ayanokōji'll prolly be fine."

Sudō responded in my stead, forcefully grabbing Ike by the arm to get him to start walking.

Like that, the five of us set off together.

“There’s a real possibility of getting injured moving around like this, isn’t there?”

Nanase provided casual commentary as we advanced through the forest.

“Gosh, why the heck are we movin’ around so early in the mornin’?”

Hondō voiced his complaints as he rubbed his sleepy eyes.

“It ain’t all that strange. If the next designated area were super far away or somethin’, we’d have to start moving early like this in order to try’n get closer.”

For the most part, the school had chosen designated areas with some level of consideration in place for how long it would take most groups to get there. With the existence of randomly designated areas, however, there were plenty of scenarios that could force groups to take action early in the morning or late at night.

Little by little, we approached the source of the alert. Even now, it was still blaring throughout the forest.

The Emergency Alert was gradually growing louder and louder.

No, there was something more to it than that...

“If someone’s there, respond to us-!”

Sudō shouted out in the direction the sound was coming from, but nobody responded. There didn’t seem to be any movement in the area either.

“Why aren’t they sayin’ anything...? D-do you think this might be the work of a g-ghost?”

The sound had a certain ominous vibe to it due to the location we were in, and perhaps because of that, Hondō began to tremble.

“I think it just means that they’re in a situation where they can’t even call out for help.”

“If that’s the case, then they might be in a real bad spot.”

Either way, the only way to find out for sure was to keep pushing toward the source of the sound.

We held back the urge to speed up our pace, choosing instead to err on the side of caution and carefully light the path forward as we continued to advance further into the depths of the forest.

“Everyone, don’t you think the sound is a little... peculiar?”

Nanase, who was trailing behind me, pointed out the unusual, out-of-place nature of the sound.

“Peculiar? Well, it certainly sounds eerie. That’s prolly just cuz we’ve been sloggin’ through this dark-ass forest though...”

“No, that’s not what I—”

“You’re talking about the frequency, right Nanase?”

I looked over my shoulder and replied to her, to which she responded with a decisive nod of the head.

“At first, I thought that the noise was simply echoing because it was coming from deep within the forest. But now that we’re closer, I realized that that’s not the case. Rather, I’m fairly certain that it’s actually two different sounds.”

An Emergency Alert would only go off when someone was in an exceptionally severe condition.

So, the notion that two were going off at the same time wasn’t something any of us had been expecting.

However, now that we were so close, it was clear.

The definite rhythmic sound of two Emergency Alerts was blaring out from what seemed to be the same location at about the same time.

It had only seemed like there was an echo due to the fact that they were ever so slightly out of sync with each other.

“Scary... Are you guys... Are you guys sure it’s safe to keep going...?”

As the terrain ahead gradually began to incline upward, Hondō began to voice even more concerns.

Though, given that we were approaching a location where two people had been incapacitated in quick succession, his fear wasn't unreasonable.

Soon, the sound became so incredibly loud that it seemed like we had finally arrived at our destination.

We temporarily came to a stop and began to comb the area with our flashlights in search of the source.

Not long thereafter, we found the figure of a certain boy collapsed on the ground.

"Is that... Komiya!?"

The first one to recognize the boy's identity was Sudō.

He wasn't wrong. It was indeed Class 2-B's Komiya.

"O-oi! The hell is this? P-pull yourself together man! Komiya!"

Sudō, seemingly spurred on by the bonds he had forged as a fellow member of the basketball club, rushed over to the fallen Komiya in a panic.

"Senpai..."

"Yeah."

Just as we had predicted, it wasn't just one alert, but two.

A second alert was sounding off from someone lying several meters away from where Komiya had collapsed. The person in question was Kinoshita Minori, a fellow classmate from Class 2-B. Although Nanase seemed momentarily baffled by the peculiar situation we had stumbled upon, she quickly rushed over to Kinoshita's side.

In order to try and piece together what had happened, I left Komiya and Kinoshita to the others as I went to survey the rest of the surrounding area. It weighed on my mind that I couldn't find any trace of their third group member, Shinohara, nor any of their backpacks or other equipment.

"Oi Komiya! What happened to Shinohara!?"

"There's no use, he's not waking up at all..."

I listened in as Sudō and Ike spoke to each other about Komiya's condition.

They then manually turned off the Emergency Alerts, returning the forest to a state of tranquil silence.

“Kinoshita-senpai won’t regain consciousness either. But, judging from all the dirt and scratches on her jersey, I’m afraid that...”

As Nanase’s words trailed off, she turned and looked at the steep slope of the nearby cliff several meters in height.

After assessing Komiya’s condition, Sudō nodded along in agreement. They seemed to think that one of them had lost their footing and fell down the slope somehow, while the other had probably been dragged down as well after trying to save them.

I drew closer to the slope to investigate, only to find that there were clear signs that somebody had recently come tumbling down it.

In other words, it was safe to assume that the somebody in question (or somebodies) were Komiya and Kinoshita.

The visibility in this area was so poor that it was entirely possible that they could’ve lost their sense of direction. Moreover, the humidity was high and the ground was somewhat damp, making slipping a very likely possibility.

I pointed my light down toward my feet. The ground was a bit muddy in some places, so depending on where I stepped, my footprints would be left behind.

By shining my light on the pathway, I could make out two distinct sets of footprints from when Sudō and Nanase had rushed over to where Komiya and Kinoshita had ended up after their fall. Alongside those, however, were faint traces of what appeared to be a third, faded set of footprints.

The footprints drew close to where Komiya and Kinoshita were laying, but abruptly turned back.

While it wasn’t exactly clear if they were related, this meant there was a possibility that someone else had been here recently.

The thought that the footprints could’ve belonged to Shinohara crossed my mind, but it was hard to imagine that she would leave without trying to help them.

Plus, even if she had gone to find help, she still would've rushed over to them to try and confirm their wellbeing first.

Given that, I compared the size of the footprints to my own shoes and found that they were on the smaller side. My shoe size was 26cm, but the mystery footprints, on the other hand, appeared to be 1.5 to 2cm smaller than that. Although I couldn't completely rule out the possibility that they had been left by a boy, it seemed much more likely that they had been made by a girl.

Suddenly sensing an unknown presence off to the northwest, I kept my light trained on the ground and discreetly looked in its direction.

However, the world around me was covered in a layer of darkness and lain thick with trees, so I wasn't able to see anyone there.

I wondered if there was some reason for them, whoever it was, to feel guilty about not approaching us.

Ultimately, I chose to disregard the presence for the time being and went to check the area around Kinoshita's feet instead.

I figured that there was a small chance that Kinoshita might've walked around the area before she lost consciousness.

However, I found no evidence to suggest that she had been walking in the nearby vicinity.

In any case, it was probably safe to assume that the footprints I had found belonged to an unidentified third party.

Kinoshita's face and clothes were dirty and covered in various scrapes and scratches just like Komiya, but there didn't seem to be any major external injuries that I could see.

"Everything else aside, the problem here is what's going to happen after the teachers show up...?"

The full extent of their injuries was unknown, but there was clearly no way for them to avoid being checked out by a medical team. If they had really lost consciousness after falling off the slope, a thorough medical examination would be necessary, and retirement would be all but guaranteed.

They probably wouldn't have enough time to wake up and try to gloss over what had happened with a lie of some sort.

If Shinohara was in a similar situation someplace else, then Komiya's group would have all three people retire from the exam at the same time.

And then, given that none of them had an 'Insurance Card', expulsion would naturally be right around the corner.

"Shinohara-!!"

Ike shouted Shinohara's name into the depths of the dimly-lit forest.

If she was in the area, then she should've been able to respond to him, or at least send some kind of signal.

The fact that she hadn't meant that it was possible that she had gotten caught up in some kind of accident, much like Komiya and Kinoshita.

Ike was about to run off to try and find her, but I hurriedly grabbed him before he could.

"If you go charging into the forest without a tablet then you'll just get yourself lost."

"T-that's, I know that but still!"

"I understand that you're anxious. After all, it is strange that she's not responding despite your shouting."

"Y-yeah. That's why we gotta hurry up and find her!"

"However, if she were seriously injured, her Emergency Alert would most likely be going off like Komiya and Kinoshita. Right?"

Apart from the two Emergency Alerts from earlier, the forest was dead silent.

"That's... that's... Well, you're not wrong..."

"And since Shinohara doesn't seem to be anywhere nearby, we can assume that there's a low chance that she's sustained a major injury."

"So, you're sayin' she might be lost...?"

Of course, that was definitely a possibility here as well.

“Ugh... guh...!”

While everyone was baffled, unable to fully grasp the situation at hand, Komiya suddenly let out a weak, stifled groan.

“Komiya! Can you hear me Komiya!?”

Sudō immediately called out to him, and he seemed to respond to this, meekly grabbing hold of the arm of Sudō’s jacket.

Apparently, Komiya had managed to regain consciousness.

A feeling of relief began to wash over us, but when Komiya finally opened his mouth to speak, that relief was just as quickly washed away.

“M-my leg... it hurts...!”

From the look of it, Komiya’s right leg was just fine, but his left was another matter. Anguish and agony showed on his face whenever he tried to move it.

“Your fuckin’ leg man...!”

Judging from the way Sudō was shaking, I could deduce Komiya’s condition without needing to take a look for myself.

In order to properly assess the situation, Nanase took a closer look at Kinoshita’s condition as well.

“It isn’t just Komiya-senpai, Kinoshita-senpai’s left leg seems to be in terrible shape as well. Worst case scenario, it may even be broken.”

Not only had the two of them fallen off the same slope, but they had both seriously injured their left leg as well.

I could’ve personally confirmed the extent of their injuries by feeling around the affected area myself, but very little good would come out of doing so at this point.

“If they have any bone contusions or fractures they’ll be disqualified, no questions asked.”

The fourth day of the exam hadn’t even officially started yet, so it was only natural to assume that nobody had retired so far. By that same logic, it stood to reason that their disqualification, and ensuing expulsion, was

practically set in stone. Even if Shinohara was safe and sound, it would be difficult for her to accumulate a meaningful number of points on her own. Moreover, she herself was currently nowhere to be found.

Be that as it may, there had to be more going on here than what meets the eye...

What's more, there was still a strange presence watching over us from the northwest.

And yet, they didn't make any moves, simply choosing to keep their distance instead. At first they kept their presence exceedingly faint, but as I continued to play dumb it gradually became more pronounced. It was as if they were daring me to pay attention to them already.

At this point, Nanase suddenly left Kinoshita's side and came over to me before whispering into my ear:

“Something seems a bit off, don't you think?”

Sudō and the others probably hadn't caught onto it, but there was definitely something weird about this entire situation.

“You're right. They might've gotten caught up in trouble of some sort.”

It wouldn't be that strange if this had only happened to one person, but the fact that they were both in the exact same condition was definitely cause for concern.

“Komiya. Can you remember exactly what happened at the time of the accident?”

While I could continue to theorize on my own, doing that would only get me so far. Therefore, I figured it would be better to ask Komiya outright instead.

After all, I probably wouldn't have the time to ask him once the school faculty members arrived.

“I-I don't know... it just happened out of nowhere. I suddenly felt something strike my calf and the next thing I knew I was rolling down the slope... Agh...!”

His face twisted in pain as he once again tried to move his leg.

“Your calf was hit by something?”

“M-maybe? I don’t really remember very well... Sorry.”

His memory of the moment when the accident took place was vague and fuzzy, but you couldn’t really hold that against him.

“Kinoshita fell as well and ended up beside you. Do you know anything about what happened to her?”

“Eh...? N-no, I have no idea. Why is Kinoshita here...? If I remember correctly, when it happened we...”

Judging from Komiya’s reaction, it didn’t seem like Kinoshita had been the first one to fall down the slope.

So, at the very least, I could assume that Komiya had fallen first.

“That’s right...! Satsuki, where’s Satsuki!? Did she fall too!?”

Enduring the pain as his memories came flooding back to him, Komiya cried out Shinohara’s name through gritted teeth. Ike’s expression darkened when he heard Komiya call Shinohara by her given name, but he knew that this was no time to be upset over something so trivial.

“Shinohara is missing. Were you guys not moving together?”

“Satsuki was— Agh...!!”

His left leg seemed to hurt so badly that it was difficult for him to keep talking properly.

“You don’t have to force yourself.”

“N-no, I’m worried about Satsuki... Sorry Sudō, but can you help me sit up...?”

“Y-yeah. But don’t overdo it.”

With Sudō’s support, Komiya slowly managed to prop himself up.

“Komiya, where’s Shinohara!?”

Ike shouted out a question of his own. Naturally, he was far more concerned about Komiya’s group than the rest of us.

In fact, his inability to contain himself was so obvious that Komiya probably took note of it as well.

“...I don’t know... We... We were trying to move quickly...”

Komiya continued with his explanation, glimpses of pain and anguish occasionally flashing across his face.

“Then, we were waiting... for Satsuki to come back...”

“You were waiting? What? I don’t understand what you’re sayin’ here!”

Komiya was struggling to provide proper context for what he was saying, so he shook his head a few times to try and focus his mind.

He then slowly sifted through his memories as he tried to set up a proper timeline for us.

“Let me start from the beginning. We were in a hurry because we missed the last two designated areas yesterday. After talking it out last night, we ultimately decided to try and close the distance early this morning... It was still fairly dark when we set out, so we were keeping tabs on each other as we traveled, but... at some point, Satsuki said she needed to go to the restroom, so she split off for a bit while Kinoshita and I waited for her to finish. Of course, we were using our flashlights to keep track of each other...”

He had calmed down quite a bit compared to back when he first woke up. Even though he was fraught with pain, it was obvious just how worried he was about Shinohara.

“While we waited for Satsuki to come back, the two of us were looking down the slope over there and talking about whether we could use it as a shortcut. Just as I was thinking that it’d be pretty difficult to make our way down—”

“That’s when something hit your calf, yes?”

Having anticipated where he was going with this, Nanase cut in, prompting Komiya to nod in response.

“I remember it hurt like hell... But the pain didn’t last long ‘cause the next thing I knew I was rolling down the slope... And then, when I came to, Sudō and the rest of you guys were here.”

Human limbs are by no means invincible. It's not uncommon for them to unexpectedly sustain injuries at a moment's notice.

If Komiya had been the only one involved in this incident, then it would be simple enough to conclude that the pain of the impact had knocked him off his feet and sent him falling down the slope he was looking at.

However, the fact that the same thing had happened to Kinoshita as well made it seem like I wasn't quite seeing the full picture yet.

Did she suddenly freak out upon seeing Komiya start to collapse and end up falling with him when she tried to help...?

Whatever the reason may be, the mysterious set of eyes watching over us and the unidentified set of footprints were definitely cause for concern.

As I pondered about it, I suddenly heard movement come from the top of the slope.

We all simultaneously turned our flashlights in the direction it had come from, but there didn't appear to be anyone there.

It could've just been a small animal or something given how faint of a sound it had been, but...

“Shinohara!?”

Ike had only just begun to regain his composure, but when he heard the sound, he immediately started running toward the slope.

“Oi Kanji! Hold on! It's dangerous!”

The cries of his best friend fell on deaf ears, left only to echo throughout the dark forest.

“Senpai, it's too dangerous to let Ike-senpai go off on his own!”

“I know. I'll leave the tablet with you. Wait here until we get back.”

I was tempted to quickly go running after him, but Ike had his sights set on climbing what basically amounted to the face of a cliff.

A slight delay wouldn't be that much of a problem.

“But won't you be in trouble if you get lost without the tablet, Senpai?”

“It'll just get in the way of climbing the slope.”

Besides, climbing the slope with the tablet wasn't the only risk at play here. In the unlikely event that something happened, it would be riskier for me to drop the tablet and lose it altogether. By simply leaving it with Nanase, it wouldn't be impossible for her to come find us if we got lost or something went wrong either.

Once Nanase took the tablet, I immediately went after Ike.

Ike was eagerly clawing his way up toward the source of the sound, but his movements were dangerous. By the time I finally caught up to him, I decided to show him a suitable path to navigate up the slope. It was clear as day that he would put up a fight if I tried to get him to come back with me.

“A-Ayanokōji!?”

At first he probably thought that I had come to stop him as he was surprised when I quickly climbed past him. As a result, this surprise caused him to panic and try what he could to catch up with me.

And in turn, panic gave rise to negligence. He stopped paying close attention to his footing and began to slip off of the slope.

“Oh, ah...!?”

I quickly reached down and grabbed Ike by the arm and helped to pull him back up.

“Are you going to calm down and follow me or not? If you can't then I'll take you back by force.”

“...G-got it. I'll chill out and follow you so... please don't take me back...”

Content with his response, I nodded and proceeded to lead the way up the slope.

Although visibility was still poor, little by little the sun was beginning to light the path ahead.

We took our time to climb safely, and once we reached the top, we came upon a narrow point that Komiya and Kinoshita had apparently fallen from.

Ike was on his hands and knees as he tried to catch his breath, but his eyes were frantically scanning the surrounding area in search of Shinohara.

I took a cursory look around the area myself, but there was nobody to be found.

“Shinohara-!!”

He called out Shinohara’s name with all the strength he could muster, desperately hoping that his voice would somehow reach her this time.

There didn’t seem to be very many solid pathways, so it wasn’t impossible to imagine that Shinohara had fallen at some other point along the slope when she tried to get down.

At this point, on the ground, I discovered three different backpacks that appeared to belong to Komiya, Kinoshita, and Shinohara.

As far as I could tell, there wasn’t any evidence to suggest that someone had gone through them without permission.

The three of them had probably decided to leave their bags here until Shinohara had gotten back from the bathroom.

I could picture the scene of Komiya and Kinoshita standing here talking with each other about whether or not they should try to head down the slope.

“Dammit, she’s not here either!”

Ike struck the ground in frustration, dismayed about the lack of a response. But then, at that very moment...

“...Ike? Is that you?”

Shinohara slowly stood up from within a thicket of bushes off in the distance.

“Shinohara? Shinohara!!!”

When she finally caught sight of the two of us, she immediately came running over, stumbling over her own feet as she did.

She then threw herself into Ike’s chest, her body shaking and tears streaming down her face.

“Y-you’ve been here this whole time?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Then why didn’t you call out sooner!? Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been!?”

“B-because...”

Having seemingly recalled something hard to swallow, Shinohara began to tremble even more than before.

With this, Ike must’ve understood that she wasn’t hiding due to ill-intentions.

“K-Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san, where are they!?”

“They’re both seriously injured at the bottom of the slope, what the hell happened to them?”

If her fellow group members had simply tripped and fallen down the slope, then Shinohara would’ve been frantic about trying to get down and help them.

However, given that she didn’t do that and chose to single-mindedly hide in the bushes instead, something was definitely amiss here.

She turned pale upon hearing that they were seriously injured, and after a moment, she opened her trembling lips.

“I-I couldn’t move... I was scared, so scared... a-and... I saw...”

“You saw? Saw what?”

“...Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san... Somebody... I saw somebody push them off...”

According to Shinohara, this wasn’t just an accident.

“Somebody? Who the hell was it!?”

“I-I don’t know! I really don’t! ...But why, why would they do such a thing!?”

Ike clenched his teeth in frustration, watching as Shinohara collapsed to the ground and broke down in tears.

Essentially, she had been afraid that this ‘somebody’ would find her too, so she hid, putting forth her full effort to erase all traces of her presence and shut out the sound of her surroundings.

That being the case, it was no wonder that she didn't immediately try to rush to her friends or respond to Ike's calls. Although there was no conclusive evidence that what she was saying here was correct, I didn't think Shinohara was the type of person who would conjure up a fabricated story like this.

However, it would be a huge undertaking for 'someone' to have snuck up behind them without being noticed.

Furthermore, since they'd give away their position if they used a flashlight, the perpetrator must've acted with a poor field of vision as well.

"Do you remember seeing anyone since last night? If there's someone behind this, it would make any groups camping nearby into prime suspects."

I decided to redirect the conversation a bit and asked Shinohara a question instead.

"I think after 8:30 last night... there were, um, first-years... Yeah... we came across a group of first-years camping out together... We passed them back that way."

She pointed off to the north as she said this.

"Do you know the names of those first-years? Anything you might know would be helpful."

"Sorry, I don't really know most of the first-years yet. All I remember is that there were three girls and one boy."

If this was all she knew, I couldn't exactly say it was very useful information.

But if those first-years had attacked Komiya and Kinoshita as part of some sort of prank, it should be easy enough to catch the perpetrator.

"For now, let's head back down and meet up with Sudō and the others. It won't be long before the teachers arrive."

"R-right."

Going back down the way we came would be a bit risky for both Shinohara and Ike, so we opted to take a short detour instead.



5.1

About five minutes had passed since Ayanokōji-senpai went running up the slope in pursuit of Ike-senpai.

I gently laid Kinoshita-senpai, who I had been holding in my arms, onto the ground beside Komiya-senpai.

After which, I stood back up and quietly stared into the deep forest behind me.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

Sudō-senpai spoke up, suspicious of my actions. I felt sorry about not responding to him, but I didn't have the time to explain anything right now.

Someone was clearly trying to provoke us.

They had been watching over us this entire time, and although they were making their presence known, they had chosen not to approach us.

Though, while their presence was obvious to me, it was no more than a subtle difference in the atmosphere that ordinary people wouldn't be able to notice.

But how long had they been there? Right, it had been since Ayanokōji-senpai left to run up the slope.

They were continuously emitting a viscous, demanding aura that only became more pronounced with time.

I didn't know what their motives or reasons for this were exactly, but that was irrelevant.

After all, whoever they were, any information they had would still be valuable, given the current circumstances.

I quietly set the tablet onto the ground and took a moment to steady my breathing.

The presence was well aware that I had noticed them, yet they hadn't moved an inch.

They may have confidence in their speed, but so did I.

"Sudou-senpai! Please take care of them until I'm back!"

"Eh? Wha, hey!"

The only thing I could be certain of, right here, right now, was that somebody was watching us.

I kicked off the ground and broke into a sprint in one fluid motion, headed toward the direction of the presence.



Even if they tried to escape in a panic, I should be able to close the distance when they turned around to run.

And then, if they trip up on something, even if it's only just for a second, I would catch them and force them to answer my questions.

The distance between us was ten to twenty meters at most. As the morning sun continued to rise, the forest slowly began to light up. And even though the terrain was difficult to traverse, it didn't take long before I caught up to them.

However...!

“So fast!”

I managed to grab hold of the cuff of their jersey for a split second, but their movements were far too nimble.

Making clever use of the surrounding trees, they skillfully managed to break free without showing hide nor hair of their identity.

I chased after them at top speed, but despite my best efforts, the distance between us steadily proceeded to widen.

“Damn!”

In terms of speed and stamina, the two of us seemed evenly matched.

That said, from the way they were effortlessly navigating the forest as they ran, their understanding of the terrain was clearly far superior to my own.

Just how were they able to do that?

Although my knowledge of the area was no doubt inferior, I still tried my best to overcome it.

“Please wait! I simply want to talk to you!”

I shouted as we continued to dash into the depths of the forest, but the person I was chasing showed no sign of stopping.

It wasn't that they hadn't heard my cries either. No, they had chosen to ignore them.

In which case, I was left with only one conclusion: That the person I was chasing definitely had something to hide.

“The reason those two are hurt so badly is because of something you did, isn’t it!?”

At this point, I decided to change strategies. I shouted out a harsh accusation, looking to make them falter. To make some sort of mistake.

After all, if I could get them to make a mistake before I did, I’d be able to close the distance in an instant.

Even if I was wrong about their involvement in what had happened, as long as I could get them to trip or fall, nothing else would matter.

However, instead of faltering, they began moving even faster than before.

I held full confidence in my prior training and physical ability, at least to the point where I didn’t think I would lose to anyone else at this school.

And yet, the distance between us only continued to widen.

Occasionally, I would manage to recover lost ground, but that would never last for long. It was clear that they were just toying with me, showing me just how superior they really were.

They were taunting me; all but whispering the words ‘catch me if you can’ into my ear.

But, even so, I had no intention of giving up until the bitter end.

If I couldn’t win in a contest of speed... then I’d win in a battle of stamina instead.

For less than a second, a ray of light came streaming through the canopy above and I managed to catch sight of my opponent’s hair swaying in the wind as they ran.

“What, you!?”

The distinct, almost characteristic color and style of their hair was seared into the back of my eyes.

I knew exactly where I had seen it before too.

“Dammit...!”

Before long, my foot got caught on the root of a tree, bringing an abrupt, unsatisfying end to our chase.

“Haa, Haaaa...!”

I had gotten distracted, caught off guard by a revelation that I never saw coming.

The fatigue and exhaustion I had built up came rushing at me all at once, and my breathing soon became erratic.

“Haaaa, Haaa...! Haaa, Haaa...!”

In order to calm the incessant beating of my heart, I closed my eyes and focused on getting my disordered breathing under control.

Although I hadn't been able to get a good look at them, there wasn't a doubt in my mind.

“Don't tell me... They... pushed Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai...? But, why...?”

My gaze continued to wander for a while, as if searching for the back of the person who had disappeared into the depths of the forest.



5.2

I led Shinohara and Ike on a detour that took about fifteen minutes in total.

When we finally found a safe way to get down the slope, we happened to meet up with Nanase who was walking alone.

“Why are you here Nanase?”

Sudō and the others should've still been quite a fair distance away from here.

“That— Uhm, I wasn’t able to see you and Ike-senpai anymore so I decided to go looking for you...”

Nanase responded, and although her breathing was steady, her brow was covered in sweat.

It seemed like she had been in quite a hurry to come find us, however, her eyes were looking somewhere else.

“Are you searching for something?”

“No, please don’t worry about it.”

She refused to elaborate further, keeping her gaze fixed in a specific direction as she stared on with a rigid expression.

Then, as if a switch had been flipped, she turned and looked over toward Shinohara and Ike, who were trailing a fair distance behind me.

“I’m glad that you managed to find Shinohara-senpai safe and sound.”

Upon seeing Shinohara walking together with Ike, she let out a genuine sigh of relief.

I had been walking ahead so far, so we waited until Ike and Shinohara caught up to us.

“Sudō-senpai and the others are this way.”

As the one most familiar with the route back, Nanase took the reins and led the way.

In the meantime, I decided to tell Nanase about what Shinohara had told us earlier.

In particular, I told her that Shinohara had seen someone push Komiya and Kinoshita down the slope, but she didn’t know if the perpetrator was a boy or a girl.

I also spoke of how she had held her breath and hid in fear of being discovered.

And then, I shared one more piece of potentially vital information.

“It seems that Shinohara and her friends passed a group of first-years last night.”

“First-years, you say?”

“They probably set up camp somewhere nearby. But, she only said that they passed each other, so we can’t really say they’re the culprits here.”

“That’s true. Though, I wonder who the first-year students in question are? If we knew, then we might be able to poke around for information or at least find some clues.”

Even if they were somewhere in the surrounding area, it would be difficult to find them in this thick, overgrown forest. It might be a different story if they stayed in the same location for an extended length of time, but in all probability, they would be constantly on the move, heading toward their next destination. In fact, it was even possible that they were headed off in the opposite direction right now.

In any case, it bugged me that first-year students were involved in this.

After all, if one of them were the White Room student, they would’ve been able to do the deed without so much as batting an eye.

Nanase remained silent for a while before eventually opening her mouth to speak.

“Senpai. If... there really was someone out there willing to cause such a grievous injury, isn’t it strange that Komiya-senpai didn’t notice anybody?”

“Yeah. Normally, you’d know if someone was there or not.”

Komiya definitely would’ve said something if he remembered seeing someone, even if they had been a student that he didn’t know the name of.

However, his memory of the incident was vague, and from what it sounded like, they might not have been attacked at all.

Was it really just a simple accident?

Or, had someone truly managed to pull off this attack without being noticed?

Assuming that it was even darker out when it happened, it would only make sense that the perpetrator had a light of some sort.

“If it were you, Ayanokōji-senpai, would you be able to do it without the two of them noticing?”

“Me? Don’t be unreasonable.”

Although I evaded the question, it wouldn’t be impossible if I set my mind to it.

In his earlier testimony, Komiya said that it all started when something suddenly struck his calf.

In the same way, I would soundlessly approach from behind and kick his calf as a leading strike. In turn, he’d be sent tumbling down the slope, his face warped with pain. He probably wouldn’t even have the time to look back at me.

“As for me… If I were to attack Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai… I don’t think it would be impossible. Well, depending on the timing. Though, of course, it would still be fairly difficult.”

She voiced her own conclusion. Rather than assert that Shinohara had imagined it, Nanase seemed to agree with the idea that someone had assaulted them.

But, even if there was a culprit, their motive was unknown.

Were they indirectly sending me a warning? No, the risks would be far too great if that were the case.

Or perhaps… they were trying to emphasize that they weren’t afraid of taking on risks, no matter how large they may be?

It was also possible that some unforeseen turn of events had taken place and they had no choice but to take action.

But, as it stood, none of these theories felt very convincing. After all, it was more than possible that the culprit wasn’t the White Room student. Furthermore, there might not even be a culprit at all.

“That said, it’s not clear why they were attacked in the first place.”

Inevitably, Nanase arrived at the same conclusion that I had.

The motive behind the attack. The most perplexing part of the entire situation.

Before long, we made our way back to Sudō and the others, but nothing had changed since we left.

“Now it’s just a question of when the teachers will get here.”

It had already been half an hour since the Emergency Alert first went off, but there was still no sign of them anywhere.

We were in the northeast corner of the island, so it would take them an adequate amount of time to get here, even if they made use of a boat or helicopter.

“Uhm~… Has something happened here?”

Just as the situation began to stagnate, a group of several students appeared from within the forest and called out to us.

Nanase and I briefly exchanged glances with each other. The students in question were a group of first-years: Mitsui Ayumi from Class 1-A, Dōgami Mitsuko from Class 1-B, Tsubaki Sakurako from Class 1-C, and Makita Takashige from Class 1-D. Altogether, there were three girls and one boy, a combination that fell in line with Shinohara’s testimony from earlier.

As someone who had also heard Shinohara’s testimony, Ike looked at the four of them with a hint of wariness in his eyes.

“There’s been a bit of trouble. These two fell down the slope and got injured pretty badly.”

Upon hearing this, the first-years exchanged glances for a moment.

“We were camping nearby when we heard an alert go off and what sounded like somebody shouting… We chose to wait a little for it to get brighter out before coming here to check on what had happened, just in case.”

The sound of the alert had been incredibly piercing, so it only made sense that they would hear it if they were in the area.

“Anyway, could I ask if the injured are alright?”

Dōgami, the girl who was acting as the sole spokesperson for the group, looked fairly alarmed, as did Makita and Mitsui.

Tsubaki, in contrast, was perfectly calm.

Despite being surrounded by upperclassmen, two of which who were seriously injured, she didn’t appear to be phased at all.

“They don’t seem alright, but it’s hard for any of us to say for sure. At this point, we’re just waiting for the teachers to get here.”

Like that, another thirty minutes passed.

And then, around an hour after the Emergency Alert first went off, officials from the school finally arrived.

The first to show up were Sakagami-sensei, the homeroom teacher of Class 2-B, and our own homeroom teacher, Chabashira. In addition, there were three adults who appeared to be medical personnel, for a total of five people.

“Let’s get down to business and hear what happened here, shall we?”

Sakagami-sensei spoke as he approached Komiya, who was sitting up, and Kinoshita, who was still lying unconscious beside him.

Everyone began to gather around him, as if drawn in by the prospect of checking out a crime scene.

Seeing this, I distanced myself from the group and approached Chabashira, who was looking in my direction.

“From a cursory observation, it seems like it’ll be difficult for Komiya and Kinoshita to continue the exam.”

“Yes. Their retirement seems virtually unavoidable.”

Her expression was heavy, which was to be expected given that Komiya’s group included a student from her own class.

“Was it just a simple accident?”

“Well... I imagine we’ll find out soon enough.”

After seeing to it that treatment was underway, Sakagami-sensei turned to the unscathed member of the group, Shinohara, and motioned for her to explain.

Shinohara, however, took one look at the state of her friends and burst into tears all over again.

“Crying isn’t going to get us anywhere, I hope you know that.”

Sakagami-sensei admonished her in a strict tone, prompting Ike to step forward to protect her.

“Uhm, is it alright if I explain? Shinohara told me what happened.”

He apparently wanted to explain the situation to Sakagami-sensei on Shinohara’s behalf.

“...Well, I suppose that’s fine. Go ahead and speak.”

“Shinohara said that they were pushed off the slope.”

I took a look at the slope in question as Ike repeated what Shinohara had told him earlier, but all of a sudden, his explanation somehow seemed hard to believe.

“Pushed off? ...How awfully unsettling.”

“So they won’t have to retire because of that, right? That’s right, right?”

“If that’s the truth, then yes, of course they won’t.”

“What do you mean ‘if that’s the truth’? Shinohara said so herself!”

“Then, I assume she must have evidence of some sort to back that up, yes?”

Faced with Sakagami’s response, both Shinohara and Ike were left momentarily speechless, at an utter loss for words.

“Y-you say that, but we’re not at the school! There aren’t any surveillance cameras or anything like that!”

“Though, if they were pushed, one of them must’ve at least seen the culprit’s face.”

“That’s—!”

“So how about it, Shinohara-san? You can’t just keep crying, so how about you give us an answer?”

The only evidence available at the moment was Shinohara’s personal testimony as a member of the same group.

Although I could try to mention the mysterious set of footprints I had identified earlier, the ground all throughout the nearby area had long since been trampled by a sizable number of people.

Even if I were to bring them up, it wouldn't accomplish anything.

"I-it was dark..."

"Dark? So dark that you couldn't see the culprit's face?"

In response, Shinohara nodded several times over, however Sakagami-sensei simply let out a deep sigh.

"So, it was dark to the extent that you couldn't see their face, and yet you were able to see them get pushed without any problems...? It pains me to say this, but that's an awfully convenient tale you've spun, now isn't it?"

With that, Sakagami-sensei began to pressure Shinohara to confess as she broke into tears once more.

She was crying to the point of incoherence, so she just kept nodding her head, trying what she could to affirm that she was telling the truth.

"Shinohara would never lie!"

"You're her classmate. It's only natural that you would say that."

"Are you saying that you don't believe her!?"

"If she's telling the truth, then this is quite a serious matter. However, this testimony alone is not enough."

"How could you! Then what's gonna happen to Komiya and Kinoshita!?"

"No matter how things play out, I'd say that their only real option is retirement. As their homeroom teacher, I certainly can't say I'm happy to see them withdraw from the exam either, but from the look of their legs, it would be impossible for them to continue."

It's not like Sakagami-sensei was actively trying to be cruel here or anything like that.

He was just being objective. The damage that had been done to their legs was by no means light enough that they'd be back on their feet in a day or two.

"Given the current situation, we have no choice but to conclude that Shinohara-san is lying in order to gloss over the injuries caused by this accident."

“You’re fuckin’ kidding me! Who in their right mind would buy that bullshit!?”

Ike fought back in a blaze of passion, holding onto Shinohara’s shoulders as she wept, but the response he got back was exceedingly cold.



“I’ll overlook that careless outburst of yours just this once. Are we clear?”

“Tsk...!”

Realizing that he had said far too much to a teacher, Ike bit down on his lip.

Together, Shinohara and Ike had been desperately pleading their case for a while now, and yet, there seemed to be something peculiar about the way Sakagami-sensei had been responding to them.

“It seems that you already had a lot of this figured out before you got here, Chabashira-sensei.”

I expressed my thoughts to Chabashira as we stood beside each other, to which she nodded quietly.

“We relied on Komiya and Kinoshita’s GPS signals to get here. Komiya’s Emergency Alert went off at 4:56:24 AM, whereas Kinoshita’s went off seven seconds later. The only other signal that was in the nearby area in that timeframe was Shinohara’s and Shinohara’s alone.”

Chabashira responded, her eyes focused on a tablet in hand.

It was just as I had expected.

This meant that Sakagami-sensei had this very same information as well.

If there had been even a single questionable GPS signal in the area, then there would’ve been room for suspicion. However, the information gathered from the GPS went against the notion that there was a culprit in the first place. In which case, the only logical conclusion for the school officials to make was that Shinohara was fabricating the existence of an unknown third party, all for the sake of procuring a lighter sentence and protecting her fellow group members from retirement.

“The first to arrive at the scene after the alerts went off was a group of five students, yourself included. The next to arrive was a group of four first-year students. We were the last to arrive.”

According to the records, nobody else had come into contact with Komiya’s group before us.

It should probably be safe to trust this information to a certain extent.

Then... was it possible that the culprit wasn’t a student?

The teachers and exam staff didn't have to wear watches so they wouldn't have a GPS signal.

No— that shouldn't be the case here, right?

I had a hypothesis in the works, but there were still a lot of points that didn't quite add up yet, such as the fact that the teachers seemed to be missing something.

"Chabashira-sensei. You'll be heading back to the starting area with Komiya and Kinoshita after this, right?"

"Yeah. We'll do a more detailed examination of their injuries back on the ship."

"There's something I'd like you to investigate while you're at it. Discreetly."

I then lowered my voice and whispered something into her ear. Although she was slightly surprised by my request, she nodded in agreement nonetheless.

Nevertheless, there was a more pressing matter at hand right now.

With Komiya and Kinoshita's retirement all but guaranteed at this point, Shinohara would be left to fend for herself.

For her, surviving on her own for the next day or two must seem impossible, let alone the next week and a half.

"I can't... I-I can't go on like this....! There's no way I can do this alone...!"

Ike watched as Shinohara fell to her knees, unable to find the right words to comfort her.

He simply stood there, stuck in a perpetual state of uncertainty about what to do next.

I wasn't the only one who took notice of this either.

Komiya, moments away from being carried off on a stretcher by the medical personnel, had as well.

"Ike... come here real quick."

“W-what is it?”

Komiya suddenly called out to Ike, motioning for him to come within arm's reach.

And then, caring not for strain on his injured body, he lurched out, wrapped his arm around Ike's neck, and pulled him in close.

“Show me how much of a man you are.”

After those few short words, Komiya laid back down, practically collapsing onto the stretcher.

Komiya had planned on confessing to Shinohara during this very exam.

But it didn't seem like he had done so yet.

Perhaps, on the contrary, Shinohara had consulted him about Ike before he ever had the chance to make his feelings known.

If so, then Komiya would be aware of just how much Shinohara cared for Ike.

With those few short words, he had entrusted Shinohara, the girl he had sworn to protect with his own two hands, to Ike, his rival in love.

“That's gotta be tough...”

Sudō commented as we all watched the medics carry Komiya away.

It seemed that, after bearing witness to what had just taken place, Sudō had realized how hard this must've been for Komiya as well.

My classmates weren't the only ones moving forward on the journey to adulthood. Day by day, Komiya was growing as well, just like Sudō.

After a brief period of silence, Nanase addressed Shinohara, proposing an idea to help overcome the harsh situation she had been put into.

“It's possible to lighten the burden by bunkering down near the starting area. While you won't be able to earn points from reaching designated areas, it should definitely be more than enough to help you avoid retirement.”

Indeed, this was most likely the best strategy that Shinohara had available.

In what remained of the two weeks we had on the island, she would have to pin her hopes on other groups getting eliminated.

Of course, if no other groups retired, then Shinohara would have no way to escape expulsion.

Chabashira, having overheard Nanase's suggestion, chimed in as well.

"Shinohara. I don't want it to sound like I'm expecting you to get expelled, but... what's your plan? It'll be difficult to continue with the exam on your own."

"I-I know..."

"Then, like Nanase said, you can at least head back to the harbor and hold out until the end of the exam. It's not like it would be impossible for you to pick up the Tasks that show up in the nearby area either."

Their proposal was undoubtedly cruel, but it was the best option Shinohara could make now that she was on her own. If she tried to continue with the exam alone, then in all likelihood, she would end up burning out at some point. And once she ran out of stamina and provisions, she would eventually be forced to retire.

However, if she changed her approach to the exam as a whole, she could hold out at the harbor and potentially even get help from groups that passed by. That way, she might be able to survive until the end.

Ultimately, it was a far better alternative than the one currently in front of her: expulsion.

Wiping away her tears, Shinohara slowly nodded her head.

Seeing that, Chabashira said one last thing to her.

"I hope that, somehow, you're able to make it to the starting area on your own."

"Yes... Understood."

Since the school wasn't allowed to provide any aid, Shinohara would have to get to the harbor all by herself.

After the first-years and Sakagami-sensei left, Shinohara went to pick up her bag, only for Ike to hurriedly grab her wrist.

"...What?"

“D-don’t give me that...! Are you really just gonna go back to the starting area and wait there!?”

“What other choice do I have? Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san aren’t here anymore... There’s absolutely no way I can make it through this special exam on my own.”

“But, but like—”

“I’m just gonna be expelled anyway, so leave me alone!”

She jerked her arm away, breaking free of Ike’s grasp, and immediately turned to leave.

“...”

Ike stood frozen, his teeth clenched in silence.

The Ike of the past probably wouldn’t have had the strength to keep moving forward, to keep trying.

But Komiya’s words had given him the push he needed to take the next step.

“I... I’ll do something about it!”

He shouted after Shinohara, watching helplessly as she began to close herself off to the world around her.

“Just stop. It’s impossible. Absolutely impossible.”

Shinohara just continued to walk without even considering entertaining Ike’s protests.

“It’s not impossible!”

Unable to stand and watch as she left, Ike sprinted after her and grabbed hold of her wrist for a second time.

“Let me go...!”

“I won’t! You think I’m gonna let you get expelled cuz of somethin’ like this?”

“Why not!? This has nothing to do with you Ike! With me outta the way, there’ll be less of a chance for your group to get expelled... You should be happy!”

“Happy? What kind of shit are you spouting!? There’s no way I’d be happy!”

“Huh...?”

“I mean, we’ll lose a whole lotta class points if you get expelled! I’ve, uhm, you know, I’ve gotta stop that from happening! That’s why I’ll lend you a hand to make sure!”

“Well, that’s true, but... What’ll you do if your group sinks down to the bottom because you’re helping me? Not to mention, it’ll just end up making trouble for Sudō-kun and Hondō-kun.”

“That—”

“Ike, you never think things through, do you? If you keep going on like that, then sooner or later you’re gonna get yourself expelled.”

Shinohara smiled a somewhat exasperated smile and lightly shook off Ike’s hand.

“Anyway, I’m not going to give up until the very end, so you should do your best too Ike.”

She tactfully rejected his offer before turning away for what seemed like the final time.

“W-wait...!”

Ike’s previously confident attitude had disappeared without a trace.

There was nothing more he could do to stop Shinohara from leaving.

“Kanji.”

Seeing this, Sudō called out to Ike with a fearless smile on his face. He beat his chest twice, wordlessly encouraging his friend to persevere.

At that, Ike tried to step forward once again, fueled by the support of his best friend.

“Wait...! Wait Shinohara...! I, I just... so... that...”

He desperately tried to squeeze out the right words, but he simply couldn’t find the strength.

They were sitting right there, on the tip of his tongue, yet they just wouldn't come out.

He needed one last push. This was the final stretch.

But neither I nor Sudō nor Nanase would be able to say the words for him.

The only person who could do that was Ike himself.

He had no choice but to suppress the fear within his heart and take the last step forward on his own.

“Wait, I said wait!”

“M-my god, you scared me. I heard you already, jeez... Is there still something you want from me?”

“There is! There’s all sorts of stuff! I really don’t want you to get expelled! That’s why I’m gonna save you whether you like it or not!”

The words he had chosen... weren’t elegant or beautiful like a confession of love.

But even so, they embodied Ike’s way of doing things, as they were packed full of every ounce of emotion he could muster.

“Right-oh! If this is how Kanji wants to do it, let’s discuss battle plans, Ryōtarō!”

“G-gotcha!”

Sudō and Hondō circled around and took a stand behind Ike, fully supporting his resolve to help Shinohara. They waved her over, beckoning for her to come and join them.

“Huh...? What the? Are you guys stupid? Even though you shouldn’t waste your time on someone like me, you guys...”

Unwilling to wait for a Shinohara who might not even come, Ike ran to her and took hold of her wrist for the third and final time.

He was burning with a level of determination that seemed to shout to the world that he would never let go of her again.

Upon seeing this, even the usually indifferent Chabashira cracked a slight smile.

It must've been enough to make her feel like Shinohara would be in good hands, as she then disappeared into the forest, headed off in the same direction as Sakagami-sensei and the medical team.

That being said, this was no time for blind optimism. After all, saving Shinohara certainly wouldn't be easy.

"In order to guarantee that you save Shinohara, she'll have to join up with a group with at least three slots for extra group members."

Once the four of them gathered together, I spoke up.

It was hard to say whether or not Sudō and his group would be able to win the rights to those three slots on their own.

"It'd be most realistic to try'n ask for help from people in the same class, right?"

"I don't believe there's anything exactly wrong with that, but from what I recall of the rules for the exam, it's impossible to find out which groups have earned the right to increase their maximum size. I also imagine that you'd be hard-pressed to find a group willing to take Shinohara-senpai in when two members of her group have already retired. Moreover, since losing points comes as a direct side-effect of the merging process, the entire notion is just riddled with numerous risks. All of that being the case, rather than going through the effort of forming another group, it may very well be more realistic for her to prioritize accumulating points. I think she should steadily score points from designated areas and use whatever time she has to spare to challenge Tasks."

Nanase was recommending that Shinohara give up on merging with another group and focus on gathering points independently instead.

"But wouldn't it be better to assume that there won't be any Tasks that she can win by herself? She'd prolly end up having to pin her hopes on getting lucky or some kinda freak coincidence where there aren't enough participants or something."

"Is there really no way for her to get into a group smoothly, Ayanokōji?"

In the midst of their conversation, Sudō suddenly turned to me, looking to see if I had any ideas.

“It’s not like it’s impossible. There is one idea that comes to mind that has a high probability of working out.”

“R-really? What is it!?”

I considered for a moment whether or not I should share it with them, but ultimately decided against it.

If I told them my plan now, a sliver of hope would be born amidst their despair.

But at the same time, it would weaken their resolve to save Shinohara, so it was hard to say that it’d be worth it.

It was important for Ike and the others to maintain a strong competitive mindset until the very end of the exam.

Not to mention that there were several things that had to be done in order to realize the plan.

I began walking toward where the luggage was located and instructed for Nanase to get ready to head out as well.

“O-oi, Ayanokōji? What’s this plan of yours?”

“The only thing you can do right now is have Ike take the lead in protecting Shinohara and focus on earning as many points as possible. Beyond that, you should try to take part in Tasks that increase the maximum number of people allowed in your group if you get the chance.”

“What are you gonna be doing?”

“I’ll be setting up a contingency plan of sorts just in case something goes wrong.”

For that very reason, I simply didn’t have the time to stay here and dawdle with Ike and the others.

“But, like I said earlier, there’s no way to guarantee anything here. Furthermore, if any of our other classmates were to fall into the bottom five as well, then... we might be forced to make a tough choice about who to save.”

I wanted to make sure they knew beforehand that we might have to give up on Shinohara at some point.

This special exam was such that, as long as it held true that five groups would be subjected to the ultimate penalty, there would inevitably be students that couldn't be saved.

“Don’t forget that, Ike.”

“...I won’t.”

About two and a half hours after the whole ordeal began, we finally arrived back at our campsite with Shinohara in tow. It seemed that Kei’s group, who had been camping nearby, had already left for their next designated area.

The backpacks that Komiya and Kinoshita had left behind were brought back by Sudō and Ike respectively.

“Sudō, take care of Ike and the others. Out of everyone, you’re the one capable of making the most sensible decisions.”

“R-right, leave it to me.”

Since the next designated area had already been announced, I retrieved my tablet from Nanase as I finished up with the final arrangements.

“It seems like you’ve used up quite a lot of energy this morning...”

“Please don’t worry. I still have enough to keep up with you.”

From today, the fourth day of the exam, onwards, the ten highest and lowest ranked groups would be revealed. Alongside that, it was also the day where Tasks that allow for large group creation would be added to the pool. If one of these Tasks appear, it would probably reach max capacity in an instant and the ensuing competition would most certainly be fierce.

However, before any of that, we first needed to confirm our next designated area.

The area we were given was area G3, which meant that we needed to go northwest from our current location.

We were already half an hour behind schedule, so it was highly unlikely that we’d be able to get the Early Bird Bonus this time.

Despite the fact that it would take at least an hour to get there, I decided to satiate my curiosity and look at the current group standings first.

Though I was interested in the groups that were in the lead, it was far more important to check the bottom five, as those were the ones who were at risk of expulsion.

Interested as well, Nanase took a look at my tablet from over my shoulder.

The bottom ten groups were sorted in a table from highest to lowest. The information displayed in the table was more detailed than expected, as it not only told us the members and scores of each group, but it even had a general breakdown of how they had earned their points.

“This—”

Of the bottom ten groups, seven were composed of students from Class 3-B and Class 3-D. The group in last place was a three-person group from Class 3-D with an overall total of 21 points. 5 of which were from Tasks and 16 were from designated areas. However, this particular group was the one who had someone retire due to illness on the very first day of the exam, so there was some room for sympathy.

Of the remaining three, there was one second-year group and two first-year groups.

The lone second-year group was composed of three of my classmates: Akito, Haruka, and Airi.

“It seems that some of your classmates are in a dangerous position, Senpai.”

Currently, they were ranked ninth from the bottom with a total of 28 points, which was worse than I expected. It required a certain amount of strength and fortitude to continuously travel between designated areas. Since they had Airi in their group, who tended to struggle when it came to stamina, it would probably be difficult to earn Arrival Bonuses.

Meanwhile, there were two first-year groups in the bottom ten, but they were both composed of two people each. Given that the first-years were allowed to form four-man groups from the beginning, it made sense that there wouldn't be very many of them occupying the bottom spots.

“All things considered, it's surprising. To think so many third-year students would be at the bottom...”

Although it was certainly unexpected, I doubted that their poor performance was just due to incompetence.

I decided to check the top rankings later and instead focused on telling Nanase what our plan would be moving forward.

“To start out I’m going to aim for the Arrival Bonus at G3. But, I’ll probably skip the designated areas that come after that for a while.”

“So there’s somewhere you want to go, even if it means missing out on the designated areas?”

“Yeah. If you want to continue going for them, then we’ll have to split up at G3.”

“No no, I’ll stay with you. As long as Amasawa-san or Hōsen-kun arrive in time, my group won’t miss out on the area… Besides, this has to do with the plan you’ve thought of to save Shinohara-senpai, right?”

After responding with a light nod, we set out. Once we reached G3, we’d head to the starting area.

If possible, I wanted to make it there by sometime tomorrow.



Chapter 6: The Aloof Wunderkind of Class 2-D

At just before 7:00 AM the following day, the fifth of the exam, we were pushing south along the river from area D4 to D5. After we stepped foot in G3 yesterday, we decided to forego our next designated area, H4, and travel due west on our way back to the starting area. As a result, we missed out on the next two designations — H6 and I7 — as well, meaning that we had now missed three areas in a row.

Unless a randomly designated area were to appear somewhere along our projected route by some miracle, that number would inevitably increase to four. Ultimately, the odds didn't play out in our favor, as when the clock finally struck 7:00 AM, the first designated area of the day was revealed to be I8.

Well, on the bright side, the designated area was so far away that it made it easier to detach from the matter since I wouldn't have to fret about going through the effort to get there.

Perhaps because it was so early in the morning, the gentle murmur of the nearby river was quite pleasant.

If it hadn't been for the bad news that came shortly thereafter, it would've been a pretty solid start to the day.

“Shinohara-senpai's situation doesn't seem very optimistic...”

Shinohara had been left to fend for herself after Komiya and Kinoshita retired yesterday. Even though Ike and Sudō were doing what they could to support her, the number of points she could score on her own was, in the end, limited.

As of yesterday, her group hadn't been included in the bottom ten, but when we checked the rankings this morning, she had already dropped down to the bottom eight. From the fact that the groups ranked below her would earn points at a faster rate, she would probably sink down to last place by tomorrow or the day after at the latest. Thanks to this, in an ironic twist of

fate, Akito's group had been spared from the bottom ranks, at least for the time being.

Meanwhile, there were the current rankings for the top groups that I hadn't gotten the chance to look at yesterday. In first place was Nagumo's group, made up entirely of students from Class 3-A, whereas second place was held by Kiriyma's group from Class 3-B. The two top representatives of the third year were fully accounted for.

"Ah, Senpai. There's someone fishing up ahead."

A lone student came into view ahead of us. They were sitting on a rocky sidebar, leisurely passing the time with a fishing rod in hand. Due to their distinctive outward appearance, I recognized them immediately. They were a member of the one group I wanted to meet more than anyone else right now. I didn't expect the chance to meet up with them to come so soon. Due to the nature of the exam and the size of the island, finding one specific individual was akin to finding a needle in a haystack. I had even considered making use of the GPS searching feature once it was made available tomorrow to attempt to meet with their group.

I wanted to capitalize on this stroke of good luck no matter what.

"Mind if we make a detour, Nanase?"

Although several solid Tasks had popped up in the nearby area, we'd probably have to give up on them.

"I'm just your travelling companion, Ayanokōji-senpai. Please don't feel the need to ask for my opinion."

I took her thoughtful words at face value and decided to approach the student.

They hadn't seemed to have noticed us yet, but I chose not to call out to them so as to not interrupt their fishing.

Instead, we approached quietly, walking along the sandy gravel of the riverside.

Before long, we drew in close enough for them to notice our presence, as they slowly turned to face us.

“You started off on your own, but it doesn’t seem like you’ve dropped to the bottom ten yet.”

With these words, we were greeted by Katsuragi of Class 2-B, who openly welcomed us.

“Somehow. But if I took it easy for a day, my rank would probably plummet.”

Having overheard the commotion, Ryūen emerged from inside his tent and gave me a somewhat surprised look.

“So you’re strollin’ ‘round the island with a lass on your arm, eh? You get tired of that Karuizawa chick and ditch her?”

“Karuizawa? Why are you bringing her up?”

Katsuragi looked back at Ryūen, confused.

“Kuku, it’s nothin’. Don’t mind it.”

“It seems you two have been doing pretty well for yourselves.”

You could easily check the top ten highest-ranked groups through the tablet. As of this morning, I had a cumulative total of 52 points, putting me in 74th place overall. If you took into account the fact that I was a one-man group, my placement was fairly high.

Be that as it may, Ryūen and Katsuragi were ranked even higher, occupying tenth place with a cumulative total of 92 points.

Of those 92 points, 29 had come from Arrival Bonuses, 41 from Early Bird Bonuses, and 22 from Tasks.

“Oh shove it with the sarcasm. Isn’t that freak with a few screws loose one of your classmates?”

“Well, that’s true.”

The ‘freak with a few screws loose’ that Ryūen was referring to was none other than Kōenji.

Like me, he was taking on the exam alone. But despite that, he currently sat in fourth place. Out of all the groups in the top ten, he had earned the most points from Early Bird Bonuses, not to mention the noteworthy number of

points he had racked up from Tasks as well, all for a cumulative total of 126 points. His performance so far had been truly outstanding with practically no room for error.

However, there were still ten days left in the exam, including today. If an accident were to happen due to overexertion or injury, he would drop out of the top ten in an instant.

In this two-week long exam on an uninhabited island, we wouldn't be given even a single day to rest our bodies. No matter who you were, stressing your body out day after day would inevitably lead to muscle damage. It would start with obvious symptoms like muscle pains and general soreness, and then, little by little, your legs would grow heavier as even simple tasks like walking became difficult. Furthermore, since we could only replenish the bare minimum of nutrients that our bodies needed while we were on the island, you'd be afflicted by constant mental and physical fatigue as well.

“What’s your next designated area?”

“Hah?”

“It’s already past 7:00 AM. You two sure seem to be taking it easy.”

“It was my decision.”

Katsuragi responded as he cast his line into the river.



“We’ve been moving at a rapid pace these past four days as we worked on Tasks and map movement. That being said, our first designated area today turned out to be the random designation down in E10, so we’d have to push ourselves fairly hard if we wanted to arrive within the time limit. I decided that the one or two points we’d get for making it there wouldn’t be worth the effort.”

Ryūen let show a wry smile as he shrugged his shoulders. Ryūen was the type of person who always looked to push himself to the absolute limit, and yet Katsuragi had somehow managed to persuade him to take a break. Ishizaki or Kaneda probably wouldn’t have been able to control Ryūen to such an extent. It seemed that Katsuragi was already playing an important role as a member of Class 2-B.

“So, have you caught anything?”

Nanase posed a question to Katsuragi as she eyed the bobber in the river.

“Sadly, not much. We’d have to go to the sea if we wanted to catch a lot of fish.”

In other words, they were fishing here simply as a way to pass the time.

“I take it you’re doing fine on the food front, then?”

While I didn’t know if he’d answer me honestly or not, I decided to take a stab at it anyway.

“There’s plenty of food to gather from the sea, rivers, and forest. Water is no different too since all you have to do is boil river water.”

“But isn’t it risky to drink river water?”

“You’re not wrong. Boiling it doesn’t guarantee that it’s perfectly safe, but that’s why I’m the only one who drinks it. Ryūen drinks the water we started out with and whatever we get from Tasks.”

They were managing the risks flawlessly. By this point in the exam, there should be groups out there who were struggling to get by, but it looked like these two would be living steadily for quite a while.

“It just so happens that I’ve been looking for you, Ryūen.”

“Lookin’ for me, eh?”

“I assume you’re aware of which groups are in the bottom ten right now, right?”

“Well, sure. I dunno what those idiots from my class are doin’ down there in the bottom eight though.”

With two members out of the picture, their income had dropped sharply, creating an ever-growing disparity between them and the other groups at the bottom.

“Komiya and Kinoshita retired.”

The smile on Ryūen’s face disappeared instantly, replaced with a serious expression.

Katsuragi looked in my direction as well, his attention ripped away from the fishing pole in his hands.

“They retired? What happened?”

Since Katsuragi was now a full-fledged member of Class 2-B, both Komiya and Kinoshita were fellow comrades that he needed to protect.

Nanase spoke up in response to Katsuragi’s question.

“They were seriously injured. It’s unlikely that either of them will be able to walk anytime soon.”

“Was it an accident?”

“Well, that’s—”

“According to Shinohara, the last remaining member of their group, they were attacked by someone.”

“I assume this ‘someone’ was kicked outta here right along with ‘em then, right?”

“Unfortunately, Shinohara’s testimony was the only evidence they had. Neither Komiya nor Kinoshita could recall whether they were actually attacked or not. The school should still be investigating it, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up.”

“They’re looking at it under the pretense that Shinohara-senpai lied because she didn’t want her fellow group members to retire.”

“What should we do Ryūen? Even if we manage to place in the top three, it’ll be meaningless if Komiya and Kinoshita get expelled.”

If Shinohara’s group came in last place, Class 2-D and 2-B would both suffer major setbacks.

“You said you were lookin’ for me, right? Shinohara’s your classmate, so I assume you’ve already come up with a plan to stop the expulsions. Or am I wrong?”

Of course, despite not knowing any of the details, Ryūen instinctively knew that I had thought of something.

“Sorry Nanase, but I can’t let you listen to the rest of this conversation. The survival of the second-years is at stake here.”

“I understand.”

After confirming that Nanase had moved a sufficient distance away from us, I approached Ryūen and shared the details of my strategy with him.

He could just tell Katsuragi about it himself afterward.

“Kuku, I see. With a plan like that there really is a way for Shinohara to survive. That said... will it all go smoothly?”

“It should have a decent chance as long as you cooperate. The rest will happen naturally.”

“You’ve got balls changing shit up like this. If the other groups realize what’s happening, they’ll start takin’ action too.”

I responded with a small nod. That was the very reason why I didn’t want Nanase to overhear us. If the first-year students were to find out about it, it would probably lead to a confrontation between the second-year students and everyone else.

“There are some clever first-year students out there as well. There’s a chance that they might catch on sooner than anticipated.”

It was also impossible to predict what the third-years would do if they found out.

“If it were a couple of small fry I wouldn’t even hesitate to let ‘em go, but Komiya and Kinoshita still have their uses.”

“So you’ll work with me... is that what you’re saying?”

“Our interests align so there’s no way I wouldn’t take advantage of this strat of yours.”

Shinohara’s group was made up of students from both of our classes, after all.

If we didn’t join hands here and now, it would be impossible to save any of them.

“If you run into Ichinose, can you tell her the plan as well?”

“That doormat Ichinose aside, I don’t think Sakayanagi’ll choose to lend a hand so easily.”

“She’s not the type to sit back and let the first-years look down on her.”

“Kuku, I guess so.”

With that, our impromptu meeting came to an end. We said our farewells and immediately set out for the starting area.



6.1

Nanase and I were making our way south toward the starting area, but along the way, a Task appeared near the summit of area C5, so we adjusted our route accordingly. The Task in question was a one-on-one match of Tug of War. It had a short registration deadline of 40 minutes, and the number of participants was limited to two boys and two girls, so overall the conditions were iron-clad. However, you would earn five points just for participating, and if you won, you would earn an additional ten points, for a total of fifteen.

Due to the fact that the summit was just a short distance ahead of us, it would be more or less impossible for other students to beat us there unless

they were already in the area. After taking into account the fact that I would be missing my fourth designated area in a row soon (and would be losing two points as a result), I decided that we should go for it. Plus, there was a good chance that we would have fifteen points simply fall into our laps if nobody else showed up.

Despite the high elevation of the mountain, we pushed forward at a rapid pace and arrived at the Task with around five minutes to spare.

I thought that we would be the first to arrive, but apparently somebody had beaten us to the punch.

This ‘somebody’ seemed to have noticed our presence, but they made no effort to look in our direction.

“He got here pretty quickly didn’t he? He must’ve been even closer than we were.”

“I wonder.”

Even if he had been toward the south side of C5 when the Task was announced, it should’ve still taken him a decent amount of time to get here.

“I’m not sure whether this will help clear things up for you or not, but that’s Kōenji Rokusuke.”

“Kōenji…? The same Kōenji from your class who’s currently in fourth place overall? …Well, he does seem to give off an… aura of greatness of some sort.”

It was one thing that he had arrived earlier than us, but even stranger yet was the fact that, apart from the single bottle of mineral water he was holding, he didn’t have any bags or luggage with him.

If he was traveling light, then it made sense that he would be able to climb to the summit faster than us, but...

That would then mean that he had been moving around without a tablet, which I suppose was only to be expected of someone like Kōenji.

After taking a single sip of his water, he proceeded to pour the rest above his head, showering himself with what remained in the bottle. In a sense, it

seemed as though he was basking in the satisfaction that came with ascending to the summit of the mountain.



“Ah... such a splendidly handsome man I am, these drops of masculine beauty trickling down my magnificent body. It seems that I myself have powered up all the more since the year before.”

“He seems to be saying... something... Is he talking to us...?”

“No, he’s definitely talking to himself. He’s probably just immersed in his own beauty.”

“I-is that so...”

Puzzled, Nanase tilted her head, unable to comprehend his behavior.

I didn’t think that anyone else would show up, but there were only a few minutes left to register, so I figured that we should just focus on getting it over with. As such, the two of us went forward with the registration process and secured our spots in the Task. However, since the rules called for a one-on-one match split by gender, I would be forced to face-off against Kōenji as we were the only boys who registered. Nanase, on the other hand, was the only girl to show up, so she won her category by default.

“It seeeeems that my opponent is you, Ayanokōji-boy.”

“That it does.”

In previous Tasks, I had indirectly competed against my own classmates by simply being a part of the crowd.

However, this was the first time I had to compete with a classmate in a direct one-on-one match. Furthermore, the opponent of that match was none other than Kōenji. I sincerely hoped that this wasn’t the start of something written in the stars.

The staff member in charge of the Task presented us with a rope and instructed us to wrap the ends around our bodies.

Given that my series of missed designations would only continue to increase, I wanted to secure as many points as possible, but...

Instead of taking the win for myself when I wasn’t even a part of the top ten, it seemed more reasonable to concede the points to Kōenji so that our class would ultimately have a higher chance of coming out on top. With the

fifteen points he'd get from winning, he would overtake Kiriya's score of 135 points and rise up to second place all on his own, temporary as it may be.

Anyway, if I was truly going to concede the win, it would be better to give up now so I didn't waste more time or energy than necessary.

I could simply take my five points, head back down the mountain, and resume my journey back to the harbor at the starting area.

"The match will begin momentarily, so please prepare yourselves."

"Is something the matter, Senpai?"

As the staff notified us about the impending start of the match, Nanase noticed that I was lost in thought and looked to me with a question.

"Well, I..."

"Fufu, so you're a man who thinks about things from the perspective of efficiency, hmmmm?"

Kōenji instantly gleaned my inner thoughts as if they had been written expressly on my face.

"You were thinking that it would be best to abstain from the match rather than go to the trouble of facing off against me, weren't you? After all, relinquishing the points to my fourth-place self would indeed bring about the most benefit for our class. As would it be the best use of our time."

"Is... Is that true, Senpai?"

"I have no complaints as long as it helps Kōenji succeed in the rankings."

"Though, I doubt the Horikita-girl would be very satisfied with that, wouldn't you agree? For her, it's not hard to imagine it'd be preferable that I take second or third place rather than first."

He was so spot-on with his conjecture that a part of me wondered if he had somehow been listening in back when Horikita and I talked about this.

"That's limited to the situation where our own classmates are competing with each other for the top spot. As it stands now, your group is the only one in the top ten composed entirely of Class 2-D students, so if we were to compete for points here, we'd just end up getting in each other's way."

“I, of course, understand, but that’s just poppycock. The fact that you believe you have a chance to prevail over me is the fundamental reason you’re having these wasteful thoughts. No matter who the opponent, the one to win this bout will be yours truly.”

Kōenji had taken part in a fair number of Tasks so far and he had earned rewards in each and every one of them.

Out of all the various groups spanning across the three different school years, he was the only one who had taken complete control like this.

There had been some Tasks where he had come in first or second, but in those that had to do with strength or stamina, he swept first place across the board.

So as far as this Task was concerned, he understandably held absolute confidence that he would take first place as well.

“Ayanokōji-boy, quit overselling your worth inside that head of yours. After all, it’s not every day that you’ll get the chance to compete against my motivated self.”

The fact that he would believe in his own strength come hell or high water was probably Kōenji’s greatest charm.

I slowly picked up the rope at my feet and wrapped it around my waist.

“Now then, if you’ll each take up your positions, I’ll begin the countdown. You may start pulling when I get to zero.”

All I had to do was make it seem like I was putting in effort and then lose to him. That way I wouldn’t pointlessly waste any energy.

“It doesn’t seem my wisdom has done much to motivate you.”

For Kōenji, my true intentions were probably as transparent as they could possibly be.

“Well, just try as best you can. Either way, just know that no matter how you may struggle, victory shan’t be smiling upon you this time.”

From the moment we each took hold of the rope, the countdown began.

“——Three, two, one... Zero!”

At the count of zero, I very lightly pulled the rope in my direction.

Given how little force I was exerting, if Kōenji were to make a serious effort, he'd probably drag me over the line in less than a second.

However, the rope didn't move in his direction at all.

He stood across from me with a fearless smile painted onto his face, waiting for me to start competing in earnest.

While I didn't have any intention of taking this seriously, I didn't want to waste any time here either.

That being the case, it might be more productive for me to fight back a little bit in order to make him feel threatened.

If I were to suddenly start pulling with more force than he expected, he would have no choice but to panic and respond accordingly.

There was more to winning Tug of War than just pulling at the rope with all your strength.

There was the force of the friction of the rope in your hands, the force of the friction between your feet and the ground, as well as the normal force tying it all together.

And to be even more precise, you'd also have to take into consideration the force of gravity.

I maximized my grip on the rope and firmly planted my feet on the ground. I then inclined my body back without bending at the waist.

And finally, by bending my knees and pulling the rope in close to my waist...

The flag marking the middle of the rope gave way in my direction ever so slightly. Everything was moving in accordance with my calculations.

That said, the amount of give was smaller than expected.

A heinous amount of force had begun to pull back on the rope, sealing away my counterattack in an instant.

"To win at Tug of War, one needs not these paltry parlor tricks, but raw, unbridled power."

It's not like I was going easy on him, not by any means. However, the force he was exerting on the rope was so great that it drew the center flag back to its place in between us, returning the match to a state of equilibrium.

From this, it seemed that Kōenji and I were just about evenly matched when it came to arm strength.

Not only that, he also weighed more than me. The most important factor in Tug of War may very well be weight, and since I lost in that respect, it would be difficult to beat him without securing an advantage in another way. If I used the full extent of my strength, I could easily turn this into a battle of attrition and wait for him to make a mistake of some sort, but that would be a complete waste of both time and energy. I did have another strategy I could use to come out on top, but it would be too early to use it now.

As the rope painfully dug into my fingers and palms, I once again thought about the fact that our arm strength was evenly matched. The young man known as Kōenji had physical capabilities in a league all their own. Even the likes of Sudō and Albert, who were themselves exceptionally strong amongst high school students, were far inferior in comparison. In fact, even the title ‘Super High School-Level Student’ seemed far too mild for him.

When I put strength into my arms and pulled on the rope for a second time, Kōenji instantly sensed my movement and responded with an equivalent amount of force.

Taking full advantage of the opportunity, I immediately relaxed my grip and stopped pulling.

Naturally, the rope was then pulled all the way in by Kōenji, and just like that, the match was over.

“So you chose to prioritize efficiency until the bitter end, did you?”

Kōenji seemed a little surprised, but with the outcome decided, he apparently lost all interest in pursuing it any further as he didn’t say anything else.

“It’s quite unfortunate, Senpai.”

“No, even if I were to seriously face off against him, I wouldn’t stand a chance. It’s only natural that it ended up this way.”

Overall, this Task had resulted in a net gain of 20 points for groups Class 2-D students.

That alone was more than enough to make the journey here worthwhile.

“Can you keep going, Nanase?”

“If I’m being honest, my legs are slightly sore.”

She rubbed the side of her thigh a little as she spoke.

“But like I said back when I first joined up with you, please feel free to take action as you see fit, Ayanokōji-senpai.”

Her resolve to stay with me hadn’t wavered in the slightest.

“Full speed ahead then.”

“Yes!”

Apparently, Kōenji had already started on some other route down the mountain in the brief period of time I was speaking with Nanase, as he was nowhere to be seen.



6.2

After around two more hours of travel, we finally arrived back at the harbor in the starting area.

Nanase had started lagging behind during the final stretch of the journey, so she arrived about a minute after me, completely out of breath.

“Haaaa... I finally managed to catch up.”

She wiped her sweat with a hand towel as she tried to stabilize her breathing.

“It’s hard to believe you’re a first-year high school girl. I didn’t expect you to have so much stamina.”

Throughout our time together so far, there had been several instances where her physical prowess had piqued my interest, but this had been the most intriguing by a long shot.

“No no, compared to me, you’re not even short of breath, Ayanokōji-senpai... You’re just as outstanding as I thought.”

“I’m just putting on a stoic front. Well, that aside, take a look over there.”

“Wow—! So many people!”

Nanase, who had more or less caught her breath at this point, expressed her surprise about the sheer number of people bustling throughout the harbor.

Not only could you buy additional supplies here with your leftover provision points, but you could also receive free medical treatment, take a refreshing shower, or even make use of one of the clean, well-kept restrooms.

It was, so to speak, an oasis for the students. The one and only location on the island where you could let your guard down and relax a bit.

Whether it be those who were just stopping by due to the harbor’s proximity to their last designated area or those who had made the choice to give up on the next few areas and take a break, students with all sorts of goals and motivations had gathered here.

Furthermore, there were a fair number of school officials scrambling to and fro to handle the various needs and services of the harbor.

“So... Why did we come all the way here to the starting area, Senpai?”

“Before that, let’s check out the Task.”

“Ah, yes, I had forgotten about that.”

Just around the time when we stepped foot in area C8 on our way south from the Tug of War Task in C5, another Task had popped up in the starting area.

The Task in question was called ‘Open Water Swimming’.

It entailed a race where the participants would have to swim approximately 2km from start to finish.

While there had been plenty of physically demanding Tasks so far in the exam, the bar had been set drastically higher than usual for this one. Perhaps for that very reason, the Task also boasted the largest reward to date with 20 points.

Since the starting area was such an easy location to access, the Task should fill up fairly quickly. However, the number of students who would actually choose to register would inevitably be limited, given its demanding nature.

It was also worth mentioning that the sea didn't exactly seem calm today.

Swimming in the open ocean was completely different from swimming in a pool and because of the inherent danger involved, it would probably be safe to assume that they were restricted to holding the Task in the vicinity of the starting area.

Lifeguards would surely be on standby, ready to jump into action in the event of an emergency.

The Task registration desk seemed to be located at the far edge of the harbor, so we made our way over.

From what I could see at a distance, there seemed to be a suitably large gathering there, but I couldn't help but wonder if the size of the crowd was truly proportional to the number of registrations.

Before long, the two of us arrived at the registration desk and declared our interest in entering the competition.

"I must apologize. The last spot for the boy's category filled up just a few minutes ago."

The girl's category, on the other hand, had just one spot remaining, making the situation highly reminiscent of the Beach Flags Task from a few days ago.

While the Task didn't have a particularly large capacity or anything, I didn't think so many students would actually choose to register.

What surprised me the most, however, was...

“Senpai... Is... Is that Kōenji-senpai?”

A young man could be seen standing with his back turned to the registration desk from just up ahead. And, sure enough, it was none other than Kōenji.

Seeing him here right after the Task was announced was... shocking to say the least.

“Erm... Senpai...”

“If you want to compete in the Task, you’d better hurry up and register. That said, are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

The journey here had by no means been an easy one.

It wouldn’t even be surprising if she had already exhausted every last drop of energy.

She would need to recover her stamina in the brief period of time she had to change clothes before the Task commenced.

“Although I’m reluctant to say I’m in perfect condition... it’s a rare opportunity, so I’d like to give it my best shot.”

Despite the circumstances, she seemed to be fairly enthusiastic and motivated.

“I’ll be waiting over there then. Come find me when it’s over.”

“Will do!”

After seeing Nanase off, I decided to leave the Task registration area in the harbor for a bit.

In the meantime, I wanted to make contact with a certain someone. In fact, meeting with this certain someone had been the main purpose behind my coming all the way back to the starting area.

Not too long after I started searching, I found the person I was looking for seated elegantly on a folding chair beneath a parasol that had been set up on the sandy beach.

“Good day to you, Ayanokōji-kun. It seems the weather is going to be awfully hot today, don’t you think?”

“How are you doing, Sakayanagi?”

“Reasonably well, I suppose. Ichinose-san and Shibata-kun are putting forth their best efforts for my sake, so I truly can’t ask for much more than that.”

Ichinose and Shibata were Sakayanagi’s fellow group members. She was participating in the exam in a pseudo-retired state because of her bad leg. Since she couldn’t move together with her group, they could only earn a maximum Arrival Bonus of two points per designated area.

“I’ve been curious about whether or not your group is eligible for Early Bird Bonuses.”

If a group had someone retire, they would lose the ability to earn Early Bird Bonuses.

Sakayanagi, however, was a special case.

“The school has graciously decided to make an exception for my group. After all, it’s not my fault that I’m forced to stay sedentary.”

Even though her group wasn’t part of the top ten right now, it was probably safe to assume that they had achieved fairly decent results so far.

“I must ask, what brings you to the starting area today?”

“There were a few reasons, but the first didn’t play out according to plan.”

I shifted my gaze toward the Open Water Swimming Task that would probably begin any second now.

“Unfortunately, the final spot was taken by Kōenji.”

“He was in fourth place just this morning, and yet now he’s already in second? As a classmate of yours, he’s quite the prodigy, isn’t he?”

“I hold the same opinion.”

Most of the top groups were competing against one another with a fairly slim margin of points separating their scores. If Kōenji were to take first in this swimming Task, he would temporarily shoot up to the first place spot.

“It should be about half an hour until the Task is over and Nanase-san comes back, so you’re welcome to come join me if you’d like. The shade here is wonderfully refreshing, I must say.”



She motioned toward the open space underneath the parasol, granting me full permission to share her space.

“How do you know about Nanase?”

“Because I receive regular updates about the various going-ons of the island.”

I had crossed paths with students from Class 2-A several times so far, so I suppose it wouldn’t be surprising if one of them had reported back to Sakayanagi here at the starting point. After all, traveling alone with an underclassman — and a girl at that — definitely tended to stand out in a bad way.

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to join you? I’m an enemy after all.”

The heat from the sun’s rays was so intense that it would be difficult to justify half an hour of direct exposure.

By standing still under direct sunlight, you would just end up needlessly exhausting your stamina.

“Fufu, by all means. Don’t be shy.”

She seemed to be saying that I, as someone who wasn’t part of the top ten, didn’t even amount to a perceivable threat.

As I pondered over whether or not to take her up on her offer, the various students participating in the Task arrived on the beachfront and entered the water in preparation for the start of the competition.

Shortly thereafter, the boys began with their race.

“How overwhelmingly one-sided.”

Kōenji set out at top speed from the very start and proceeded to swim straight to the finish line, completely outpacing the rest of the competition. In other words, despite all the strength and stamina he had used while quickly traveling from area to area, he still had plenty left to spare.

“It seems to me that Kōenji-kun has been surprisingly motivated during this exam. Other groups must see him as quite the threat.”

As far as this particular special exam was concerned, one might even go so far as to say that he was a reliable member of Class 2-D.

“Actually, there’s a favor I’d like to ask of you, Sakayanagi.”

“Ayanokōji-kun himself is asking me? Well now isn’t that intriguing? Please, do go on.”

Most people wouldn’t even want to entertain a request from an enemy, but Sakayanagi’s eyes were sparkling with anticipation.

“Five days have passed since the exam started, and yet only two people have retired.”

“Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san, right? It seems you’re fairly well informed yourself.”

“Incidentally, I just happened to be there when they retired.”

Hearing this, the seemingly fascinated Sakayanagi nodded.

“From what I’ve gathered by looking at the rankings, the remaining Shinohara-san still seems to be putting forth the effort to stay afloat… As such, I would reckon that she’s working with someone else now in order to get through the rest of the exam, is that right?”

“Correct.”

“Though, given her abilities, it would be considerably difficult for her to navigate the second half of the battle on her own. Ideally, she should look to get absorbed by some other group sooner rather than later… Ah, I see what you’re after.”

Even though I hadn’t said all that much yet, she had successfully managed to deduce what I wanted to ask of her. Just like that, she continued:

“So you want to get me to cooperate? Have you already met with Ryūen-kun?”

“He’s on board with my plan. It seems he thinks quite highly of Komiya and Kinoshita.”

“Is that so?”

Sakayanagi let show an amused smile as she looked at me with discerning eyes.

“It’s only natural that Ryūen-kun would lend a hand given the circumstances, but I don’t see any merit in doing so myself. At some level, I suppose that it would be prudent to prevent second-year Class Points from falling into the hands of the other school years. But to be honest, if there’s no harm done to Class 2-A, I don’t think it warrants any kind of intervention on my part.”

Although she had patiently listened to my request, that was markedly different from an agreement.

“But, if you’re willing to stomach working with me under the same conditions, I wouldn’t be opposed to helping you out.”

Sakayanagi countered my request for a favor with an exceedingly fair proposal of her own. Thanks to her quick intuition, it seemed that negotiations would be finished quickly.

“I’d like to agree to your condition, but I lack the necessary manpower right now.”

“I’ll gladly wait for when you’re ready, of course. This strategy of yours will require both time and effort to execute, so if you want to take action, it’d be best to do so sooner rather than later.”

“Right.”

Moreover, I had reason to believe that Nagumo has been carrying out a similar strategy from relatively early on as well.

I had a suspicion that this type of strategy would come into play more frequently throughout the latter half of the exam.

“I’ll contact you later.”

“I’ll leave it to you to decide on a messenger then. Whether it be Horikita-san or Ryūen-kun, it’s of no concern to me.”

I nodded in response before promptly taking my leave, having decided that it would be for the best not to loiter for too long.

After all, if I were to be seen together with Sakayanagi I would end up drawing far too much negative attention.

After that, I once again returned to the center of the harbor.

As I drew closer, I caught sight of a group of first-year students in the middle of purchasing an assortment of different supplies from Mashima-sensei. It seemed that he was the one in charge of selling provisions.

Even though I was essentially out of provision points, I decided to stop by and take a look.

“Hello.”

“Ah, Ayanokōji. Perfect timing actually. I have something to tell you, so make it seem like you’re looking through the merchandise and listen up.”

I moved in line with his suggestion, casually dropping my gaze to the various goods on display as I discreetly drew closer to him.

“Acting Director Tsukishiro hasn’t done anything noteworthy so far, at least not since the exam started. I haven’t noticed him planning anything to interfere with you.”

“So you’re saying I don’t need to worry about him doing anything?”

“...That’s what I’d like to tell you, but there are still certain things that seem a bit strange.”

“What do you mean?”

I slowly moved through the merchandise on display, occasionally taking the products into my hands as I did.

“In this exam, there’s no telling when or where someone might run into danger. In the event that a student suffers a particularly time-critical injury, the school has prepared a small boat and a helicopter to help expedite the rescue process.”

“That seems reasonable to me.”

The helicopter and the boat each had their individual uses, so it wasn’t strange that the school would have both prepared. If, for instance, a student were to run into trouble on the opposite side of the island during a spell of bad weather, it would be better to make use of the boat, whereas the helicopter would win out in cases where every second mattered.

“We originally planned on bringing along one helicopter and one boat, but for some reason we ended up bringing two boats. When I looked into it, I

found that the Acting Director had arranged it as a supposed safety precaution.”

It seemed that, even as the exam went on, Mashima-sensei had been dutifully keeping tabs on even the smallest of details as he collected information on Tsukishiro’s movements.

“So then, maybe it’s possible that he did so expecting the need for two boats to arise at once?”

“That’s certainly true. In the end, it’s just something peculiar that I thought would be worth mentioning. Take it for what you will.”

What was originally supposed to be a single small rescue boat had apparently turned into two.

However, though the boat may be small in size, it would inevitably be noticed once it started moving. It would probably be pretty difficult to send one out without an SOS signal from a student. Most importantly, even if they managed to mobilize the boat, the question still remained: What exactly did that have to do with me?

“Where does the Acting Director usually spend his time?”

“Generally, he stays in the tent where the monitoring equipment has been set up, making sure that nothing has gone wrong with any of the students’ watches. Of course, other staff members are in there monitoring the watches as well. Outside of that, he tends to go out and patrol the island once or twice a day, sometimes for several hours at a time.”

“The Acting Director goes out of his way to patrol the island, all on his own?”

“Yes.”

Although it was unknown what exactly it was that he was doing, there was still one concrete takeaway I could glean from this. Namely, that there were several hours each day where nobody was watching him.

“In any case, I have a bad feeling about all of this, so be sure to watch your back, Ayanokōji.”

“Thank you for going to the trouble of providing me with this warning.”

I fully intended to stay as vigilant as physically possible, but I still wouldn't be able to forget about the exam. At the end of the day, no matter how wary I may be, I would continue to be bound by the Basic Movement rule.



6.3

The Open Water Swimming Task came and went, and even though Nanase ended up missing out on first place, she managed to just narrowly slip into third and earn some points for her efforts.

She had covered a long, harsh distance in a drastically short period of time, so all things considered, she had performed admirably.

I was going to praise her for her efforts when she came back, but she looked discontent so I took a different approach.

“That girl who took first place is my classmate Onodera. She’s a highly formidable opponent when it comes to swimming, so you shouldn’t let the loss get to you.”

With a top member of the swimming club like Onodera as her opponent, Nanase had managed quite well for herself.

“Yes. Onodera-senpai was certainly amazing. However, the one I’m truly concerned about is...”

Nanase trailed off as she looked over her shoulder and fixed her gaze on a certain someone.

That someone was none other than Kōenji, the young man who had snatched away the first place spot in the boy’s category in an overwhelming display of superiority.

“On top of making his way to the starting area faster than us, he won his match in record time.”

He stood refined as he looked out over the sea, and from what I could tell, his breathing wasn’t labored in the slightest.

“He’s as much a freak as he is a superhuman. Thinking about him any more than necessary isn’t worth the time.”

Although I may say this, even I, as his fellow classmate, have had to personally change my evaluation of him two or three times so far during this special exam. The Tug of War Task from earlier was only one such example of this.

He held utterly unfathomable potential.

If this was a glimpse of what he was truly capable of, then it would certainly be fair to call him a prodigy of some sort.

Having been awarded a lump sum of 20 points from his win, Kōenji had temporarily moved up to first place overall.

However, it would be incorrect to say that this put Nagumo at a disadvantage.

Rather, the fact remained unchanged that Nagumo was in an overwhelmingly advantageous position compared to Kōenji.

Moving forward, Nagumo would undoubtedly max out the size of his group through Tasks.

Once his group hits six members, they would start earning points at an accelerated rate and probably run away with the lead.

No matter how extraordinary Kōenji may be, in the end, he was acting alone. He lacked the human resources necessary to come out on top.

Therefore, when push came to shove, I wondered how exactly Kōenji planned on overcoming this setback?

At this point, we decided to rest until our next designated area was announced.

We rehydrated ourselves with the free drinking water they had on site, laid back, and enjoyed a well-earned break.

Then, at 1:00 PM, the third designated area of the day was revealed.

It was the random designation for the day, jumping straight from area H9 to area B6 — from one side of the map to the other.

I had missed a total of five areas in a row so far, costing me a sizable number of points due to the ramping penalty.

As such, I wanted to reach this new designated area by any means necessary.

“Senpai. In terms of distance it’s certainly manageable, but...”

Having seen the area that had been designated on her own tablet, Nanase looked to me with shining eyes.

“It’ll be hard if we try to go straight through the forest. However, we can take the beach in D8 and C8 and cut through a shorter patch of forest to the beach in B8 instead. Then, if we just head north from there, we can get to B6 without too much trouble.”

I finished her sentence for her and added a few thoughts of my own, prompting her to nod and stand up. Apparently, she had pictured this very same route.

“Thankfully, I’ve been able to recover my strength and rehydrate a bit. I should be fine to push forward without issue.”

Although we were reluctant to part ways with the starting area, we once again set off toward the forests of the uninhabited island.

We could see plenty of other groups of students at first, but just as soon as we stepped foot into the forest, we found ourselves reunited with the familiar feeling of solitude.

Unlike the sandy beaches where you were subject to the intense rays of direct sunlight, the muggy heat and humidity of the forest gnawed away your body.

“We’ve only just started and I’m already thirsty.”

“I’m grateful that we could stay hydrated back at the starting area, but I’m going to miss the easy access to water as well.”

Going from drinking as much water as we wanted to being forced to conserve water again felt worse than expected. That’s why, even though earning points came at a high priority, it’s only natural that there would be groups that try to stay somewhat nearby the starting area.

“There are more groups huddled around the starting area than I expected. I wonder if that’s due to the stress and difficulty that comes with living on the island for four or five days in a row? What do you think, Senpai?”

“I think that’s part of it, but that’s not the only reason. I’d say the largest factor is the revelation of the bottom ten groups.”

“...Is that so? Well, the expulsion penalty only applies to the bottom five groups, and since they were given the ability to find out their current situation through their tablets on the fourth day, I suppose it makes sense that they’ve grown complacent...”

By the end of the third day, nearly every student had been putting forward their full effort to secure a position on the leaderboards. We had been set to meander around an unfamiliar uninhabited island, told to pile up as many points as possible while being tossed around by Tasks and designated areas. All of this, just for the sake of escaping from the underlying threat known as ‘expulsion’.

On the fourth day, however, that all changed. Students began to compare the points they had earned with those down at the bottom ranks. Using their first three days of island life as a baseline of sorts, they'd make rough, arbitrary approximations of how many points they could earn in a day and use that to help decide whether or not they were at an advantage.

“But, even if you have a 10 to 20 point lead on the bottom five, there’s no absolute guarantee that you’ll be safe, right? If it were me, I’d try my best to establish a 30 to 40 point lead and work to maintain it.”

“Of course, at some level, everyone knows that they should be doing it that way. After all, everyone wants to face the special exam with the resolve to give it their all from start to finish. But reality is not that kind. Just like how you and I are eager to get a drink of water right now, once you get a taste of something sweet, whatever resolve you might have is bound to falter.”

“I see... I suppose I can somewhat understand what you’re saying. For instance, even if you’ve resolved yourself to stay up all night to study on the day before a big test, once you start thinking about how much you want to take a quick nap, you’ll find yourself getting under the covers of your futon and end up accidentally sleeping until morning...”

She looked embarrassed as she spoke, as though this was a retelling of something she had experienced firsthand.

“Since the start of the fourth day, most groups should’ve started to run out of both food and water, and general fatigue has begun to set in as well. I think you can see that dropping in for a short visit at the starting area is the root cause here. If you see another group taking it easy in such a comfortable environment, it’s only natural that you would think to do so yourself, at least for a bit.”

In a world where nobody was taking a break in and around the starting area, most of the groups that stopped by would never be tempted to join in and instead choose to resume their journey.

“I would imagine that the decision to stay and rest at the starting area would come after a discussion between group members. They’d say something like: ‘We have a lead for the time being, so let’s stay here for a bit

and pick up some easy Tasks while we enjoy the free water and safety. Then, once we've secured a suitable amount of food and water, we'll set out again.' Well, that would probably be the gist of it, anyway."

Nanase nodded along as I spoke, seemingly convinced. However, she sent a question my way only moments afterward.

"Then, the correct choice is to give up on taking the easy way out and be stricter with yourself... that's what you're getting at, right?"

"Nanase, you said that you'd want to establish a sizable lead and maintain it, but fatigue has started to catch up with you, hasn't it? You've taken part in more physically demanding Tasks than I have too."

"Y-yes. I know I said earlier that I'd work hard, but I must admit that my pace has actually slowed down by a fair bit since day one. I suspect that by tomorrow or the day after I'll probably be even slower."

Though she didn't say it explicitly, the wear and tear on her body was probably more severe than I imagined.

Energy spent participating in Tasks aside, just how many dozens of kilometers had she and I traveled in these last five days?

"Rest is important. There are times where you'll have no choice but to overwork yourself to earn points, but the key to that is knowing when to push yourself and when to take a step back and take a break. You ultimately just have to avoid doing the same things as the majority of other students."

Move when others have chosen to rest and rest when others have chosen to move.

"I've been thinking that you've been taking on the exam fairly negligently these past few days, Ayanokōji-senpai. But, you've just been conducting yourself that way because you don't want to stand out too much during the first half, haven't you?"

"That's about right. Of course, I'll bite if an adequate opportunity presents itself, but even if I made it into a highly contested Task, the number of points I can earn would be limited."

There had been many Tasks so far where I could've won if I had been given the chance to participate, but was never given that chance because

someone else had already taken up the last spot.

“Uhm, if I may ask... why are you telling me about your plan? Up until now, it has always seemed that you’ve been looking to placate or deceive me whenever the topic comes up, Senpai.”

She wanted to know why, and rightfully so as well. After all, I didn’t normally let other people hear me talk like this.

So then, why did I choose to share a select portion of my overall strategy with her instead of trying to cover it up like I usually did?

Having spent the last several days traveling the island together with her, I had naturally come to understand her better.

The student named Nanase Tsubasa... What kind of personality did she have? What kind of mentality? She was a diligent honor student whose physical and academic capabilities were well above average. She was someone who followed instructions without voicing a single complaint, but wouldn’t hesitate to speak her mind when she felt like something needed to be said. Above all, she had the confidence and resolve necessary to not break down easily.

Altogether, this was just as much a strength as it was a weakness, as well as a fairly awkward way for someone to live their life. It was precisely because she was such a person that I couldn’t help but feel a sense of incongruity about the fact that she had chosen to join forces with someone like Hōsen.

Was it because she was trying to get me expelled as the White Room student?

Or perhaps there was some other motive for it?

Back when she first proposed the idea of traveling together with me, I thought that she was looking for an opportunity to strike when I showed a moment of weakness.

For that very reason, I had tried to make myself seem relaxed or careless on multiple occasions during our time together.

If she chose to strike while we were deep in the dark forest, her actions would be hidden from any prying eyes.

But, in the end, Nanase never even tried to take advantage of the opportunities I gave her.

Rather, between lending an ear to Ike's troubles and helping Shinohara and the others when they were in danger, she always put forward a genuine effort to try and help those in need.

"Put simply, there's no questioning the fact you're my enemy, Nanase. Not only because this exam requires us to compete against each other as students from different school years, but also because there's 20 million private points in it for you for getting me expelled."

"...That's right. After all, I tried to plot against you before, Senpai."

"That being said, your actions so far have made it impossible for me to see you as an enemy."

"Even though I've acted with blatant hostility before...?"

"Strange, isn't it? Well, that aside, I'm also fairly certain that even if I didn't say anything you'd still understand my strategy to some extent."

She acted as though she was surprised when I said this, but deep down she should've already picked up on my true intentions.

And despite the fact that she was already vaguely aware of my plans, she looked to feign ignorance so as to potentially find out something more.

"But with all that being said, this is just my intuition."

At this point, Nanase sank into silence.

I had no intention of pressing her any further on the matter, perfectly content with quietly continuing our journey through the forest.

For the time being, my top priority was reaching the next designated area.



6.4

“Phew~! Somehow we finally managed to make it to our last area.”

With a heavy breath, Nanase collapsed to the ground, succumbing to the fatigue plaguing her entire body.

The fourth designated area of the day had been area B5, right above the previous area B6.

For Nanase, even a short distance like that must've been considerably burdensome.

“It seems like you’ve been pushing yourself quite a lot.”

She had been fine when we left the starting area, but after a while, her pace gradually began to slow down. Given the circumstances, I had been eyeing the possibility of leaving her behind and making my way to the designated area on my own, but she ultimately managed to persevere through sheer willpower alone.

“To be honest, participating in that swimming Task was far too much for me.”

That Task had probably drained away just about every last drop of spare energy she had.

“Fortunately for you, we’re done for today. We can take it slow from here and look for a good place to set up camp.”

We rested for a bit while we waited for her to feel ready to walk again, and then we set out in search of a suitable campsite.

Before long, we came across a large opening in the forest where another group had already set up camp. It seemed as though they were getting ready for dinner, as there was an assortment of different cooking utensils lined up in front of their tents.

It was a great location with plenty of space for us to set up for the night, but it felt like it would be awkward to do so when we weren’t particularly close to the other group. Just as we tried to pass them by and look elsewhere, one of the students called out to us.

“Yo!”

The student in question was Hamaguchi Tetsuya, a boy from Class 2-C. I lightly raised my hand in response, prompting Nanase to follow suit with a bow.

“You guys in a hurry to get somewhere?”

“No. We’ve already reached our designated area for the day. We were just thinking of finding somewhere a bit closer to the ocean.”

“Then how about you take it easy and stick around for a bit?”

I hadn’t spoken with Hamaguchi since last year’s island exam and the exam on the cruise ship that was held on the way back.

We had only spent a brief period of time together back then, and we had never interacted with one another outside of that.

Our relationship was in no way close enough to warrant calling each other friends...

So then, why in the world was he looking to strike up a conversation with me?

“Though, you don’t have to force yourself if you don’t want to.”

After a lengthy silence, he added in a couple of slightly apologetic words.

Nanase had been following along without voicing even a single complaint, but her fatigue was probably reaching its peak, so I figured we might as well take him up on his offer.

“Well, I suppose we’ll take a short break.”

“Come on over then, make yourself at home.”

Hamaguchi ushered us over to his campsite as if he were inviting a couple of close friends into his room.

The way he managed to create such a welcoming atmosphere was just what you would expect of one of Ichinose’s classmates.

That being said, what truly piqued my interest here was not Hamaguchi, but the other two members of his group.

They had come out from within their tent not too long after Hamaguchi called out to us, having overheard the sound of our ensuing chatter.

Their names were Andō Sayo and Minamikata Kozue.

The entire time, they had been casting glances in my direction as they unabashedly whispered to each other about something.

“If you two aren’t on board with Hamaguchi’s invitation, we’ll leave immediately.”

As students from different classes, if our presence made them uncomfortable, it would probably be better for us to leave.

At least, that’s what I thought, but Andō hurriedly put a stop to that.

“No, no, nothin’ like that. We were whisperin’ ‘bout somethin’ else. It just so happens we wanted to talk with you, Ayanokōji-kun, so it’s totally fine by us if you guys camp here tonight. Right Kozue?”

With that, she looked to Minamikata, who nodded along several times in agreement.

“If we’re all on the same page, then let’s take the opportunity to hold ourselves a welcome party!”

Saying that, Hamaguchi brought out a backpack from inside one of the tents.

He then unfastened the zipper and opened it up, revealing a considerably large amount of canned food contained within.

“That’s quite a lot.”

With just the amount I could currently see, a group could easily survive for a week.

“As luck would have it, all three of us had the card that gave 50% more provision points when the exam started. That’s why we’ve got so much more food than other groups.”

Although I had already figured that out myself, I decided to make it seem like I was genuinely impressed by this. A usual group of three would’ve had 15000 provision points to work with, but Hamaguchi’s group had 22500. Even if they chose to buy a barbecue grill and a rich selection of meat, they’d still have plenty of points left to spare. Of course, purchases like that would be ill-fit for travel and transportation, given the weight.

One of the primary strengths of Class 2-C was that its students practically never acted selfishly. In spite of that, one might be led to think that Hamaguchi’s group was being wasteful with their purchases, given the abundance of food and cooking supplies they had purchased, but that probably wasn’t the case here at all.

Chances are that this was all Ichinose’s idea. It would be extremely difficult to move about the map with such a large amount of food. This was particularly true for cooking utensils and tools like gas stoves and such, which would just end up getting in the way. However, it’s a different story

when someone is explicitly tasked with holding onto these things. Ichinose probably wanted to have some sort of system put in place for students to share useful cooking tools with each other.

As far as the rules of the special exam were concerned, the school had already officially stated that students were allowed to share food with other groups. So, in that sense, it felt fairly accurate to think of these three as the kitchen keepers of Class 2-C.

Hamaguchi pulled out a bundle of skewers from the backpack.

“What an exceedingly interesting strategy.”

Nanase mumbled from off to the side, having seemingly gone through the same thought process that I had.

“I suppose you could say that.”

“We first-years are rather lacking in terms of solidarity. I would imagine that those of us willing to take action for the sake of another are few and far between.”

However, a strategy like this undoubtedly came with problems of its own.

Staying back and guarding the food and supplies was certainly important, but in the process, you would run into issues scoring points for the exam.

In the worst case, the penalty for missing out on designated areas could be mitigated by a single person. However, you’d still gradually get outpaced by the rest of the competition. In which case, you’d inevitably find yourself standing on the doorstep to expulsion.

“You guys alright with some yakiniku?”

“Eh, what do you mean?”

“We’ve at least gotta treat you guys to a solid dinner. Right you two?”

When Hamaguchi looked to check with his fellow group members, the two girls responded with an immediate nod of their heads, completely fine with the idea.

Seeing this, I spoke up.

“No, hold on a moment. I appreciate your sentiment, but there’s no way we can accept such a generous offer.”

“That’s right. Your food is far too valuable to be used on us.”

Although Nanase and I felt grateful for their show of goodwill, we both declined the offer. Despite this, however, Hamaguchi simply acted as if he hadn’t heard us and continued preparing the meal. He was really far too good-natured a person. Rather than waste the resources on us, students from other classes and school years, they should be using them to support their own classmates in need.

Without so much as a second thought, Hamaguchi proceeded to take out some packed meat from a cooler box stored inside the backpack.

“You guys really don’t gotta worry ‘bout it. We just so happened to get our hands on some nice beef as a reward from a Task today. It’s not gonna last for long in storage either way, so we might as well dig in while we can.”

He took the cuts of meat and began to pierce them with skewers. From the look of it, we were about to be served a full-blown meal.

They even brought out a can of mosquito repellent for us to use in order to make the atmosphere even more welcoming and comfortable.

“Is it... really, really okay for you to treat the likes of us to a meal like this?”

“Oh stop it with the formalities. Don’t hold back.”

Even though their class had a tendency to overly prioritize helping others, I still had to ask myself: why me?

There was surely no way that they would go to these lengths for every student that passed them by.

“Are you curious about why I called out to you?”

“Considering that you’re also treating me to a meal, it definitely raises questions.”

After pausing for a bit to come up with the right words, Hamaguchi came out with it.

“It’s cause we’ve been hearing a lot of talk about you lately, Ayanokōji-kun. We wanted to get a chance to talk to you ourselves. Ain’t that right guys?”

“Yep.”

Minamikata and Andō promptly agreed, fully on board with Hamaguchi’s reasoning.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, like... ya know...”

Andō shot me a questioning glance, the look in her eyes all but saying: ‘You DO get what I’m talkin’ about, right?’

Once they realized that I genuinely had no idea what they were getting at, their expressions became even more surprised than before.

“Eh? Wait, then has there really not been any progress yet? For real?”

“No way! I thought for sure that they’d at least be at that ‘more than friends, less than lovers’ stage by now!”

“I know right? Honami-chan’s been dropping his name pretty much all the time these days.”

“Is that so?”

“I know it’s not our place to say this an’ all, but... is there even any reason why they shouldn’t be going out at this point?”

While I had heard somewhere before that girls love talking about this kind of thing, was it really appropriate for them to do so right in front of the person himself?

Nanase seemed to have connected the dots for herself by this point, as she was looking at me with keen, undivided interest filling her gaze.

“...I’m not 100% certain I get what you two are going on about, but I don’t think we should go out with each other.”

“No no no no no. What are you saying? I’ll say it again just to be sure, but you do know that this is THE Honami-chan we’re talkin’ about, right?”

“I can’t really speak for all the boys out there, but prolly like 80 to 90% of the second-years like Honami-chan, right?”

“That sounds like a safe bet to me.”

While there was certainly no denying the fact that Ichinose was popular with boys and girls alike, 90% was clearly an overstatement. Sudō liked Horikita, Ike liked Shinohara, and that was no doubt just the tip of the iceberg.

“You two are in different classes, sure, but you don’t have to let that get in the way of love! There’re tons of couples out there going steady with each other regardless of their class or grade.”

“Isn’t the bigger issue here the fact that Ichinose isn’t even interested in me?”

“Ooooo, is that modesty I see? You do know that you were quite the hit with the girls back when we first enrolled here, right Ayanokōji-kun?”

When I thought back on it, I could recall Kushida saying something relatively similar to that about a year ago.

I simply didn’t take what she said at face value at the time, or rather, I chose not to think all that much about it.

“It sounds like you’re quite a hit with the ladies, Ayanokōji-senpai.”

“No, I’m not. Nothing of the sort. No girls have ever said anything like that to me before.”

“Reeeeally~? Ah, well I can think of one time when you came up in a conversation, but the topic changed real fast.”

“Well, ain’t no helpin’ that. There’s no way to tell if you’re gonna like a guy unless you up and talk with ‘em face-to-face, and Ayanokōji-kun wasn’t the type a’ guy to talk with people a year ago.”

“Doesn’t seem to me like he’s changed much since then either though~!”

The two girls shared a laugh as they cracked a joke at my expense.

“Ayanokōji-senpai has changed a little from how he used to be, then?”

Nanase observed as the two chattered away before raising a question of her own.

“Well, I guess in some ways he seems a lot... softer now?”

The one to respond this time was Hamaguchi, who had only just returned from a trip to the restroom moments before Nanase asked her question. While I had never spoken with Andō or Minamikata before, I had spent a bit of time together with Hamaguchi during the exam on the cruise ship.

He was pretty much the perfect person to give an objective comparison of how much I had changed this past year.

All of that aside... it didn't seem to me like these three were afraid of the possibility of getting expelled. Of course, there was no way for me to tell exactly how many points they had, but there was no way that they were anywhere near the top of the leaderboards.

If that's the case, then...

After we finished with dinner, we ended up deciding to accept their warm hospitality and chose to stay there for the night.



Chapter 7: The First-Years Start to Move

The sixth day of the exam. We started out by making a beeline south to our first designated area of the day, B6, where I took the first-place Early Bird Bonus. After that, our second designated area was A5, which was fairly close, but we unfortunately only received the Arrival Bonus.

Following closely after at 1:00 PM was the third area, which was the random designation over in area C3. There were a couple of different ways available for us to get there. The first was to cut straight through the steep mountains of area B4. Though it wasn't readily obvious from looking at the map, this route would probably require us to do a fair bit of rock climbing. A somewhat safer alternative to this was to move a bit further east from where we were now before going through the pass in area C4. And lastly there was the option of making a huge detour around the mountain range to area D5 and traveling north from there along the river.

"I'm guessing that most of the other groups we're up against are going to go through C4 or take a detour down and around."

"I think so too."

If we could successfully navigate the slopes of A4 and B4, we'd have a very solid chance of securing the first-place Early Bird Bonus.

"While I don't imagine that you're in the best condition, we're going to have to take on the risk anyway."

"You want to take the direct path through A4 and B4, don't you Senpai?"

Nanase had somehow managed to keep up with me so far, but there was no telling if she'd make it this time.

But apparently, she had already made up her mind about it, as she elected to follow along with me without any hesitation.

Shortly thereafter, however, she found herself standing face-to-face with her largest obstacle yet.

We had only had to navigate a couple of fairly steep inclines and slopes so far, but the challenge before us now was far more akin to a sheer cliff.

Whether you looked to the left or right, the cliff stretched on as far as the eye could see. Taking a slightly easier detour didn't seem like it would be an option here.

Now that it had come to this, we had two distinct options: Scale the mountain, or turn back and find another way.

"I... I can do this!"

Watching as she talked herself into it, I decided to let her go first and see how she'd hold up.

She pulled a ribbon out of her backpack and tied up her long hair to make it easier to climb.

"Ah...!"

The very moment she started the climb, she made a mistake with her footing on the rock and came tumbling down to the ground.

"Oww, that hurt...!"

She gingerly rubbed at her bottom as she stood up again. Fortunately, she hadn't been very high up when she fell. If she had been two meters higher, it probably wouldn't have ended as well for her.

The cliff was close to ten meters tall and in all honesty it didn't even seem like it would even be that hard to climb. That being said, it would probably be challenging for Nanase to scale it by herself.

"I guess that's the end of the line."

In reality, this obstacle was more challenging for her than I thought it'd be.

She had done well to keep up with me these past six days, but it seemed like I would have to push on from here on my own.

"I-I can do it!"

"Even if you can, there's no point if it takes up all your stamina just to get to the top. The entire reason why we're scaling the mountain like this is to

save time. Not everyone is going to end up taking a detour, so every second counts.”

In fact, pointlessly standing around and talking about this was already a massive waste of time, something that Nanase probably understood as well.

“I’m going now. It’s up to you if you still want to insist on climbing, but you’re the one responsible for whatever happens.”

She looked blatantly frustrated by this, but I simply turned my back on her, placed my hands on the rock, and began to ascend the cliff.

Knowing her, I felt confident that she’d make the calm, rational decision here, so I didn’t have any intention of looking back to see what she ended up doing. Contrary to my expectations, however, I sensed her presence draw closer to me from behind and looked over my shoulder.

“What are you doing?”

“Please... don’t mind me. I’ve made the choice to follow after you of my own volition, Ayanokōji-senpai...!”

Saying that, she fearlessly reached out and took hold of the rock again.

But, due to the lingering traces of fatigue still plaguing her body, she couldn’t put enough strength into her grip. Her arms began to shake as she clung to the face of the cliff.

“If you’re not careful, you might end up facing consequences even worse than retirement.”

I warned her yet again, but she still seemed hell-bent on chasing after me.

What exactly was compelling her to go so far to accompany me?

If she was trying to slow me down by being a hindrance, then in some ways, she was succeeding.

Being careful to maintain a secure foothold on the cliff, I climbed back down to around the halfway point and outstretched my hand to her.



“I, I can’t do that Senpai. I promised you that I wouldn’t get in your way back when I asked to accompany you... So please, go on ahead and don’t worry about me. I beg you.”

“If I went ahead and you got injured, it’d leave a bad taste in my mouth. If you were down there begging me for help I might feel differently, but I’m the one making the decision in this case, so don’t worry about it.”

“But...!”

“Isn’t it a waste of time to continue arguing about it like this?”

After bringing attention to this for a second time, her hand was forced. There was nothing more that she could say.

“...Alright.”

Although she was still slightly frustrated, she took hold of my hand. It was one thing that she wasn’t in peak physical condition right now, but even if she was, the question still remained on whether or not she’d be able to climb at all.

“Senpai... Do you perhaps have prior rock climbing experience?”

“No, this is my first time doing something like this.”

This exam required you to fumble through all sorts of things you’ve never tried before. Reaching out to help her like this probably wasn’t the correct approach either, given the various risks that came with it.

“Is that so...”

I guided her hands, showing her which spots she should grab on to.

Though it was an inefficient way of going about it, we eventually managed to scale the cliff.

However, we hadn’t crossed the finish line just yet. We had spent more than ten minutes simply getting up the cliff. Without a moment of rest, I set off once again. Now that I had helped her find her way up, she could take her time finding a way back down on her own. She lagged behind me for a bit at first, but her firm resolve hadn’t changed in the slightest as she quickly caught back up.

As we continued to push forward, I couldn't help but think that she had an uncanny resemblance to a loyal dog chasing after its owner.

Before long, we finally arrived at area C3. Although it had taken a fair amount of time, none of our competitors seemed to have made it here yet, so I easily secured the first-place Early Bird Bonus.

“T-thank goodness...!”

Even though she hadn't even gotten the second-place bonus for her efforts, Nanase let out a sigh of relief.

We had a bit until the next designated area would be announced, so figured that I might as well keep her company and rest for a while.

Just like when we were at the top of the mountain, the light breeze that swept by from time to time was quite refreshing.

“It's been pretty calm out these last few days but it's pretty windy today, huh?”

It had been consistently clear and sunny so far, but thick clouds had begun to fill the increasingly overcast sky.

“It must've been surprising to suddenly get tossed onto a deserted island right after entering highschool.”

“Of course it was. This really is such an amazing school.”

Nanase let show a shy, yet forced smile.

“Senpai, do you enjoy it? This school?”

“I guess. There have certainly been a handful of headaches to deal with, but I've never really thought of it as unenjoyable.”

For the most part the school seemed to be the same day by day, but in some ways it was quite different.

I was simply enjoying my time here, content with the constant, subtle daily changes it brought into my life.

“While it feels like graduation is a long ways away, it'll probably be here in the blink of an eye. That's why I think it'd be best to spend what time I do have without any regrets.”

“...Graduation...”

“Is something wrong?”

“O-oh, no. It’s nothing.”

There was something about Nanase, a certain air with the way she was acting, that seemed completely different from the Nanase I had become accustomed to over these past several days.

It was roughly identical to the feeling she gave off back when she first enrolled here.

However, it was very faint. So faint, in fact, that if someone were to tell me that it was just my imagination, then I might even be inclined to believe them.

If she really did have something on her mind, then I suppose I’ll just have to wait for her to tell me about it when the time comes.



7.1

At 9:00 PM on the sixth day of the exam, several first-year class representatives had arranged to meet up together in area F9.

The representatives in question were Class A's Takahashi Osamu, Class B's Yagami Takuya, Class C's Utomiya Riku and Tsubaki Sakurako, and Class D's Hōsen Kazuomi. It would typically be difficult for such a diverse cast of students to meet up in one location given their separate Tables, but in this case, they had decided on a time and place for the meeting before the exam even started.

Furthermore, since the chosen location was on the beach, a bonfire would serve as a reliable signal for the meeting.

Despite the fact that she hadn't really done anything noteworthy or remarkable so far, the person who had spearheaded this get-together was... Tsubaki.

The appointed time for the meeting had already come and gone, but Hōsen still hadn't arrived yet.

"Tsubaki-san, it seems that Hōsen-kun still hasn't arrived yet."

"Well, he doesn't really seem the type to show up on time. Or maybe he's just not coming."

The group decided to wait a little longer to see if he would show up, but before long, Takahashi raised his hand with an arm pressed against his abdomen.

"Sorry guys... I've got a bit of a stomach ache so I'mma excuse myself. It... It might take a while!"

With that, he hurriedly ran off toward the forest.

As the group watched Takahashi take his leave, Yagami's eyes were fixed on Tsubaki.

"It's certainly more convenient for all of us if everyone is present before we start, but..."

Yagami trailed off, seemingly lost in thought, but he picked up where he left off only moments afterward.

"While Hōsen-kun still isn't here yet, just a little should be fine, right?"

Tsubaki, who had been silently staring at the bonfire, turned and looked toward Yagami.

"What...?"

"I was thinking that it'd be fine if you told us about this plan of yours in detail."

"What do you mean?"

“You’ve been scheming something big, have you not? Otherwise you wouldn’t have proposed for all the representatives to meet together like this when the latter half of the exam is about to start. There’s no way you merely want us to report on our progress, right?”

Tsubaki said nothing to this, choosing instead to simply keep her gaze locked onto Yagami.

“Your OAA ratings are, at a glance, below average. In fact, there doesn’t seem to be anything remarkable about you in the slightest. However, from what I’ve seen during the battles we first-years have taken part in so far, you’ve been one to provide fairly critical insight from time to time. Furthermore...”

“Furthermore?”

“While on the surface it doesn’t seem like your class has been doing anything to get Ayanokōji-senpai expelled, I suspect that you’ve actually been doing quite a bit of work behind the scenes. Utomiya-kun’s control of Class C is just a front. You’re the one pulling the strings from the shadows, aren’t you?”

“Hmmm. You say some interesting stuff, Yagami-kun. So the reason you supported my proposal to set this up is cuz you knew I thought of something?”

Back when Tsubaki first tried to set this up, the core personalities behind each class hadn’t been willing to cooperate at all.

After all, there was no way they would’ve been willing to listen to an obscure, seemingly irrelevant student like her.

With that being the case, the reason why everyone had been willing to meet here today was because Yagami had been such a strong proponent for it.

“From the very beginning, I’ve consistently advocated that the first-year student body should look to cooperate with one another. Even if you didn’t have a profound reason behind gathering us here today, Tsubaki-san, I felt like it would still be worthwhile just to make sure we all have a solid grasp of the current state of affairs.”

“Well, Yagami-kun, how ‘bout I tell you something interesting?”

“Something interesting? How immensely curious.”

“Though, do know that after you hear it... I won’t be able to guarantee anything.”

“...It must be something truly fascinating, then.”

Yagami felt slightly concerned, but he maintained his composure and waited for Tsubaki to speak.

“Yagami-kun, you said just now that Utomiya-kun and I’ve been scheming from the shadows to try’n get Ayanokōji-senpai kicked outta school, yeah?”

“Yes. At first glance, one might be led to believe that Hōsen-kun and Amasawa-san were the only ones to take part in it during the last exam, but I think that you two were also targeting him.”

“A reward of 20 million private points, just for getting a senpai expelled? Just about anybody would find that attractive, yeah?”

“That may be true for others, but not for me.”

Upon hearing Yagami’s flat refusal, Tsubaki narrowed her eyes.

“Not for you? Sorry, but I’m having a hard time believing that. You make yourself seem harmless, but aren’t you really lookin’ to get Ayanokōji-senpai expelled as well? Hell, you might even be more obsessed with it than Hōsen-kun and Amasawa-san.”

“And what makes you think that? I haven’t done a single thing thus far.”

“It’s the kinda thing I can tell just by looking at you. I’ll have you know that I’ve gotta lotta confidence in my eye for people.”

At this, Yagami’s smile, while still present, became noticeably more strained.

“It’s hard to imagine given the way you normally act, but like... I’d imagine that your plan started out with pretending to be an ally so you could slowly get closer to him and stab ‘em right in the back. Or am I wrong?”

Tsubaki stared at Yagami with eyes that seemed to peer into the depths of his very being, making him unconsciously avert his gaze.

While he had always had a hunch that Tsubaki wasn't an ordinary student, the way her gaze practically bored into his skull made it seem even more extreme than he had anticipated.

“You...”

“Well whatever, we'll get back to that later. Getting back to the point, the situation's currently looking kinda cruddy, wouldn't you say?”

“Kinda cruddy?”

“Apparently, Nanase-san's been sticking together with Ayanokōji-senpai for a while now. I heard that he's even given her permission to tag along too. I tried checking up on them with the GPS Search feature just to make sure, and sure enough, the both of 'em are up in area C3 together right now.”

“I see. So you're saying that Hōsen-kun's already looking to make his next move?”

“I'm saying that we gotta take action sooner rather than later. If Hōsen-kun gets Ayanokōji-senpai expelled, it'll all be over for the rest of us. If possible, I'd like to hear what kinda plans you've thought of to get Senpai kicked out, just as a reference. You get me?”

“I already told you I don't have...”

Tsubaki leaned in closer to Yagami, her eyes brimming with conviction.

“If you don't willingly cooperate starting now, you might end up paying dearly later.”

“Pay dearly...?”

“Well, like, someone important to you'll be in danger, or something like that.”

“S-surely you're not going to do something to Kushida-senpai!?”

Upon hearing Kushida's name come up, a thin smile finally emerged on Tsubaki's perpetually expressionless face.

She knew that Yagami and Kushida had been connected for a long time now.

Furthermore, she knew that there was something going on between them that he was looking to hide.

“Ah, what’s that about Kushida-senpai? Do tell.”

“N-no, it’s nothing... I apologize, but there’s nothing more I can tell y—!?”

Yagami’s words cut off as Utomiya suddenly came up from behind and forcefully restrained him in a Full Nelson hold.

He resisted in an attempt to try and break free, but he didn’t have the strength needed to get away.

“What, what are you doing Utomiya-kun...?”

“Sorry Yagami. I don’t have anything against you, but... it can’t be helped.”

With this, it was clear that Yagami’s earlier suspicions of Tsubaki’s true involvement in Class 2-C had been correct all along.

“I-I think of each and every first-year student as I would my own classmate! Why don’t we just calm down and stop with this!?”

“Either you come clean and tell us what you know, or you retire right here, right now. Those are your only options.”

Since the three of them were the only ones present, there was nobody Yagami could turn to for help.

“Yagami-kun, I get that you think Kushida-senpai is like, the key to getting Ayanokōji-senpai expelled, but why is that? How exactly do you plan on making use of her?”

“I can’t say...”

When he refused to answer, Utomiya further tightened his hold on Yagami’s arms.

“If you can’t say, then that must mean you really are up to something. Dontcha feel like confessing? Like gettin’ this over with?”

“I— Kushida-senpai is just...”

Still not hearing the answer they wanted, Utomiya momentarily released his hold and proceeded to wrap his arm around Yagami's neck instead.

Yagami began to choke for air as he was constricted in a headlock.

"Yer nearing your limit, Yagami-kun. If you don't fess up now, I guess we'll just haveta hear it from Kushida-senpai... directly."

This wasn't just some empty threat. Rather, it was obvious that Tsubaki would actually follow through with it.

The fact that she was using Utomiya as a medium to carry out acts of violence and intimidation was more than enough proof for that.

"I'll ask you one last time. Will you confess or not?"

Faced with no other real option, Yagami finally resigned himself and gave in.

"...I understand. I'll tell you everything."

With his eyes to the ground, Yagami began to speak about the past of the girl named Kushida Kikyō and Ayanokōji Kiyotaka's knowledge on the matter.

Not long after he finished, Takahashi returned from within the forest.

They all waited around for a while after that, but in the end, Hōsen never showed up.



Chapter 8: True Colors Revealed

The dawn of the seventh day. So far, I had accumulated a grand total of 67 points.

Hypothetically speaking, if a four-man group forewent all participation in Tasks and just focused on getting all of their Arrival Bonuses, they'd have 92 points. From that perspective, my score might make it seem like I was in a tough spot, but... there was more to this exam than that. My overall rank had been steadily going up these last few days, and I was now at 51st place. This helped illustrate just how difficult it truly was to continuously traverse the island without missing any designated areas.

Chances were that around half of all groups had pushed forward full steam ahead for the first three or four days until they exhausted their initial supply of food and water. And then, when their progress stagnated by the fifth day, they probably began setting their sights on the harbor to try and get back on their feet.

However, it wouldn't be easy for a group to get back into perfect shape. The physical stress and fatigue that had been continuously building up wouldn't go away immediately. There was also no getting around the mental burden that came hand in hand with the prospect of traveling long distances.

Furthermore, since they'd have no choice but to try and curb the loss of points from missing designated areas, they'd probably have to take alternative measures such as sending one of their fellow group members out on their own to reach designated areas. Though, while this would let them avoid the penalty, they'd be forced to give up on any Early Bird Bonuses and they'd only receive a one-point Arrival Bonus as well.

In comparison, I had successfully managed to conserve my energy. I felt just about the same as I did back when the exam started.

I was ready to step it up a notch now that we were moving into the second half of the battle.

In the meantime, Kōenji had been steadily pushing forward, and it didn't seem like he would be slowing down anytime soon.

He was currently second place on the leaderboard, and only trailed behind the first place group, Nagumo's, by a slim eight-point margin.

When it came to the second-year groups in the top ten, Ryūen and Katsuragi's group had gone up a spot and were now sitting in ninth place.

Well, all that aside—— I finished washing my face in the river and turned around to look at the tent behind me.

Over the course of the last several days that we had been traveling together, Nanase had been a consistently early riser.

But today, even though it was already 6:50 AM, she still hadn't come out of her tent. I couldn't help but wonder if she had just overslept, or if there had been some sort of change in her health.

After all, the burden on her body must be substantial due to all the traveling and Tasks she had done every day.

After wiping off my face with a towel, I approached her tent and somewhat loudly rummaged through my bag as I brought out my tablet.

Having heard the noise that I was making, Nanase finally emerged from her tent.

“...Good morning to you, Ayanokōji-senpai.”

“Yeah, good morning. Are you feeling alright?”

“Eh? Ah, yes. I'm feeling perfectly fine. Nothing wrong at all.”

While I had expected her to show signs of fatigue, neither her words nor her movements gave off that impression at all.

She had apparently just not slept very well, as there were very slight bags visible under her eyes.

“I've been checking the rankings while I waited. There's a group of first-years that have been doing quite well for themselves so far.”

Of the ten groups currently at the top of the leaderboard, there were six third-year groups and three second-year groups, but only one made up of

first-years.

As it was now, the leaderboards were a perfect representation of the strength of the more senior, experienced students.

“The group that’s doing well is Utomiya-kun and Yagami-kun’s, correct?”

They had been in seventh place yesterday, and as of this morning, they had risen up to sixth.

The group consisted of three boys: Takahashi Osamu from Class 1-A, Yagami Takuya from Class 1-B, and Utomiya Riku from Class 1-C.

“After all, amongst all the first-year groups, well... Yes, they’re definitely one of the best.”

Despite her use of the phrase ‘one of the best’, her response had been fairly inarticulate.

“As a member of Class 1-D, it’s honestly difficult for me to earnestly support them in their efforts.”

“I see. That does make sense.”

Given the situation, Class 1-D would probably rather see students from the other school years succeed than see Takahashi’s group get into the top three.

“Nevertheless, our third-year senpais really are amazing, aren’t they? Every class from Class 3-A to Class 3-D has someone currently in the top ten.”

This was something I also found impressive.

As of this morning, the number of third-year groups in the top ten had increased to six, with Nagumo’s group up in first place undoubtedly paving the way.

Not only had they taken part in more Tasks than any other group, they had the most first-place victories in those Tasks by an overwhelming margin.

It was as though he wanted to illustrate the tenacity of the third-years to the rest of us.

“That said, you’re also amazing, Ayanokōji-senpai. Despite being all on your own, you’ve managed to earn quite a large number of points.”

“While that may be true, it won’t be easy for me to push into the top ranks from where I’m at now. At the end of the day, if you aren’t part of the top three, you won’t get the reward that matters most.”

Avoiding expulsion and taking the reward given to the top 50% of groups simply wouldn’t suffice.

That probably wouldn’t even be enough to pay back the points that I borrowed from Horikita.

“Although you say it won’t be easy, you don’t seem to be very anxious about it, Senpai.”

“I’m hoping for a miracle. People in other groups should start retiring soon enough.”

“...That is true, I suppose.”

As our conversation came to an end, we both looked up into the sky at just about the same time.

We had been blessed with near-perfect weather for the last six days, but starting today, it was looking like things were going to be very different.

Thick, grey clouds lined the sky and it looked like it would start pouring any minute. From what I saw in the weather forecast, it should start raining sometime this morning, meaning that we had two or three hours left at most.

I personally hadn’t spent any of my provision points on rain gear. If my clothes and shoes were to get soaked, I’d have to spend extra energy dealing with the added weight and lower temperature. Additionally, the muddiness of the ground would limit our travel speed making our journey without the gear even more difficult.

We couldn’t check on the rankings of any group that wasn’t part of the top or bottom ten.

As such, I wondered if Horikita, who was also traveling alone, would be okay. After all, we hadn’t seen each other at all since our conversation at the start of the exam. If she were to get sick or injured, her fate would be sealed.

At any rate, I wanted to get the first designated area out the way before the weather took a turn for the worse.

Once we finished packing up our things, I looked to see which area had been designated first.

Fortunately, the first designation of the day was close to area C3.

It shouldn't take us long to get there from where we were now.

But, just as I was about to put away my tablet, a notification popped up on the screen.

If I wasn't mistaken, the school would send out global messages like this in order to contact us.

『Depending on the state of the weather, Basic Movement and Tasks may be put on pause until further notice. Please be sure to keep an eye on your tablets for future updates.』

Apparently, the weather was forcing the school to make a tough decision about the sustainability of the exam.

Losing out on the opportunity to earn points for an extended period of time could prove fatal for the lower ranked groups.

It didn't seem like the school would come to a decision until they absolutely had to, but this was a thought for another time.

“Alright, let's go.”

After taking a couple of steps, I noticed Nanase wasn't following me. When I looked back, I saw that she was just absentmindedly standing there, seemingly unaware that I had even started walking.

“Nanase?”

Only after I called out her name did she realize she was being left behind.

“Sorry, I'm coming now!”

She apologized as she hurriedly ran to catch up to me.

If there was nothing wrong with her physically, then it was most likely a mental block that was causing her to act like this.

Either way, the one thing I could say for certain was that something about her had changed somehow since yesterday.

There hadn't been any noteworthy changes in the way we had been interacting...

Although, I didn't think that she'd had the opportunity to make contact with a third-party either...



8.1

After getting the ten-point Early Bird Bonus for our first area, we decided to wait for a suitable Task to pop up somewhere nearby. But, perhaps due to

the poor weather, there were fewer Tasks showing up than yesterday and we couldn't find any to participate in.

In the end, we spent the next hour and a half leisurely killing time.

Then, once 9:00 AM came around, the second area of the day was announced. This time, our destination was the randomly-designated area E2.

For a random designation, this was honestly not that far away.

I wanted to try and make it there if at all possible, but...

"We'll really have to think about how we're going to get there, won't we?"

"Yeah."

If we wanted to make it there as quickly as possible, taking a direct path over the mountains of D2 and D3 was probably the way to go.

If the conditions outside had been like they were yesterday, I probably would've chosen this route in a heartbeat.

However, the weather didn't seem like it was going to hold up for very much longer.

Once it starts raining, a usually well-traveled path would turn into a difficult one.

"How should we proceed?"

"Let's see... Well, I guess it's safest to take a detour."

If it ended up looking too dangerous when it starts to pour, we could always give up halfway.

"That's understandable. Depending on what the weather's like after this, we might not even be able to continue our journey."

Though she said she understood, she had an unsatisfied look on her face.

"But personally, I'd still like to go over the mountain."

"If it starts raining, it'd be hard to find a proper foothold on the mountain. It's too dangerous."

Even I couldn't say that I wasn't afraid of slipping and taking a bad fall.

“I believe that most of our rivals will choose to take a detour in anticipation of the weather. However, that’s why it’s a golden opportunity for you to pile up another first-place Early Bird Bonus, don’t you think? Let’s make a run for it before it starts raining.”

Over the last several days we had been traveling together, she had never once opposed my decision on how to proceed.

That was the very least she could do to maintain common courtesy as someone who had asked to accompany me.

Of course, Nanase must have known that herself when she decided to say something.

I don’t think she spoke up just because she wanted to change my mind either.

“What if I don’t choose to go over the mountain?”

In order to find out for myself, I decided to toss her a question.

For a split second, she seemed hesitant about whether or not she should answer, but she ultimately fixed her eyes onto mine.

“...In that case, I will try to go over the mountain on my own.”

“There’s a limit to how impractical you can get. Hōsen and Amasawa might not even reach E2 in time to make a difference.”

Even if Nanase were to reach the designated area before anyone else, there was no guarantee that she would get her hands on the Early Bird Bonus.

And even if she managed to make it over the mountain before the weather got bad, there wouldn’t be any point to it if the other two members of her group didn’t get there within a similar timeframe.

So, why was she so fixated on pointlessly ascending a mountain this time around?

While I didn’t really have a problem with letting her go on her own, it would be dangerous for a girl to try and get over the mountain all by herself.

Although I didn’t exactly feel responsible for her, I’d at least like to see her off when I felt better about her future safety.

Furthermore, I still hadn't figured out why she asked to travel with me in the first place.

If I chose to part ways with her here, I'd probably never figure out the answer.

"Alright. If you've already made up your mind then I'll go with you."

"Thank you very much, Senpai."

As I looked at her expression, I came to understand something.

That, she had been absolutely certain I would choose to follow her up the mountain.

"Since we've decided on a route we should hurry up and get going."

It would be pitiful if we only managed to earn one point after making such a big deal out of this.

We made our way east for a while, but not too long after, the path ahead began to incline upward, and the wind started to pick up speed.

The sky gradually turned into an even deeper, darker shade of grey. It seemed like the rain would start coming down any minute now.

I opened up my tablet to check our current location, and the GPS indicated that we were just about to reach the edge of area D3.

As much as I had hoped that we could hold out until we managed to reach the designated area—

I could hear Nanase begin to lose control of her breathing from behind me.

We hadn't done anything particularly strenuous yet today, so it seemed far too early for her to be already running out of breath.

Was it because of all the fatigue she had built up over the past few days?

If she wasn't feeling well, then the right choice would be to set up a tent to rest and wait for the weather to clear up. If she were to catch a cold, her poor condition would be reported back to the school due to her watch.

I decided to ever so slightly slow down my pace, only to the extent that she wouldn't notice. If she decided to give up and ask for a break, we'd stop

then and there. That being said, she certainly wasn't the type to throw in the towel so easily. If it seemed like I needed to slow down even further, I'd have no choice but to force her to stop and figure out what to do from there.

Step by step, the two of us silently made our way up the slope of the mountain. The temperature had dropped sharply and the humidity kept on increasing by the second. We were both wearing standard, school-issue running shoes that weren't suitable for traversing terrain like this, not by any stretch of the imagination.

Sure enough, the more we walked, the more Nanase continued to slow down. The time had come for me to make a decision.

I stopped walking and turned around to face her.

“Senpai...! I can still— !”

“Give me your backpack.”

“Eh?”

“You won't be able to keep up with me while lugging around that backpack with you.”

“No way... How could possibly I have you carry around my things for me, Senpai!?”

“You can say that once you're capable of keeping up the pace. At this rate, I'll have to give up on the Early Bird Bonus. That being the case, you might as well give me your bag so we can get going already.”

The need to maintain pretenses and the need to face reality were at odds with each other.

And now that I had broached the matter, she no longer had the right to refuse.

“But, my backpack is really quite heavy. I think it'll be tough carrying around, even if it's you, Senpai.”

“I'll decide that for myself once you hand it over.”

“...Alright, I understand.”

Reluctantly conceding, Nanase took off her backpack and handed it over to me with a seemingly apologetic look on her face. Although its contents were different, its weight was surprisingly not all too different from my own.

Given that, I should be able to maintain my initial pace without any added difficulty.

Normally, it would be easiest to use your lower back muscles to help support the weight of a backpack, but given that I was already carrying one, that wasn't really an option here.

Instead, I chose to hold it in front of me and began moving forward once again.

"A-are you sure you can carry it?"

"You should get moving if you have the time to stand around and ask questions."

Taking my advice to heart, Nanase promptly zipped her lips and began to walk.

This time, she stuck close behind me, maintaining a consistent distance of around two meters as we pushed forward.



8.2

The sky grew dimmer and dimmer by the second as the overall visibility of our surroundings began to get much, much worse.

The wind was also getting stronger, and at times a particularly fierce gale would come and violently blow down the slope.

Despite all of this, the good news was that we were nearly finished with our journey to the top.

All we had to do now was follow a relatively smoother path heading down the other side.

Of course, we'd still have to make sure not to lose our footing somehow on our way back down, so we couldn't be too careful.

"I'll be fine now that we've come this far. My bag... I'll carry it again from here."

"Are you sure? I'd like to avoid wasting time later by having to go through the process of handing it over again."

"Yes, I'm sure. Thank you very much for helping me."

I looked to confirm once more just to be sure, but she seemed confident, so I returned her bag.

However, rather than sling it over her shoulder and wear it as she had earlier, she stood still and stared at it as she held it in her hands.

"So? Ready to go?"

I asked her this, but she didn't even try to respond. It didn't seem like the type of behavior you'd expect from someone who was in a hurry to get somewhere.

"Ayanokōji-senpai, I have something I'd like to ask you."

"It's seemed like you've been thinking about something ever since you first came out of your tent this morning."

No, to be precise, I'd say she's had this air of curiosity about her from the moment she first asked to accompany me.

"So... you noticed after all, huh?"

Nanase didn't seem very surprised by this as she just nodded along as she spoke.

"There's a reason why I've been sticking close to you these past few days, Ayanokōji-senpai."

She stood there unmoving as she began to elaborate.

It clearly went deeper than just being because we both had the same Table.

Apparently, she was finally ready to tell me the answer that I had been looking for.

“But before that, please allow me to apologize for something.”

She turned her back on me as she went and placed her backpack down at the base of a large tree.

“I’m afraid you won’t be reaching area E2 today, Senpai.”

“That’s a strange thing to say. Aren’t we on our way there right now?”

“The reason I wanted to head up the mountain was to lure you here, Senpai.”

In other words, Nanase’s target destination hadn’t been area E2, but rather where we were now – the northern part of D3.

“We’re probably the only two people up here right now.”

“Yes indeed. I believe that to be the case as well.”

With her backpack now out of the way, Nanase turned back to face me.

“Over the course of the last six days I’ve been with you, I’ve been able to witness all sorts of things, Ayanokōji-senpai. You’ve made a lot of friends at this school and built up a lot of trust for yourself. And, slowly but surely, you’ve demonstrated what you’re truly capable of.”

Thinking back on the first week of our time out here on the island, Nanase began to summarize her impressions.

“I’d also like to express my respect for the depth of the insight and physical prowess you’ve shown from time to time.”

“I don’t remember having done anything special though.”

“If that’s really the case, then that just makes you even more amazing, don’t you think?”

Although she was throwing out praises left and right, her expression remained solemn.

“But, Ayanokōji-senpai, I don’t think you’re someone who belongs at this school.”

At this point, the aura around her began to change into something far different from what I had grown accustomed to over the last several days.

“You don’t? Care to explain the reason for that?”

To that, Nanase nodded as she slowly stood up and turned to look me in the eyes.

“It’s because you’re from the White Room.”

After all this time, I finally heard the words ‘The White Room’ come from the mouth of another student.

There were very few people who knew about the existence of that place.

Under more normal circumstances, I’d be able to say without a shadow of a doubt that she was the enforcer that Tsukishiro had sent in.

“As you may have already guessed, I enrolled here in this school under Acting Director Tsukishiro’s orders. And more precisely, those orders were to get you expelled.”

The way that she was laying everything out in the open like this made it hard to imagine how she’d been dormant behind the scenes for so long, hiding her true intentions.

“You could’ve done this at any point over the last few days, so why here? Why now? You must have had some other reason than just wanting to avoid the eyes of others, right?”

“I’m going to knock you out here and injure you, setting off your Emergency Alert in the process. The teachers would then come running and force you to retire, thus resulting in your expulsion. Something like that.”

“So, something similar to what happened to Komiya and Kinoshita. Were you the one behind what happened to them as well?”

“Well, hmm... What do you think, Senpai?”

“I don’t really think you’d have been able to make it there and back in such a short timeframe, but if you were really from the White Room, I’m not so confident about that.”

Either way, it didn’t matter anymore at this point.

“What happens if I tell the faculty members who came rushing to the scene that you were the one who had attacked me?”

“I don’t think you’d be able to explain your way out of it. If you want to know why, it’s because the faculty member who comes here will

undoubtedly be the Acting Director himself.”

There wouldn’t be any point in trying to defend myself. After all, no matter what evidence or proof I might have, Tsukishiro would still choose to side with Nanase in the end.

“I see. So basically, losing to you here would be no different from being kicked out of school.”

I slowly began to take off my backpack.

And then, after setting it down beside a suitable tree, I turned to face Nanase once again.

“If Acting Director Tsukishiro sent you thinking you’d be able to take me down, then it looks like there’ll be no getting around having to fight seriously. Although, having said that, raising my hand against a girl could easily turn into a major issue in its own right.”

This probably wouldn’t just end as a harmless, childish scuffle.

However, if it got to the point where I were to strike back at her, then that would be more than enough to warrant a penalty.

There was no guarantee that Tsukishiro wouldn’t choose to retire, or rather, expel, the both of us just for exchanging blows.

If we were evenly matched, it would be my loss.

“If you’re looking for a way out of this, Senpai, then I believe your only option is abandoning your bag and running away.”

“Perhaps.”

“But, I’m afraid that would be futile as well.”

Trying to continue the exam without a tablet, a tent, or any other provisions would be suicide.

For Nanase, this meant that no matter which choice I made, she was fully prepared to respond.

“So, what will you do?”

“Since it’s come to this, there’s really only one choice I can make.”

I looked Nanase in the eye and steeled my resolve to fight.

“So you’ve chosen to fight. But, do you think you’ll be saved by doing that? This might seem cowardly of me to say, but my loss is no different from your own loss, Ayanokōji-senpai.”

“Maybe so.”

As the conversation progressed forward, I created an opening, making myself seem vulnerable to any attack she might throw at me.

However, Nanase didn’t engage immediately, clearly wary of the opening I was testing her with.

It didn’t seem like she was the type to fight reckless battles. Rather, she took on a more orthodox approach where she looked to methodically force her opponent into the corner.

Making a conscious effort to avoid getting caught up in your opponent’s pace had been the right choice for her to make.

“I’ll be making my move, then.”

On top of all of this, the fact that she had gone out of her way to warn me ahead of time was proof enough that she wasn’t very fond of plotting from behind the scenes.

Of course, that could easily be nothing more than a feint as well.

Although the ground beneath us was relatively soft, it seemed like it would fulfill its role as the foundation for our fight quite well.

“Hyaaah!!!”

Kicking off against the soil, Nanase closed the distance between us in a single breath.

Would she look to strike with her arms or would she instead focus on using her legs?

Or perhaps she would make use of both?

Under more usual circumstances, I would start out by closely analyzing my opponent’s fighting style like this.

After all, if I were to strike back carelessly, Nanase might end up getting seriously injured.

And, given what was said earlier, that would only serve to put me even more of a disadvantage.

With that being the case, my next thought was to try and look to restrain her by force instead, but I feared that it was all too likely she had taken that into consideration as well.

But even so— it still wouldn't be a very wise choice either way.

Even though Nanase's words alone weren't very trustworthy, I had been sensing a presence following after us all throughout the entire day today.

There was definitely somebody, or somebodies, watching to see how things played out as they carefully maintained their distance.

Whoever they were, if they weren't reinforcements, then it was probably safe to assume that they had been tasked with recording conclusive evidence of what happened with a tablet or something.

Therefore, given the situation, the only real choice I could make here was...

After making a feint to her left, Nanase lunged straight at me with an outstretched arm.

She didn't come at me with a fist, but a gentle, open palm. She had chosen to engage me with a grappling technique.

Upon seeing this, I took action, and while my movements were delayed, I easily surpassed the speed of Nanase's incoming strike.

Cleanly avoiding her arm, I extended my own, the blow aimed straight for her face.

My fist, strongly clenched, stopped mere centimeters before making contact with Nanase's forehead.

“!”

Since her kinetic vision was far better than that of an ordinary person, the threat of the impact unconsciously caused her to stiffen up.

“That's the first.”

If I hadn't chosen to stop my fist, the blow would've decisively settled the outcome of the fight.

Nanase's consciousness would've been blown away in an instant, leaving her to simply crumble on the spot.

"Nanase, are you tired? Or was that hesitation? You should be capable of much more than this."

Given everything she had shown me the past few days, she should at least be able to perform at a level above this.

In the end, her resolve to hunt me down and force me into a corner wasn't strong enough.

"Do you think you can beat me without even trying to fight back...? Is that what this is?"

I pulled back my fist without giving her an answer, and as I did, Nanase retreated, putting around two meters between us. This was temporary, however, as she then kicked off against the ground once again, coming at me slightly faster than last time. Her left hand was clenched into a fist and, given the way she had lowered her stance, she seemed to be looking to strike with an uppercut.

Dodging to the side just before she made contact, I sent my own fist exploding forward, aimed straight for her cheek.

Of course, just like last time, I stopped one or two centimeters before making contact.

"And that's the second. If I had gone through with it, I could've knocked you out two times now."

"But you didn't go through with it."

Her eyes were trained on my fist, frozen in the air in front of her, but she didn't seem scared in the slightest.

"That's true."

"Although you're free to make this show of dominance all you want, you don't stand a chance at winning if you don't actually fight back."

"I still wouldn't stand a chance even if I did, though?"

“Correct. So, what will you do?”

From the sound of it, Nanase hadn’t been treating this seriously yet either.

She was watching me closely, examining my movements. Pushing forward on the offensive as she thought about how to dodge whatever I threw at her next.

“I’m not sure yet.”

“It would be great if you could figure that out while you’re still able to stand around and talk.”

At that, she suddenly sprang into action and grabbed hold of my right arm with a level of dexterity and strength that seemed to indicate that she was finally treating this seriously. It looked like she was planning to yank me straight down to the ground, so I steeled myself, counteracting her force with my own.

There are many forms of martial arts that allow one to gain the upper hand against raw strength through the trained application of technique and skill, regardless of their gender or physique.

However, that’s only the case when you were facing an opponent whose strength paled in comparison to your skill.

“What the—!?”

Seeing that she was caught off guard by the rigidity of my body, I took advantage of the opening to attack.

I went for an uppercut the moment she stopped trying to pull down on my arm. My left fist tore through the air, only stopping when it was less than a centimeter away from smashing into her lower jaw. The force of the swing had been so great that her long hair was sent dancing even though there hadn’t been an impact.

“!!!”

She stared down at my fist, her eyes wide, before eventually turning to me.

“I’ll say this just in case you haven’t noticed, but this makes three times now.”

For the first time, her eyes began to waver as she matched my gaze.

“It seems your strength is just as the rumors say, Ayanokōji-senpai...”

I couldn’t afford to fight back seriously right now. Breaking Nanase’s fighting spirit without actually hurting her was the only means I had at my disposal.

I had to make her realize that I was an opponent she’d never be able to win against.

“I know what you’re trying to do here, Senpai...”

Apparently, Nanase was aware of this as well.

“It’s true that it’s improbable that I’ll be able to win against you if we keep going on like this. I’ll admit to that.”

Had I broken her fighting spirit already...? No, that simply wasn’t possible.

Her eyes were filled with a clear mixture of hatred and fervor as she looked at me.

“‘I’... may not be able to beat you.”

Nanase had been at my mercy throughout the course of our fight so far. But now, as she spoke, the slight traces of uncertainty in her expression, in the way she carried herself, began to disappear. Or, rather, it was like she had never once harbored uncertainty in the first place.

It was as if she was trying to bring together all of her thoughts, feelings, and emotions and consolidate them to reach a state of inner unity.

After a brief period of silence, Nanase wordlessly kicked off against the ground once again, lurching forward at a high speed.

I didn’t have the time to calmly analyze the situation anymore and was instead forced to focus my full attention on taking emergency evasive action. Her movements were now twice as fast as they were only moments earlier. I distanced myself far enough away to avoid her strike, and then took a few additional steps away from her on top of that.

She glared straight at me with a look so sharp it felt like it could kill a man.

It was such a dramatic change that it was hard to believe she was still the same person. If I had taken that last attack of hers directly, I would've suffered a substantial amount of damage. If I slipped up even once, she may very well end up taking the upper hand after all.

The feeling she gave off was painfully different than anything I had seen from her before.

“Therefore...『I』will. Right here, right now.”

The change from ‘Watashi’ to『Boku』.

There was no way that this simple change in the first-person pronoun she chose to use was enough to change her movements.

But, even so, there was no denying that this last attack of hers was on a completely different level than the first three she had opened up with.

“Who are you?”

Given the circumstances, I couldn’t help but ask her this question.

“『I』came back from ‘that place’ in order to put a stop to you.”

‘That place’? For a moment, I thought she might be referring to the White Room, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“From that dark... gloomy place...『I』have come back.”

Even though I didn’t understand what in the world she was talking about, I couldn’t afford to be negligent.

This new Nanase who referred to herself with『Boku』had shifted her fighting style from one that focused primarily on jiu-jitsu to karate. She came at me repeatedly with swift, lethal thrusts and jabs that, if landed properly, would probably be powerful enough to knock out an adult man.

After I got into the rhythm of parrying and dodging her repeated attacks, I began to contemplate the mystery behind why she had changed her first-person pronoun.

“Do you really think that you can keep dodging forever!?”

In Nanase’s mind, she had probably convinced herself that if she just kept attacking, ten, twenty times over, one would eventually have to hit the mark.

For that very reason, she had done away with all hesitation and pushed forward with her relentless barrage.

If someone else were to bear witness to what was happening, they probably would've thought something similar.

They'd think that there's no way I'd be able to avoid everything she threw at me and eventually reach the conclusion that I'd have to strike back at some point to try and defend myself.

“Ha, Haaa!!!”

Nanase's breathing began getting heavier and heavier as she continued with her onslaught.

Naturally, there was no way she would be able to keep up with her rapid barrage of attacks forever.

Still, if I never ended up fighting back, she'd be able to recover her strength at any time.

“Whew... Haaa...!”

Just as anticipated, Nanase soon ran out of breath and distanced herself to try and get it back under control.

“Absolutely...『I'll』absolutely defeat you... Absolutely... defeat... you...”

She was chanting these select few words like a Buddhist monk would a mantra, all while looking at me as if I were a murderer.

“『I』came back...『I』came back in order to bring you down...”

“You came back? What are you talking about?”

I hadn't been able to understand what Nanase was going on about for quite a while now.

“It makes sense that you don't understand. After all, you and『I』have never met in-person before.”

If that was really true, then this excessive hatred she had for me didn't really make any sense.

I could imagine that the White Room student might bear a grudge against me even though I had never met them before.

However, was Nanase really from the White Room?

The tone of her voice was ever so slightly different than usual.

While she still looked like a girl on the outside, it seemed as though her personality had become that of a man.

“If you aren’t going to fight back, then that’s your decision.『I’ll』just have to do this over and over until you’re down on the ground—”

It had been less than twenty seconds since she stopped attacking, but it seemed like it had been just long enough for her to recover her energy.

“Hyaah!!!”

Her feelings of hatred for me seemed to be spurring her forward more and more, seeing as she came at me with the fastest jab I had seen from her today.

Her slender, white hand came hurtling straight toward my face and her fist just barely grazed past the tips of my bangs.

She seemed like the usual Nanase on the outside, but perhaps she had become someone else on the inside?

As I asked myself this, another thought came to mind.

Namely, the notion of split personalities, or what was officially known as dissociative identity disorder.

Put in layman’s terms, it’s a mental disorder where two or more distinct personalities reside within a single individual.

If Nanase had dissociative identity disorder, everything would make a lot more sense.

There was more to this disorder than just a simple change in personality. From what I’ve been told, there have been rare cases where one of the personalities had a chronic illness, but the illness disappeared whenever the patient switched over to another personality.

Under that same logic, it was more than possible that this separate『Boku』 personality residing within Nanase possessed physical abilities even greater

than the original.

And, if this personality was that of a man, then she might even be able to demonstrate strength effectively identical to that.

“You don’t seem like Nanase anymore.”

Upon hearing me say this, Nanase momentarily stopped with her onslaught, a visibly irritated expression on her face.

“You still don’t get it, do you?”

She glared at me with her arm thrusted out in front of her; Her fists were shaking with rage just as much as the sound of her voice.

“『I’m』not Nanase. The one standing here before you right now is...
Matsuo Eiichiro.”

“Matsuo Eiichiro?”

I had definitely heard the surname ‘Matsuo’ before, and it hadn’t even been that long since the last time I heard it either. The name had come out of ‘that man’s’ mouth back when he paid a visit to Advanced Nurturing High School. Given all of that, I had a fairly good idea of where this was headed.

“The son of a man who was killed by your father.”

Seeing that I still didn’t seem to understand where she was going with this, she spoke up once again, having completely lost her patience.

“This body has been borrowed.『I’m』right here, right now, all for the sake of bringing you down.”

“Borrowed? What a funny joke.”

It simply wasn’t possible for someone to take on the personality of another real human being.

“If you think『I’m』joking, then please, be my guest.”

Nanase kicked off against the ground once more, her arms trembling violently.

The traditional, orthodox attack style that she had used so far gradually began to change to something much more rough and unrestrained.

“『I’m』here...『I』came all the way here just to see you fall!”

And it wasn't just her attack style, her movements in general had changed from being decisive and controlled to wild and violent.

Her goal was to try and overwhelm me with speed and strength, although her movements became somewhat less efficient as a tradeoff.

That being said, regardless of whether they were refined or not, it probably wouldn't make much of a difference as long as she managed to land a hit on me.

“『I'll』make sure you suffer retribution!”

Even though she had turned up the intensity, I wasn't going to let myself get hit so easily. And after everything that had happened, Nanase should be more than aware of that as well.

Although she was pretending to be calm and composed, she was the one whose back was really up against the wall here, not me.

No matter how many short breaks she may take to recover her stamina, it was clear from the way her shoulders were heaving up and down that she was reaching her limit.

However, it would be meaningless to try and wait for that limit to catch up to her. There was no way that I could see her choosing to back down any time soon. In fact, she'd probably choose to keep challenging me until the bitter end. I really had no other choice but to break her fighting spirit.

“This is the first time『I've』encountered an opponent capable of dodging so many attacks like this. ...But, there's no way you can keep it up forever. If it's『me』... If『I'm』the one you're up against... Then『I』can definitely defeat you!『I』know it!”

Even though I was slowly chipping away at her will to go on, she still bore fangs at me as she tried what she could to bite back.

“I think I understand what you've been trying to say.”

While I didn't know the exact details of the situation, there was at least one thing that I had ascertained throughout all of this.

After a few moments of mulling it over internally, I finished sorting out my thoughts and began to speak.

“Nanase, you don’t have multiple personalities, nor did someone else’s personality take over you.”

“Like I said, if you think『I’m』joking, then please, be my guest. But there’s no getting around the fact that『I’m』the one right here in front of you.”

She raised her voice in denial as she stamped her feet into the ground.

But, that and that alone was proof enough it didn’t exist.

“No, it’s unfortunate, but I just don’t believe you. If this alternate personality of yours hadn’t been someone who actually existed elsewhere, then I suppose that I might’ve been able to believe you. However, you’re saying that ‘Matsuo Eiichiro’, a person who exists here in real life, has gone and borrowed your body. And sorry, but that’s just far too unrealistic.”

“If... If that’s the case, then how do you explain『my』presence here!?”

There was no need to think very hard about the answer to that. It truly wasn’t very complicated.

“You just took the liberty to dream up another personality inside of yourself. The reason you deliberately chose to change from using ‘Watashi’ to『Boku』was to remind yourself of that.”

Nanase was, fundamentally, a nonviolent person.

She didn’t like the thought of using violence and force to make her opponents submit to her.

Even so, since she had to fight, she had no choice but to conjure up a personality to do the fighting for her.

Or, put more simply, she had no choice but to ‘act out’ this personality.

“More than anything else, this force, this power is proof that『I’m』real!”

With that, her fist came flying at me, no doubt faster and stronger than any punches she had thrown before the change.

“You’re not showing me anything more than the strength you’ve always had in you, Nanase.”

Nanase's face paled, seemingly shaken that I had managed to hit at the very core of the matter.

"Y-you're wrong!『I』...『I'm』Matsuo!"

"If you really are this 'Matsuo' person, then there's no need for you to be so upset by this."

As Matsuo, she could simply turn up her nose and laugh at my blatantly misguided reasoning.

"There was something out of sorts about the way you were talking when you changed your first-person pronoun. It's nothing more than a form of self-deception."

She was just using the pronoun『Boku』as a trigger of sorts to make herself into a more aggressive person.

"No!!!"

"You want to believe that Matsuo's personality resides within you... No, I'll bet that deep down, even you don't believe that."

She was desperately trying to embrace the guise of self-deception, but couldn't.

"AAAAAAAHHHHHHH!!!"

Unable to listen to my words for even a second longer, Nanase cried out and threw herself at me.

The speed and sharpness she had displayed earlier was now nowhere to be seen. It had gotten to the point where I'd probably be able to avoid her with my eyes shut.

"It's time to give up Nanase. You can't beat me."

"Yes『I』can!『I』have to!"

She extended her left arm and grabbed hold of the collar of my jersey.

And then, having decided that this was the chance she had been waiting for, she raised her right fist and swung at me in a wide, dramatic arch.

I was an easy target, wide open. And usually, there was probably no way that someone would be able to dodge from my position.

But, despite my movements being limited by her stranglehold on my collar, I deftly avoided the punch as it came barreling straight at my face.

“Tsk!”

Another punch was sent flying toward me immediately afterward, yet I dodged it just the same as the first.

“Why!? Why can’t I land a hit!?!? Why is this happening!?!?”

A third, fourth, and fifth punch came flying, but try as she might, every attempt ended up with the same result.

Fed up with the fact that her punches weren’t landing, she forcefully reached out to try and grab me by the hair.

She probably thought that, if she could prevent me from moving my head, she’d finally be able to hit me.

I seized her by the wrist just as it came close enough.

“L-let go!”

“Even if I let go, nothing would change.”

“Let go of me!!!”

She forcefully tore her hand away before repeating the entire meaningless cycle all over again.

Her fist came flying at me, only to once again punch through the open air. At this point, I’d already lost track of how many times we had gone through this.

“Haa! Haa! Haaaa...!”

She had finally reached her limit, both physically and mentally.

“Why... Why... I’m so close and yet... Only a little more, and yet!”

Nanase’s resolve to continue throwing herself at me had already disappeared.

Trembling at the knees, she tried what she could to spurn her legs forward, but her body refused to fight.

“From the very beginning, you were wrong to tell yourself that you’d eventually land a hit as long as you kept trying. At your level, even if you kept this up until the day you died, you’d never be able to hit me. Not even once.”

Of course, this was just a bluff.

Nobody could avoid being hit forever, not even me.

Nanase, however, had just been forced to come to terms with her failure to land even a single hit on me, so my words probably resonated with her.

“If you really want me expelled, your best bet is to start playing the victim now. If you make your clothes seem disorderly, that alone would probably be enough to drive me into a corner.”

Even though it seemed like I was helping the enemy here, I knew Nanase wouldn’t choose to do that.

After all, I didn’t think she really, truly wanted to get me expelled at all.

“『I』…『I』!!!”

She cried out as her knees finally gave in and collapsed to the ground.

No matter how much one may lay bare their fighting spirit, if, deep down, they had already given up, then doing so was merely an empty, meaningless gesture.



8.3

The sound of the harsh wind resounded throughout the forest as I struggled to follow the tracks of two specific people.

Just how hard did I have to work to make it to area D3 this morning...?

It should only be a little longer... Or at least, that's what I kept telling myself as I pushed forward, my legs trembling with every step I took.

If they were to find out that I was following after them, then everything I've gone through, all my efforts so far, would be meaningless.

Normally, when tailing after someone, it was necessary to keep them in your sights at all times so as not to lose track of them.

That, of course, meant that the other party would be able to see you as well. There were certain inevitable risks that came along with doing something like this.

But, no matter who the other party may be, there was absolutely no way they'd catch onto what I was doing.

After all, even I wasn't able to see Ayanokōji, my target, from where I was right now.

The key to this was a walkie-talkie hidden in the pocket of my jersey.

Thanks to this walkie-talkie, I had been able to keep in touch with a certain someone who was helping me constantly pinpoint Ayanokōji's exact location.

Ever since the sixth day, the entire student body had been given permission to use their points on the 'GPS Search' feature on our tablets.

As such, it was possible for my accomplice and me to get a rough idea of Ayanokōji's location.

Even if worse came to worst, I'd gladly exhaust my own supply of points in order to track him down.

No matter the method, there was something I absolutely had to get my hands on:

Decisive, conclusive evidence.

One way or another, I needed to get my hands on enough definitive proof to get Ayanokōji expelled.

I didn't have any other options anymore. Horikita's expulsion wasn't what I should've been prioritizing all this time.

I felt truly ashamed that, despite having always been vaguely aware of his true potential, I had always chosen to look the other way.

In retrospect, I should've been more suspicious back when Ryūen stopped searching for 'X' in Class D.

Ayanokōji had been involved in everything that had happened back then. Even after having my eyes opened to the truth, there was still a part of me that found it hard to believe. After all, he never seemed like anything more than your average, unremarkable, run-of-the-mill high school boy.

My walkie-talkie sounded off from within my pocket. I was wearing a wireless earpiece, so I could listen in without having to stop.

[Please hold on for a moment, Kushida-senpai. It seems the two of them have stopped not too far ahead of your current location.]

“Haa, haa... really? They’re finally taking a break...?”

Following the instructions I had received, I gratefully eased to a stop. With this, I could finally rest for a moment.

[I know you must be tired, but please hang in there for just a little longer. The moment of truth should come along soon enough, and when it does, there won’t be anything left standing in your way.]

My accomplice shouldn’t have been able to hear what I said since I hadn’t been holding down the transmission button, but from what it sounded like, they had a perfect understanding of my current situation.

“I get it, I get it...”

At this point, I was just flat-out irritated. It felt like a carrot was dangling just before my eyes, ever so slightly out of reach.

I’d been out here risking my ass all on my own since the moment the sun came up, and there was still a ton of other stuff I had to get done after this too...

My well-earned break only lasted for five short minutes, interrupted by further instructions coming through over the walkie-talkie.

[There’s no sign of movement. It appears that they’ve stopped altogether. Do your best to conceal your presence and slowly make your way northwest. Also, don’t forget to take a recording with your tablet.]

My accomplices’ polite, dumbed-down way of explaining things pissed me off, but at this point, I honestly just wanted to get this over with as soon as possible.

Suppressing the urge to run, I took my tablet out of my backpack and began heading northwest. Not too long afterward, I caught sight of two people off in the distance ahead of me.

I watched as Nanase, frozen in place, suddenly looked over her shoulder and said something to Ayanokōji.

Given that neither of them seemed to be wearing a backpack, I wondered if they really were taking a break after all.

I launched the camera app on my tablet and switched it over to recording mode.

And then, I slowly inched as close as possible without revealing myself, carefully hiding among the trees, but no matter how hard I concentrated, the wind was so frustratingly loud that I couldn't properly make out what they were saying.

A surge of impatience coursed through my veins.

My blood was boiling over with the gnawing desire to see them start hitting each other already.

I might've been able to get a better idea of what their situation was like if I could just hear what they were talking about, but it was too dangerous.

If I tried getting any closer than this, I'd run the risk of getting spotted by Nanase now that she had her head turned.

For the time being, I needed to rein in my emotions. It'd be a little dicey, but my only choice at this point was to calm down and work my way around in search of a better, safer angle.

I held my breath as I quietly began to move.

After distancing myself from them a bit, my plan was to skirt around the perimeter and——

“W—!?!“

Even though I should've been completely alone, a hand suddenly came out of nowhere and grabbed my shoulder.

And just as I was about to raise my voice in shock, another hand immediately reached to cover up my mouth.

Faced with such an unexpected turn of events, I quickly began to panic.

As I did, a pair of glossy, alluring lips crept close to my ear.

“Shh~ I get you’re surprised but you’ve like, gotta be quiet, Kushida-senpai. It’d be waaay bad if Ayanokōji-senpai and Nanase-chan caught onto you, yeah?”

From those sultry lips came a knowing voice that seemed as if it could pierce straight through my very soul.

It was none other than Amasawa Ichika from Class 1-A, a girl who I had never had a formal conversation with before. In fact, you could even say that this was effectively our first time meeting each other.

And yet, Amasawa clearly knew me, given that she knew my name.

After being effectively dragged away from where Ayanokōji and Nanase were, Amasawa finally let go of me.

“Uhm... Why are you here, Amasawa-san?”

I managed to somewhat regain my composure as I addressed her, eager to get her to fuck off.

If the fight were to break out while I was wasting time with her, then everything would be ruined.

I could feel my blood pressure rising, but even so, I couldn’t afford to lose my cool here.

“I just happened to be passing through when I saw you acting all sneaky-sneaky, Senpai.”

“I wasn’t ‘acting sneaky’. I was just... well, taking a walk on my own, that’s all.”

I knew that this was a poor excuse. After all, I was acting independently, separated from my group.

Anyone with eyes could see that this was a strange situation.

Moreover, Amasawa herself had already said that it would be bad if Ayanokōji and Nanase caught on to what I was doing.

As such, it'd make sense that she somehow knew about what I was really up to.

Though, from what I'd been told, a select portion of the first-years already knew about me anyway.

“Hmmm... That so?”

Amasawa approached me with a somewhat suspicious look in her eyes.

Come to think of it, how'd this Amasawa chick manage to get all the way out here without so much as a tablet or even a backpack—

SMACK!!!

A dry, out-of-place sound echoed throughout the forest. It, of course, was no doubt drowned out by the overbearing sound of the wind.

Just as I began to wonder where the sound had come from, I felt a sharp, stinging pain well up in my right cheek and covered it up with my hand.

“W-what!?”

“You came poking your nose around in the mountains all on your own, so like, what are you really trynna get at, Senpai?”

“W-what do you mean? What are you talking about Amasawa-san!?”

“Oh? I’m real excited to see how long you can keep hiding behind that mask of yours~.”

She drew closer once again as I feigned a sense of terror and fear over the fact that she had suddenly slapped me across the face.

“S-stop!”

“No way I’m gonna stop now, silly~”

Saying that, she raised an open palm up in the air.

I immediately tried to cower back and protect myself, but she forced her way past nonetheless.

SMACK!!!

This time, she hit my other cheek and she hit hard.

Despite my best attempt to block it, I simply couldn't keep up with her overwhelming speed.

"D-do you even understand what you're doing!? You can't do this!"

"I know it may not seem like it, but I'm being pretty gentle with you. It totally shouldn't hurt that bad."

"Why though!? None of this makes any sense!"

"So you don't get it, huh~? Well alrighty then. I wonder if you'll start connecting the dots if I start smacking you with my fist instead~?"

"What?"

My brain was still in the middle of processing her words when my vision suddenly began to warp and distort.

I only registered the sound of something being struck a little afterward, and before I knew it, I was already on the ground looking up at the cloudy, overcast sky.

Did... Did I get punched just now...?

I felt an increasingly warm sensation on the side of my face, as if blood was slowly pooling up underneath the skin.

My cheek began to burn and swell, aching with pain.

"...wha, ah... Ah!!"

"I'll betcha that one hurt a lil' didn't it? Gotta say, you don't usually get to experience getting beaten up like this, do ya?"

I couldn't make sense of it. This chick had come flying out of nowhere and started picking a fight with me, but why???

And the fact that she was being so excessively violent made it all make even less sense.

"So, how about I go for your other cheek next?"

With that, Amasawa started approaching me all over again.

Right now, the only thing I knew for sure was that this wasn't just some sick joke of hers.

I wanted to avoid being beaten senseless any more than I already had, no matter the cost.

I did my best to ward off Amasawa's outstretched hand, pushing her arm away.

"Ah, uh, I-I'm sorry for pushing you, but you just hit me so suddenly..."

"Still acting like a goody two shoes are you? You see, I know you real, *reeeal* well Kushida-senpai. You're a nasty, vile woman who's totally caught up in that cute lil' face of yours. You feast off other people's deepest darkest secrets, and if you ever get into trouble, you'll gladly self-destruct just to drag everyone else down along with you. A real piece of work through and through, ain'tcha?"

"I don't really understand what you're talking about Amasawa-san... But, violence isn't... allowed, right?"

"Then why don'tcha go and cry to school about it? You might even be able to get me expelled. But just know that if you do that I'll have to leave behind a parting gift, okay? Just for you, I'll expose a~l~l of the dark, dirty middle school secrets you've been trying so hard to keep hidden and take away your status."

"How...?"

Amasawa's sudden appearance without so much as a bottle of water in hand wasn't just some mere coincidence. No... Something was very wrong here.

"How do I know your secret? From the look on your face, it seems you're thinking I heard it from Ayanokōji-senpai?"

She looked at me with eyes that seemed to see through everything.

"But, that would be in~correct. Nothing in this world gets past me. I'm a special existence, after all."

"Nothing in this world..."

"How about I give you an example? Ah, what about that time you tried to cozy up to Student Council President Nagumo, but got turned away at the door? Well, honestly, even if that ended up working out for you, I doubt he'd

be willing to support your cause now that Horikita-senpai's joined the student council.”

“How... How do you even know about tha—!”

“Oh dear oh dear, how indeed~?”

Amasawa smiled down at me as if I was just some toy for her to play with, and just like that, I had reached the very limit of my patience.

“Who... Who fucking told you!?!?”

“Ooo, you've finally shown your true colors! That said, you really need to shush, yeah? I get that the island is real huge so it may seem like there's no one around right now, but there's no telling when someone else might show up.”

Amasawa crouched down and playfully tapped me on the nose, giving me a gentle, patronizing warning.

That rotten, smug, condescending attitude of hers pissed me off to no end.

“Stop it, you shitty bitch!”

In a fit of uncontrollable rage, a voice burst forth from the bottom of my heart.

If you had only ever seen the outward mask of the girl named ‘Kushida Kikyō’, then my words just now would probably seem surprising.

But Amasawa didn't seem surprised at all. Rather, she let out a giddy laugh.

“Ahahahaha! Mmm, now this suits you much, much better Kushida-senpai~!”

Sure enough, this chick knew all about me, about the things I'd done.

In fact, she seemed to know far, far more than the likes of Ayanokōji and Horikita...

“What... What the hell are you!?”

“I'm not sure how to respond to a question like that. I'm just... well, I'm just here to save Ayanokōji-senpai.”

“Save? Huh?”

“Don’t try and hide it, Kushida-senpai. I can see through your every move. You were planning on finding some dirt on Ayanokōji-senpai with that tablet you dropped over there to try and get him expelled, right?”

“I don’t understand what you mean. Find dirt on him with my tablet? Huh?”

Shit. This chick had already seen through everything... Some small part of me knew that it was pointless to try and resist any longer, but even so, I felt that I had no choice but to continue to do so, denying the truth until the bitter end.

“You’ve been in a class together with him for over a year already, and yet you still don’t understand anything, do ya Senpai? There’s like, no way Ayanokōji-senpai would feel threatened by such a shallow display of thinking.”

Amasawa turned her gaze toward where Ayanokōji and Nanase should be.

“Aaah, I really wanted to sit back and watch from a front-row seat. I’m sure he’ll defeat Nanase-chan without even hurting her. I *reeeally* wanted to see it~.”

After mumbling a few words to herself, she turned back to face me again.

“I don’t know who put you up to this, but you’re really letting yourself get used, huh Kushida-senpai? No matter what things are like over there with Nanase-chan, I’m fairly certain that Ayanokōji-senpai’s already noticed what you’ve been up to. There’s no way he wouldn’t, given like, how much of a silly amateur you are.”

“B-but I’ve put plenty of distance between us...!”

“Eh? Plenty of distance, hmm? Did I just hear you admit that you’ve been stalking him?”

“W-well... I-I just thought those two being together was kinda weird is all...”

“So you followed them out of curiosity? Headed up this rough mountain trail all on your own?”

I felt like I should stop making excuses and answer her honestly, but my habitual impulse to try and escape won out in the end. I had no choice but to recognize Amasawa as a formidable enemy.

“It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Yes yes, I had a hunch you’d still be uncooperative. But, the thing is, it actually has quite a lot to do with me. After all, Ayanokōji-senpai is a very special person to me.”

“Huh? What the heck...? Do you like him?”

“I’d rather you not come to such a vulgar conclusion~. It’s not that I ‘like’ him romantically or anything, it’s more that I ‘love’ him...? No, I suppose it’s much, much more than that... A feeling that goes far beyond the likes of love.”

“What?”

“I said what I said. Anyway, I’ve gone outta my way to tell you a lot, so how about you head down the mountain and go back to your group like a good girl. The weather’s gonna turn bad any time now. This’ll prolly be your last chance to turn back.”

“...Don’t fuck with me!”

I took a clump of wet soil in hand and threw it at Amasawa as a means of rejection.

“I’m going to get dirt on Ayanokōji and get him kicked outta here, no matter what it takes...!”

“Even if you get him expelled, that’s not going to solve anything. You do know that right?”

I had come all this way, desperate to see my ambitions fulfilled.

For all that, there was no way I’d back down to an underclassman like her and leave empty-handed.

“I’ll say it again. Ayanokōji-senpai is a very special person to me. I’ll never allow him to get expelled by an outsider like you.”

Amasawa reached out and mercilessly grabbed hold of my bangs, wrenching up my head to draw my eyes level with her own.

“Ah!!! Let go of me!”

“Now why would I do that~?”

Amasawa’s colorful eyes seemed like hollow, empty voids; The eyes of a person who had lost touch with reality.

My body began to tremble as my instincts told me to escape, pleading for me to run away.

“You freak! You’re not normal...!”

“How curious~! To think you’d start shaking in fear of a girl younger than you. But, well, I think it’s best you cherish that wonderful feeling, Kushida-senpai~.”

Amasawa spoke highly of me in a strange, almost insulting way.

She continued on, clearly uninterested in hearing what I had to say in response to this.

“You think you’re cuter than everyone, smarter than everyone, better than everyone... In short, you’re just hopelessly in love with yourself, aren’t you Kushida-senpai? Your mouth waters at the thought of asserting your dominance, always eager to take hold of other people’s secrets. Nonetheless, you hate the thought of losing that control you crave, forever unable to forgive those that know your secrets. Personally, I don’t mind this messed-up personality of yours.”

I held back the urge to talk back and instead looked to process the situation.

Clearly, this chick... this bitch already knew everything there was to know about me.

For the time being, I had to cast aside questions like ‘how’ and ‘why’.

With that in mind, I calmed my racing heart and stood up.

“Earlier... What exactly were you trying to say?”

I sorted out the rest of my thoughts, finally regaining my composure.

The more I let my emotions get the better of me, the more I’d get caught up in her pace.

“You know, it’s really quite amazing you made it this far on your own. Sure you’ve got your tablet and someone helping you, but like, that doesn’t change the fact that you walked here with your own two legs. You must’ve had quite a hard time lying to your fellow group members too. After all, breaking away from your group comes with quite a bit of risk, now doesn’t it? You toe the line of expulsion more and more by cutting back on the points you earn—”

Once again, Amasawa knocked me off my feet and proceeded to look down on me from above.

“However, cute lil’ Kushida-senpai wouldn’t overlook something so simple, now would she? Even if your actions put your group’s position at risk and you sank to the bottom of the leaderboards, I assume you’ve at least saved up the private points needed to ensure your own survival, yes?”

Needless to say, her assumption hit right on the money.

I was only acting so recklessly because I had secured the two million points necessary to stay out of danger.

1.3 million of which had come from my own pocket, with ‘that guy’ having supplied me the rest.

“I’ll never lose... No matter what, I’ll never give up until the very end...”

“Well then~, just how do you plan on doing that~? Seems to me like you’re putty in my hands right now, Senpai.”

What Amasawa was saying was true, but...

“—So what? Sure you’ve been able to mess with me, but when exactly did I lose?”

The flames of determination burning within me would never be extinguished because of something so trivial.

Instead of feeling shaken, I gradually began to regain a hold over my emotions.

There was no need to panic. This just meant that I’d have to get rid of Amasawa as well. I’d get rid of anyone and everyone that got in my way.

But, that wasn’t the only thing.

“Oh...? This is far more than I imagined. You sure are one nasty bitch, Kushida-senpai, but there’s still one thing I admire about you. Your strength, strength in a mental sense that is, is quite praiseworthy. Rather than fear, it’s more like you’re overflowing with hatred. And it’s not just directed at me, but at anyone who finds out the truth about your past.”

Without so much as brushing the dirt and mud off my jersey, I stood back up again, just as I would no matter how many times it would take.

If I had to, I’d even knock Amasawa off her feet right here, right now.

“Don’t bother. You wouldn’t stand a chance against me even if I had my hands tied. Toodles~, Kushida-senpai~”

She spoke as if she knew exactly what I was planning and proceeded to turn her back to me, giving me a perfect opportunity to throw myself at her.

There was nothing going through my mind other than the tantalizing thought of pushing her over and pinning her down against the ground.

However, she had apparently predicted that I’d do this as she effortlessly sidestepped my strike just in the nick of time.

Not even a second later, my legs were swept out from under me as I found myself crashing down yet again. This had happened so many times now that I had lost count.

“G-gah...! Shit!”

“We don’t get along very well, do we Senpai? I know you treat other people’s secrets like weapons to get what you want, but I don’t have any you can use against me. Even if you try to threaten me with violence, I’m stronger than most boys are. I’m also not particularly close with anyone, so taking a hostage won’t work either. If I had to come up with something, I suppose Ayanokōji-senpai could be considered somewhat of a weakness, but... for someone like you, beating him would be just about as difficult as beating me. Are we on the same page?”

She prattled on and on with the same kind of condescendingly casual tone that a shitty teacher would use.

“Well, how about you, like, give up now? I’ve still gotta go see Ayanokōji-senpai.”

“...What are you gonna do? Tell him I’ve been stalking him?”

“No no, I already told you there’s no point in doing that, silly. He already knows. But, who knows, maybe things’ll play out exactly how you want them to, Kushida-senpai. Maybe this little spat with Nanase will end up with Ayanokōji-senpai getting kicked out of school. Sounds like your dream come true.”

“...After Ayankōji’s out of here, it’ll be your turn... I’ll crush you for sure.”

“Aww, Kushida-senpai~. That’s cute, but the outcome of our match was decided before it even began. I get that having those who know your secret expelled is your only way of protecting yourself, but that really only works with gentlemen like Ayanokōji-senpai who don’t go around telling everybody the truth. If it were me, I’d do everything in my power to make sure your secret gets out before leaving the school, you do know that right?”

“Hah...! Don’t make me laugh. It’s true a shitty brat like you’d probably go and run their mouth about it, but it’s not like anyone would believe you. Most would probably pass it off as nonsense from someone who’s about to be expelled.”

“Well, sure? I doubt that very many would believe everything I say. However, it’d still manage to put a crack in the superficially flawless persona of ‘Kushida Kikyō’ you’ve created for yourself. Isn’t that more than enough?”

Having apparently said all that she felt necessary, Amasawa disappeared into the forest, headed toward where Ayanokōji and Nanase were.

It wouldn’t be impossible for me to chase after her, but if I did... there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that she’d respond mercilessly.

She’d probably choose to spread the secrets I hold without the slightest hesitation.

And that would spell my complete and utter defeat.

I sat in the forest alone, paralyzed, staring up at the sky.

Ever so faintly, raindrops began to fall through the gaps of the dense foliage above.

They landed on my cheeks and proceeded to trickle down the back of my neck.

“I... What am I even doing...?”

I voiced my spiritless words to myself. Everything felt hollow. So much so that I couldn’t even find it in me to feel angry.

First Ayanokōji and now Amasawa... people threatening to disturb my calm, peaceful life kept showing up one after the other.

No... It wasn’t just those two.

They weren’t the only reasons why I had been forced to grovel with my knees down in the mud here today.

I began to recall where all of this had started... The reason why it had ended up like this in the first place.



8.4

On the fifth day of my time on the uninhabited island, I encountered a lone first-year student.

Simply running into another student wasn't a particularly unusual occurrence. If one had been left to travel as they pleased throughout such a vast, spacious island, it's only natural that they'd eventually cross paths with someone, be they a classmate or not. But such instances were, for the most part, merely coincidences.

However, as far as this specific encounter was concerned, things were a little different. I had been contacted via a walkie-talkie I had secretly been

entrusted with, and deliberately made arrangements to meet with this student ahead of time.

After all, given the circumstances, I had no other choice but to meet up in person. I was greeted with a smiling face when we finally saw one another, a smile that I responded to with my own as I drew closer.

And then, after confirming that there was nobody else in the surrounding area, I broke the ice.

“I received your report over the walkie-talkie this morning. You’re going to explain what happened, right?”

After a brief pause with no response, I decided to tack on the first-year student’s name as well.

“Yagami-kun.”

The de-facto leader of Class 1-B: Yagami Takuya.

“Thank you very much for coming all the way out here on such short notice.”

“You can drop the formalities. I’m asking you to explain yourself.”

In response to my urgency, Yagami averted his gaze as if troubled by something.

Shortly thereafter, he turned back and locked eyes with me once again.

“Things have their way of taking a turn for the unexpected from time to time, Kushida-senpai.”

The way he spoke as though this was someone else’s problem absolutely infuriated me.

It didn’t seem like this was going to get anywhere with me continuing to hide behind my mask.

“What do you mean ‘unexpected’? It’s your fault that those first-years found out about my past, right?”

Back when Yagami contacted me this morning, he told me that a group of first-year students, Takahashi Osamu from Class 1-A, Tsubaki Sakurako and Utomiya Riku from Class 1-C, and Hōsen Kazuomi from Class 1-D, had

pressured him into confessing about me. Allegedly, the four of them had been suspicious of our relationship from fairly early on and it had apparently been impossible for Yagami to talk his way out of it.

This was by no means a problem that could just be swept under the rug with the type of half-assed response he was giving me.

“Please allow me to apologize for that.”

“Seriously? Even if you apologize, it’s not like it’s gonna change anything.”

There were now four more people who knew my secret.

At this point, there was nothing I could do about it on my own anymore.

“Tsubaki-san and the others had been more informed than I anticipated. It was a surprise for me too.”

“A surprise? How stupid.”

“Please calm down Kushida-senpai. Tsubaki-san and the other first-years aren’t what’s important right now.”

“What?”

“Their objective is purely to get Ayanokōji-senpai expelled from the school. I don’t think they’re very interested in what your past is like, Kushida-senpai.”

It didn’t matter if they were interested in it or not.

I simply couldn’t stand the thought of living in the same general space as someone who had their hands on my sensitive information.

Just why couldn’t anyone else understand that?

“Besides, those four are all first-year students. They basically have nothing to do with a second-year like you, Kushida-senpai.”

“Hah! Don’t make me laugh... You do know we’re in the middle of fighting each other on a freaking island right now, right? When the time comes that I have to go against them, they’ll have something to lord over my head!”

Inevitably, this would end up putting me at a disadvantage.

If they blackmailed me with the threat of disclosing everything, it wouldn't matter what school year they were in; I'd have no choice but to comply with their every demand.

"Yes, I suppose that's true. Looking at it from Senpai's perspective, that must be awfully important."

Yagami conceded, admitting to understanding where I was coming from.

"That being said, it would be nigh-impossible to get those four expelled right now. Or am I wrong?"

"Are you looking down on me? You'd best not get too carried away."

"...I'm sorry. However, I still feel as though I made the best choice at the time."

How exactly was it the 'best choice' to blab about my secrets without my permission?

I just barely managed to suppress the urge to sock him right in the nose as he continued.

"Do you remember what I told you back on the cruise ship? About how I was devising a strategy to expel Ayanokōji-senpai?"

Of course I remembered that.

Yagami had come up with a secret plan to force Ayanokōji out of school, one that he was going to implement once we were actually on the island.

However, he had only handed me a walkie-talkie at the time, leaving me in the dark about the exact details of what he was up to.

"For your sake, Kushida-senpai, I'll add on a few things to my strategy."

"Add on?"

"Once Ayanokōji-senpai has been dealt with, I'll make sure to have those four... unwelcome individuals shown to the exit as well. That should take care of the problem, right?"

Yagami spoke without so much as a trace of guilt lining his voice.

"For now, let's think about getting a leg up on the rest of them. As it currently stands, even if Ayanokōji-senpai's expulsion goes by without a

hitch, most of the credit will go to Tsubaki-san and the rest of Class 1-C. You and I won't get a very large cut of the 20 million."

"I don't care about the points."

"I understand, but having a huge sum of points at your disposal makes for a better safety net to fall back on."

This entire time, I had been reluctantly going along with all of Yagami's ideas.

Even if I didn't want to, I didn't really have any other choice given the situation I was in.

However, I was at my limit. I couldn't afford to sit around on this sinking ship any longer.

"I'm done with you. It's already clear enough that I decided to follow the wrong person."

I hadn't come all the way here today just to have Yagami order me around like this.

Rather, I came to draw the line and distance myself from him.

"You can still come back from this."

"It's already too late."

"No, it isn't too late at all. In fact, I'd say that this is your chance."

"Wha...?"

"Currently, Ayanokōji-senpai has his hands full with Nanase-san clinging onto him."

"Nanase? Isn't she that girl from Class 1-D? Don't tell me she als—"

"Please don't worry. You can rest assured that Nanase-san knows nothing about your past, Senpai."

"You know I can't trust anything you say anymore, right?"

"I truly apologize for betraying your trust. But, please, at least hear me out."

Even though I had been making it painfully clear how irritated I was for quite a while now, Yagami simply refused to stop talking.

“I told you previously that she’s working with Hōsen-kun to try and get Ayanokōji-senpai expelled, right? Well, I have a general idea of what their strategy is this time around as well.”

“...So? What is it? Talk.”

“Given that Hōsen-kun is the one who came up with it, I’m fairly certain it’ll revolve around violence.”

“Violence? That’d be problematic, but I guess the Acting Director did say the school would be looking past any minor disputes that popped up between students. I can’t imagine that’d be enough to warrant expulsion though.”

“If it’s nothing more than a light scuffle, then yeah, that might be true. But what if it’s violent to the point of turning into a gruesome bloodbath? What then?”

“Hōsen certainly seems brutal enough to do something like that, but he’ll be the only one expelled if Ayanokōji one-sidedly gets his ass handed to him, right?”

Although Ayanokōji would be disqualified from the exam due to his injuries, I found it hard to believe that he would be expelled on top of that.

“I don’t think Hōsen-kun will be the one squaring off with Ayanokōji-senpai this time. As you said, Hōsen-kun’s already got a bit of a reputation, so if a fight were to break out, he’d bear the brunt of the school’s suspicion.”

“If you say that, then...”

“Yes. The one facing off with Ayanokōji-senpai will instead be Nanase-san. Although, even if she raises her hand against him, I can’t imagine that he’ll strike back right away. However, if she really puts her all into it, he’ll inevitably have to do something to keep her at bay. Perhaps he’ll actually end up hitting her? Or maybe he’ll get on top of her and pin her down? Either way, the spectacle would surely be quite unsightly.”

Indeed, if those two were to duke it out with each other... well, needless to say, it would be a big deal.

“So... You’re saying their plan is to have Nanase tell the school that Ayanokōji beat her up...?”

“Precisely, and that’s why we need to keep an eye on her. Once she takes action, we’ll strike while the iron is hot.”

“Say you’re right about all of this, it’s not like we can do anything if we don’t know when the fight’ll happen, right? It’s not like we can just hover around them 24-7.”

“I’ve already got that covered. A certain somebody told me which day it’ll be taking place.”

“A certain somebody...?”

“While I can’t disclose their identity, they’re definitely trustworthy. Anyway, Nanase-san will be making her move on the seventh day of the exam. Though the exact timeframe is still unclear, chances are that once they’ve gotten somewhere remote enough...”

Then and there, things would start getting ugly.

“So, what exactly is your plan here? Your plan to get a leg up on the other first-years?”

“Our tablets come with the ability to record videos, right? If we use that to record their fight, it’d be possible for us to get our hands on incriminating video evidence.”

If we turned the video evidence of their fight over to the school, expulsion would certainly be on the table.

“But, a single video might not be enough to guarantee his expulsion.”

“It’d at least be enough to use as a threat. It’s even possible that he might choose to drop out on his own accord.”

I understood the gist of what Yagami was trying to tell me.

If it really ended up playing out the way he said it would, taking a recording would indeed give us the upper hand.

“I’d like to entrust the job of recording the video to you, Kushida-senpai.”

“Huh? Why does it have to be me...? Can’t you just do it yourself?”

“Compared to me, it won’t seem unnatural if you’re the one approaching him.”

“That’s what you think. Ayanokōji’s already super wary of me.”

“I’m a guy. At some level, it’d be expected of me to step up and intervene if a fight were to break out in front of me, making it too suspicious if I were to just stand there and take a video. However, you’d have the excuse of just being a delicate, terrified girl who, despite not being brave enough to intervene directly, at least managed to turn on her tablet and record what was happening. You’d be able to represent righteousness, refusing to cower in the face of injustice even though the perpetrator was a fellow classmate.”

“While righteousness is great and all, I might end up being scorned by my peers for selling out one of my own.”

“In that case, you can just give the video to me. I’ll just say I got it from an anonymous source and leave it at that.”

Yagami was trying his best to persuade me, but as far as I was concerned, I was perfectly fine with letting Nanase or whoever else get rid of Ayanokōji for me.

That being said, it’d also be worthwhile for me to put in the effort if it meant increasing the odds of success, even if only by 1%.

“I just don’t want to be on a sinking ship any longer.”

“Naturally.”

“... So what’s your role in all of this? Are you just gonna pile this on me and wash your hands of it?”

“Of course not. On the day of, I’ll be providing you back up over the walkie-talkie. Once the ‘GPS Search’ feature is made available tomorrow, I’ll be able to relay Ayanokōji-senpai’s location to you at any time. That way, you’ll be able to maintain a safe distance while you tail them. Plus...”

“Plus?”

“There’s a chance Tsubaki-san is conspiring something too. She might try and pull something at the same time as us, so I’ll be poking around to try and find out what they’re up to as well.”

“What about that Utomiya guy you’re in a group with?”

“He’s nothing more than Tsubaki-san’s pawn. There’s no need to worry about him being up to anything.”

It was important, if not necessary, to take anything Yagami had to say with a grain of salt.

But right now, I didn’t really have much of a say in the matter anyway.

“You’ll do it for me, right Kushida-senpai?”

“...It’s not like I’ve got any other choice.”

There was no way out for me anymore.

For the sake of protecting my position at this school... My status...

I couldn’t afford to allow myself any more mistakes.

A B C D E F G H I J

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10



Page 324

Goldenagato | mp4directs.com

T Task



Designated Area



Character end location



Ayanokōji movement

Epilogue: The Seeds of Unrest

“What a bother...”

It was just past 7:00 AM on the seventh day of the exam, a time at which most groups would already be headed off to their first designated area. Ichinose Honami, however, simply let out a deep sigh as she stared down at the watch fastened onto her right wrist. Dark grey clouds lined the overcast skies above, threatening to drop their rain at a moment’s notice.

“Ichinose, is it really broken?”

Shibata Sō, a fellow group member, asked as he peered down at her watch.

“Yeah, seems like it. I think it happened this morning when I fell by the river and hit it on a rock.”

She had already tried everything she could think of to fix it once she noticed that it wasn’t working properly.

But despite her best efforts, she hadn’t been able to get the GPS and heart rate monitor to function at all.

Nothing showed up on the map when she tried to confirm her current position on her tablet either.

With a broken watch, she wouldn’t be able to earn points from any designated areas or Tasks.

Absolutely nothing good would come from leaving it like this.

“I guess we should be grateful we’re not on the other side of the island, huh?”

“Yeah, that’s for sure.”

Ichinose and her fellow group members were currently in the southwest of area E6. While the walk back to the starting area would only take about two

hours, it would be fairly dangerous for her to make the trip on her own with a broken GPS.

“For the time being, it looks like we’ll have no choice but to go back.”

Shibata sounded a bit peeved, but from the tone of his voice it was obvious that he wasn’t placing the blame on Ichinose.

“But—”

Their first designated area of the day was area D5.

In other words, they’d have to move in pretty much the opposite direction of the starting area.

So not only would she have to miss out on the valuable Arrival Bonus, but the entire group would lose out on the chance to earn any Early Bird Bonuses as well. Though Ichinose understood what she had to do, she instead looked back at the three people, Kamuro, Hashimoto, and Ninomiya, who were waiting to depart behind her.

“Well, since it’s busted I guess there’s no helping it, right Masumi-chan?”

“If you head out now, you might make it back in time for the third area.”

As Hashimoto and Kamuro chimed in, Ninomiya, a fellow classmate, also nodded along in agreement.

From what it sounded like, it didn’t seem like any of them held this against her.

Ichinose felt happy about this, but at the same time feelings of guilt began to well up inside her.

Two days earlier, on the fifth day of the exam, Ichinose’s group had taken first place in a Task that allowed groups to increase their maximum size, successfully earning the right to take on three more people. And on the sixth day, they used the GPS Searching feature to merge with Hashimoto’s group, only for trouble to strike the very next morning.

“Sorry you guys. I’ll definitely be back in time for the third designation.”

Now that a course of action had been decided on, every second mattered. She would need to move quickly in order to make her way back to her friends as soon as possible.

“Well, guess I’ll stick with Ichinose.”

After Shibata’s self-nomination, Ichinose buckled down and together, the two of them set off toward the south.

“Sorry Shibata-kun, for having to accompany me like this.”

“It’s not like there’s anything you could’ve done about it, so don’t sweat the apology.”

“Yeah, that’s fair I guess.”

Just like that, Ichinose and Shibata spent the next hour or so walking south along the river until they arrived at area E9.

By the time they stepped foot on the sandy beach, the starting area was close at hand.

“We’re going a lot faster than I expected. Good work.”

All they needed to do now was push westward and they’d eventually turn up near the port.

Even if they moved slowly, this final leg of the journey would only take less than half an hour.

However, that meant that the round trip would take around an hour, so time was still of the essence.

“Shibata-kun, why don’t you just head for the next designated area from here?”

“No way. Even though it’s close, isn’t it still dangerous for you to head back alone? The forest is like a maze, you know that. And yeah it’s still daytime and all, but it’s really cloudy today, so rain...”

Shibata looked up at the sky as he trailed off. It was currently 8:00 AM, and while it wasn’t raining yet, there was no telling when the weather would take a turn for the worse.

“Yeah, I know it’s dangerous, but I should be able to make it back to the port from here without getting lost. If we want to catch up to the top groups, we can’t afford to miss out on even a single point. Besides, if it does start raining, we might not be able to meet back up with the others.”

Though it was somewhat greedy, Ichinose felt strongly that they should go after as many points as possible.

“I just need to walk in a straight line. I’ll be fine.”

At the very least, she wanted to get Shibata back onto the field quickly so he could earn points for the group.

As the one holding everyone back, she simply wanted to minimize the burden.

“...Alright, but please don’t do anything foolish. If it starts raining, don’t try to force it, just wait until it stops, okay?”

“Yep, I definitely won’t overdo it. After all, it’d be no laughing matter if I got injured and was made to retire because of it.”

After promising to be careful, Ichinose waved her hand, urging Shibata to meet back up with Hashimoto and the others.

And then, with the general directions Shibata had given still fresh in her mind, she set foot into the forest. Even if she couldn’t make it in time for the next designated area, her resolve to get back in time for the third drove her to keep pushing forward.

Her feet moved even faster than her racing mind, eager to avoid wasting any time.

Given that she hadn’t spotted a single person since she split off from Shibata, there didn’t seem to be anyone else in the area. Originally, she thought that she’d be able to ask another group for help if the need arose, but as time went by, she realized just how naive that line of thinking had truly been.

After trudging forward for about ten minutes, the already-poor visibility of dimly-lit forest gradually began to deteriorate.

The cause for this was obvious: the grey clouds lining the sky had become even thicker and darker than before.

Though Ichinose had every intention of walking in a straight line, the dense thicket of trees standing in her way had other plans.

The path, if you could even call it that, was treacherous. The moment she worked her way around one tree, two more would already be lying in wait just ahead.

As time went by, she eventually began to lose confidence that she was walking straight at all.

“Why does it feel like everything’s gone terribly wrong for some reason...?”

A quiet laugh of self-derision crept past her lips. She had no choice but to keep pushing forward.

After all, the port should theoretically only be a couple hundred meters away.

She continued walking for twenty more minutes or so before finally coming to a stop, at a complete and utter loss for what to do.

If she hadn’t taken a wrong turn at some point, she definitely would’ve arrived at the port by now.

“What... What am I even doing...?”

She tried checking her tablet again, but just as before, her current location didn’t show on the map.

Even if she attempted to head back the way she came, there was no guaranteeing that she’d be able to do so.

Ichinose wasn’t usually the type to make rash decisions like this, but ever since her class fell down to Class C, she found herself acting more and more impatient.

But despite this impatience, she had successfully managed to form a formidable group at the request of Class A’s leader, Sakayanagi.

Therefore, in order to maintain parity with Class A, she needed now more than ever to demonstrate her competency.

She had no idea where she was or where she was going, but she had an obligation to push forward nonetheless.

Where should she go? Which direction?

So as to dispel the anxious questions running through her mind, Ichinose steeled herself and took a right step forward.

Just then, a noise, ever so faint, came from somewhere up ahead.

She momentarily deliberated over whether or not to shout out, excited by the prospect of running into somebody else, but she couldn't discount the possibility that it had just been a wild animal of some sort.

Thinking that she might as well just go and take a look for herself, Ichinose quietly began to move toward the source of the sound.

Before long, the figures of two people came into view: Tsukishiro, the school's Acting Director, and Shiba, the homeroom teacher of Class 1-D.

Upon seeing them, Ichinose let out a deep, prolonged sigh of relief since she could now ask for directions to the port.

However...

She quickly realized that was the same naive line of thinking that had gotten her into this situation in the first place. Even though this was an accident, that didn't change the fact that she was currently in the middle of a special exam. Given that, it didn't seem very likely that they would give her directions if she told them that she had lost her way.

And while it would be one thing if her watch had broken due to some technical issue, given that she was the one who had broken it, well... If they were to chalk it up as her own responsibility, this precious chance to get out of the forest would slip through her fingers.

Therefore, she wanted to find a way to hold onto the chance instead.

A thought came to mind: that it might be for the best to just follow after them.

They'd ideally just go back to the starting area from here, but if they ended up heading off to an upcoming Task site instead, other students would be bound to show up sooner or later. Either way, by following them she'd probably manage to avoid the worst-case scenario.

After thinking about it for a bit longer, she ultimately settled on tailing them from behind.

Since they seemed to be immersed in a conversation of some sort as they walked, she figured that she would be relatively hard to notice. And even in the off chance she did get caught, she didn't think it'd be a very big deal as long as she feigned ignorance.

"I asked you to confirm whether or not we're in the clear to freely take action. How about it?"

"It seems that will be difficult. I've found evidence to suggest that the teachers are keeping a keen eye on us. Among them, Mashima seems to be on particularly high alert..."

The sound of their voices traveled clearly throughout the quiet, tranquil forest, allowing Ichinose to make out most of what they were saying.

Though, she wasn't very interested in the contents of their conversation, so she didn't listen in very closely, choosing to focus primarily on staying concealed instead.

"Aside from him, there's one other teacher of note: Chabashira, Class 2-D's homeroom teacher. She's been searching through all the logs and records."

"It's because dragging the teachers into this was one of the few viable options he had left. Be it Chabashira-sensei or Mashima-sensei, there's no doubt in my mind that their actions link back to Ayanokōji-kun. Since Ayanokōji-kun happened to be at the scene back then, it's only natural that he managed to figure out the truth."

However, everything changed the moment a certain, unexpected name came up.

Ichinose held her breath with newfound interest.

Ayanokōji.

A name that subconsciously made her heart throb whenever she heard it.

The two men came to a complete stop before continuing, perhaps due to the sudden mention of this very name.

"I've already altered the logs on our end, so I don't believe they'll be able to trace anything."

“Thank you for that. However, they still might get their hands on something. If so, we’re not going to get another chance. We have to be sure to corner him this time.”

“Will it really be that simple to force his expulsion though? He’s the —— of the White Room.”

“People are always so caught up with titles. He’s just a ——, that’s ——.”

White Room?

Despite straining her ears to try and comprehend what had been said, Ichinose couldn’t quite make out some of the words.

The wind had suddenly picked up strength, the sound of the gale drowning out their voices.

Ayanokōji’s name together with the word ‘expulsion’ ceaselessly echoed throughout her mind. Of all people, why were the Acting Director and a first-year teacher talking about something like that? Desperate to make out just a little bit more of their conversation, Ichinose unconsciously began to close the distance, a distance she otherwise knew she ought to maintain.

“If he keeps —— until the last day, let’s —— him disappear in I2 —— planned.”

Ichinose felt pretty certain that they wouldn’t be able to hear her, but just as she drew close enough to make out the gist of what was being said... At that very moment...

The Acting Director’s head snapped backward, staring on with a sharp, pointed gaze.

‘Danger’

Her intuition, or perhaps her instincts, cried out this one word, compelling her to turn her back and run off as fast as her legs could carry her.

However, her backpack weighed far too much, preventing her from picking up speed. As a snap judgment, she unbuckled the fasteners and hurled it into the thicket with as much strength as she could muster. If they were to pick it up, they’d be able to pin down her identity by looking at the

tablet inside, but Ichinose was currently far too frantic to act with that level of foresight.

While she was pretty sure that they hadn't seen her face, there wasn't a doubt in her mind that they had realized that someone was eavesdropping on them. That alone, she was certain of.

Their entire conversation just now... was something she was never supposed to hear.

It was a premonition, one that chilled her down to her very bones as she continued to run.

She could definitely get away from them just fine, right?

And there was definitely no way that they, of all people, would come and chase her down, right?

Yeah, everything was definitely going to be fine... Right?

Definitely. Definitely. Definitely...

From behind, the sound of twigs breaking and leaves crumbling underfoot could be heard. While Ichinose wasn't that confident in her physical capabilities, she was very proud of her speed.

Left, right, straight, the direction didn't matter anymore.

She just kept running, completely lost within the forest, losing further control with every mindless step she took.

There was a strange, almost surreal feeling that came with bearing witness to something that shouldn't be seen.

And it was that very feeling that drove her forward.

"!!!"

Ichinose's eyes had been glued to the path ahead as she ran, sparing not even a single glance to where she had been placing her feet. So, in the midst of her delirium, her foot inevitably got caught on something, sending her toppling down to the forest floor. When she looked back, she saw the apparent culprit: a large tree root protruding up and out of the ground.

Although there was a sharp, biting pain in her knee due to her fall, she endured it, doing what she could to try and get back up on her feet again.



Just as she slowly began to put weight back into her legs, a large hand reached out and clamped down on her left shoulder from behind.

Ichinose immediately froze in place, surprised to the point where her heart nearly stopped, and fearfully looked over her shoulder.

“...If I’m not mistaken, you’re Ichinose Honami from Class 2-C, correct?”

Intimidated by Shiba’s strong gaze, Ichinose sank back down to the ground again.

“Ah- Uh- Y-yes, that’s correct...”

With her rear end now on the forest floor, she tried desperately to scramble backward, but there was simply no escaping his discerning gaze.

He stood, towering over Ichinose, his eyes filled with indecipherable emotion.

“Why are you here?”

“U-uhm, well, it seems that my watch is broken, so... I was going to get it looked at...”

“I see. So that’s why there aren’t any GPS signals nearby.”

After a brief pause, he continued.

“It doesn’t really matter how much you heard. Even if it was only a couple of words, for you to get yourself involved in this, well... it simply means you were unlucky.”

“Are... Are you saying that I’m going to be penalized for something?”

“It has nothing to do with the school’s rules or penalties. We’re just going to have to dispose of you. Immediately.”

At that, Shiba slowly began to reach for Ichinose.

“It’s a bit premature to resort to such violent methods, Shiba-sensei.”

Tsukishiro, having shown up slightly late with Ichinose’s backpack in hand, spoke up to rein Shiba back in.

“Yes, forgive me.”

At that, the Acting Director turned and looked at Ichinose with an ominous smile on his face.

“Let’s go about this formally. Did you happen to hear anything, Ichinose-san?”

“N-not at all. I didn’t hear anything...”

Of course, that was a lie.

While it had only been a few bits and pieces, Ichinose had indeed overheard their unsettling conversation.

But no matter what she chose to say in response, they probably weren’t going to believe her anyway.

“I’m not so naive as to trust those words of yours. As adults, we always have to assume the worst and act accordingly, so I have no choice but to proceed under the premise that you heard everything.”

Tsukishiro stood before Ichinose with an evaluative look in his eyes.

And then, he crouched down to match her gaze with his own.

“Accidental as it may have been, you still heard it all. Information that should’ve never reached your ears, and yet, here we are.”

Shiba simply stood back as he watched his superior, seemingly afraid of where it was headed.

“If our conversation earlier were to leak to the public, Shiba-sensei and I would be in a great deal of trouble.”

“I-I really didn’t hear anyth—”

“That’s not true. I’m speaking now under the firm premise that you did, remember?”

Being told this, Ichinose could only swallow her bated breath.

“Should we perhaps roughen you up a bit until you forget the memory, Ichinose-san? Your retirement would be soon to follow.”

Seeing her cower in fear, Tsukishiro smiled and stood back up.

“I say that jokingly, of course. As the one entrusted with protecting this school, I would never truly say something like that. I too would like to avoid

a violent solution if at all possible. Therefore, I'll offer you a proposal. If you tell a soul about any of this, I'll personally see to it that a group composed entirely of Class 2-C students retires from the exam."

"...!"

"Naturally, this would be a group that doesn't have the private points they'd need to save themselves."

This was a slightly nicer way of saying that they would be subject to 'mandatory expulsion'.

"Do you perhaps think it'd be impossible for me to do such a thing? As the man in control of the rules, fabricating a justification would be trivial. There's no telling what might happen, especially out here on such an unsupervised, vast deserted island."

Tsukishiro narrowed his gaze, peering down at the terrified Ichinose.

It was his way of tacitly asking her if she understood.

"Acting Director Tsukishiro, rather than showing such leniency, wouldn't it be better to exercise your authority here? If Ichinose were to disappear, I doubt that Chabashira and Mashima would notice. Those two are only cautious when it comes to matters regarding Ayanokōji."

"You have a point. Well then, what do you think should be done instead, Shiba-sensei?"

Without so much as a second thought, Shiba took out a pair of rubber gloves from his pocket.

"If you're willing to leave it to me, I'll handle her myself."

Any and all hopes that Ichinose had of getting away were long gone by now, leaving her with no choice but to wait for her sentencing as the two men discussed how to deal with her.

From the mortified look on her face, it was clear that she couldn't even begin to imagine what Shiba intended to do once he put on the gloves.

The sight caused Tsukishiro to let show a tender smile.

"Well, I'd rather not waste any more time on this."

Saying that, Tsukishiro set down the backpack he was holding in front of Ichinose before stepping away again.

“The port is located about 150 meters straight ahead of us. Do get going, if you would.”

“Y-yes sir...!”

Overcome with a sense of panic, Ichinose hurriedly put on her backpack, desperate to get away as quickly as possible.

“It’s not your enemies that you should be protecting, but your own classmates. It would do you well to keep that in mind.”

Ichinose nodded in response before promptly setting off in the direction Tsukishiro had indicated.

Once she had disappeared into the forest, Shiba sent a look of confusion toward Tsukishiro.

“It’s fine. Just leave her be.”

“Are you sure? If she mentions this to Ayanokōji, it’ll interfere with the plan.”

He simply couldn’t shake the thought that there were still loose ends that ought to be dealt with somehow.

“Unexpected setbacks happen all the time. That being the case, we’ll just have to adapt.”

Shiba still seemed visibly apprehensive about this, unable to perceive Tsukishiro’s true intentions.

“Are you really that worried? I thought I gave her a rather effective warning.”

If she were to go back on her word, several of her classmates would be expelled. Although it was just a threat, for someone like Ichinose who prioritized her classmates above all else, it would’ve seemed far more real.

“Regardless of her relationship with Ayanokōji-kun, the elimination of a formidable enemy like him would be great for Class C. She herself will also come to terms with that as time passes, so let’s just stay calm and see what happens, shall we?”

A raindrop fell upon Tsukishiro's cheek.

"I was 99% certain that Nanase-san would fail, but it seems that she's finally taken action. If everything goes according to plan, Ayanokōji-kun's Emergency Alert should go off any time now."

Tsukishiro was perfectly calm as he spoke, without even the slightest trace of uncertainty in his voice.

An outlook made possible thanks to his unwavering conviction.



1

The pouring rain began to get stronger.

Having taken the time to cool her head and come to terms with her own feelings, Nanase spoke with a heavy tone.

“It’s my loss... Ayanokōji-senpai.”

“Can I take that to mean you’re finally convinced?”

“Yes. It seems that, despite my best efforts, it truly isn’t possible for me to beat you Senpai.”

Having been seen through to her very core, she seemed resigned, as if all the spite and malice from earlier had been drained away.

Making her stand down without laying a finger on her had, in a way, been successful.

“If possible, how about you explain everything in detail? Why were you targeting me? If we don’t clear this up, there will be several issues later.”

“That’s fair. You have a right to know— No, I want you to know, Senpai.”

She sat down as she spoke, having lost the strength to stay standing any longer.

While her movements hadn’t been those of an ordinary person, it still didn’t seem like she was the White Room student.

Her strength was definitely praiseworthy. So much so that she probably wouldn’t lose out against an opponent like Horikita or Ibuki.

Compared to someone who hails from the White Room, however, she was far too rough around the edges.

Moreover, it would be strange for the White Room student to bring up Matsuo’s name, of all things.

So, in order to find out the truth, I patiently waited for her answer.

“I... I enrolled in this school because I wanted to avenge my childhood friend.”

“Your childhood friend? You mean—”

“Yes. Matsuo Eiichiro.”

I felt all but certain that she was referring to the son of the very butler who had taken care of me in the past.

“I hadn’t truly realized it before enrolling here, but since this school is completely isolated from the outside world, there’s no way you could’ve known what happened, is there?”

To her credit, Nanase wasn’t exactly wrong for thinking this. However, in this case, I happened to know at least a little bit about what had happened to the Matsuo family. After all, ‘that man’ had mentioned it back when he had shown up to take me back to the White Room.

At this point, Nanase calmly began to tell me everything.

How Eiichiro had been forcibly expelled from the high school he had worked so hard to get into due to my father’s relentless scheming.

How, no matter which school he tried to apply for afterward, he ended up suffering the exact same fate, eventually leading to him giving up on pursuing higher education altogether.

How, upon finding out about this, his father had committed suicide, burning himself to death.

And how, after his father’s death, he was left to do what he could to make ends meet by working a part-time job.

Even though ‘that man’ had already told me all of this, I simply chose to hold my tongue and listen.

“From kindergarten up until the day he graduated from middle school, I was always together with Eiichiro-kun. He was a year above me and better than me at just about anything, from studies to the games we played together... He was my inspiration, my role model.”

Nanase’s calm voice gradually began to grow heavier.

“Even after he was kicked out of his home, Eiichiro-kun said he wouldn’t give up until the very end, and that’s when he started working. While we weren’t able to see each other as often, I didn’t think the relationship between us would change.”

She continued without pause, speaking as though she was reliving the past.

“Even though he had given up on his education... Even though he had lost his father... He told me that he wouldn’t give up... That he’d look toward the future and try his best... He even smiled... And yet...”

Nanase’s voice began to shake, her fists clenched.

“Earlier this year, on the evening of February 14th, I paid a visit to Eiichiro-kun’s apartment. He was trying so hard, so I was hoping to at least make him feel a little bit better, but—”

Even without hearing the end of it, I could tell exactly where she was going with this:

That, despite all his hard work, Matsuo Eiichiro had ultimately chosen to give up on his own life.

“‘If you can never meet again, then you’ll never be able to tell them how you feel.’ You said it yourself.”

I was reminded of what she said back when she was consoling Ike on the second day of the exam.

In her case, she had been far too late for regrets. Heartfelt words would indeed be meaningless when said to a corpse.

“I didn’t know very much about you or your father at the time. In fact, I had only just sent out my application to another high school when... that person appeared before me.”

“You mean Tsukishiro?”

“Yes. Back then, Acting Director Tsukishiro told me why Eiichiro-kun’s life had been thrown into turmoil. He said that the root cause of all of it had been that someone named Ayanokōji Kiyotaka had escaped from an establishment called ‘The White Room’ by enrolling at a school named ‘Advanced Nurturing High School’, and that he had made arrangements for me to enroll there myself.”

And so, she had taken him up on the offer in order to seek vengeance for the death of her childhood friend.

“If I could successfully get you expelled, he promised to let me meet your father, Senpai. Truth be told, I was going to ask your father to bow his head

and apologize to Eiichiro-kun, but..."

Even if she somehow managed to get me expelled, there was simply no way 'that man' would ever choose to bow his head.

Her words would've never managed to get through to him. Of that, I was certain.

I was able to see the bigger picture at this point, but there were still several things that I didn't understand.

"Tsukishiro told me that he had sent in a student from the White Room. Was that just a bluff?"

"Uhm, what do you mean by that, Senpai? I don't really know much about this 'White Room' thing to begin with."

It didn't seem like she was lying when she said this, so with that being the case, there were only two possible explanations I could come up with.

The first was that the enforcer he had sent wasn't Nanase, but someone entirely different, be they from the White Room or not.

While the other was that the very 'enforcer' he had mentioned really was Nanase, and he had just wanted me to think that she was from the White Room.

If it was the latter, then there wouldn't be anyone else targeting me anymore.

However, that felt pretty hard to imagine.

When compared to the general public, Nanase was exceptionally talented, but her abilities fell short for an enforcer tasked with forcing my expulsion. Even Tsukishiro should've realized that it would end up like this.

"I knew that you weren't the one at fault, Ayanokōji-senpai, but... I wanted... no, needed someone to take it out on... all my pent-up anger and frustration..."

Upon hearing this, all sorts of things started to make sense. Her behavior ever since she first came here.

Throughout all her attempts to have me expelled, there had also been several occasions where she had stepped in to help me.

Contradictory behavior that had come about because Nanase herself didn't truly believe that she was doing the right thing.

And today, convinced that she had Matsuo Eiichiro's dying will at heart, she unleashed it all.

We were high up on the mountain and the falling rain had cooled down the ground beneath our feet, causing a thick fog to enshroud the area.

"I... I don't know how I can face you anymore, Senpai... I'm so, so sorry..."

Ashamed of herself and what she had done, Nanase covered her face with her hands, unable to look at me.

Without saying a word, I waited patiently until she had calmed down.

"You don't need to apologize. The anger you feel is perfectly justified."

The fact of the matter was that 'that man' had committed such a grave crime just to bring me back.

A cold-hearted, calculating being who doesn't even see others as human.

But, ironically enough, that was also a projection of myself.

"I've failed to carry out the Acting Director's orders. There's no point in me staying here anymore."

"Will you drop out?"

"It's the least I can do to atone for my actions."

'That man' and I had always been similar.

As long as we could protect ourselves, our own existence, it didn't matter what happened to others.

And neither of us believed in casually revealing our true nature to outsiders.

However, despite our similarities, there was still a key difference.

It all came down to whether or not we'd choose to discard the ignorant who stand in our way.

That is, whether or not we were even capable of extending our hands.

Extending his hand to an ignorant person was something ‘that man’ would absolutely never do, and that was the decisive difference between us.

I slowly reached out, extending my hand to Nanase.

“Senpai...?”

“If you’re really sorry, then please take back what you said just now.”

“What... do you mean...?”

“You have nothing to feel ashamed of. You simply tried your best to avenge your friend. But there’s a reason I can’t lose to you, since I believe that staying here at this school is the only way I have of going against ‘that man’, my father.”

While still unwilling to meet my gaze head-on, she lifted her head just enough to stare at my outstretched palm.

“If I could be a bit selfish here, I’d rather not hear about you leaving the school. Instead, I’d like you to cooperate with me. Even now, Tsukishiro is probably scheming to use this special exam to expel me and present me as a gift to my father. If that were to happen, all the painstaking efforts Matsuo Eiichiro went through to get me into this school would be for nothing.”

“Are you saying that... I should’ve been doing the opposite this entire time?”

“Can you lend me your hand?”

Her delicate, smooth hand took hold of my own.

“—It’s a promise.”

Though her hand was cold due to the rain, there was still a hint of warmth contained within.

Nanase, whose head had been down for a while now, finally looked me in the eyes.

This had nothing to do with whether she’d actually be able to help me or not.

I just needed to make good use of her so that she could, even if I ended up only using her once and throwing her away.

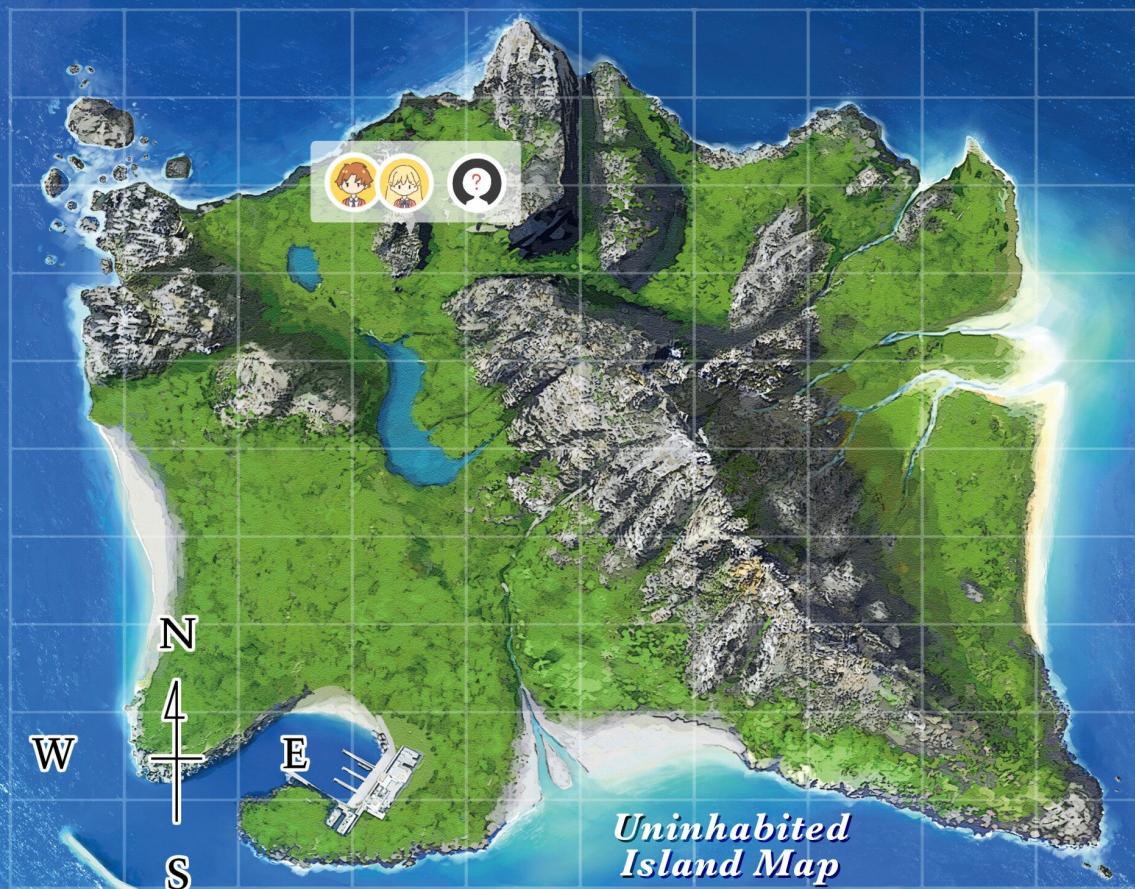
“You’ll catch a cold if you stay in the rain for too long, so let’s get going.”

“...Okay.”



A B C D E F G H I J

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10



Page 349

Goldenagato | mp4directs.com

T Task



Designated Area



Character end location



Ayanokōji movement

Afterword

Hello, hello everyone. It's Kinugasa, the world's biggest fan of Ume Chazuke, served with green tea poured over it. (Rice Soup With Japanese Pickled Plums)

First of all, please take note that this is the first time the special exam has spanned for more than one volume. I wanted to write about the other students scattered about the island, but before I knew it, I had already hit the page limit. I'm really starting to feel the limits on how much a single volume can permit.

Back when I first started writing, I'd think to myself: "It'd be fine if I went a couple of pages over the limit, right? What's the big deal?" Despite that optimism, most of the time I'm struggling to fit everything in. Why can't they just make an exception for You-Zitsu and let me write over 500 pages per... No no, I'll stop. That would probably just end up with me injuring myself in vain. I'd probably be just fine with a 50 page increase instead!

Alright alright. Sorry for the lengthy preamble here, but I've only gone o~n~e page for the afterword this time.

Honestly, I feel like we'd be perfectly fine without an afterword. Is there really anyone out there dying to read these anyway? I wonder this all the time, but I imagine it's really annoying for the reader if the very next page after finishing the story is the afterword without any blank pages to space it out. (That being said, there simply aren't enough pages, so it can't be helped.)

While the end of 2020 is now in sight, I'll continue working hard to finish off the year! Until next time!

Sakayanagi Arisu SS: An Enjoyable Moment

The 5th day of the special exam is fast approaching.

But the only ones who felt time running fast are the strong students with lots of extra energy, or the ones like me who remained at the starting line.

The physical and mental stress is generally felt throughout all classes.

As long as they repeatedly throw themselves into this harsh environment, bad injuries will definitely begin to appear at this stage.

I clearly understand that from watching the people entering and leaving the harbour from the beach I'm at.

“Oh my?”

I notice someone approaching me and my cheeks softens.

Without showing any signs of fatigue, he walks closer to me as usual.

“Good day Ayanokouji-kun. It's a rather hot day today, isn't it?”

“How are you?”

He's the same as always. There are many people who exhibit this kind of calmness. But as expected of him, a mere few days of living on this uninhabited island doesn't mean a thing to him.

“About as usual, considering it's me. I'm having Ichinose-san and Shibata-kun do their best so I can't say it's been too indulging.”

It doesn't need to be said but...

If I could move freely, I would gladly have accompanied them...

“I wanted to ask you something, can you still receive the arrival rewards?”

A question regarding the status of the exception that was me, the only one who was considered half-retired.

It probably wasn't the only reason he came here to me.

I will consider it the appetiser before moving on to the main dish.

“I’m glad to say I’m still being recognised for that as it wasn’t my intention to retire after all.”

Thanks to that, Ichinose-san and Shibata-kun is properly able to receive the arrival rewards.

It’s lower than the other top groups naturally, but that can’t be helped.

“By the way, what affairs do you have for coming to the starting spot today, may I ask?”

“One of them was a waste of effort in the end.”

He replied as he gazed out towards the sea at the task now taking place.

“The last spot was unfortunately taken by Kouenji already.”

That’s regrettable. I would have used my binoculars to spectate if he was participating.

Kouenji’s performances was just a pain for us however.

Even if I left my personal feelings out, I still would have liked to see Ayanokouji-kun do the honours instead.

“He was 4th in the morning, but now he’s in 2nd place it seems. He really is the Wunderkind of Class 2-D if I may say so.”

“We share the same opinion then.”

Kouenji-kun’s talent is unlimited. Ayanokouji-kun is probably feeling the weight of it directly on his skin.

The fact Nanase-san isn’t by him now means there was an empty spot for the girls’ side.

“It should take about 30 mins before the task is over and Nanase-san comes back. Please take a seat. It’s rather refreshing here in the shade.”

It wasn’t a suitable place to entertain guests, but letting him stand there in the sun won’t do.

“How did you know about Nanase?”

“I regularly receive information from all over the island.”

The main group has a transceiver which I use to contact them.

As someone who can't move her legs, it's a necessary tool to process information, don't you think?

"Is that okay with you? I'm your enemy you know?"

"Fufu, I don't mind."

Ayanokouji-kun is not in the top 10 as of now. He could still be included in another group later and become a terrifying enemy later, but moving up as soloer is difficult. Furthermore, the amount of damage he has taken from fatigue is hard to guess.

If so, being close to him makes it all more enjoyable am I right?

It's almost impossible to make time to be alone with him at the school. No need to concern ourselves with others. No need to think too much.

The fact that he doesn't seem to share that sentiment is a pity.

While my heart is racing thinking about the conversation we are about to have...

I always end up wishing it could last forever. Even for just a moment longer.

Nanase Tsubasa SS: Unfathomable

Data shows that men have better stamina than women.

But as far as I know, there isn't that big of a difference between me and Ayanokouji-senpai.

That belief stems from the confidence and conviction gained from training ever since I was small.

But I now clearly understand that it was far too naive of me.

Ayanokouji-senpai hasn't been the least tired these recent days.

He's always at about 50-60 percent and clears every obstacle like nothing.

He's easily surpassing me, climbing the towering cliffs.

If this goes on, I won't manage to follow him.

I have to avoid falling too far back no matter what.

Fearing that everything would end, I forcibly made up my mind.

“What are you doing?”

“Don’t... mind me. I will, catch up to you, at my own pace...!”

If I stopped climbing and fell down from here, that would mean I amounted to just that.

I fervently stretched my arm and grabbed onto the rocky surface.

While my mind was brimming with willpower, my hands were screaming at their limits.

“Retiring will be the least of your worries if you fall from here.”

Whether I retired or not wasn't that important to me.

It was whether I could catch up to him or not. Everything depended on that.

I focused on my arms and legs when suddenly he came back to me.

“Grab on.”

Seeing how desperate I was, he held out his hand.

“N-no, I won’t have it. Since one of the conditions for following you was that you wouldn’t help me... Don’t mind me and go on, please.”

Even though climbing here was so dangerous, he went down to me without a worry.

He’s always collected and there are so many things I don’t know about it. As expected, this person isn’t normal.

From what he brazenly did during the fight with Housen to this.

“It would leave a bad aftertaste if I went ahead and you hurt yourself. It would be one thing if you asked me for it, but I’m offering this kindness of my own accord. Don’t mind it.”

“But...!”

“We’re wasting time as we speak. Am I right?”

I no longer had any places I could escape to.

The more I resisted, the more I realised how much I wasted his precious time.

“...Yes.”

I couldn’t hide my frustration as I took his hand.

“Senpai... have you ever climbed before?”

“No, this is the first time I’m moving up like this.”

“Is that so...”

He raised me along with my heavy backpack up.

This person really possesses unfathomable abilities after all.

I wonder if I’m even able to cross blades with him...

No, that’s not important.

He’s definitely—definitely a person I have to defeat.

And then I must drag out that person.

That's why I came to this school in the first place.
It's the only goal I have.

Horikita Suzune SS: A Brief Farewell

“Well then, I’ll be leaving.”

I told Ayanokouji-kun as I began to take my leave, while adjusting my hat which shielded me from the sun.

It seems he would be staying at the starting line since he just saw me off.

I had to perform well as someone who was going solo these next two weeks.

The same could be said about Ayanokouji-kun, but I probably didn’t need to worry about him.

“...no need to worry, huh?”

Without even realising, my thought patterns had inadvertently settled on this option

As soon as I had heard the rules for this special exam, I had immediately realised just how difficult it would be to fight solo.

For him though, there weren’t any reasons for concern

I took a swift glance at him.

He was still watching me with a slightly puzzled expression on his face

After watching him score the highest possible marks in that math test and how he had handled Housen, I had realised he was much more than he let on. Was that why?

It was probably a factor, but that wasn’t the complete story by far

That’s because I’ve been watching him from up close this entire year. More than anyone else.

He never panicked and remained calm no matter what. He was a person who would always find the right answer and win regardless of the situation he was in. .

He had flaws obviously. He couldn't achieve certain goals without revealing some extent of his true abilities. Not to mention, he wasn't particularly good at communicating either.

But he would shield those weaknesses by using others.

I stopped looking back and took a strong step forward

A new invisible feeling was growing.

It probably wasn't 'jealousy' nor was it 'admiration'.

I wanted to become someone who could stand shoulder to shoulder with him, I believe. Probably.

But his style was fundamentally different from mine.

Even if I tried to mimic him, it wouldn't do me any good.

I wanted to become someone who could cover his back, a partner he could rely on...

"As if... I guess that wasn't like me."

I had somehow just ended up thinking that way.

"First priority is to fight in the best way only I knew possible"

That's because the battle on this uninhabited island was by no means going to be easy.

Nanase Tsubasa Tapestry SS: What Could Be Seen From that Back

I lie face down on the sand, taking the required position and wait on standby.

It's the final match for the Beach Flags event.

My opponent is Tokunaga-senpai from the 3rd year. Her timing for the last 2 matches were flawless.

I think I have the advantage regarding power when kicking the sand, but any miss on my part will be lethal. Which means that as long as I don't make a miss and get slowed down, she is someone I should beat.

The sound of the pistol being fired reverberates throughout the beach.

The same moment the sound reaches my ears, I stand up while turning around.

At about the same time, I feel her take a similar stance and become convinced of my victory.

Taking a small lead from the first moment, I then wholeheartedly went for the flag.

Ayanokouji-senpai is also watching this battle nearby.

While showing too much of my abilities here is a demerit to me, I cannot hold back.

I went all out compared to the two other people in my group.

That's because I feel like I have to show them my full power at all times.

Before I knew it, the flag is right in front of me and I stretch out my hand to take it.

“Fuu...”

Feeling relieved over securing the win in this final round I breath in and out to calm down.

“What a terrifying 1st year. It’s my loss.”

Tokunaga-senpai, who came in after me, said as reached out her hand for a handshake.

“Thank you so much, Tokunaga-senpai.”

“You know about me?”

“I looked at the OAA app for any upperclassmen I had to be wary of when preparing for this special exam.”

I managed to win since I knew she was athletic and didn’t let my guard down.

I went with Tokunaga-senpai to wash off the sand before receiving the mineral water as reward for participating.

“That was an overwhelming victory.”

While being refreshed by the cold water, Ayanokouji-senpai calls out to me.

“Thank you so much. I managed to win somehow.”

He was thinking about something while staring at me.

I try to not let it bother me and ignore it, but he still continues to stare.

I somehow begin feeling a bit bothered by it or shall I say a bit distracted by it.

I was wearing a swimsuit so I can’t help but feel a bit embarrassed by it.

“H-hey, Ayanokouji-senpai?”

“Hmm?”

“I can’t really relax when you are, staring at me like that...”

I instinctively said.

I have never showed so much of my skin to anybody before so... yeah.

“Whops, you’re right. My bad.”

He apologises and looks another way but I still can’t relax and turn my gaze somewhere else.

I hope I can calm down a bit but...

I am spending a lot of alone time with him during this uninhabited special exam.

Which also means that we, a boy and a girl, are moving around together.

That felt like — a bit of problem to me.

Oh, no no.

If I continue thinking about this, my plan will break down.

Ayanokouji-senpai seems to be talking to Kiriyama-senpai so I'm going to change while I have the chance.

I decide to go and wash these unexpected feelings off me.

Translator's Notes

1. From here on out, I will be using 『I』『I'm』『My』 and other similar terms to refer to when Nanase uses ‘boku’ instead of her usual ‘watashi’. It will be far more natural to read that way, and I won’t need to leave translation notes every time she does it moving forward. If you ever see me using these brackets around one of her terms, it’s me signalling that she’s speaking with boku. Just a heads up. [↑]
2. There are two anime references in this part. The first to Mobile Suit Gundam, and the second to some anime/work that I’m not sure of. I spent a few hours asking around my Japanese friends and through many websites and it’s not clear what reference Dashu Sea Chicken is making. “Sea Chicken” is a brand of Tuna in Japan, but that’s not enough to make it clear what’s happening here. Who knows honestly. [↑]
3. I looked up a bit of information about Beach Flags, since I had never heard of it before. I translated a few pages out of a Japanese dictionary that spoke about it:

ビーチフラッグス (English: Beach Flags) is an Australian life-saving sporting event performed by lifeguards meant to train various skills essential to their practice, such as their running speed and reflexes. It is sometimes performed in recreational contexts that don’t emphasize lifeguarding skill. The sport is usually performed on beaches and such in which several players contend with each other for flags, of which there are less than the number of participants. The distance from the starting line to the flags is usually 20 meters, and competitors start out by laying prone on the ground with their back facing the flags.

It’s highly akin to musical chairs, in that the person who does not get a flag is eliminated and then one flag is taken away and it repeats like that until there’s a winner. If you’re interested, I found a video of it [here](#). Personally, I can’t fathom the sport, but I guess it’s more common in Japan than America. Who knows. [↑]