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# CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

2nd Year

Welcome to  
the 2nd Year  
Classroom

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ROYAL  
MTLS



# CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

2nd Year

12

SYOUGO KINUGASA  
TOMOSE SHUNSAKU





**"None of your lackeys are around today huh."**

**"Well, ain't that a surprise. You wanted things to get lively up in here or something?"**

**"I was just thinking that if Ibuki or Ishizaki were here, then they would've been able to do something about this tense atmosphere."**

**"You sure are spewing quite a lot of shit being the one who called me out here."**

**"Well, you're right."**



**“Good morning.”**

When I called out,  
she turned to me and smiled.

**“Good morning, Ayanokoji.**

**Is everything okay?**  
**Calling me to a place like this.”**

**“What do you mean?”**

**“This is a public area.**  
**If Karuizawa or the others around see us,**  
**won’t they get the wrong idea?”**



**“You’re already going to bed?”**

“I’ve been active since  
early this morning, after all.”

**“Should I hang up then?”**

“Don’t say something so sad.  
I’m fully prepared for  
my drowsiness.”

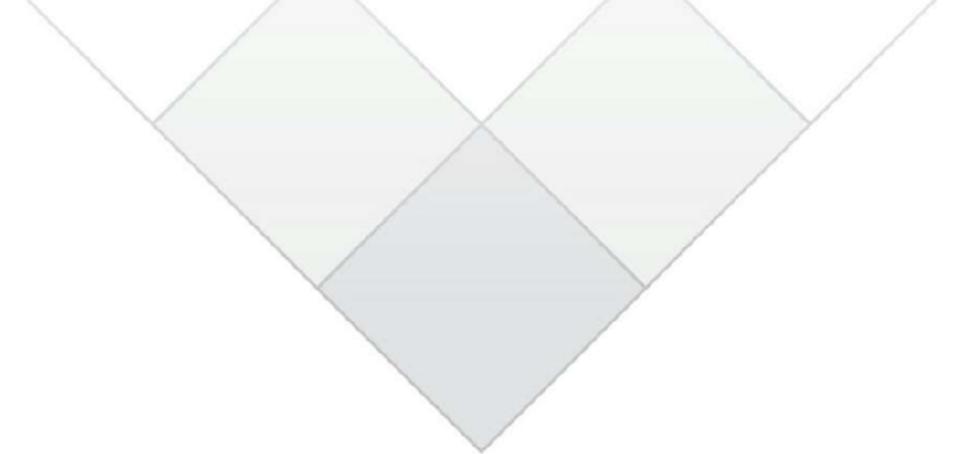
**“Fully prepared?”**

“I’ve taken a bath, brushed my teeth,  
changed into my pajamas,  
and I myself am already lying down,  
so I can fall asleep as soon as the call ends.”



12

WELCOME TO CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2



# CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

## NOVEL 12

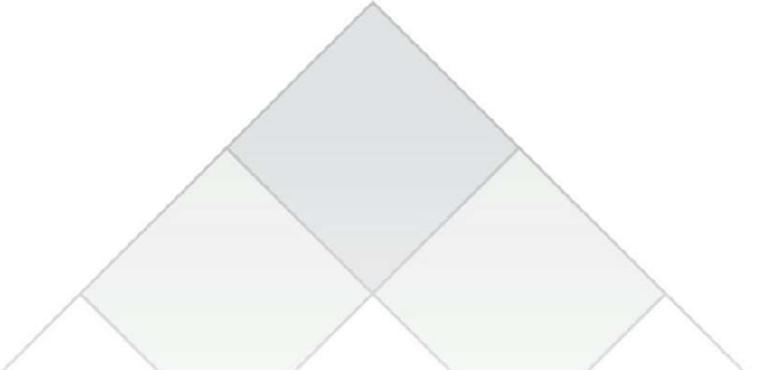
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**CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE  
YEAR 2 VOLUME 12**

**SYOUGO KINUGASA**

**ROYALMTLS**

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## Chie Hoshinomiya's Monologue

FOR ME, SAE-CHAN is my best friend.

For me, Sae-chan is also a rival.

It might seem contradictory, but surprisingly, it works.

And having these two feelings coexist isn't so unusual, I think.

Despite my appearances, I have quite a few friends.

Friends from elementary and middle school, ANHS, friends I met in college, and friends I made after becoming a working adult.

But the relationship where I could really share my true feelings continued only with Sae-chan.

I don't know what she thought about it.

Even if I were to lose to anyone else, I just can't lose to Sae-chan.

We were in the same class, and the days we spent together aiming for Class A instilled such feelings in me.

Originally, Sae-chan didn't want to become a teacher.

But on that day, the day she understood that she couldn't graduate from Class A, I realized that Sae-chan wanted to become a teacher and aim for Class A again.

That was why I decided to become a teacher too.

Honestly, it's a profession far from what I want to do.

Every day, I'm disrespected by cheeky students, and I can't expect much in terms of salary.

Yet, I became a teacher.

There was just one purpose.

To eliminate all hopes from Sae-chan's dream, her goal of graduating from Class A.

It makes sense, right?

That day, because of Sae-chan's worthless feelings of love, I couldn't graduate from Class A.

Otherwise, I wouldn't have become a teacher and could've had a more glamorous life.

Yet, only Sae-chan gets to graduate her students from Class A?

And she feels satisfied with herself, settling her past?

I can't allow that.

I'm still trapped by the past.

So as long as I can breathe, I absolutely wouldn't let her win.

(*TL NOTE: Literally "So as long as I can see."*)

If my class loses in the year-end special exam...

If Sae-chan's class becomes Class A—

At worst, I would have to stop it by any means necessary.

I don't care if I'm branded a failure as a teacher.

I'm fine with being driven out of this profession.

*Even if it means dragging others down, I absolutely have to stop it.*

I swore that in my heart.

The end-of-year special exam for the second years is about to begin.

Depending on the outcome of this exam, the fate of my class, which has been pushed to the brink, will be decided.

For me and my students, an important battle that we absolutely can't lose is about to begin.

## Chapter 1: Unusual End-of-Year Special Exam

IT WAS THE second week of March, Thursday. Our second year of school life was finally reaching its climax.

This year, like last year or even more so, was filled with unforgettable days.

There might've been many good and bad moments, but for those enrolled in this school, the answer would drastically change depending on whether they could successfully overcome the next challenge.

The end-of-year special exam was given a role that distinguished itself from the other special exams.

I want you to remember the special exam conducted during the first year.

A one-on-one class battle in selected subjects.

A seven-match contest, where each victory would steal 30 class points from the opponent.

In the end, it was a close match, but if we'd won seven games in a row, we would've gained 210 class points.

Moreover, the winning class received a reward of 100 class points.

In other words, there could've been a maximum difference of 520 points between the winner and the loser.

That alone showed how significant the end-of-year special exam was.

“Good morning.”

Chabashira-sensei appeared in the classroom with a calm demeanor. The morning greetings from the students were sparse. For the past few days, the students had been paying attention to what Chabashira-sensei was saying after her greetings.

Although it hadn't been anything important before, today, it seemed like the time had finally come.

“I will now announce the end-of-year special exam and its contents. But before that, I would like to share a little personal story.”

Chabashira-sensei, our homeroom teacher, had told us numerous things about special exams.

However, this time, the introduction was clearly different.

“This is my eighth year as a teacher at the Advanced Nurturing High School. For six years, I've been in charge of two classes. But during those six years, I've never managed to move up from Class D. Looking back at my behavior when I first joined, it's not particularly surprising.”

It was quite hard to imagine now, but at the time, Chabashira-sensei used to respond quite coldly.

For me, who knew a bit more about the circumstances than other students, it wasn't a story that required much thought.

“When I was in charge of the two classes, I’d only one thought in mind—that I wouldn’t get emotionally involved and would continue to observe from a fair and calm standpoint. I believed that maintaining a distance as a teacher, whether in good times or bad, was the right thing to do. Of course, this aligned with the school’s educational philosophy, and it wasn’t wrong. But now, I feel that this was also my way of escaping due to my immaturity as a teacher.”

The students listened silently to Chabashira-sensei’s words.

“Fairness is important. As a teacher, I must not intervene in class competition and skew the results. However, overlooking opportunities for students to grow is something that shouldn’t be done as a homeroom teacher, as an adult, and as a working professional. I’ve only recently come to realize this.”

It was a statement of self-reflection.

“The ones who made me realize this were none other than the students of this class. You might’ve heard about it when you first enrolled—that it was taken for granted that Class D would never rise and would just continue staying at the bottom. Rumors spread, and students assigned to Class D were increasingly ridiculed as ‘defective goods.’”

Chabashira-sensei paused for a moment before speaking again.

“However, no one calls you defective goods anymore. It’s fair to say that this class has dispelled the negative images that had been built up over the years.”

It was a compliment to the students.

Chabashira-sensei operated the tablet and turned on the monitor.

This displayed the rankings and situations of each class as of the first of March.

### ***Class Points:***

*2nd Year Class A 1098 points*

*2nd Year Class B 983 points*

*2nd Year Class C 730 points*

*2nd Year Class D 654 points*

To clarify, Class A was led by Sakayanagi, Class B by Horikita, Class C by Ryūen, and Class D by Ichinose.

Although class points would change significantly if a special exam were held, typically, in a month without any events, the number of class points would only decrease slightly.

Initially, points were often significantly reduced due to tardiness, absences, and unknown negative evaluations, but such changes were no longer expected.

Looking at the class point rankings anew, it was clear to see just how much this class was improving.

It wasn't just the students who felt this way.

"We have 983 class points. No matter how many times I look at it, it's an unbelievable number of points. It's hard to believe this is the same class that lost all its class points just one month after enrollment."

Chabashira-sensei also looked at the rankings with admiration and a hint of hesitation, reflecting a bit on the last two years.

"Above all, Class 2-B. Class B. No matter how many times I say it, there's a sense of incongruity that I can't completely shake off. But Class B isn't the goal. Depending on the results of this end-of-year special exam, this class could potentially become Class A."

At the moment, the lead held by Class A was about 100 points.

It was the path to Class A that Chabashira-sensei had dreamed of, or rather, hadn't even been allowed to dream of.

It was now within reach.

"However, I don't want you to become complacent. Now that it's within reach, you mustn't relax but continue to strive towards your goal. This is a request from an incompetent teacher."

Chabashira-sensei bowed to the students once.

Then, she slowly raised her face and took a deep breath before opening her eyes wide.

"I will now explain the overview of the end-of-year special exam."

With these words from our teacher, the students were surely prepared.

No one panicked, and they took her words head-on.

As the teacher operated the tablet, the details of the special exam appeared on the monitor.

## [Overview of End-of-Year Special Exam]

*Exam Venue: Special Building*

### ***Competing Classes:***

*2nd Year Class A vs. 2nd Year Class C*

*2nd Year Class B vs. 2nd Year Class D*

### ***Arrangements:***

- *Each class must select three representatives by the deadline: vanguard, middle guard, and general.*

*(At least one representative from each gender is required)*

- *It's possible to designate any number of substitutes in the case of absences on the day of the exam.*
- *The school will randomly select representatives if there are less than three representatives on the day of the exam, including substitutes.*

## **Exam Rules**

### ***Representative Overview:***

- *Each class's representatives (vanguard → middle guard → general) will compete in a knockout format.*
- *The vanguard will be given 5 lives, the middle guard 7 lives, and the general 10 lives.*
- *The class whose general loses all their lives first will be defeated.*
- *The matches will be one-on-one within the set rules.*
- *There will be no draws; the exam will be extended as necessary until a conclusion is reached.*

Only the classes that would be facing off (which we already knew in advance), the points under “preparations,” and the unusually simple rules were shown on the monitor.

At this stage, the specific content of the matches remained completely unknown.

“We will need to make some arrangements before your end-of-year special exam. You should be able to understand this by looking at it, but I will explain it verbally just in case. After this explanation, you will need to discuss with your classmates and decide on the three representatives. These are very important roles in determining the outcome of the special exam, so discuss it thoroughly and make decisions you won't regret.”

The defeat of the three representatives would spell the class's defeat. The importance of this was clear regardless of the exam content.

It seemed that anyone could be chosen, but we had to keep in mind the restriction on gender, so a team couldn't consist of three boys or three girls.

A substitute would be arranged just in case the representative was absent. There would be no harm in nominating multiple candidates just in case.

"When selecting someone, you will also decide which of the battle positions they take—vanguard, middle guard, or general. The representatives' battle will be conducted in a knockout format. Initially, the vanguards from each class will compete, and the winning vanguard will continue with their current lives against the opposing class's middle guard and general until they lose all their lives. In theory, if a vanguard could defeat all three opponents including the general, their class would win at that point. If you think the most capable student should be the vanguard, such a possibility might seem feasible... but I wouldn't recommend it."

Chabashira-sensei described an intriguing, yet realistically difficult scenario.

Since the general was given more lives, a total of ten, than the vanguard and middle guard, it was clear that it was overwhelmingly more advantageous to place capable students later.

The likelihood of benefiting from bringing leaders like Sakayanagi, Ryūen, or Ichinose as a surprise vanguard was low compared to the definite benefits it would bring if they weren't in the role.

Of course, if it were an 'exam advantageous for the vanguard,' it would be different, but the current exam rules didn't suggest that, and Chabashira-sensei's attitude made it seem like that slim chance could be ignored.

"There isn't much time left to decide on the representatives. The deadline is this Sunday. If the deadline passes, the school will randomly select three students."

That was a typical rule.

Naturally, no class would surpass the time limit.

"Are you saying that the outcome of the special exam is decided by just these three representatives?"

It would make sense to think so after hearing the explanation so far.

Yōsuke was concerned about this and asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Indeed, that's how it might seem from the arrangements and exam rules. However, of course, a significant role is also given to students other than the three representatives. All remaining students, other than the representatives, must fulfill their assigned roles diligently."

"A significant role...?"

Chabashira-sensei operated the tablet and switched the monitor's display.

## Exam Rules

### Participant Overview:

- *Students other than the representatives will participate in the exam as participants.*
- *If the number of attendees falls below 35 due to illness or other reasons, a penalty will occur.*  
※*Penalty: 5 class points per person.*
- *Classes with 36 participants or more will receive 5 class points for each person beyond the 35.*

“All students other than the representatives will participate in the special exam as participants. As mentioned, there is a penalty, but our class has 38 people. Subtracting the three representatives leaves 35. This means if even one person is absent for any reason, a penalty will be incurred. Conversely, classes with extra students can handle unforeseen circumstances and receive some benefits.”

Horikita’s class had 38 people, and Sakayanagi’s class had a total of 37, so there were no extra participants.

Ryūen and Ichinose’s classes had 40 people, so they would gain an extra 10 points.

While it wasn’t a significant amount of class points, it was still better to have them than to receive nothing.

That was a welcoming element regardless of the outcome.

It was impossible to complain about this point as being unfair.

Ichinose’s class had fought continuously for two years without anyone being expelled.

Even if you considered this their reward for that, it wasn’t sufficient.

After Manabe was expelled, Ryūen’s class had invested heavily to bring in Katsuragi. Their situation wasn’t simply beneficial either.

However, not only the representatives but also the role of participants was becoming less clear.

Still, it seemed certain that the representatives’ tasks and participants’ tasks were different.

Just when it appeared more details would be displayed, the screen suddenly blacked out.

It seemed to be a technical issue or an operational error, but apparently, it wasn’t.

“Now, this is all I can tell you guys.”

“What do you mean? Honestly, I don’t understand anything about the content of the special exam.”

Horikita, who'd been silent until now, responded to Chabashira-sensei's unusual statement.

"That's right. But as I've just told you, I can't tell you anything beyond what I've explained. It's not that I'm being mean and hiding it; I myself haven't been told the details by the school. Those details will be revealed on the day of the special exam."

The class atmosphere changed drastically upon hearing this unexpected statement.

It was clearly abnormal that even the homeroom teacher hadn't been informed of the details.

This was an unprecedented announcement that we hadn't seen in the past two years.

"The first task assigned to you is to select three representatives. There are no merits to becoming a representative, but at the same time, there are no demerits. Simply put, taking on the role won't earn you a large amount of private points, nor will you risk expulsion even if you lose."

All that was certain was that this was an important position.

"I understand that you don't know the rules, Chabashira-sensei, but currently, we have no measure to decide on the representatives. What should we base our selection on?"

"I wish I could tell you, but unfortunately, I don't know anything about the rules either."

As she wasn't even informed of the criteria for selection, she showed a troubled expression.

"I can't say for certain, but considering that the special building is the exam venue and that we will compete regardless of gender, it seems unlikely that it will involve competing in physical abilities."

She mentioned only what could be predicted.

It seemed she couldn't guarantee it, but given the location and rules, that guess seemed likely.

*Then, should we perhaps take the opposite route and choose students who are good at studying as representatives?*

The answer was probably no.

If it were a competition solely based on academic ability, it would be unlikely to keep the information hidden.

We would compete, one-on-one, in something that is neither studying nor sports.

*Then what could it possibly be?*

"...A battle through conversation... Could that be a possibility?"

Horikita, who'd stood up from her chair, muttered almost to herself.

"That's quite possible."

It couldn't be said for certain, but the possibility of it being a dialogue or something similar couldn't be denied. If smooth communication skills were necessary, students like Yōsuke or Kushida might be the prime candidates for selection.

Even if the exam content had nothing to do with dialogue, both of them, being highly versatile, seemed capable of adapting flexibly. In essence, it was a situation where they should choose students who could compete in any context.

"And as for the crucial reward, the winning class will earn 200 points. If they lose, they simply won't receive any reward. However, this result will also reflect the choices made in the unanimous special exam, so in your case, if you win, you will earn 250 class points."

The first thing that became clear was that there were no class points to lose if we lost.

Not having to worry about losing points was one relief, but the difference in points would still be significant.

Considering the very large reward, the damage to the losing side would be considerable. For Ichinose's class, who were already in a desperate situation, it would be quite ominous how much they could recover even if they won all the special exams held over the next year, as the gap in class points with the top would widen further.

"That's all for the explanation. Once the representatives are decided, please contact me."

With that, Chabashira-sensei concluded her talk.

# 1

As I walked home from school with Kei, I found myself reflecting a bit on a conversation I had with Hashimoto.

The end-of-year special exam was finally set for next week.

The details of the rules were still unknown, but the fluctuations of class points would clearly be significant.

The winners would laugh, and the losers would cry.

Honestly, as it was an exam, either outcome was within expectations.

However, there was one point I did not originally anticipate. It involved Sakayanagi and Ryūen; whichever of them lost, regardless of the exam content, would drop out of school.

As explicitly stated in the exam rules, there would be no draws; a winner would definitely be determined.

Meaning, one of them would disappear from this school at the end of the special exam.

The goal I secretly envisioned, to ‘keep the possibility of reaching Class A open for all four classes as we entered the third year,’ had practically been crushed.

No matter which class won or lost, I’d been preparing accordingly.

For irreplaceable figures like Sakayanagi and Ryūen, I planned to lend a hand if they were on the brink of dropping out, and indeed, I had taken such actions. After all, the situation where all four classes could achieve Class A wasn’t normal in itself.

By competitive nature, students don’t wish for a close rivalry battle with other classes.

That was why it was crucial to win when necessary, to exhaust the best possible strategies.

Both Horikita Manabu’s and Nagumo Miyabi’s classes had created a dominating system as a result.

Even if that weren’t the case, it would be either Class A or B competing, repeatedly engaging in duels.

The history of the school was supposed to be a repetition of such events.

With that background, I’d thought of creating a battle involving all four classes to overturn the foundation.

*It’s indeed one future I had envisioned...*

If this match could be canceled before being carried out, it might’ve been possible. However, it wasn’t appropriate for a third party to interfere in an agreement made by two people.

*With one of them certain to be gone going forward, what should I do?*

Both Ryūen's and Sakayanagi's classes had capable people to keep the classes together.

But still, no one could replace the current leaders. The balance would definitely be disrupted. *If maintaining the balance among the four became impossible, what should I do?* A decision I'd been postponing might have to be made once the results of the end-of-year special exam were out.

"Hey, Kiyotaka..."

Walking beside me, Kei spoke in a voice just loud enough to be heard.

"What's up?"

I asked briefly, and Kei, who'd initiated the conversation, looked a bit surprised.

"This upcoming movie... it's exciting, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

I replied, but Kei seemed somewhat uninterested.

"Were you thinking about something? You were, right?"

"Sorry. Maybe I was a bit preoccupied? I was thinking about the special exam."

I hadn't shown it in my expression or gestures, but perhaps she'd sensed it.

It seemed more like a sense developed from spending a not-so-short time together as a couple rather than her individual ability.

"It isn't something to be thinking about while we're walking home together. Are you angry?"

"I'm not saying that... but this time, are you perhaps cooperating with the class?"

"I wonder. I'm just thinking about various things. If you have something to talk about, I'll listen."

I might've seemed to be hiding my true feelings, but I switched my focus to Kei's recent situation.

However, Kei appeared hesitant.

"No, don't worry about me. Look, the end-of-year exams are really important, right? If you seriously participate, our class will definitely win, and if we get 250 class points, we might even reach Class A, right?"

*So I don't want to be a hindrance*, Kei answered through her smile.

Of course, it was clear as day that this commendable attitude was feigned, but without hesitation, I decided to take advantage of her consideration.

"Then, is it okay to cancel our date this weekend? Of course, I'll make it up next week."

"Well, that's fine, but... do you have to cancel? I'd like to be together this week and next week too."

"I'd like to meet and talk with the leaders of each class before the end-of-year exams."

In fact, besides the four leaders, there were several other people I wanted to contact.

But I decided there was no need to get into that here.

“...Not just with Horikita-san, but with the leaders of each class...?”

Normally, you’d focus on securing victories for your own class.

It wouldn’t be unreasonable to think that talking with Horikita would be enough.

“Yes, all four of them. Do you dislike me meeting Ichinose?”

“Uh...”

As if hitting the mark, Kei flinched and panicked.

“It’s not... that I don’t dislike it, but... I mean, of course I do... But it’s necessary for you, right?”

“This time, it’s quite important.”

As I nodded in response, Kei reluctantly nodded back.

“If there’s something shady, you could secretly contact or meet people as much as you want, but instead, you properly ask for permission...”

Her muttering seemed like she was trying to convince herself.

“Do you trust me?”

And finally, I asked for confirmation.

“I’m meeting the leaders of each class this time to plan for the future.

Nothing more, nothing less.”

Even if I conveyed my true intentions, it wouldn’t clear up the answer for Kei.

Watching Kei’s behavior lately, something had started to change.

Of course, it was clear that I was the cause.

In a romantic relationship between a man and a woman, you fundamentally need to trust and be trusted by each other.

However, cracks were beginning to form in that relationship. The triggers were numerous.

Money, violence, infidelity, listlessness. There were countless reasons why relationships fail.

But it wouldn’t be easy to confront the other person.

‘Have you stopped loving me?’

‘Have you fallen in love with someone else?’

‘Are you tired of me?’

Even if there were concerns, it takes considerable courage to voice them.

Even if voiced, there was no guarantee that the problem would be resolved.

“I understand. I won’t say anything more about this. So, I don’t need a detailed report.”

Kei explained that she wouldn’t inquire about the content of our meetings.

“That helps.”

Now, I could focus on preparing for the end-of-year special exam without any worries.

“So, can I stay over tonight?”

What Kei, unable to voice her thoughts, could do was spend as much time together as possible.

In the time we shared, she wanted to do what she could to keep the connection.

There was no particular reason to refuse here.

Even if I didn't possess a heart that could ache, there would be no downside for me.

“No, let's stop this week. I'll be busy preparing for the end of the year.”

I decided to refuse nonetheless.

It wasn't a time to keep hope alive, but rather a stage of preparation to sever it.

No matter how thin and fragile the thread, Kei would come to grasp it with all her might.

“...Even just a little... Is it no good?”

“Even just a little is no good. Being only half-committed, I'd feel sorry for you.”

Still, she seemed intent on persisting, continuing her words without giving up.

“I don't mind, I'll just devote myself to you, Kiyotaka... I'll... I'll try harder to make you like me more.”

When I turned my gaze as if to respond to her words, she slightly bit her lip and closed her eyes.

“Sorry... Even though you said you don't want to... I shouldn't act like this, right? I'm sorry for being selfish during the important end-of-year special exam.”

“It's fine. Let's go to a movie together after the exams are over.”

With that reply, Kei quietly nodded “Yes.”

## 2

Kei and I then entered the dormitory, and we parted for the day in front of the elevator.

From Friday to Sunday, I had one objective to accomplish over the next three days.

That was to meet with Horikita, Ichinose, Ryūen, and Sakayanagi, the four leaders.

To speak directly with the leaders of each class.

Upon closely reviewing the content of the end-of-year special exam, the possibility of it ending peacefully without anyone getting hurt was extremely low.

How they were facing this issue and what they would do going forward. Considering my own situation, I wanted to make a final confirmation.

It didn't matter who I met first—

As I thought about it while looking at my phone, a message arrived.

Apparently, there was someone who wanted to meet without me having to call them.

Moreover, they'd specified the date and place, saving the trouble of going through unnecessary exchanges.

I sent an approving reply and decided to reconsider the order of appointments with the leaders.

Although I wasn't particular about the order, it was better to be a bit careful if I was to accomplish a certain objective simultaneously.

Back in my room, I immediately sent messages to the leaders of each class, asking the three, excluding Horikita, if they could meet on either Saturday or Sunday.

For Horikita, I slightly changed the text to indicate from Friday to Sunday.

Of course, at this point, I didn't mention that I had plans to meet everyone or the content of the discussion.

It wouldn't be strange if some of them would become wary and keep their distance.

The first to read the message was Ryūen.

He was the person who, at this moment, wouldn't be surprised to choose not to meet me...

*[I can make time after school tomorrow.]*

As I placed my bag on the table, such a reply came back.

He probably proposed Friday because his weekend was booked, but it felt slightly odd that he couldn't spare even a little time. However, there was no deeper meaning, and it felt like he was just refusing the days I'd specified. That also seemed somewhat typical of Ryūen.

Well, if I adjusted to meeting with Horikita first, Friday wouldn't be a problem.

In response to his message, we lightly exchanged information about where to meet and other details.

Eventually, we settled on heading to the karaoke room at 7 PM.

Later, Ichinose also replied, suggesting we meet early since she had plans with a friend on Sunday, to which I replied that it was fine.

About an hour later, I also heard from Horikita.

It was something I'd anticipated. She had intended to discuss the end-of-year special exam with me, and that she'd be grateful if we could talk about it.

As for the time and place, she was flexible, so I decided to meet her at the café in Keyaki Mall after school on Friday.

The last person, Sakayanagi, also replied later, but her weekend seemed packed with prior commitments, so she asked if a phone call on Sunday night would be acceptable.

I'd hoped to meet in person as much as possible, but a call wouldn't pose much of an issue.

I sent back a reply to Sakayanagi that it was fine.

Meet Horikita at the café in Keyaki Mall on early Friday evening.

Visit Ryūen in the karaoke room on Friday night.

Meet Ichinose at the bench along the school route before the gym on Sunday morning.

Talk to Sakayanagi on the phone Sunday night.

These four were a must, but there were several other things I wanted to take care of.

I decided on the plan.

## Chapter 2: What Should be Finished

ON FRIDAY AFTER SCHOOL, the atmosphere at Keyaki Mall was notably different compared to other weekdays.

After five days of studying, everyone was gearing up to enjoy the weekend. However, this week, the scenery looked slightly different from usual.

It was probably because there were visibly fewer students visiting the mall.

When I arrived at the appointed café, Horikita, who had left the classroom earlier, was already seated and waiting.

Upon noticing me, she gestured that she was going to order a drink and headed to the register.

I bought a hot cup of coffee and joined Horikita.

Horikita, seated in front of me, seemed restless, fidgeting a bit.

“Is something wrong?”

“...What do you mean?”

“I just felt like you might be worried about something. I hope I’m mistaken.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“It is.”

“I see. No, I was just thinking about next week’s exam. Sorry if it bothered you.”

“Are you nervous about it already?”

“It can’t be helped, right? The fluctuation in class points will be significant. It’s a major turning point whether our class moves up or down.”

As a leader, her sense of responsibility must have grown, and she probably had more on her mind than usual.

*It isn’t unreasonable, but a moderate amount of stress isn’t all that bad.*

“By the way... have you noticed there are fewer first years around?”

Perhaps wanting to change the subject, she asked while averting her gaze.

“Yeah. It seems the first years are finally facing the challenges of the end-of-year special exams.”

Even just looking around the café, it was clear to see that the number of first-year students was indeed unusually low.

If the situation is like this even on a weekend, they must have been facing a particularly tough special exam.

“Time seems to pass slowly, yet flies by so quickly. It’s already been a year since they enrolled in this school.”

The second-year student, who is only a year older, said something rather philosophical and took a sip of her drink.

“That sounds like something an old person would say.”

“Calling me old is a bit rude. Couldn’t you have phrased that differently?”

Horikita spoke disapprovingly, a sweet scent of tea wafting from her direction.

“That’s unusual. Milk tea?”

“I felt like I needed some sugar since I’ve been thinking about a lot of things.”

As the class leader, she had to strategize more than anyone else.

“I wonder what kind of exam the first years are having.”

“Who knows? If you’re curious, why not catch a first year and ask?”

“I can’t be turning my focus to the other years to the point of going out to ask someone. Besides, it’s not really appropriate for a senpai to be meddling in the special exams of other years purely out of curiosity, right?”

That wasn’t the case when seeking advice, but Horikita was right.

Generally, issues should be resolved within the same year. Of course, there were rare instances where someone found a way out by relying on their senpai or kōhai.

“Regardless of the exam content, do you know how the first-year classes are doing?”

“The rankings for Class A through Class D haven’t changed since enrollment.”

What we could do, while having an unspoken agreement not to interfere with others too deeply, was to look at the information disclosed by the school and share it.

“Yes. When Yagami-kun from Class B dropped out due to reasons unrelated to the special exam, they incurred a significant penalty, however, the gap between them and Class C and D was too large for any changes in the ranking. Moreover, the gap with Class A has widened, and they are slowly starting to pull away on their own.”

Having said that, instead of using her phone, Horikita turned the screen towards me.

### **Class points as of March 1:**

*Class 1-A: 991 points*

*Class 1-B: 697 points*

*Class 1-C: 532 points*

*Class 1-D: 510 points*

She seemed to have done her research on the first years during her free time while waiting for me.

“Last year, our situation wasn’t much different, but the bottom three classes were quite close, and depending on the end-of-year special exam, a major shift in class rankings was possible.”

It depended on the rewards and the method of competition, but there was a possibility that Class A and Class D could completely swap places. I didn't remember the exact numbers, but both Horikita's class and Ryūen's class were hovering around 350 points. Moreover, this year's first years started with 800 class points, and even Class D currently has over 500 points, which is to say that they are doing quite well.

"Looking at the class points alone, they looked much better compared to us last year. It's to the point that I'm curious as to how the first years managed to unify their classes together."

I gave this as an honest assessment after looking at the rankings and points.

Class A had well-defined leaders like Takahashi or Ishigami, and Class D had Hōsen, but it seemed like there were currently no clear leaders in Classes B and C. Students like Tsubaki and Utomiya from Class C were relatively memorable, but there were few signs of them actively leading their classes.

As for Class B, Yagami was their leader, but with his expulsion, it became unclear how the class had changed.

"Their class points might be high, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're doing great, right? The special exams they're given are different from the ones last year. Since our environments are different, we can't easily judge them based on just the point values."

Perhaps Horikita felt slightly dissatisfied with the praise given to the kōhai, as she retorted quite a bit.

"True, abilities are a different matter. Maybe our year just had more dead weight, like Sudō from back when we first enrolled, when compared to others."

"...I wouldn't go that far. You sure can say some mean things."

Horikita brought up the topic of the first years, but she didn't seem to intent on continuing any further. After turning off her phone screen, she took another sip from her cup.

"I'd like to move on to the main topic, but should I listen to what you have to say first? Or shall we talk about the end-of-year special exam?"

Bringing up the topic of the first years seemed to have relaxed her a little.

"It's fine to start with the exam. Actually, I was planning to talk about that too."

"I was hoping you'd say that, so I'm grateful."

Horikita narrowed her eyes happily.

She seemed to take kindly to the fact that I'd contacted her about the special exam myself.

"So... first off, do you think there are any measures we can take now to gain an advantage in the upcoming special exam?"

Horikita asked, but then quickly shook her head slightly from side to side as if to correct herself.

“Let me ask you more directly. Do you have any winning strategies in mind?”

She changed her question.

This time, I appreciated being asked directly rather than in a roundabout way.

“Honestly, it’s tough. The information that the school has given us about the content of the exam is so broad that it’s hard to narrow it down. And without being able to narrow it down, it’s impossible to come up with a strategy that could lead us to victory.”

Guessing the exam content, which could be one of hundreds or thousands of patterns, was frankly a waste of resources.

“...Right. Even Chabashira-sensei doesn’t know the details of the exam. It’s impossible to prepare any countermeasures.”

If she was expecting some advice from me, normally she’d be disappointed.

However, for some reason, Horikita put on an expression that made her seem just a little bit pleased.

“You look pleased. I thought I’d get the opposite reaction.”

“Really? Of course it would make me pleased. I thought you might say you had figured out a way to win in such a special exam where it’s impossible to know what’ll be thrown at you. Rather than hopeful, I would be more disappointed. So I’m a bit relieved.”

She explained why she seemed happy and then added another comment.

“You have an aura that suggests you might come up with something outrageous.”

I didn’t recall giving off such an aura, but I didn’t interject.

“Since the content of the exam is unknown, everyone is in the same situation. Sakayanagi and Ryūen are no different.”

“Right. So there’s nothing we can do until the details are announced on the day of... right?”

“The best we can do is carefully select three representatives who seem likely to produce solid results, regardless of the content.”

Choosing students with the fewest weaknesses from within the class would be the best approach.

“Or we could gamble by sneaking in students with clear strengths and weaknesses.”

“That’s... a bit scary.”

“Yeah, it is. That’s why most classes will likely focus on reliable members.”

“It’s fair, but it feels frustrating.”

At this stage, there wasn't much to do, and it seemed like there would be a lot of time spent seeking answers when there weren't any.

"The more you try to deduce the test and find a way out, the more you get bogged down. So sometimes, it might be interesting to change your perspective a bit."

"What do you mean?"

"Even if we don't know the content of the exam, we can imagine who our opponents might be. If I were to be a student from an opposing class, you would naturally be general, and the vanguard and middle guard would be Yōsuke and Kushida. Expected choices like these could easily be guessed."

"...That makes sense."

Indeed, the names I just mentioned would likely be among Horikita's choices.

"Then, who is in Ichinose's class? The leader is undoubtedly Ichinose, but who else?"

"I suppose Kanzaki-kun would be a safe bet. I can't think of anyone else who stands out. However, Hatsukawa-san, Hamaguchi-kun, and Niiura-kun could also be likely candidates. But..."

*What does that tell us?* She showed such an expression.

"If we can narrow down our opponents, we can at least look for their weaknesses. This is just a hypothetical, but let's say Hatsukawa, whose name just came up, has a strong affection for Miyake Akito. If that were the case, selecting Miyake with that in mind could impair Hatsukawa's ability to make sound judgements."

"So, it's about 'compatibility'?"

"That's right."

"But I can't imagine how compatibility can easily sway the outcome of the test—"

"I'm not saying it's easy. When breakthroughs are difficult, the first step is to change your perspective. Whether it's a good or bad idea can be considered later."

I taught Horikita that this was important.

A slight change in perspective could easily reveal new insights.

"I'll keep that in mind."

Her words were honest, but something seemed to displease her as her eyes appeared slightly dissatisfied.

"Since you're quick-witted, I have a question. You mentioned me, Hirata-kun, and Kushida-san. Do you think the three of us would make good representatives?"

"That's something for you, as the class leader, to decide."

“I thought I’d start by listening to those around me. That’s my current line of thinking.”

She spoke in a slightly twisted, witty manner.

*If that’s the case, I might as well answer.*

“The class representatives are set to compete in a one-on-one format. It’s better to choose students who can perform individually rather than those who excel in a group setting. Students specialized in physical abilities like Sudō or Onodera should be avoided. Yōsuke and Kushida can perform in a group but also have the skills to adapt individually. They would be safe choices.”

“Your answer sounds like something out of a textbook, lacking any flair. I’d like a bit more personality.”

“You’ve probably already decided on your strategy without relying on my opinion, right?”

The deadline to decide our representatives was at the end of Sunday.

Even at this point, if we hadn’t narrowed down the candidates, it wasn’t even worth discussing.

“Well, that’s true. But there aren’t many people I can trust. Your opinion is almost the same as mine. Hirata-kun and Kushida-san being the top candidates is inevitable. However, that might not truly be the best choice.”

“Then what’s your idea of the best lineup?”

I asked, and she looked at me with a piercing gaze.

“If you and Kōenji-kun would participate, I’d be relieved.”

There were three representatives that Horikita envisioned: Horikita, Ayanokōji, Kōenji, huh?

Indeed, if it were possible to choose representatives regardless of their will, that might be ideal.

“Even if we set aside your case, I still wish Kōenji-kun would simply cooperate when it comes to times like this.”

“If he took it seriously, his natural instincts might just cut through everything.”

*That’s right,* Horikita strongly agreed.

As the vanguard, he might take the general’s head just like that. Even such a scenario might be possible.

Of course, forcefully nominating Kōenji could lead to him conceding defeat without a fight, a high-risk move.

In fact, I couldn’t see any other outcome.

“I know it’s unlikely. I’ve resigned myself to just observing Kōenji-kun until graduation. Unless he volunteers to be a representative, it’s not realistic to ask him.”

It seemed she hadn’t even attempted to ask him, thinking that the chances were slim.

Of course, that was the right choice, and hopeful invitations should be avoided.

With Kōenji, it wouldn't be surprising if he claimed that it was a breach of contract and made unreasonable demands.

"Even if he's a long shot, if at least you'd accept, I could safely entrust it in your hands."

She glanced at me as if gauging my reaction.

"Do you think I'd participate?"

"I don't think so."

"Not really? I wouldn't mind participating if you want."

"That's right, you wouldn't just say yes that easi— Eh?"

She started to say something, then froze with her mouth open.

"What did you just say?"

"I said I wouldn't mind participating if you want."

I repeated, but it seemed her brain couldn't catch up immediately as her mouth flapped open and closed.

"Really? You're not just joking?"

"I wouldn't make such a boring joke. It would only be troublesome if you took it seriously."

"But... if you would take on this role as the representative, it wouldn't just be me, but it would be a great asset to the class. Are you really okay with this?"

Horikita kept asking for confirmation, but her eyes shone brightly. I knew it might cloud that brightness, but I decided to add something important.

"It's true. However, there are several conditions."

*Conditions.* Naturally, Horikita would be wary of such a word.

"What kind of conditions? Are they difficult?"

"It depends. It also involves whether your pride can accept it."

"My pride? Can you explain more?"

Even though I mentioned conditions, Horikita seemed very willing to consider me as the representative, so I decided to proceed with the discussion.

"Almost 100% of the leaders from each class will face the exam as the general."

"That makes sense. The general has the most lives. Having more chances to make mistakes means that being the vanguard or the middle guard would just be giving up those advantages. It's almost certain."

Understanding that, I moved on to talk about pride.

"The current undeniable leader of this class is you, Horikita. One of the conditions for me to take on this role is that you would be the middle guard and I would be the general."

"You as the general...?"

It was clear what this implied. The real leader of the class might be seen not as Horikita but as me, Ayanokōji.

“As I said earlier, other classes will—nine times out of ten, no, with close to a 100% certainty—have Ichinose, Ryūen, and Sakayanagi as their generals. They’d want to fight with as many lives as possible.”

Horikita nodded in agreement.

“If I become the general, some students in our class and other classes might garner some thoughts towards me. Some might even start to see you as an unreliable leader.”

“You’re putting it quite mildly, but you’re right. In this special exam, it’s inevitable that the class’s most capable student would become the general.”

“Yes. So, whether you can accept that is the premise for this discussion.”

Of course, I respected Horikita’s decision. If she wished to remain the general herself, I would be rather happy that she’s beginning to feel a strong self-awareness about her role as the leader.

“What if I said I can’t give up being the general?”

“I’d just refuse.”

But if Horikita were to reject the premise, naturally, I wouldn’t become the representative.

“Pride, I see. Honestly, as long as we can win, I don’t care much whether I’m the general or not. But it’s not like it doesn’t bother me at all.”

“That’s right. No, it wouldn’t make sense otherwise.”

Pride itself wasn’t valuable. However, having a leader with pride did have value.

“Can you tell me why you won’t take it if you don’t become the general? Simply because you’re more capable than I am?”

“No? It’s a simpler matter. I just don’t want you to give me a turn to compete.”

“So you’re okay with being the representative, but you’d rather not fight?”

“That’s right.”

Horikita frowned as she tried to understand my reasoning for joining as a representative.

“That is... How beneficial is that for me? If you become the general, I’ll probably be the middle guard. If I have to fight without giving you a turn, it’s going to be a tough battle.”

“Indeed, it would be a disadvantage. The number of mistakes you’re allowed would decrease, which is a significant handicap. And winning as the middle guard means you have to reduce the opponent’s lives quickly and in large quantities.”

It was understandable that Horikita had doubts after hearing all this.

Saying I would be the general while also asking not to be given a turn was a hard pill to swallow.

Of course, it would be easier if Horikita could win it all, but it wasn't that simple.

"By the way, judging from your tone earlier, it seems there are still more conditions?"

Horikita, still unable to come to a conclusion, wanted to confirm what else there was. Either way, I had no plans of rushing her.

"Let's put the general matter on hold and move forward. In exchange for taking on the representative role, I want a reward."

"Private points?"

"No, I'm not asking for that. What I want is the same thing as Kōenji. From now on, I won't contribute anything else to the class. I won't cooperate at all. I want you to acknowledge that."

"...That is..."

Unexpected... No, I thought it was a conversation she didn't even want to consider. Horikita must have been prepared to accept some sort of compensation, but her words faltered.

"You're asking for quite the unreasonable demand. Do you want me to let you run wild like Kōenji-kun too?"

It wasn't anger, but rather astonishment that Horikita brought to the forefront.

"Recently, you've been willing to give advice and even started contributing a bit to the class. And now you say you won't cooperate anymore..."

"I understand you're displeased. But I have my own reasons for this proposal."

"Will you share what you're thinking?"

"First of all, I'm not fixated on moving up to Class A. I don't mind graduating from Class C or D. I don't see the need to desperately cooperate to move up to Class A, do you understand?"

"...Indeed, I do."

"Moreover, I'm not as concerned about private points as Kōenji. I think the current class points are sufficient, and even if they were halved, it wouldn't bother me."

I conveyed that even if we lost due to my non-cooperation, it was a situation I could accept.

"Why have you occasionally helped out until now?"

"If the class stabilizes, that's all the better. You and our classmates have grown. I've just judged that you all have reached a point where all of you can manage on your own."

“I honestly don’t know which part of what you say I should believe... But I understand what you want to say. You want to help out in this final special exam of the school year, and then you want to enjoy a relaxed school life?”

“That’s right. However, I don’t intend to demand the current conditions just because I took on the role of the general. If I become the general, I promise not to ask for anything in return as long as we win with the middle guards without needing me.”

“So, you’re saying you’ll only make those demands if you’re dragged out as the general and you lead the class to victory?”

“Yes. But even if you have Ichinose, who will be the general, down to just one life point, if my turn then comes and I win, you will still have to keep your promise.”

Fisherman’s profit—I had to make sure Horikita considered such a scenario, where I could reap the benefits without having to barely do any work myself.

(*TL NOTE: Fisherman’s profit, (漁夫の利), profiting while others fight.*)

It was a proposal that could easily be refused under normal circumstances.

That was why I touched on an important part here.

“And, if I come out as the general and we still lose the exam, as long as I remain your classmate, I promise to cooperate next time... no, for the next six months.”

I promised assistance for the next six months in exchange for defeat.

This should be a favorable deal for Horikita.

“Even if we lose, I’ll have your cooperation for a while—you really are asking for the same conditions as Kōenji-kun.”

“If you compare it to Kōenji, I think it’s more than just that. Unless I drop out or something else takes me out of your class, I’ll continue to cooperate for the next six months.”

“Why not until graduation instead of just six months?”

“That’s impossible.”

“Well... even if I refuse your proposal here, there’s no guarantee that you will continue to cooperate devotedly in the future, right?”

“Of course. I don’t mind not graduating from Class A.”

“How typical of you. It’s a rather troublesome proposal.”

Asking for some time to think, Horikita crossed her arms and closed her eyes.

It seemed she was going to come to a conclusion here without delay.

I could’ve waited until evening, but I didn’t want to disturb her thoughts, so I waited for her answer.

If Horikita, as a middle guard, were to defeat the opposing class’s general, our relationship would remain unchanged.

If Horikita lost, but I won, we would still gain the class points from the end-of-year special exam.

However, as a risk, my cooperation would no longer be available. If Horikita lost and I also lost, unless there was an unexpected problem, my cooperation could be secured for the next six months.

Now, these three futures were presented to Horikita.

“What if our vanguard and I team up to lose on purpose to put you at a disadvantage in the match?”

“I don’t mind. Whatever the situation, if I lose, I’ll keep my promise.”

“...I see.”

After pondering for a few dozen seconds, Horikita unfolded her arms.

“Well, actually planning to lose on purpose is out of the question. Alright, I’ve decided.”

After discussing it this far, she seemed to have reached a decision on which future to aim for.

“Honestly, I was prepared to serve as the general myself. There were no other candidates, and I thought I would have to fight as the leader.”

“That makes sense.”

“However, if you’re willing to serve as the general... everything else is trivial. The class winning is the top priority. I’ll adopt the strategy with the highest chance of winning.”

“So you’re willing to give up being the general?”

“Yes. I will fight with all my might. It gives me peace of mind and simultaneously heightens the tension. In an unavoidable tough battle, I must think about winning while giving up on being the general.”

Horikita felt that even if she lost, I would somehow take care of things, giving her a sense of security and assurance.

However, using that insurance meant she wouldn’t be able to get cooperation in the future.

Therefore, it was most ideal for her, who was the middle guard, to lead the class to victory.

“That’s why I formally accept your proposal. I’ll leave the role of the general in this special exam to you.”

After saying that, she then continued.

“Is that okay? To see you as a potential asset.”

“Of course, I don’t intend to hold you back. It’s a deal.”

I extended my hand, and Horikita shook it.

*I’m determined to snatch victory by any means necessary.*

That sense of urgency must have been growing stronger inside Horikita.

“Ah, right. There’s something I need you to do beforehand. I don’t know how the others will feel about me sitting in as the general. It wouldn’t be strange

if some classmates think it's not right to entrust such an important battle to me, considering what happened last year."

"I don't think many people would object, but it's not impossible."

"That's why I want you to get the consent of the entire class."

"Everyone, including Kōenji-kun?"

*Is that necessary?* That question was implied in her response.

"Yes, including Kōenji."

"What if he opposes? There's a good chance he might act on a whim."

"I don't think he's the type to oppose if there's no disadvantage, but I can't guarantee it. If he does oppose it, let me know right away. I'll handle it myself."

"You will? Well, that's reassuring... I'll get on it right away."

"Thanks. Just be sure to proceed with caution."

"Proceed with caution? Ah, of course, I'll keep it under wraps that your participation is based on the assumption that you won't cooperate with the class in the future. That's okay with you, right?"

If the students knew that my participation was just to slack off, naturally, they wouldn't look favorably upon it. It was something that should be kept confidential.

"Of course, that's fine. I said 'proceed with caution' because I want you to keep it a secret from Ichinose's class that I'm taking on the role of the general. To increase our chances of winning even slightly, it's essential to surprise and unsettle the opponent. So please announce to everyone in the class not to leak anything outside."

"Even without that, there shouldn't be any students who would do something like leaking secrets to other classes."

"But still, even if there's no intention to leak, there's a risk of conversations about it being overheard. It's also a reminder to be vigilant."

*That makes sense,* Horikita thought and readily agreed.

"I'll let you know whether everyone agrees or if there are any objections. I plan to finish this by tonight since we don't have much time."

I nodded and decided to wait for Horikita's report.

# 1

I parted ways with Horikita at the cafe after 6 PM and then stopped by the bookstore.

After killing time in the store for nearly an hour, I started walking towards the designated karaoke to meet the man I had an appointment with as planned.

On the way, I spotted Hasebe Haruka in front of me.

Miyake, who often accompanied her, was nowhere to be seen.

If it had been a mere chance encounter, we would've passed by each other in silence. However, Hasebe's confused gaze, fixed on me, indicated she wanted to say something. It was easy to read that emotion.

"Need something?"

As the distance closed, I spoke up, and she looked surprised, her eyes widening dramatically. She clearly wanted to speak, but she didn't seem to expect to be addressed.

"Uh... I... saw you talking with Horikita-san at the cafe earlier..."

She glanced back at the cafe once and whispered.

"Just wanted to talk for a bit... Is it a bother?"

"Not at all. It's no problem if it's okay with you, Hasebe."

"Thank you."

Being called by her last name might have given her something to think about, but that level of formality was appropriate. Calling her Haruka at this point would've been problematic.

"Shall we move somewhere else? This place is a bit too conspicuous."

"Yes, that sounds good..."

We moved towards the edge of the mall, near a wall, where it was less noticeable. Although one student seemed to be watching us from a distance, this spot wouldn't attract much attention.

"I haven't talked to you like this since the festival."

"Yeah... um... Has anything changed with you recently, Ayanokōji-kun?"

Sorry, that's a weird question. What am I even saying?"

I thought there were things to talk about, but maybe her mind was still in disarray since the conversation had started so suddenly. She seemed unable to find the right words.

"Nothing much has changed. For better or worse, it's business as usual."

"I see... Recently, I feel like I've started to find more opportunities to smile. Whether it's because I've come to accept Airi through the cultural festival, or simply because too much time has passed. I honestly don't know."

No matter how sad the events, wounds would gradually heal.

As time passes, the sadness fades along with the memories.

Of course, it wasn't as simple as it sounded in one's head.

A painful past would remain painful, and would certainly leave deep scars.

“Um, after this... uh...”

Hasebe stuttered her words.

At that moment, I slightly bent my right index finger a few times.

“So... um...”

She desperately tried to connect her fragmented words.

“Um... after this... let’s, with Miyacchi and Yukimū—”

Just as Hasebe was about to get to the main point, a shadow fell over her.

“Is this a secret meeting here~? Senpai!”

Running up with impeccable timing was Amasawa.

“Even though you have Karuizawa-senpai as your girlfriend, now you’re plotting on making this busty one your girlfriend too?”

She pretended not to know, despite likely having a solid grasp on every students’ OAA data.

“She’s just a classmate.”

I added the comment, though Amasawa’s arrival probably wasn’t a welcome development for Hasebe.

“I have something to talk to you about, Senpai. Do you have a moment?”

Her pushy attitude was more than just a polite inquiry, causing Hasebe to step back.

“I’ll go... I’m keeping two people waiting.”

With a slight nod in response, Hasebe turned her back and quickly left the scene.

“I was a disturbance, wasn’t I?”

“Yeah, you were quite the disturbance.”

“That’s mean! Even though you’re the one who called me here, Senpai!”

I was a bit mean. That was true.

Amasawa showing up while I was talking to Hasebe was no mere coincidence.

When Hasebe approached me, Amasawa had also spotted me at the same time.

That was why I immediately signaled her to join us with my fingertips.

She quickly caught on to my intentions and acted accordingly, which was impressive.

“Did you dislike talking with Hasebe-senpai?”

“It’s not that. I just didn’t want to waste more time on something worthless.”

“That’s cold.”

How Amasawa took it was up to her, and how Hasebe felt about it was naturally her own business.

“The first years seem busy with the end-of-year special exams.”

“They seem to be panicking a bit. I’m just watching quietly though.”

After saying that, she quickly corrected herself.

“Ah, I didn’t come here to annoy you today... When I attacked Nagumo-senpai during the last camp, there was also a surprise counterattack, so I’m here to report that.”

I’d been somewhat curious if anything had happened, but since there hadn’t been any news of expulsions within the first years, I’d ignored it. There was still a chance that she hadn’t made contact with Nagumo, but apparently, that wasn’t the case.

If so, she had been prepared to be expelled at the time of that camp.

And as a result, she had reconsidered and was still here.

“I haven’t come to a conclusion yet. But I believe a better future awaits than taking my frustrations out on Nagumo-senpai, so I’ve decided to keep attending school for a while. I think I’ll have a lot of free time, so if something interesting comes up, please include me.”

“If that’s the case, could you do me a favor with that free time you’ll have?”

“Eh? That’s totally fine, but... what is it?”

“I want to know more about Nanase Tsubasa.”

“Eh? She’s your knight, isn’t she? Isn’t it obvious enough without having to investigate? You mean she’s a threat?”

“I don’t think she’s a threat. But I do want to know her real intentions.”

She couldn’t be simply categorized as an ally or enemy at this point.

“Of course, if you say so, I’ll get right on it. Do you want me to expel her?”

“There’s no need to go that far. Just gather the information appropriately, that’s all.”

“Okay, understood.”

Honestly, I didn’t need to rely on Amasawa to get information on Nanase.

*I believe that dealing with Nanase won’t be difficult, and I can respond as needed whenever it would be necessary.*

However, if this could serve as a means to keep Amasawa tied to the school, it wasn’t a bad strategy.

“I have another appointment later, see you. You should also moderately cooperate with your class in the end-of-year special exam.”

“If you say so, Senpai, I will.”

Amasawa saluted exaggeratedly and passed by.

“...Thank you, Senpai.”

As she left, Amasawa muttered and walked away.

“As expected, she understands.”

She wasn’t achieving excellent grades in the White Room for nothing.

It seemed she could easily see through my true intentions.

## 2

A classic spot for students, perfect for secret meetings, the karaoke room.

I followed the number according to the message I had received and visited the room. As I opened the door, a student sitting cross-legged in the silent room slightly turned his gaze towards me.

“None of your lackeys are around today, huh?”

“Well, ain’t that a surprise. You wanted things to get lively up in here or something?”

“I was just thinking that if Ibuki or Ishizaki were here, then they would’ve been able to do something about this tense atmosphere.”

I joked in response, but Ryūen just snorted.

“You sure are spewing quite a lot of shit being the one who called me out here.”

“Well, you’re right.”

“Well, it’s fine. I was thinking of contacting you myself this time. I’ll let it slide.”

Ryūen said, faintly smiling.

“If that’s the case, it seems we’ll be discussing similar topics.”

“Then you go ahead and start.”

Prompted to speak first, I began while still standing at the entrance.

“I heard about your bet with Sakayanagi.”

“Oh?”

Ryūen must have guessed it was about the special exam, but whether he expected this topic to come up first was fifty-fifty.

“It seems the loser will be expelled. Since one of us might not meet again, I thought I’d at least see your face.”

“Then you should meet Sakayanagi before it’s too late.”

“That’s the plan, but I’m sure Sakayanagi will say something similar.”

‘It might be better for you to meet with Ryūen before having to say your farewells’ is something she’d say.

Neither of them considered losing at all. This was as I’d anticipated.

“Don’t be shy, sit down.”

We met because we both had things to discuss, but it seemed he already had the initiative.

“I’d prefer to refrain if possible. Are you planning on pouring grape juice on me this time?”

Ryūen, sitting in front of me, extended his right hand towards a suspicious purple glass within reach. I couldn’t picture him usually drinking something like this; the drink also looked untouched.

“You’re reading too much into it. Besides, you could avoid it anytime if you wanted, right?”

“Don’t treat me like some kind of psychic. There are plenty of situations where avoiding it isn’t an option.”

“For example?”

“For example... well...”

I was urged by Ryūen to sit near the entrance.

“If something happens when the staff brings something, there’s only one way to escape. It would be impossible to avoid it completely.”

Ryūen, planning his next move, aimed to cover a wide area.

“I can tell you’re quite the skeptic.”

“Even so, you don’t seem to find it amusing.”

Well, I decided to follow Ryūen’s lead and sit down.

It was surreal, the two of us facing each other in a spacious karaoke room.

“You took quite a gamble. If the next special exam was centered around academic ability, you would have almost certainly lost. Even if you took risks and tried to manipulate things behind the scenes, unlike the good-natured Ichinose, Sakayanagi would’ve thoroughly prevented that.”

“It’s the once a year do-or-die-battle. You’d think that it’d be the type of fight where even those who aren’t academically inclined could have a chance to win. If the school lacked any entertainment value like that, I’d have turned it down myself.”

Ryūen laughed as he responded, but it seemed he hadn’t considered it a mere gamble. Looking at the trends of the end-of-year special exams from the generation of the graduated Horikita Manabu, Nagumo’s generation, and our own, it was clear that the required skills weren’t limited to academic ability.

He must’ve been confident that a contest suitable for our classes would be chosen.

“Are you prepared for the special exam? I hope you’re not planning any foolish schemes like the ones you tried on Ichinose’s class last year.”

In the end-of-year special exams, absences on the day could lead to penalties. Therefore, weakening the opponent beforehand could be a viable strategy.

“I hope you remember what you told me back then. ‘Try to mature more effectively.’ You said something like that, right?”

“That’s true. That’s why I said it.”

Ryūen snorted through his nose at my blunt words, his gaze sharpening.

“I’ll show you and Sakayanagi what I’m really capable of. It’s not like me, but I’ll crush her fair and square.”

“That’s a bold statement. If it’s a bluff, you’re talking to the wrong person. Even if you were to ensure fairness, I don’t trust a word you say. I won’t even mention it to Sakayanagi.”

I firmly stated that it wouldn’t serve as a ploy to catch her off guard.

“That’s right. That’s why it means something.”

“I see. In other words, it could also lend credibility to your claim of fighting fairly.”

It was a good example of how perspectives can change things.

“There’s no need to tell anyone else about this. It’s enough that you know.”

“Understood.”

Whether Ryūen would engage in underhanded tactics was his choice, but this statement would determine how he would be viewed and judged by me in the future.

“You don’t seem to be feeling any pressure or anxiety.”

*There’s no way I would,* Ryūen communicated with a light wave of his hand.

“Then let’s see it. How you’ll fare going head-to-head with Sakayanagi.”

I stood up and turned my back to Ryūen.

“Ayanokōji, aren’t you participating in the exam as a representative?”

“Are you concerned about that? Whatever I do this time doesn’t matter.”

“Normally, there’s no need to go out of your way against someone like Ichinose. But that woman is getting a wild scent about her. Horikita might just get torn apart.”

It seemed like a serious comment rather than a joke.

“Even so, as of now, it’s not my turn according to our class’s strategy.”

I conveyed this, and Ryūen snorted in disinterest.

“Well, good. It’s more convenient for us if your class loses.”

Fortunately, it seemed like I wouldn’t end up having juice thrown at me, and I was relieved.

# 3

After leaving the karaoke room with Ryūen, I took a moment outside the store.

It had gotten quite late, and I decided it was about time to head home.

While thinking that, I decided to make a detour to a certain place.

The chances of meeting someone at this hour weren't high, but there were a few people besides the class leaders I wanted to see. I headed to a place where one of them often appeared. I reached the rest area on the second floor. As expected, I found the person I was looking for there. Standing in front of one of the lined-up vending machines, I pretended to choose a product while glancing at the displayed bottles and cans.

"How have things been with Sakayanagi since then?"

I muttered as if talking to myself, and after a brief pause, a reply came back.

"...Right. We've had more opportunities to talk than before."

"That's good. You still like it here even though your participation within the class has improved."

"It's calming. Plus, I'm still not good at dealing with people."

Listening to the words coming through the gap in the vending machine, I continued standing in the same spot.

"I understand the importance of having some alone time."

Being surrounded by a crowd all the time can be suffocating.

"Is it a coincidence... that you came here?"

"I stopped by hoping you would be here, Yamamura. Actually, there's something I want to ask."

"Something you want to ask...?"

I made sure no one was around before I spoke about what I wanted to know.

After I finished speaking, Yamamura seemed to silently ponder the meaning for a moment.

"Why... did you come to ask me...?"

"I thought you would be the most knowledgeable about this area. Is my assumption wrong?"

"...Well... maybe."

If Yamamura didn't know the answer, she could simply say so.

However, Yamamura evaded a clear response as if dodging the question. That meant she had some kind of answer.

"I already have some suspects in mind. But I need more information to narrow it down."

"Would that be good for Sakayanagi-san? Or..."

“I wonder. ‘This matter’ doesn’t involve Sakayanagi at the moment. I don’t intend to cause any trouble for Class A. I want you to see it as an outsider’s issue.”

After a pause, Yamamura slowly emerged from behind the vending machine.

“I’m not sure if I can be of help, but I do have some information that might assist with your question.”

There was a chance she wouldn’t share the information, but Yamamura took out her cell phone.

She turned the screen towards me and started playing a video.

However, the subjects were filmed from a distance, and the audio couldn’t be captured.

“The only person I found during my investigation that matches what you’re talking about is this person. I couldn’t hear the conversation in the video because it was too far away... What do you think? I’m sorry if it’s completely unrelated.”

The date was December 26th at 7 PM. The location was Keyaki Mall.

The two people in the video were interacting closely.

“...Is it not helpful?”

“No, it’s quite helpful. You’re impressive, Yamamura.”

“No, it’s nothing special... I just happened to be there...”

She was being modest, but the people being filmed were quite cautious of their surroundings.

Being able to film this much under such conditions was significant.

I wouldn’t be surprised if she knew various circumstances that I was unaware of.

However, this video alone wouldn’t reveal everything.

*I’d like one more piece of evidence to reach a conclusion.*

“I’ll make good use of that information. Of course, I won’t mention your involvement.”

“I hope it helps.”

Despite providing useful information, she bowed her head as if feeling somewhat apologetic.

After parting with Yamamura, I quickly decided which student to contact based on the information and arranged to meet with them, getting further details from Kei.

## 4

I waited at a certain location inside Keyaki Mall for my classmate to arrive. About 15 minutes after making the call, Matsushita appeared around the corner.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ayanokōji-kun. Karuizawa-san told me to contact you... What did you want to talk about?”

Caught off guard by the unusual situation, Matsushita approached me.

“Is this okay with your friend?”

“Yes, she said I could step out for about 30 minutes. That’s enough, right?”

“Plenty.”

“So... what’s the topic?”

It was normal to be cautious when asked to meet alone for a conversation.

Matsushita’s expression was unchanged, but she probably wasn’t feeling calm on the inside.

“Do you know why I chose this place to meet?”

“What do you mean? Is there a reason other than me already being at Keyaki Mall?”

Indeed, I’d immediately learned from Kei that Matsushita was at Keyaki Mall, so it was natural to think that I was waiting in the same mall.

“Last year, you were following me. This location should be where we stopped to talk.”

“Ah... now that you mention it, it might have been here. Yes, this is the place.”

She seemed to recall the position where she had hidden herself as she looked around and at the pillars again.

I had been questioned about things like my relationship with the acting chairman and my flash mental calculation skills.

“You told me at that time that you wanted to know my true abilities.”

“Yeah. I feel like you dodged the question somewhat though.”

“Nearly a year has passed since then. Have you found the answer?”

“I wonder. You’ve started to take more actions than in our first year, but... I still feel like you’re not showing real effort.”

“I see.”

Unlike mere superficial evaluations, Matsushita had an eye for discerning individual abilities better than other classmates.

“If you’d cooperate, Matsushita, maybe I could show a bit more of my abilities.”

“What do you mean?”

Here, I piqued Matsushita's interest while progressing the conversation based on information I had obtained from Yamamura. Matsushita seemed unable to hide her surprise after hearing what I had to say.

"Indeed, there was such a thing, but at this point... Who told you about it?"

It might just be a memory, but Matsushita's expression told a different story.

"It's been nearly three months since then. Was there something that bothered you?"

"Well... yes."

While admitting it, Matsushita seemed very curious about where I had gotten the information.

"Sorry, but I can't reveal my source. I'll just say it's not a classmate."

Pointlessly suspecting classmates would not be beneficial for the future, so I only revealed that much.

"So, what do you want to know about that matter? I hope I remember the details."

"There's no need to go over the content of the conversation. I've got it covered."

As I named everyone involved, Matsushita, who had been maintaining her composure, finally stumbled over her words.

"Uh, yes... that's everyone. But then, what do you want to ask me?"

"I thought that if it's you, Matsushita, something might have struck you during that discussion."

I had two reasons for calling Matsushita out. One was to confirm the accuracy of the information from Yamamura, which I could judge as correct since the names of the classmates matched. The other was to see if Matsushita was a student worthy of recognition. This also served as a test.

Sorting out the reasons for being called out, Matsushita sighed and muttered.

"It feels like I'm being tested."

"Maybe."

With a softened expression, Matsushita smiled.

"Since I'm supposedly being tested, I'll answer seriously. I remember that time well. Indeed, there were things that bothered me. The topics of the discussion and the members felt off."

As she dug up her memories and began to speak about that time, I listened until the consistency was confirmed, then I interrupted her.

"That's enough."

"You said you'd show your abilities, but what do you plan to do?"

"If there's a chance in the next special exam, I intend to show the results as expected."

“That’s good. If I have your approval, I can feel secure about this special exam.”

“But from here on, it’s not just me. The entire class needs to grow.”

“I understand. But if our class comes together one day, we probably won’t lose to anyone.”

Taking today’s events into account, Matsushita said this with a smile.

“For now, let’s pretend today’s meeting didn’t happen. Contact me anytime.”

It was a small thing, but being able to show such consideration on her own was also an important element.

# 5

That night, just after 10 PM, I heard a light knock on my room. I opened the door and immediately invited him in as he looked around cautiously.

It was Hashimoto from Class 2-A, dressed in casual clothes.

“Is anyone watching?”

“I took some time because I was checking around. Just to be safe, I used the stairs.”

“That’s good. No one would welcome seeing me meeting with you at this time.”

“Couldn’t you have just called if you had something to discuss? Or maybe meet at a different place?”

While saying this, Hashimoto cast a probing glance my way.

It was an unconscious behavior belonging to someone who always suspected others.

“There are things that can’t be discussed over the phone. Meeting outside carries its own risks too.”

“Well, okay. So, what did you want to talk about?”

I didn’t intend to keep him standing, so I let him into the room and had him sit down.

“The end-of-year special exam has been decided, so I thought we should talk. I want to confirm your position in the next special exam.”

“The school hasn’t disclosed any rules, right? How can I know how to act?”

“It’s not about how you act; it’s about your position. You said before that you would side with Ryūen.”

I asked this while recalling the time Hashimoto spoke about it in this room not long ago.

“Nothing’s changed. The only way for me to survive is to make Ryūen win. But I must say, the situation isn’t looking good. I planned to assist Ryūen once the exam was announced, but I never expected that they wouldn’t even disclose the rules.”

Indeed, depending on the rules of the exam, there might have been a chance to help from the preparation stage.

“If you’re betraying your class, it might actually be better for you.”

“Eh?”

Hashimoto sighed, but that was under the assumption that his betrayal hadn’t been discovered.

“If the details had been disclosed, Sakayanagi would have likely used that information to trap you and Ryūen. But since the content is unknown, no

preemptive measures can be taken. At most, they can avoid choosing you as the representative. It's unpredictable how things will play out during the actual exam."

For Sakayanagi, the progression of this special exam is rather disadvantageous from the start.

"I see. So that's another way to look at it."

He nodded with interest, but he didn't seem to rely on that perspective.

Rather, it seemed like he had something else on his mind, almost urging me to get to the point.

"Let me hear your answer soon, Ayanokōji. I've been waiting for a while."

"You're asking if I have any intention of transferring to Ryūen's class, right?"

"That's right. I've decided to take a big risk and betray Sakayanagi. Where you decide to continue will determine my fate."

As usual, Hashimoto asked this, mixing truth and lies.

If Ryūen wins the end-of-year special exam, Hashimoto's plan would likely be on track.

And if I decided to transfer, it would lead to him achieving his goals.

"What if I said I won't go?"

"That would be troublesome. It would decrease the chances of graduating from Class A."

"I didn't ask earlier, but what about the private points? Ryūen's class isn't exactly flush with funds. It would cost a considerable amount to accept both me and you."

I threw the obvious question at him, and Hashimoto gave a faint smile.

"That's not necessarily the case. Ryūen has been dealing with the first and third years, gathering a significant amount of private points, it seems."

"Dealing?"

"I don't know the details, but if he's gathering from other years, the transfer fee for two people isn't unrealistic, right?"

If that was true, it might indeed become a feasible option.

But how much I should believe him remained a skeptical matter.

"Well, even if it's a bit short, don't worry. The private points I got from Nagumo recently were more than I expected. That really helped."

During the camp, Nagumo had promised a reward when I gambled with him, resulting in 3 million points.

I was honestly surprised by the significantly higher amount of private points he transferred.

Hashimoto, who had taken the lead, received the 20% he had hoped for, 600,000 points, and the remaining 2.4 million points were divided among the other 15 people, 160,000 points each.

Against the 20 million needed for the transfer, it could only cover about 3%. But still, it was 3%.

“You were the main player; you should’ve taken 1 million... 1.5 million at least. I would’ve taken that much without hesitation. Settling for the same share is too saintly.”

While amazed, Hashimoto reminisced about the time at the camp.

Indeed, private points play an almost omnipotent role in the school.

I still wasn’t fixated on that one point alone.

“Well, not easily falling for money is a strength too.”

When I remained silent, Hashimoto muttered to himself.

“I plan to keep quiet over the weekend, but do you have any advice for the exam?”

There wasn’t much I could say to Hashimoto at the moment.

In fact, I felt there was no need to say anything at all.

But...

“Any advice? You’re silent, huh?”

I had no intention of doing anything that might lead to interfering with the confrontation between Sakayanagi and Ryūen.

So, the correct choice was to leave it alone and watch.

However, it wasn’t bad to prepare enough to be able to flexibly deal with some outcomes.

“I’ve been thinking a bit.”

“Really? So, you’ve thought of some advice?”

He didn’t seem very hopeful, but he was seeking my opinion.

“Hashimoto. If you continue as you are, without any new strategies for the special exam, you might find yourself at a dead end.”

“Hey, hey, I asked for advice, not for you to scare me. I might get into a pinch, but I’ll manage.”

“By mixing in lies as usual?”

“Lies are a powerful weapon.”

I knew that. Lies sometimes possess a strength that surpasses even violence.

I had told Horikita about this a long time ago.

“Indeed, lies are strong. They can easily ruin people. But, it’s also true that there are those who won’t fall for them.”

“Are you saying they won’t work on the opponent this time?”

“They won’t.”

Sakayanagi is highly vigilant against lies and has sharp senses.

No matter how skillfully Hashimoto manipulated his words, he built his battles on the premise of lies.

Even so, Hashimoto's trust, having betrayed Sakayanagi, is at rock bottom. She probably isn't even willing to listen now.

"Well, I still have to do it. I've always fought like this."

Hashimoto replied as if boasting about his only weapon.

No, maybe he just didn't know any other way to fight.

"Think about it, yeah? About transferring to Ryūen's class with me."

"You haven't changed your mind about siding with Ryūen?"

"I haven't."

"What if Ryūen is in a tight spot? Whether you side with him or not, what if it's certain he can't win? Will you switch sides to Sakayanagi then?"

"That is—"

"If you change your stance depending on the situation, you'll only appear vile to those around you."

"...Then what should I do? I'll side with Ryūen. I will... I don't want to think about it, but if it comes to a pinch, I have no choice. I'll have to beg Sakayanagi for forgiveness, kneeling or whatever."

While resigning himself, he still searched for a way out at the last moment.

That was just like Hashimoto Masayoshi, as I had analyzed him so far.

"At least, don't lie to yourself. That's about all you can do."

I watched Hashimoto's back disappear as the door closed, seeing him off at the entrance.

*Depending on the content of the special exam, this might be the last time I see Hashimoto.*

With that thought in mind, I decided to proceed with my preparations for bed.

# 6

*Sunday morning.*

I arrived at the destination 10 minutes before the agreed time, and the person I was waiting for was already sitting on a bench.

“Good morning.”

When I called out, a beautiful profile turned towards me and smiled.

“Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun. Is it okay? Calling me out to a place like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is a public place. If Karuizawa-san or the others around see us, won’t they get the wrong idea?”

“No need to worry. I’ve already talked to Kei about today. Careless secrets and clumsy lies only become shackles in maintaining relationships.”

I answered that way, and she modestly agreed that lying indeed might not be good.

“What will you do about the special exam, Ayanokōji-kun?”

Ichinose probably wanted to know which side I would take in the exam.

“I don’t plan to participate as a representative in the special exam at the moment.”

So I decided to answer that way. Lies are shackles in relationships, a statement I made just before telling a lie.

However, the lie I told Horikita to deceive Ichinose’s class was unfortunately not necessary.

Because the strategy I told Horikita itself was a lie, something trivial.

“I see. That might be good news for us then.”

Ichinose, who took my words at face value, seemed slightly relieved.

There was nothing suspicious about her attitude.

She almost certainly didn’t know that I would participate as a representative at this point.

“For now, that is. Maybe Horikita will ask me later. If that happens, please go easy on me.”

“That’s my line. If possible, I’d rather not compete against you, Ayanokōji-kun.”

After answering, Ichinose corrected her previous statement.

“I’d rather not compete against you, but it can’t be helped. It’s inevitable that our classes will clash.”

Ichinose quickly responded after that.

“We better not talk about the end-of-year special exam more than this, right?”

I sensed her intention not to engage in unnecessarily probing each other's intentions.

"We are both set to face each other directly, after all. It's better not to delve too deeply into the good things or the bad things."

"Yeah, that's right."

"The reason I called you here today is because the time for our promise is approaching soon. Do you remember?"

"How could I forget? It was about our conversation last year in your room, right?"

I nodded, and Ichinose nodded back in agreement.

'One year from now, I want to meet you again like this.'

'Just the two of us, Ichinose and me.'

'Go through the next year without hesitation and meet me. Can you promise that?'

Those were the words I conveyed to Ichinose last year.

"If neither of us gets expelled in the special exam, let's make some time then."

*What kind of words would she hear?*

Ichinose probably didn't know either.

Amidst mixed feelings of anticipation and anxiety, she clearly answered.

"Definitely."

I nodded and stood up from the bench.

The conversation was very brief, but considering tomorrow, this was probably enough.

"I'm going to stop by the gym now. What about you, Ichinose?"

"I have plans to meet with classmates after this, so I'll pass this time."

With the end-of-year special exam just around the corner, it probably wasn't the time to be sweating in the gym.

As she had said earlier, she seemed to have plans to meet with friends.

Ichinose, still sitting on the bench, saw me off as I headed to Keyaki Mall first.

That makes three. After talking to Sakayanagi, all my tasks would be completed.

# 7

After parting with Ichinose, I spent about an hour sweating in the gym before leaving, and there was a student standing near the entrance. It wasn't just a coincidence or a chance meeting.

"Rare to see you here, Kanzaki."

"...Yeah."

Kanzaki briefly answered and glanced back and forth between me and the gym.

"If you want to join the gym, I can introduce you."

"No, that's not it. I heard you were going to the gym and waited."

Ichinose was likely the source of that information.

"Is this something that needs to be discussed in person rather than over the phone?"

"It's not really a discussion. I just overheard that you don't plan to participate as a representative. I wanted to check if that's true."

"It depends on Horikita's policy, but there are no plans at the moment."

I answered as if tracing the words, but Kanzaki's expression was a bit grim.

"...Really?"

"I intended to answer that way, but it seems you don't believe me."

"Of course. We are direct competitors. There's no need to tell the whole truth here, and it's not up to us whether you participate or not. But... Ichinose would want to believe what you say. No, it's safe to say she does believe it."

His statement seemed reserved, but some parts of it seemed aggressive.

The source of the information was indeed Ichinose. I decided to ignore that and let it pass.

"I want to believe what you said too, but—"

He kept repeating, trying to verify the credibility.

Even though I had already answered that such commitments here meant nothing, he persisted.

"Could it be that you have a reason not to believe my statement? It seems like you're questioning me on some grounds that I might join as a representative."

"...No."

Kanzaki started to deny it but then paused and corrected himself.

"It's just a rumor—that you agreed early on to become a representative.

Not just any role, but as the general instead of the vanguard or middle guard. That's the rumor."

If it were just about being selected as a representative, I could've dismissed it as a rumor.

However, Kanzaki mentioned 'general,' a significant keyword.

Given that Horikita is widely recognized as the class leader, the rumor that she had passed on the role of general was not something to be taken lightly.

From Kanzaki's awkward expression, it seemed he hadn't intended to delve so deeply initially.

But my immediate denial of being a representative might have increased his desire to know more.

The information I stressed to keep confidential seemed to have easily leaked.

"Quite a specific rumor. But a rumor is a rumor. There are no such plans at the moment."

Convinced of this, I continued to deny it. Even if my denial here was a lie, it was an acceptable lie for the sake of strategizing, and Kanzaki had no choice but to understand that.

"...Understood. If you say so, it must just be a rumor. But, if Horikita asks you to be a representative... if possible, please refuse."

"That's quite a bold negotiation."

"I'm well aware of your capabilities. If you participate, our class will struggle. More than that, Ichinose, facing you, might not be able to perform to her full potential."

That was why he didn't want me to participate as a representative.

This seemed to be his genuine feeling.

"I understand what you want to say, but it's not a simple matter to accept. If Horikita makes such a request, it's only natural for me, as a classmate, to consider it."

Kanzaki's arms tensed visibly.

"Sorry, this was a conversation I shouldn't have expected you to accept. Forget it."

"It's fine. It just shows how much you're betting on the upcoming end-of-year special exam."

I hadn't often hinted so blatantly at taking center stage.

I could fully understand his cautious feelings.

"I came to see you today just to convey that. I'm sorry for prying so much. I'm grateful to you for many things."

"Don't worry about it. It's natural for us both to do our best to aim for Class A."

While the methods and courses of action might be debatable, Kanzaki was thinking in his own way and trying to find a path for his class. I had no intention of denying that, and rather, he was an interesting subject to observe. If no significant changes had occurred in Ichinose, I might've wanted to intervene a bit more, but it wouldn't be too late to do so after seeing the results of the end-of-year special exam.

After watching Kanzaki leave with hidden disappointment, I decided to return to the dormitory.

# 8

It was almost the end of Sunday, just before 10 PM. Considering that Sakayanagi had been busy, it had been decided that we would communicate in a slightly particular way from here on.

A call from Sakayanagi came to my phone.

I turned off the TV and pressed the call button.

*'I'm sorry for being late. Is it okay to talk now?'*

"Yes, it's fine."

*'Seems you wanted to speak with me...'*

It seemed like a matter of importance, but I feigned ignorance and asked.

"Simply put, I heard you've accepted a challenge from Ryūen, staking expulsion."

*'Was that it? I thought it would only be a matter of time before you heard about it, but who told you? No, perhaps it's rude to ask.'*

She showed a brief interest in pursuing the source of the information but quickly withdrew.

"Given the position of Class A and the presence or absence of Protection Points, the terms are exceptional."

*'Looking at the terms alone, that might be the case. However, I will not lose to him, and Ryūen-kun is merely tightening the noose around his own neck.'*

No matter how disproportionate the terms, there were no problems as long as you don't lose. That was the stance.

A different position, but essentially the same as Ryūen.

*'You didn't call out of concern for me, did you?'*

"Is concern necessary?"

*'Not at all. Just witnessing the outcome of the battle will suffice.'*

On the other end of the phone, Sakayanagi chuckled softly.

A small yawn could be heard shortly after.

"You're already going to bed?"

*'I've been active since early this morning, after all.'*

"Should I hang up then?"

*'Don't say something so sad. I'm fully prepared for my drowsiness.'*

"Fully prepared?"

*'I've taken a bath, brushed my teeth, changed into my pajamas, and I myself am already lying down, so I can fall asleep as soon as the call ends.'*

It seemed that Sakayanagi had already settled into bed on the other side of the phone.

"Indeed, that sounds fully prepared."

*'Yes, so I welcome a long conversation.'*

My words seemed to be serving as a lullaby.

*'Ryūen-kun and Ichinose-san seem to have met with you as well.'*

*"I don't remember being followed by Yamamura... impressive."*

*'Even for someone like you, it's difficult to completely escape the eyes of many people, including the other years and adults.'*

She mentioned connections not only with students but also with some adults.

Of course, not everything she said might be true, but I listened with a grain of salt, yet it was clear she had solid information.

*'By the way, will you be participating as a representative in this special exam, Ayanokōji-kun?'*

*"I can't answer that. Have your usual sources reported anything?"*

*'I haven't been focusing on your and Ichinose-san's class this time.'*

There was interest but not enough to keep a close watch.

However, even if she knew, it wouldn't be information that Sakayanagi needed to hide.

As I thought, it seemed that information had been leaked only to Ichinose's side and not to Sakayanagi's.

*"Ryūen seemed to be in battle mode, but you seem as usual."*

I meant it as a compliment for her calm demeanor, but Sakayanagi's response was unexpected.

*'I wonder. Is it as usual?'*

*"Is that wrong?"*

*'In the last two days, I decided to try something new. This new attempt involved setting up individual meetings with my classmates. The old me probably wouldn't have taken such actions.'*

Sakayanagi typically kept close only to confidants like Kamuro, Hashimoto, and Kitō.

It was a style typical of Sakayanagi, who fundamentally didn't trust people.

This was a tendency Ryūen might share.

*"Why decide to talk with your classmates? You haven't revealed anything specific, and it doesn't seem like you discussed strategies for the end-of-year special exam with them, right?"*

*'Yes, it's unrelated to the exam. That's why... yes, that could be considered a problem.'*

She organized the reasons for her actions in her head and converted them into words.

*'I should've known more about Masumi-san. I wanted to know more about Yamamura-san. Perhaps unnecessary emotions drove me.'*

Regrets came too late.

She couldn't talk to Kamuro anymore since she had already been expelled.

Although her relationship with her classmate Yamamura was initially based solely on mutual interests, she had started to take steps towards becoming genuine friends, and now she was trying to deepen her relationships without regrets.

She didn't know when or how relationships with other classmates might change or disappear. That was why she wanted to get to know her current allies better.

It was probably a change that even Sakayanagi herself found confusing.

*'Honestly, I don't think this emotion is efficient. It could even be said that I'm engaging in unproductive behavior. Yet, I've decided that I must do it. Uncharacteristic, isn't it?'*

"Ah. It's indeed unlike you."

Despite her gentle expression, Sakayanagi had always made cold, mechanical decisions based on her brain's commands.

This change began with Kamuro and Yamamura, significantly influenced by that recent incident.

*'It's because of you, Ayanokōji-kun. You're the one who changed me.'*

"I don't think it's all me, but I admit I played a part."

*'...Why did you try to mediate between me and Yamamura-san?'*

It sounded as if she could've remained like herself if not for that.

"I inadvertently caused Yamamura some trouble. So, I just returned the favor in a way that was clear. I can't provide any more explanation than that."

Yamamura had been acting as Sakayanagi's secret agent, using her inconspicuous presence as her weapon.

It was only natural for me to take responsibility for hindering that.

But it was nonsensical to blabber the details to Sakayanagi here.

*'I see. I thought it might just be your kindness, but it seems there was a solid reason.'*

"No, maybe it's better if you take it as kindness. Can I retract my previous statement?"

*'Hehe. That's impossible.'*

Sakayanagi's laughter became sleepy.

Until now, Sakayanagi had shown her usual calm demeanor over the phone.

I could hang up now, but...

*'You've done something unnecessary.'*

"You dislike your own changes, but they're not all bad. If it really was unnecessary, you could've forcibly suppressed those new emotions."

*'That's true... Maybe you're right.'*

Sakayanagi had never trusted others, only used them.

She had a mindset similar to mine, but she was beginning to accept change.

“You haven’t faced it until now, so face it more from now on. By doing so, you’ll be able to see unexpected aspects you never knew before.”

At that point, Sakayanagi would surely find new options.

Whether those would be considered strengths or weaknesses were still unknown.

*‘Karuizawa-san and Ichinose-san like you because you boldly step into people’s hearts, disrupt them, and then foster growth. But your essence is more stubborn than mine and won’t easily change. Hehe, that’s what makes you fascinating.’*

“I’ll take that as a compliment. Not to change the subject, but there’s something I need to tell you, Sakayanagi. You remember that I owe you one from the deserted island exam?”

This was one of the reasons I made time for this call.

‘*Oh, I remember that.*’

“I’m not leaning towards predicting whether you or Ryūen will win tomorrow’s match. I’m watching it as an even 50% chance for both.”

‘*So if I lose, I’ll miss the chance for that debt to be repaid.*’

“Yes. That’s why I wanted to confirm things. If necessary, I could repay it now.”

I avoided direct language, but Sakayanagi must have understood what I meant immediately.

Of course, I knew she wouldn’t demand it.

‘*The answer goes without saying.*’

“It seems so.”

Sakayanagi wouldn’t resort to relying on my help to outmaneuver Ryūen in the special exam. I knew that and asked anyway.

‘*You’ll repay the favor when I’m a third-year.*’

“Alright. I’ll keep that in mind.”

‘*Please do.*’

Sakayanagi answered, yawning again.

“Maybe it’s time to hang up.”

‘*Are you done already? I still want to continue our conversation...*’

“Today is enough. I’ve got a good grasp of the state of each class’s leader.”

‘*Is that so? Then, after the end-of-year special exam is over, let’s have tea at leisure. After defeating him, a match with you awaits in the third year.*’

As yawns began to mix into her words, I decided to wrap things up.

‘*Could you please cut off the call, Ayanokōji-kun? I’d like to go to sleep with a calm mind... Good night.*’

Sakayanagi was calm and composed throughout.

Rather, she began to show a side of herself that surrendered to the emotions she had started to reveal.

*This must be another form of growth.*

After ending the call, I also started to undress and change into my nightwear.

Ryūen and Sakayanagi. Both seem fully prepared mentally for the end-of-year special exam.

One of them will be defeated tomorrow... and leave the school.

*I should just watch the outcome as a bystander.* That was the right answer.

But if I were to speak my true feelings openly, what result would I wish for?

I tried not to think about it, but there was definitely a clear answer inside me.

Who I wanted to win. The answer had been there even before meeting either of them—

## Chapter 3: End-of-Year Special Exam, Opening

THESE DAYS, THE feeling of spring was gentle in the sunlight.

Finally, the culmination of my second year of school life had arrived.

For two years, the unwavering Class A had led the way, and now there were those trying to overtake it. There were those who started well but gradually were surpassed by Class D, yet they still tried to unite and rise again. Those who lacked inherent strength but continued to fight by any means necessary, eagerly aiming for a dramatic turnaround. Starting from Class D, having lost all class points, they now reached for the coveted Class A.

The end-of-year special exam, promising significant class point fluctuations, was about to take place.

At 7:40 AM, I left my dorm room alone.

The lobby was quiet. Not a single student was in sight.

That was to be expected. While the representatives for the end-of-year special exam were supposed to gather at the special building at 8 AM, the rest of the class was supposed to gather in the usual classrooms at 9 AM, so some might still be sleeping.

It would've been fine to run into other representatives, but since it took about 10 minutes to walk to the special building from here, leaving at 40 was cutting it close.

Almost everyone should've already arrived at school or would be arriving soon.

Walking down the school path, I spotted a student in casual clothes sitting on a bench.

“It’s quite an early morning. What are you doing here, Kiryūin-senpai?”

“I was waiting for you. I wanted to see you before you tackle the end-of-year special exam.”

Next to Kiryūin-senpai, a bag was placed.

“It looks like you’re about to leave.”

“Normally, third-year students would’ve already had their graduation ceremony and be out in the real world by now. I’ve been busy looking for a new place to live. Nagumo has been concerned about you. He’s curious about how you’ll handle the end-of-year special exam. But it seems he has no intention of seeing you anymore, leaving the reconnaissance to me.”

It seemed like a bothersome role had been pushed onto her, but it should’ve been easy to refuse.

“It seems you’re not concerned about it from the looks of it.”

“Are you concerned about me? You seem like quite the kind senpai.”

“My apologies. Concerned might be an overstatement. But you do things we can’t predict. I’m looking forward to seeing what results you’ll bring about in the exam.”

Understanding that I was in a hurry, Kiryūin-senpai said that and gently waved her hand.

I nodded in acknowledgment and started walking towards the school building.

Soon after arriving at the special building, two class representatives were waiting near the classroom door.

A singular unfamiliar adult stood beside them.

In general, I had the impression that teachers would be present during special exams, but perhaps this time it was different.

“Good morning, Kiyotaka-kun.”

Yōsuke greeted me with a smile dazzling enough to outshine any girl.

On the other hand, Horikita seemed displeased at having been made to wait, and she didn’t seem to be in a good mood.

“You’re quite late. We’re the last ones.”

Her voice was slightly raised, and her expression was stiff.

“I’m on time, so there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“That’s true, but... well, it’s a minor issue now. Let’s go.”

The real deal was the end-of-year special exam that awaited us.

She must’ve spent the time since this morning, no, since the night before feeling uneasy.

When Horikita reported that everyone had assembled to the adult, the entrance was opened for us.

Inside the classroom, representatives from each class, three from each, totaling nine, had already arrived and were seated on an arrangement of folding chairs.

Sakayanagi, Ryūen, and Ichinose seemed to have arrived without any issues.

Some turned around as we entered.

They were undoubtedly checking who the representatives were.

Especially for Ichinose’s class, it was a crucial matter. I locked eyes with Kanzaki, who had been dreading until the last moment that I would be the representative. Although he seemed prepared from the information he had, it was clear he was not welcoming it.

It wasn’t too hard to guess what he was thinking.

‘He really showed up, huh?’

That must’ve been it.

*I’m sorry, but I have my circumstances and can’t accommodate your feelings.*

Horikita and the others would also find out who the representatives were for the first time in this public setting.

As I started walking towards an empty seat, Sakagami-sensei and Hoshinomiya-sensei approached.

In both hands, Sakagami-sensei held an empty white case about 30 centimeters in length and width, marked with “2-B.”

“Please submit all phones, other metals, and electronic devices you have.”

Sakagami-sensei said this and looked down at the case.

I took out my phone from my pocket and placed it in the white case.

Horikita and Yōsuke also took out their phones and placed them in the case.

“Okay, don’t move now. I’m going to perform a body check.”

Saying this, Hoshinomiya-sensei began the inspection from my head to my toes with a handheld device, probably a metal detector.

“They’re quite thorough, aren’t they?”

Yōsuke asked as the inspection moved from me to Horikita.

“Sorry, it’s instructions from the school. Okay, all three of you are clear.”

Sakagami-sensei nodded, indicating there were no particular issues.

“The phones we’ve been entrusted with will be returned after the exam. Please sit in the empty seats and wait.”

I sat down on one of the three remaining empty folding chairs.

Then, I carefully observed the backs of the representatives.

From Ichinose’s Class D, there were Hamaguchi and Kanzaki.

I was certain about Ichinose and Kanzaki being chosen, but they brought Hamaguchi as the third representative.

His overall abilities were similar to Hirata’s, a model-type student unlikely to cause any major issues. These representatives were probably predictable choices for Horikita and the others.

However...

There were unexpected choices in Sakayanagi and Ryūen’s classes.

“What do they intend...”

What surprised Horikita the most was not that Katsuragi was chosen as a representative from Ryūen’s class, but another member.

It was the same for Yōsuke, who was next to me, and even I was a little surprised.

The presence of Nishino Takeko seemed out of place in this special exam, an exam that likely required comprehensive abilities.

She herself seemed aware of her existence being out of place, crossing her arms and looking somewhat uneasy. Although there was a rule that each gender must be represented among the three representatives, I hadn’t expected Nishino.

“They’ve gone for something unusual.”

“I didn’t expect them to bring in Nishino-san. Do you understand their intentions, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“No... it might be to poke around for surprised reactions, but even if so, they might be poking a bit too hard.”

I didn’t think Nishino was a bad student.

Even in Ryūen’s class, she generally stood out.

Her firm attitude and stance towards Ryūen, and fearlessness could certainly be recognized.

However, even so, there were other students with superior overall abilities.

“Maybe someone was absent due to illness?”

“That makes sense... Maybe someone else was supposed to be the representative, but she moved up? But even if she moved up, would Nishino-san be the next candidate...?”

Indeed, normally she might be questionable even as a substitute.

Still, whether there were other girls in Ryūen’s class whom Ryūen could trust remained a bit doubtful.

“I thought Shiina-san would be chosen from the girls’ slots, but she’s missing?”

According to Horikita’s predictions, it seemed she expected Hiyori to be chosen. If Hiyori couldn’t participate due to poor health, then that would be a reasonable explanation. However, I tried to consider another possibility.

“Ryūen’s class doesn’t have many strong female candidates. This special exam tends to focus on the representatives, but the remaining classmates are also given significant roles as participants. It’s entirely possible they deliberately kept Hiyori on that side.”

“...That’s true. In a situation where limited resources are spread thin, that choice might be possible...”

Horikita’s class had multiple candidates who could become representatives. Therefore, we could afford to have students like Kushida and Matsushita as substitutes, but Ryūen’s class was different.

“Besides, whether Hiyori is suited for a scenario where representatives battle each other is another matter.”

Without a clear answer from Ryūen’s side, it was all speculation. However, even if there was such an intention, choosing Nishino as a representative was a gamble. It might put Ryūen at a disadvantage. Or...

Since Ryūen was a representative himself, it could be a statement that no matter who else was there, he could handle it. If so, it would be a strong appeal to the opponents. But there lies the tricky Sakayanagi. While not as impactful as Nishino, there was a similar surprise. It was that Kitō Hayato had been chosen as a representative.

Kitō was a close associate of Sakayanagi, and although he was a good representative based on his position, in a situation where it wasn't likely for physical ability to be required, was it necessary to make Kitō, someone with excellent athletic ability, the representative?

Perhaps Sakayanagi's intentions were hidden here as well. If possible, I would've liked to hear each leaders' reasoning for their selections, but that wasn't feasible.

All the representatives had gathered, but the school had yet to proceed.  
“Phew...”

Horikita, sitting on my right, exhaled.

Feeling pressure in such a tense situation was inevitable, but this seemed a bit excessive.

Yōsuke also looked worriedly at her.

If the exam started now, it could lead to a bad situation for Horikita.

However, careless words might only heighten the tension.

There were several solutions, but the most effective one had just come to mind.

*I'd prepared myself for death at that time as well, but what would happen now?*

I quietly reached out with my right hand and grabbed Horikita's left side forcefully.

“Hyah!?”

Horikita jumped in her seat. At the same time, a girl's voice oppressively echoed in the solemn and quiet classroom. Most of the representatives who had been facing forward turned around, wondering what happened. Horikita hurriedly shook her head as if nothing was wrong and bowed down to escape the puzzled looks of the representatives.

“What are you doing...!”

“I thought I'd help you relax a bit. It's a bit better now, right?”

“Even so, was there a need to do it this way...!?”

She voiced her dissatisfaction in a low voice but with a fierce expression.

“I thought I'd add a bit of nostalgia to the mix. It's my way of showing concern.”

“I don't need that kind of concern!”

The other representatives were no longer paying attention, but Yōsuke looked relieved and happy as he watched Horikita complain and me being scolded.

Just then, there was movement in the room. As if announcing the start of the special exam, Mashima-sensei and Chabashira-sensei appeared in the classroom.

“You better quiet down now.”

“You’d better remember this later...”

I definitely earned her resentment, but for now, this should allow her to focus on the explanation. Now, the teachers in charge of the second-year classes were all present. One of them, the homeroom teacher of Class A, Mashima-sensei, stepped forward.

“My name is Mashima, and I will be explaining the end-of-year special exam. I would like to prepare for the start of the exam as soon as possible. I will also explain the detailed rules, which have not yet been disclosed.”

Although the special exam was scheduled to start at 10 AM, Mashima-sensei began the explanation immediately. Considering it was just past 8 AM, the time allocated merely for the explanation seemed excessively long. It was likely that we would be forced to undergo further preparations before the start of the special exam.

“First, I will announce the final representatives, three from each class, who will participate today.”

## **2nd Year Class A Representatives**

*Vanguard: Sanada Kousei, Middle Guard: Kitō Hayato, General:  
Sakayanagi Arisu*

## **2nd Year Class B Representatives**

*Vanguard: Hirata Yōsuke, Middle Guard: Horikita Suzune, General:  
Ayanokōji Kiyotaka*

## **2nd Year Class C Representatives**

*Vanguard: Nishino Takeko, Middle Guard: Katsuragi Kōhei, General:  
Ryūen Kakeru*

## **2nd Year Class D Representatives**

*Vanguard: Hamaguchi Tetsuya, Middle Guard: Kanzaki Ryūji, General:  
Ichinose Honami*

The names of the representatives and the order of their team battles were first displayed on a monitor prepared in the room. Each class had a composition of two males and one female.

There was no mention of absentees or substitutes, which was ambiguous whether it was because there were no absentees or if it was a rule not to disclose that part to other classes.

At that point, the 12 representatives were confirmed, and no changes could be made. If someone couldn't participate due to some accident, they would automatically be treated as defeated.

Without any questions from the representatives, Mashima-sensei continued the explanation.

“This is the stage for the representatives. You can see that the classroom has multiple monitors, two desks and chairs each, and two tablets each. Class A and Class C will compete in this classroom, and an identical setup is prepared in another classroom in the special building, where Class B and Class D will face each other.”

It seemed safe to assume that the arrangement would be similar to the special exam at the end of the first year, given it was a one-on-one battle.

“When the start time arrives, the vanguard representatives from each class will take their seats, and that's when the special exam will begin. The middle guard and generals appointed as representatives will stay in a different waiting room, but I want them to watch the flow of the exam and understand it.”

Mashima-sensei explained, displaying the exam instructions on one of the monitors.

## [Special Exam Flow]

*Roles of ordinary students, honor students, teachers, graduates, underclassmen, upperclassmen, and traitors are assigned for discussion.*

### **Preparation:**

- *Each class's representatives will form five groups of seven students each at their own discretion.*
- ※ *The same group cannot be used consecutively; they must rest once.*
- ※ *If there are fewer than 35 participants, the same person may join a second group if necessary.*

- ① *Each class's representative selects one group to participate in the discussion via tablet.*
- ② *The discussion between 14 participants, seven from each class, will be observed via the monitor.*
  - *Each round lasts five minutes.*
- ③ *After each round, both representatives nominate one participant and are given the right to select which specific role they believe the participant possesses.*
  - *Only one nomination per round; passing is allowed. Selections must be made on the tablet within one minute.*
- ④ *The lives of the representatives change depending on whether the selected participant's role is correct.*
  - *Teachers and graduates can exercise the powers of their roles at this time.*
  - *If either representative passes on nominating, an honor student will choose one participant to leave the room.*  
*(In which case, there is no change in the representatives' lives.)*
  - *The discussion ends for the one to two students chosen by the representative or honor student, in which they will have to leave the room.*  
*(If the nomination is correct, the role is disclosed, but not for honor student nominations.)*
- ⑤ *Discussion ends when all ordinary students OR honor students have left.*
  - *If a representative's lives reach zero during the discussion, the discussion ends.*
  - *The exam ends when the general's lives reach zero.*

- If both class generals simultaneously reach zero lives, they will rematch with one life each until a decision is reached.
- A recess interval is held at the end of each discussion or when representatives change.

As the details of the special exam were revealed, the full picture of the exam gradually became clear.

Meanwhile, Mashima-sensei continued to explain using the monitor, observing the representatives' reactions.

“The basic flow of the special exam is conducted and repeated according to steps ① to ⑤. You might notice some terms that stand out, but I'll explain them in order. First, ‘participants’ refers to all students other than you representatives, and these students will conduct the ‘discussion’ which is central to the exam. Please look forward to the upcoming explanation of the discussion.”

### **Discussion:**

- The 14 participants will engage in discussions to discern the roles assigned to each individual.

The discussion ends when either the number of ordinary students or honor students reaches zero, or when the representative's lives reaches zero.

[In this case, all students remaining in the discussion receive 5000 private points.]

- Aside from when nominating a participant as an ordinary student, honor student, or traitor, the representative can choose to nominate a participant as an ‘executive role’ instead of their specific role. In this case, it wouldn't be an exact nomination, so their specific position would not be disclosed.
- Students other than the waiting representatives can watch the discussion through monitors.
- If representatives successfully nominate in the same round, a process of canceling each other out is performed first.

## **List of roles and number of participants given to participants:**

### 'Ordinary students' 6-8 people

*Students who aren't granted any special authority.*

*If a misidentification (including executive-role nomination) occurs, the nominating representative loses one life.*

### 'Honor students' 2 people

*If successfully nominated as an honor student, reduce the life of the opposing representative by three.*

*If a misidentification (including executive-role nomination) occurs, the nominating representative loses two lives.*

*Honor students recognize other honor students and are aware of their presence.*

*If one or more representatives pass, at the end of the round, one participant is nominated by an honor student to leave the room.*

*[If two remain, the honor student with nomination rights is randomly chosen. Also, honor students cannot nominate other honor students.]*

### 'Teacher' 1 person

*If successfully nominated as an executive role, reduce the life of the opponent by one, and by two if successfully nominated as a teacher.*

*If a misidentification occurs, the nominating representative loses two lives.*

*Effect: At the end of each round, they can block one student from being nominated by an honor student. This can only be done once per game.*

### 'Graduate' 1 person

*If successfully nominated as an executive role, reduce the life of the opponent by one, and by two if successfully nominated as a graduate.*

*If a misidentification occurs, the nominating representative loses two lives.*

*Effect: At the end of each round, they may nominate one student to learn their role. However, they cannot recognize the identity of traitors and will perceive them as ordinary students.*

### 'Underclassman' 1 person

*If successfully nominated as an executive role, recover one life to yourself, and recover two lives if successfully nominated as an underclassman.*

*If a misidentification occurs, the nominating representative loses one life.*

### 'Upperclassman' 1 person

*If successfully nominated as an executive role, reduce the life of the opponent by one, and reduce life by one if successfully nominated as an upperclassman, while also randomly disclosing the roles of two participants to the representative.*

*If a misidentification occurs, the nominating representative loses one life.*

#### 'Traitor' 0-2 people

*※ Each class can utilize this role only once per exam.*

*The representative can assign one opposing class participant, who's taking part in the discussion, as a traitor.*

*During each round, the role of one participant (excluding honor students) is randomly disclosed to the representative who designated the traitor.*

*If a misidentification (including executive-role nomination) occurs, two lives are lost, and the opposing representative's rights to assign a traitor are restored.*

*If an honor student attempts to dismiss a traitor, it is treated as if blocked and does not result in the traitor leaving the room.*

*A traitor cannot be dismissed unless the opponent misidentifies them or the representative cannot determine it through interrogation.*

#### **Rewards for each role:**

- *If the ordinary students' side wins, all ordinary students receive 10,000 private points.*
- *The honor students' side receives 5000 private points each time a participant with an executive role is nominated, and if the honor students' side wins, they receive 500,000 private points.*
- *Teachers and graduates receive 50,000 private points if they do not leave the room by the end of the discussion.*
- *In the case where upperclassmen or underclassmen are dismissed by an honor student, all students with either of those two roles receive 50,000 private points.*
- *If a traitor doesn't leave the room by the end of the discussion, they receive either 5,000,000 private points or 50 class points, whichever they prefer.*

As Mashima-sensei explained the roles and their effects to the participants, he took out the tablet that would be used during the actual exam and displayed it on the monitor.

The tablet had the names of the 14 participants and the pass option tentatively placed. When passing, it would need to be reconfirmed twice. When nominating, you would need to select a name from the screen, and then either

indicate them as an *executive role* or a specific named role, and then confirm. Since ordinary students didn't need to nominate, that option wasn't presented.

"The representatives here play a crucial role in the victory or defeat of the class, but their classmates can also significantly influence the outcome of the representatives' battles. The rules may seem complex, but you all had a similar experience during the luxury cruise exam during your first year. Think of it as something close to that, and you might quickly come to understand it."

During the previous year's luxury cruise exam, I didn't know at the time, but it used a system similar to the 'Werewolf game,' aiming to identify students called 'VIPs.'

Back then, I didn't know anything about the real world, let alone such a game.

Since those days, I acquired quite a bit of unexpected knowledge, which I suppose could be called growth.

Thinking back, it was Mashima-sensei who had been explaining the zodiac exam at that time.

While reminiscing, I listened to the conversation.

"If both representatives successfully nominate, a process of canceling each other out will occur. For underclassmen, it's a bit special; if A correctly identifies an underclassman and B correctly nominates a teacher as an *executive role*, the difference is adjusted, and A's lives are restored by one."

It seemed that the final outcome reflected the comparison of our own results with those of the opponent.

"You representatives might want to join in on the discussion, but during the exam, you can only watch and listen through the monitor, without giving any instructions. Moreover, representatives who aren't participating in the match cannot even watch the discussion."

Participants would discuss among themselves, and decide the outcome with 14 members.

Meanwhile, the participating representatives would oversee the discussion, having the right to nominate who to eliminate. Though, it seemed quite unusual that one of the representatives must pass before the discussing honor students would be granted the right to remove someone.

If capable representatives were part of the discussion, they could identify suspicious students through their responses or ask questions to determine their roles, but this wasn't possible through the monitor. The majority of the deduction is left to the participants.

"Various roles can significantly impact the representatives' lives. Especially the 'traitor' role, which can only be selected once, may be able to significantly influence the outcome of the match. If A designates a student from B's class as a traitor, as long as this traitor remains, the roles of the participants in the

discussion, except for the honor students, are revealed to A one by one each round. If left unchecked, it will continue to put B in a disadvantageous spot. However, if they rush to eliminate the traitor and mistakenly nominate and remove the wrong person, on top of losing life points, the right to select a traitor is restored for the opponent's representative."

It seemed that the roles' effects would be strong enough to bring in both favorable and unfavorable turns of events to the special exam.

Therefore, at the beginning, each class would start with the right to use it only once.

Whether to use it right away as an 'early-bird-gets-the-worm' strategy for a quick start, to hope to gain a second right to use it due to the opponent's misidentification, or to save it to turn the tables in one move against the middle guard or general, was up to them.

However, what concerned me was that currently, traitors couldn't be eliminated by nomination.

"How to find and exclude the traitor from the discussion... This can be resolved by adopting a special rule only when the traitor is in play, allowing the representative to call out a student from their class at the end of each round and question them in a 'interrogation' to determine if they are the traitor."

## **Interrogation**

- At the end of each round, representatives can have a one-on-one interrogation if they wish
- ※ Interrogation prohibits discussing the progress or detailed rules of the special exam.

- ① Conduct the interrogation
- ② The participant confesses whether they are a traitor or not. In this case, they are asked to answer first
- ③ The representative decides whether to determine them as a traitor or judge them innocent
- ④ Result:

### If the participant is a traitor

- If they confess and the representative determines they're a traitor, the rule that causes a random participant's role, excluding honor students, to be disclosed to the opposing representative each round will cease, and the traitor's rewards are forfeited
- If they confess and the representative fails to notice them, the representative loses five lives
- If they deny and the representative determines they're a traitor, the traitor is expelled from the school
- If they deny and the representative fails to notice them, the representative loses five lives

### If the participant is not a traitor

- If they confess and the representative determines they're a traitor, the representative loses one life
- If they confess and the representative judges them as innocent, no penalty
- If they deny and the representative determines they're a traitor, the representative loses one life
- If they deny and the representative judges them as innocent, no penalty

First, the traitor's side would answer whether they are innocent or guilty, and then the representative would get to judge whether they're telling the truth or lying.

It was unlikely for someone who wasn't a traitor to falsely claim to be one, but it was a necessary clarification.

“The representatives can check these rules on their tablet at any time during the exam. Also, feel free to speak up if you have questions, and the examiner will answer within the scope they're able to.”

Indeed, there were many rules. There wouldn't be any problems if everyone could grasp them, but some might want to check the rules repeatedly, so that was a thoughtful consideration.

"I have something on my mind... may I?"

The representatives had been listening quietly until now, but Sanada broke the silence.

With Mashima-sensei's permission to ask questions, Sanada stood up and slightly bowed to the other representatives.

"I understand the explanation you just gave, but wouldn't it be immediately obvious if I were to sneak in a traitor among the opponent's participants? Indeed, if they remain hidden until the very end, gaining 50 class points would be very significant. They would surely want to work hard for the class's sake. Also, putting aside whether there really are students who'd wish to do so or not, it's also entirely possible to earn private points for yourself over class points. However, if they understand that remaining in the discussion as a traitor is a significant disadvantage, wouldn't many declare themselves as traitors, even through the monitor?"

In a fair discussion, even if they came forward, the possibility of them 'lying' makes the truth not entirely clear. But as Sanada said, the traitor was a special case. Because of the way the opposing representatives could exercise the rules, only one person would come forward. It would be a different story if there was a real traitor intending to confuse their classmates, but that was hardly worth considering.

"That's a valid question, but that's impossible since the participants will receive a 'different explanation' from you representatives."

"A different explanation...?"

"Yes. The victory conditions and rules disclosed here for the representatives are only partially conveyed to the participants, so they don't know the details. From the representative's perspective, finding the honor students is the key to victory, but the participating students are merely supposed to debate among ordinary students, honor students, and other roles."

In essence, the content of the discussion in this special exam was basically meaningless.

If the participants were aware that finding the honor students was the representatives' goal, in exaggerated terms, they could simply speak up and appeal with their words. Even if the opposing representative lied, there was no benefit for their own class's participants to lie.

It seemed the school covered up the real rules to resolve this contradiction.

As a result, representatives were adjusted to fight according to the rules for representatives, and participants according to the rules for participants.

Of course, among the participants, there would be those who found this unnatural. Some might even deduce what the representatives were doing and how they were fighting during the discussions. However, without knowing crucial details, like how representatives would nominate them, how valuable lives were, and the characteristics of the roles, reckless actions couldn't be taken. It was also conceivable that openly revealing one's identity could lead to disadvantages.

The same went for the risks and rewards for the traitors.

Even if they were to proceed to an interrogation with the representative, they would struggle to remain undetected in order to gain 50 class points.

However, if it came to interrogation between the traitor and the representative, confession was mandatory.

If they denied it and the representative conclusively identified them as traitors, expulsion awaited them.

It seemed that there were many abilities that would be required in this special exam.

Knowing not only one's classmates but also the opponent's classmates was an essential element.

Therefore, the difficulty would greatly vary depending on how much one grasped the everyday behaviors and gestures of each student.

Naturally, the higher the insight and observational skills in noticing the smallest gestures, the better.

Moreover, since the representatives could now engage in the interrogation, it was good to think that the mental strength not to be misled by poor leads was also required.

On the other hand, as Chabashira-sensei had mentioned, physical abilities were not necessary, and the academic abilities needed were proven to be minimal. It seemed that Ryūen's choice not to make Hiyori the representative might not have been a bad decision, considering she wasn't absent due to illness.

In Class C, where there were few people capable of facilitating discussions, she was a valuable asset.

At this stage, it was impossible to judge everything, but it seemed that Ryūen had somewhat of a tailwind, considering that it wasn't a battle of academic abilities and that Hiyori was not made the representative.

# 1

The twelve representatives first moved to a classroom to wait and rest. Naturally, the conversation shifted to the topic of the special exam on the way. Horikita and Yōsuke were discussing the rules for participants.

“We won’t be directly involved with them until the exam is over, but the burden is greater than imagined, and even the students who aren’t representatives have been given important roles.”

“That’s right. In fact, without the cooperation of the participants, we representatives wouldn’t be able to win.”

If they participated in the discussion without thinking and were easily led by the opposing class, there was a possibility that their roles could be discerned by the opponent’s representative, and our lives could be reduced.

It was conceivable that there’d be a case where the discussion was neglected, so we wouldn’t be able to get the information needed on the participants. Consequently, we wouldn’t be able to nominate and reduce the opponent representative’s lives.

Or, without any hints, the outcome might just have to be trusted to chance.

Excluding classes that weren’t all too confident, this would be an unwanted development.

“However, I’m still worried about how much Ike-kun and the others can understand.”

Horikita seemed anxious about whether they could fulfill their roles as participants.

If possible, she would want to explain things to them directly and in detail.

Things that would normally be natural weren’t allowed on this big stage.

“I’d be lying if I said I’m not worried, but that should be the same for the other classes.”

Yōsuke, walking at the end of the line, muttered this while looking at the nine people ahead.

“That’s right. The conditions are the same for everyone... It’s everyone’s first experience with such a discussion.”

“It probably won’t go smoothly right away. Since it’s a clash between classes, it might seem like a seven vs seven situation, but in reality, there are many cases where people with the same roles become allies. The idea of collaborating with other classes in the final exam was a surprise to everyone.”

Even if they were suddenly told to team up, it normally wouldn’t go so smoothly.

“Honestly, I can’t even imagine how it will go.”

Yōsuke seemed to have tried to imagine the situation but quickly gave up as the image didn’t form.

As they continued the conversation, we soon arrived at our destination.

The waiting room they entered had two monitors, unlike the previous classroom.

The rest of the room was nothing but twelve empty seats.

“Students waiting here can check the status of the exam in real-time on this monitor. However, they can only see the changes in the representatives’ lives and the outcomes of the matches. As I explained earlier, it will not be possible to know what’s happening within the exam itself.”

A sample text appeared on the left side of the two monitors.

## Results

*2nd Year B Class Vanguard Representative Name ○ Remaining Life 0  
2nd Year D Class Middle Guard Representative Name ○ Remaining Life 4  
2nd Year B Class Middle Guard Representative Name ○ Move Promptly  
Interval Remaining Time 10:00*

“When a decision is reached between representatives, it will be displayed on this monitor. In the actual exam, the circle where the representative’s name is will display each student’s name. The other monitor will only show the results between Class A and Class C.”

There was little to learn from this monitor, and it wouldn’t be able to provide hints for strategizing on the exam.

“Also, you representatives are forbidden from leaving this floor until the exam is over. You may use the restroom freely while waiting, but if you exceed the time allocated for movement during rounds, a separate penalty will be imposed. Be careful.”

It seemed to be a measure to isolate the representatives and the participants. The confiscation of cell phones, the body checks, and the ban on moving floors were all part of not giving any information to the participants. Even if you tried to find a way to communicate, you were almost certainly being thoroughly watched. It would be better not to take any suspicious actions beyond what was necessary.

“From now on, I would like the three representatives of each class to have a discussion and select 35 students to divide into 5 groups. You have one hour.”

I walked towards Horikita with Yōsuke under Mashima-sensei’s instructions. At the same time, Ichinose’s class also formed a small circle of three people. However, Sakayanagi and Ryūen’s classes, although they had closed the distance between themselves, showed no signs of discussion.

“Those two seem to be making all the groups by themselves.”

Horikita muttered without much surprise.

“They probably never intended to listen to their classmates’ opinions from the start.”

Yōsuke, who was somewhat taken aback but still had a smile on his face, said in agreement.

“I would like to incorporate any advice if there is any, so what do you think?”

Horikita, still grasping to see how to distribute her classmates, asked for my honest opinion.

“I think we should create a group consisting of only excellent students. Even though a group can only participate once before they must rest, they could still become a trump card.”

Here, ‘excellent students’ didn’t refer to academic ability.

It meant students who could think quickly, read the atmosphere, and had good communication skills. Preferably, those who wouldn’t negatively attract attention.

“Kushida-san might’ve been more suited for this special exam than I am.”

“That can’t be helped. It was a decision made solely on the information disclosed beforehand.”

It was the same for all classes. Every class would’ve made better selections if they had all the information.

“In any case, we should count Kushida as an excellent student.”

“Yes, I think Kushida-san will definitely be able to deliver results individually.”

Yōsuke, who made the suggestion, nodded towards Horikita.

“We’ve made many sacrifices to keep her. I’ll need to have her perform well.”

With that in mind, we started creating a specific group of reliable students on the tablet.

Occasionally, she sought advice from us, and Yōsuke also racked his brains to respond.

I mostly refrained from voluntarily speaking, continuing mainly to observe.

It was necessary to let Horikita, who was settling into a middle guard position, form the groups she thought best to resolve things on her own.

“By the way... now that you’ve heard the rules, what do you think about this special exam, Horikita-san?”

Yōsuke must’ve had his own thoughts after hearing the teacher’s explanation.

As if looking to verify his own answer, he turned such a question to Horikita.

“I didn’t think that academic or physical abilities alone would directly correlate to the results of the exam, but this was certainly unexpected. In truth,

what could be said as to what decides the difference between winning and losing... Even if you say to create the ideal group, what exactly is the ideal?"

"Yeah, I also feel a strong sense of uncertainty. Even if we group students like Kushida-san together, will that be the thing that'll end up leading our class to victory?"

The stage was set for the representatives to fight, and the participants for the discussion were gathered from two classes.

Moreover, the participants weren't fully informed about the representatives' conditions for victory, so they could only engage purely in discussions, and the representatives couldn't expect any assistance from them.

In other words, whether the group's students were excellent or not could be seen as a minor issue.

The important thing was which representative could quickly identify roles such as honor students from the combined discussion of the 14 participants.

"At least, the representative needs to have good insight, the ability to see and discern people."

"...I guess so. But then again, maybe our opponents are more troublesome than we thought."

Horikita said, glancing stealthily towards Ichinose. Fortunately, they were already seriously discussing the group formation and weren't looking our way.

"Unfortunately, she might understand things about our class better than both you or me, Horikita..."

"Yes..."

I found this special exam quite interesting.

A point I wanted to especially acknowledge was how several possible means of victory had been prepared for the representatives.

In most cases, during the stage where the exam contents were announced, a bias on who would win would already seem to be evident, but with one particular method, Horikita, Ichinose, Sakayanagi, and Ryūen all have a chance to win the exam. It wouldn't be strange for any of them to win.

Under Horikita's leadership and Yōsuke's assistance, the group formation was underway.

While observing the two, there was one thing I needed to confirm and request.

After deciphering the rules for this special exam, I realized that there was something that I felt was necessary.

"Let me talk about something unrelated to forming groups first. It's about the right to designate a traitor. Could you let me have it?"

When I conveyed this, as the one holding the tablet, Horikita's fingertips stopped.

“That’s quite an unreasonable request. You’re the one who imposed the conditions on me. I thought this was an indispensable trump card for me to gain the upper hand as a middle guard?”

Indeed, Horikita was prepared to take down the opponent’s leader as a middle guard.

She wanted to exercise the right to select the traitor herself, as it could serve as a powerful weapon.

That was why I brought it up at this moment.

“Still dissatisfied? Then, you won’t give it to me?”

“It depends on the situation. First and foremost, is it something you really need?”

*Can you win without using it?* This was also a way of confirming that.

“The opponent is Ichinose. As far as what I could decipher from the rules this time, she’d be quite the formidable enemy. It would be helpful if you could decide the match as a middle guard, but if you lose after using the right, it will become a risky endeavor. It’s safer to keep it for emergencies.”

“I understand what you want to say. Indeed, that might be the case. But then, you’ll have to ease your conditions a bit before I can agree.”

If she were to give up the right to select the traitor, Horikita would have to defeat Ichinose, who holds the right to select the traitor. In addition to the difference in the amount of lives, this handicap would also be heavy.

“Then, let’s do this. If I lose after receiving the right, I will fully cooperate with our class until graduation. If you wish, I will take on any role at any time. How about this?”

“You’re retracting that stingy half-year proposal?”

“That’s right.”

“It’s not often you show such a cooperative attitude. It seems you’re confident you won’t lose if you have the right to select the traitor... Let’s settle on that.”

I had initially proposed a shorter period of half a year, and it turned out to bear fruit in this way.

“If I can get that much cooperation, perhaps it’s okay to lose. Maybe I should hold back this time?”

Having said that, she flashed a slightly malicious smile. Of course, Horikita would never actually hold back. The time given for group formation was one hour, but no particular class struggled. All classes finished their tasks in about 40 minutes, then returned the tablets to Mashima-sensei. All that was left was to sit in any available seat and wait for the signal to start the special exam...

Even now that all the rules had been disclosed, the basic ideas hadn’t changed.

However, following the one personal desire I had, I decided to leave traces of that here.

For that purpose, I sent a glance toward Ryūen. Soon our eyes met, and I conveyed that I wanted to meet him in the hallway.

Ryūen seemed to understand the signal and left the classroom ahead of me.

“I’m going to the restroom for a bit.”

I excused myself to Horikita and Yōsuke and headed out to the special building corridor.

As I stepped into the hallway, another person followed me out of the classroom.

“Ayanokōji-kun.”

With a volume that wouldn’t disturb the quiet atmosphere of the hallway, Hoshinomiya-sensei approached.

“Going to the restroom? Can I have a moment?”

I stopped and turned around, and Hoshinomiya-sensei closed the distance even more.

Close enough to touch her without stretching my arm.

“It’s surprising to see you coming out as a representative today. I hadn’t expected it at all.”

“Is it that surprising? I participated in the special exam at the end of last year too.”

When I brought up a suitable comparison, Hoshinomiya-sensei snorted a little.

“My class doesn’t have another chance. We’re Class D, you know? If you come out, our chances of winning will surely decrease. You’d understand my disagreement towards that, right?”

She bluntly voiced her thoughts without sugarcoating them. As a teacher, she seemed to have crossed a line she shouldn’t have, but it was better not to touch on that point.

“I don’t consider your class an easy opponent. Ichinose’s class is a formidable enemy. From the impression given by the rules, I actually feel as if I’m at a disadvantage.”

“Advantage or disadvantage, that doesn’t matter. What’s important is the result—the victory.”

Clinging to uncertainties was indeed pointless.

“That might be true. All we can do is compete with each other—”

“Give me the win. I want you to discreetly hold back.”

Hoshinomiya-sensei interrupted me and said that.

Kanzaki had said something similar, but this was far more direct.

“That’s unreasonable. As someone entrusted as the general, I can’t hold back.”

“I’m not saying it’s for free. What if I say I’ll properly give you something in return?”

“A return that’s equivalent to giving up the victory isn’t something you can easily offer, right? Besides, Hoshinomiya-sensei, you’re a teacher. Isn’t it breaking an unwritten rule to intervene in a student’s fight?”

While being cautious of our surroundings, Hoshinomiya-sensei stepped even closer.

“Sae-chan is the one I definitely can’t lose to. For that, I’m willing to do anything.”

“I see. You don’t care about your position as a teacher.”

“That’s right.”

“Then let me ask you, what kind of reward are you prepared to offer?”

“I’ll do anything I’m able to. For example, if I get information about the special exams held during the third year early, I could secretly inform you in advance.”

I asked the question expecting her to step out of her role as a teacher, but it was more than I imagined.

Right now, even if she didn’t know that I wasn’t carrying a recording device, she couldn’t say such things, even as a lie.

“If you’re willing to go that far, you should just leak that information to the class you’re in charge of.”

“Those kids are no good. They can’t be corrupted. Even if I made such a proposal, they wouldn’t be able to fully utilize it. Instead, they would try to protect me.”

Even though Ichinose craved victory, she wouldn’t easily resort to dishonesty.

She would undoubtedly stop Hoshinomiya-sensei, whose position as a teacher was at risk.

It seemed she understood that much.

“In that case, you might be different, right? You could surely make good use of the information.”

“Thank you for the offer, but the risk is too great. I have to decline.”

Hoshinomiya-sensei probably didn’t expect me to accept such a dangerous proposal.

“Then what kind of reward do you want? Can’t you suggest something, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“I don’t have anything in particular in mind, so I’m waiting for your proposal.”

“Ugh... then there’s something else. Yes, something only I can do... or something like that.”

Saying that, Hoshinomiya-sensei reached out with her right hand and gently touched my ear.

“Are you going to clean my ears?”

“Stop joking. You know what I mean, right?”

She was showing her resolve to do anything, no matter what it took.

However, regardless of whatever she offered in return, teaming up with Hoshinomiya-sensei here was just a risk. It was easy to dismiss a foolish teacher who desired victory, but things weren’t that simple. Her resolve to do anything for victory was undoubtedly genuine.

*If that’s the case, just like how spat-out saliva couldn’t be swallowed, I have to consider that my statements could be picked up and used by her. It’s necessary to consider various risks here.*

(TL NOTE: That’s a literal translation of a saying: 吐いた唾は飲めぬ with the meaning “words once spoken cannot be taken back.”)

“You’re looking at me with such unpleasant eyes, Ayanokōji-kun. It’s like... you can see right through my mind.”

“What you can do now is to believe in Ichinose’s class’s victory.”

“No matter what, you really won’t let me win, will you?”

I faced Hoshinomiya-sensei directly and took a step back.

“Of course not. Horikita’s class and Ichinose’s class are in completely opposite positions.”

“Then you don’t know what measures I might take, do you?”

“That’s interesting. With that included, I’ll be looking forward to it. Excuse me.”

With that, I turned my back and started walking towards the restroom.

Hoshinomiya-sensei didn’t call out to me any further, nor were there any signs of her chasing after me.

## Chapter 4: Battle of the Vanguards

AFTER JUST PAST 9 AM., participants arrived at their designated classrooms to receive detailed explanations about the exam from unfamiliar examiners. The same explanations were being given simultaneously in four different classrooms.

The rooms were filled with the usual desks and chairs, with nothing looking out of the ordinary.

It was hard to imagine what kind of exam would be conducted in such a normal environment, but as the explanation progressed, participants' understanding gradually deepened.

The explanation about the discussion that the participants would be carrying out continued without ever touching on the victory conditions for the representatives. Once the explanation was over, the examiner took a breather. The students then looked at each other, trying their best to memorize the rules.

“The most important point to remember is that in this discussion, the only way you can contribute to your class is to perform the role you are given to the best of your abilities.”

This was exactly what the participants heard from Ayanokōji and the others.

“We understand our victory conditions, but... the victory conditions for the representatives are more important, aren’t they? What are they?”

Matsushita asked on behalf of her classmates.

The battle between the participants was essentially just about whether they would gain private points.

On the other hand, the battle between the representatives would drastically affect the fluctuation of class points, which would determine the class's future.

It was only natural to prioritize long-term gains as a priority over short-term gains.

However, the unfamiliar examiner, who typically didn't tend to react, answered in a detached tone.

“As I just said, all you can do is stick to your roles and conduct your discussions properly. There’s no point in trying to guess their victory conditions —how the representatives fight and how the rules might differ each time for them might minutely change each discussion. Only when the special exam is over will you be able to learn all the answers.”

The answers weren't vague to begin with; rather, the examiner had no intentions of telling them the answers from the start.

It was impossible to go without feeling the stubborn intent of the school.

“Can we really not see our progress until the exam is over?”

“That’s right.”

Shinohara complained, and the examiner responded without pause.

They had thoroughly explained that the rules between representatives must be kept secret and were not to be disclosed.

“Remember, not taking the discussions seriously will never be advantageous for your class.”

Playing out your role in an easily recognizable way was a liberty for the participants, but there was no guarantee that it would turn out well for the representatives they belonged to.

As long as it was unclear what would determine victory or defeat, engaging seriously in discussions, as instructed, was the choice that would leave you with the least regrets.

The examiners finished conveying what the participants needed to do and ended their explanations.

# 1

After listening to the explanation, the students started moving around 9:30 AM and headed towards the special building.

They were then guided to a classroom that was set up for the discussion.

Cameras were installed on all four sides of the room, leaving no blind spots.

The desks and chairs, enough for two groups of seven, were arranged to circle around and form a single ring of seats. Each seat had a tablet placed on it, with partitions set up to prevent peeking from the sides.

Participants could check their own roles from the tablet upon entering the room. When a round ended, they could reconfirm their status using the tablet's functions. Honor students during this period had the right to eliminate someone, aside from other honor students, if a representative had passed that turn. Others with executive roles that held special authority would have to exercise their role's effect during this time as well.

At the back of each chair, red and blue tape were used as simple markers, indicating the seats for Class B and Class D, respectively.

Even if participants wanted to group with students they were close with, the seats they inevitably took placed them next to students from the opposing class, making it impossible to whisper to classmates.

A large monitor was also installed separately, displaying important rules during the discussion.

### **Rules during the discussion:**

- *All students participating in the discussion should make sure that everyone can hear them when they speak.*
- *Addressing only specific individuals is prohibited.*
- *If a student is determined to have violated any of the above-mentioned rules, for example whispering in someone's ear, they will be dismissed from the room.*
- *Excessive slander, defamation, or violence will result in the student being penalized and dismissed from the room.*
- *Leaving the room midway through the discussions will penalize the class representative.*

*※ The representatives' lives will be reduced depending on the severity of the penalty.*

“The monitor will display the results while the discussions are in progress as well as the final results of the discussion.”

With the students' attention focused on the screen, the examiner changed the monitor to show an example of what would happen at the end of the discussion, displaying patterns of the final results.

**Final Results:**

*Ordinary Students: 4*

*Honor Students: 0*

*Teachers: 0*

*Graduates: 0*

*Underclassmen: 1*

*Upperclassmen: 0*

*Traitors: 1*

*Please leave the room promptly at the end of the discussion and switch with the next group.*

*Recess Interval Time Remaining: 10:00*

“The results of your role and such will be displayed. After checking, please follow the instructions and leave the room.”

With that said, they were then quickly dismissed and told to move to the waiting room.

“The exam will be starting soon. Students who are being called in the waiting room should enter the classroom immediately.”

The flurry of explanations ended, and their battle was about to begin without even a moment to let all the information sink in.

## 2

At 10:00 AM, the monitor in the participants' waiting room lit up.

### [First Discussion]

#### Participants:

##### 2nd Year Class B

*Sotomura Hideo, Makita Susumu, Minami Hakuo, Yukimura Teruhiko, Azuma Sana, Karuizawa Kei, Satō Maya*

##### 2nd Year Class D

*Shibata Sō, Nakanishi Jirō, Moriyama Susumu, Andō Sayo, Yamagata Hina, Ishimaru Yuriko, Ōnuki Nagisa*

‘Students whose names are displayed, please head to the discussion room.’

“Ah, I’m first... Maya-chan too...”

Karuizawa, who had been sitting bored with her phone confiscated, hurriedly stood up.

Satō, who was also set to go first, quickly ran down to join Karuizawa.

While many students still hadn’t fully grasped the rules, they stepped out into the hallway and began to move.

“Hey Yukimura-kun, what should we do?”

Satō approached Yukimura, who was walking nearby, and asked for advice.

“Just follow the instructions. After all, this discussion is not directly related to the class. If our roles are divided between ordinary students and honor students, it means we will become friends and foe.”

Although Yukimura’s words were cold, he added that this was the nature of the special exam this time.

“The examiner said it too. It’s best to follow the rules and tackle it to the best of your abilities.”

“That’s true, but... we still don’t quite understand what ‘best’ means...”

(*TL NOTE: The word “best” (最善) is a Japanese saying that is hard to get across in English with the same nuance in this case. That is the reason for the emphasis on the word.*)

Seeing Satō and Karuizawa fidgeting nearby, Yukimura sighed. He found their way of thinking, which he thought was typical of girls, unpleasant.

However, Yukimura was no longer only thinking in the self-centered way he did when he first enrolled.

Nowadays, he spent time with Hasebe and Miyake whenever possible and learned to get along with people.

“Maybe... it’s not just you guys who are nervous and panicking. The other class must be in a similar state as well. Maybe the first step is to get used to the atmosphere of this exam, yeah? You’ve played the Werewolf game before, right?”

“I have a few times. So should I think of this in the same way?”

“I haven’t... Is there a trick to it?”

“Well... even if you’re chosen as an honor student, it’s better not to carelessly look at the other honor students. You’ll be surprised how quickly you’ll be noticed and found out.”

Although he wasn’t used to it, Yukimura gave them advice which also helped calm himself down. He was aware of the magnitude of this end-of-year special exam. Despite his dissatisfaction with the secretive rules and the fact that they didn’t even allow updates on the progress of representatives, he had no choice but to put his mind into doing his best as a participant.

“Ah, I can see that. Where you’re looking and so on is important after all.”

Karuizawa seemed to vaguely understand the point and began explaining it to Satō.

Seeing this, Yukimura thought they would be fine for the time being.

“...I’m fine...”

He whispered so that no one could hear him.

Helping calm down the two girls who were unrelated to him, ended up being a benefit for himself as well.

He thought about this as headed towards the discussion location.

The classroom door opened, and all 14 students stepped in.

Karuizawa and Satō exchanged glances, indicating that they wanted to try and sit as close to each other as possible, sandwiching Shibata from Class D in between them. The idea was to sit as close to each other as possible, even if they weren’t able to do anything together.

The other students also sat in their preferred designated seats.

Some preferred to sit closest to the entrance, while others preferred to sit at the farthest seat possible. Their opinions varied.

As soon as the 14 students were seated, the start of the discussion was announced.

*‘The end-of-year special exam will now begin. The roles of each student will be displayed on their respective tablets. Please check before starting the first round of discussion.’*

Every student looked down at the tablets placed on their desks. The screen momentarily switched to display the roles of the 14 students.

*Ordinary Students: 8*

*Honor Students: 2*

*Teacher: 1*

*Graduate: 1*

*Underclassman: 1*

*Upperclassman: 1*

As explained in the rules, each student was assigned to a role of some kind. While everyone seemed hesitant to speak first, Yukimura Teruhiko from Class B was the first to act.

“Let’s get to it. Can you confirm that you aren’t an honor student, Nakanishi?”

“Why me all of a sudden? Why would I be an honor student?”

“Sorry, but you were the first one I made eye contact with.”

Since he became a regular student, Yukimura, hoping for an opening, launched an offensive attack.

He spoke, naming someone from another class despite knowing that it would cause a commotion.

From here, the discussion began to unfold rapidly.

# 3

Both Hirata and Hamaguchi watched the discussion for five minutes through the monitor.

The participants seemed to be probing each other through the discussion, but there weren't many ways to tell if they were lying or telling the truth.

Suspicious students were spotted, but whether they were actually honor students was another matter. With no clear direction, the representatives had basically two choices: strike first to identify the roles and press the opponent, or avoid risks and wait.

At least, the two sitting here wouldn't recklessly push through with the risks.

*'Please proceed with nominating or passing. You have one minute.'*

After that announcement, a brief silence followed. In this classroom, apart from two students, there was only one adult present. It wasn't the second-year homeroom teacher who had been explaining things until just a moment ago, but a face they had never seen before. Without uttering a single word, he observed the students' conversations and movements from a corner of the classroom.

"It's a tough exam. Even you don't seem to understand it right away, Hirata-kun. Right?"

Hamaguchi asked, sounding skeptical.

Hirata, not fond of strategizing, simply nodded in agreement.

"Trying to figure out who's suspicious makes everyone look suspicious. It's not easy to decide at first glance."

Like the 14 participants who had discussed earlier, the two vanguards cautiously exchanged words. Both shared a common trait: they were not adept at telling the kind of lies that torment others. In fact, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say they showed a distaste for such methods.

"...Alright."

Hamaguchi, after taking a breath, unhesitatingly chose to pass on the tablet. Without a definite answer, the risk was high. That was why, without hesitation, he made that decision and waited for Hirata's judgment.

On the other hand, Hirata also couldn't afford to take risks. Among the 14, the representative had to discern two honor students, one teacher, one graduate, one underclassman, and one upperclassman. In other words, they would simply have to guess six out of fourteen roles in order to achieve results.

The probability was about 42.9%. Some might not consider the odds that bad, since it's relatively high.

In reality, however, since the roles to be nominated were divided into five categories, excluding ordinary students and traitors, the probability was significantly lower. With both sides deciding to pass, the process moved on, and

the effects held by the teacher and the graduate roles, as well as nominations by participating honor students would occur. Since it would naturally narrow down the participants when only specific roles operated the tablet, other roles without special abilities also had to choose who they currently suspected on the tablet.

The honor student ordered Karuizawa to leave. Her departure was decided in an instant, and before frustration could even surface, she quietly left the classroom.

Now there were 13 people. As the probability subtly shifted, the second round of discussion began. The two representatives stared intently at the monitors, their breaths so stifled that even the sound of their breathing seemed to disturb them.

The discussion seemed short yet long. Participants frequently stumbled over their words. And still, many didn't know how to act.

They were observing everyone with suspicion.

Every little gesture, every little action, everything felt suspicious.

When the second round ended, the representative's right to nominate came around once again. Hamaguchi glanced sideways at Hirata, who was staring at the tablet and deep in thought, hoping that Hirata had not yet figured anything out.

Half of his wish was granted; Hirata had not obtained any new information, just like in the first round.

Soon, Hirata looked towards Hamaguchi. They made eye contact, and they silently challenged each other in their minds. As the time limit approached, both made the same decision again.

Judging it too risky, they chose to hold and pass. Consequently, an honor student made a nomination, and another student left. Naturally, the student's role remained unknown.

Yet, the total number of participants kept steadily decreasing.

Preparing for the next round, Hamaguchi leaned forward and focused on the monitor again.

The number of participants had decreased by two, but the real targets were the honor students, who could take away three of the opponent's lives. With the number of participants itself decreasing, it seemed like a good time to strike.

The vanguard only had five lives. If Hamaguchi could identify one honor student, he could push his opponent into a corner. The third round began with such calculations in Hamaguchi's mind.

Yukimura's persistent remarks directed at Nakanishi caused more agitation than expected, leading to a situation where Nakanishi, under intense criticism from those around him, was on the verge of panic.

As his classmate, Hamaguchi knew well that Nakanishi wasn't the type to overact, so he decided that it was time to nominate him as an honor student, despite the risks.

On the other hand, Hirata didn't share the same sentiment.

Nakanishi's actions seemed forced, and he took it as a sign that he wasn't an honor student.

Yet, whether he held another role was still undetermined at this point.

While focusing on the same person, they reached different conclusions.

Hamaguchi quickly used the tablet to nominate Nakanishi as an honor student. Meanwhile, Hirata decided to pass once more.

*'Hamaguchi-kun has successfully identified Nakanishi-kun as an honor student, so Hirata-kun will lose three lives.'*

Hamaguchi's decision and nomination were successful, revealing that Nakanishi was indeed an honor student.

"Tsk..."

Expecting Hamaguchi to remain on the defensive, Hirata suffered a painful blow from his attack.

Hamaguchi had taken a significant head start but felt relieved realizing it was quite a reckless nomination. He had decided that Nakanishi was an honor student due to his impatience, but there was also a good chance that he played a different role. Acknowledging that luck played a part in the result, he resolved to stay composed and not let his emotions fluctuate too much.

As a result, Hirata quickly lost three lives, leaving him with only two remaining.

There was a significant change in the situation, where they had previously been keeping each other in check and progressing without speaking much.

Only one honor student remained. Hirata was pushed into a corner where he had to find another role—he became acutely aware of this as the fourth round began.

He realized how crucial it was to take the initiative in this special exam.

He could no longer carelessly choose to pass like in the previous three rounds.

He hoped for the discussion to progress and provide significant clues.

He impatiently wished for this, but things didn't proceed as he had hoped.

With Nakanishi confirmed as an honor student through the representative's nomination and having disappeared from the discussion, the remaining honor student would hide even deeper.

That was why, at this point, he wanted to rely on the students playing the other roles.

"Let's not hold grudges against each other, Hirata-kun."

"Yeah. Of course, I understand."

The discussion was progressing, albeit slowly.

It wouldn't be strange for new information to emerge soon.

About two minutes after the start of the fourth round, Yukimura finally declared himself a graduate.

Yukimura, having checked others for their roles three times, reported that all his previous checks were regular students and he had not yet determined who the honor student was.

However, this was a stroke of luck amidst Hirata's misfortune, a piece of good news.

If he nominated Yukimura as a graduate, he could reduce Hamaguchi's lives by two.

Of course, Hamaguchi would likely nominate Yukimura as a graduate as well, but then it would only cancel out.

This would allow the game to be decided in the next fifth round.

With no options left, Hirata would immediately nominate Yukimura as a graduate as soon as the discussion was over.

But...

*'Hamaguchi-kun, Hirata-kun, both of you have made incorrect nominations and will lose one life each.'*

After Yukimura was dismissed from the room, it was revealed that he wasn't a graduate.

Yukimura had only pretended to be a graduate to advance the stalemate and search for the honor student.

If he had observed Yukimura closely, he might've noticed that he was fabricating his role.

Hirata, in his impatience, failed to make a calm judgment and mistook him for a graduate who could identify the honor student.

It was a relief that Hamaguchi was also fooled, but still, their lives were now four to one. Shortly after the discussion had started, Hirata was still feeling a bit lighthearted, not realizing the weight of the end-of-year special exam.

However, it suddenly began to weigh on him now.

The cautious battle between the two representatives had begun, and from here, a cautious exchange ensued.

The participants, who had grown suspicious of the fact that Yukimura wasn't a graduate, all simultaneously shut their mouths, were unable to draw out new information, and chose to hold off. As a result, both representatives decided not to use their abilities to nominate and chose to pass. The remaining honor students continued to nominate one after another, forcing Ōnuki, Makita, and Azuma to leave.

Without fulfilling the conditions to end the discussion, he realized that only six participants remained.

The discussion moved on to the eighth round.

And then...

*'Hirata-kun has made an incorrect nomination and will lose one life. As this brings his lives to zero, Hirata-kun, please leave the room.'*

The announcement flowed mercilessly.

The participants were at a stalemate and the discussions made no progress. Hirata, driven by impatience and the lack of options, took a gamble, but he missed his mark.

Saved by luck with Nakanishi's successful nomination, Hamaguchi's choice to continue passing led to his victory.

## 4

The confrontation between the representatives, with their conversations and exchanges completely undisclosed, left the participating students and the waiting representatives, the middle guard and general positions, in a similar state of mind.

Considering the sudden call to action, it could be said that the mental and physical burden was even greater.

The waiting room was silent.

The only information that was disclosed was the decrease in the representatives' lives.

They stared intently at the monitor as fluctuations appeared.

Shortly after, an announcement began to flow into the room where the representatives were waiting.

*'With Hamaguchi-kun's victory, Hirata-kun will leave the room. Middle guards, please start preparing.'*

She wished her classmate's defeat hadn't come so soon.

Listening to the voice announcing this, Horikita let out a small sigh.

"I'll be going now."

With those brief words, Horikita addressed Ayanokōji, who was sitting next to her.

"Good luck."

His words sounded somewhat indifferent, but she wasn't irritated by them. She had learned over the past two years that this was just the kind of person Ayanokōji was.

His words might've seemed cold, but Ayanokōji contributed to the class in his own ways.

That included this special exam.

He'd asked for something in return, but as a general, he took on the role of leading the class to victory.

Therefore, Horikita could fight with all her strength without hesitation.

Above all, she felt confident in the presence sitting next to her.

Even if she were to lose to her opponent, Hamaguchi, she felt that Ayanokōji could go on to defeat Ichinose. It was a baseless belief.

However, she reminded herself not to rely too much on that belief.

She left the waiting room and headed for the classroom where the exam would take place.

On the way, she ran into Hirata who had just left the room.

"I'm sorry, Horikita-san... I couldn't be of any help..."

"I can somewhat guess the situation. There's no need for you to feel down."

Some students were better suited for certain tasks than others. Hirata was good at observing other students, but he definitely wasn't suited for exams that involved doubting others. She understood that.

There was a ten-minute recess interval.

*The school must've anticipated that the losing class would pass by here during the switch.*

That meant there was no problem in exchanging opinions as long as time allowed.

“Did you notice anything?”

“Well, I couldn't control the content of the discussion, but the timing of the attack, whether to go first or second, could greatly influence the outcome.”

Hirata shared his experiences, and she listened intently.

“The situation can quickly change depending on the participants.”

Indeed, if the conversation moved beyond control, there was nothing that could be done.

However, she believed that it wasn't completely unmanageable.

“Thank you. You should rest for now.”

She watched Hirata's back as he returned to the waiting room before starting to walk again.

Finally, she arrived at the classroom where Hamaguchi was waiting and reached for the door.

“Ahem.”

She gently cleared her throat and let go of the handle.

Once this door opened, there was no turning back.

She took a deep breath, emptied her mind, and then pulled out the organized information before slowly opening the door.

## Chapter 5: Katsuragi's Counterattack

AS THE BATTLE BETWEEN Hirata and Hamaguchi was about to begin, the representatives' battle was also about to start in another room.

The participants appeared in the discussion area, with two people watching over them through a monitor.

### [First Debate]

#### Participants:

##### *2nd Year Class A*

*Shimizu Naoki, Machida Kōji, Yoshida Kenta, Fukuyama Shinobu, Motodoi Chikako, Yano Koharu, Rotsukaku Momoe*

##### *2nd Year Class C*

*Sonoda Masashi, Oda Takumi, Yamada Albert, Yoshimoto Kōsetsu, Isoyama Nagisa, Yamashita Saki, Kinoshita Minori*

The vanguard assigned for Class A versus Class C was the matchup between Nishino and Sanada.

“Please take good care of me, Nishino-san.”

Once alone in the classroom, Sanada, feeling slightly nervous, greeted Nishino politely before taking his seat. Sanada, who always maintained a polite tone even with his classmates, showed his usual demeanor even in front of an opponent. She was aware of her own rough personality and was bad at polite speech, thus mainly spoke in a casual manner. That's why she found it difficult to get along with those who spoke formally.

(*TL NOTE: keigo (敬語), lit polite speech; A way of speaking used to show respect, considered mandatory in most social situations.*)

However, such likes and dislikes were irrelevant now. More than the details of her feelings, she was unable to shake off her immense nervousness, and her body was completely stiff. Nishino, who normally didn't flinch even when facing delinquents like Ryūen, was completely unaccustomed to the atmosphere of such a serious exam. Being the vanguard meant carrying part of the class's fate, and she couldn't help but feel the pressure.

The representative role, which she thought had nothing to do with her, was an unexpected selection by Ryūen. She deeply regretted having carelessly accepted it. Seeing Nishino standing still, forgetting even to sit, it was clear she wasn't in her usual state of mind. Sanada felt slightly hesitant about whether to offer help.

“Nishi—”

He called out her name, but then forcefully held back from saying more. He reconsidered, realizing that this inadvertent kindness might strangle himself. If his opponent was overwhelmed by the situation, he shouldn't miss the chance to use it. Suppressing his guilt, he quietly took several deep breaths.

By the time Nishino finally sat down, the exam seemed to have started as if it had been waiting for just that moment.

*'The discussion will start now.'*

With that announcement, a voice began to play from the monitor.

*'The end-of-year special exam will now begin. The roles of each student will be displayed on their respective tablets. Please check before starting the first round of discussion.'*

Participants were seated across the inorganic array of monitors. Without a moment to calm down, the discussion began. Nishino, whose nervousness hadn't eased at all, causing her vision to narrow, didn't check on Sanada even once and kept staring at the monitor.

"Ah, uh... has everyone finished checking their roles already...?"

Nishino couldn't remember the scene where the participants had just been checking their roles. It seemed like the discussion had started without her noticing, causing her to slightly panic.

However, the images in front of her were progressing in real time, and it was impossible to pause or rewind.

The participants' frantic conversation continued to reach Nishino's ears, whether she liked it or not. From right to left. She couldn't keep the conversation in her head, nor could she understand what was being discussed.

*'Please proceed with nominating or passing. You have one minute.'*

"What? Already, um, five minutes have passed...?"

Without understanding anything, the signal for the end of the first round was announced. Nishino reflexively hurried to look at her tablet. The screen displayed a list of 14 names.

If she didn't understand anything, passing seemed like the usual tactic, but Nishino continued to look at the names of the students with confused thoughts. The time limit for nominations, of course, kept ticking down.

Then, her focus landed on Yoshida's name, and she tried to recall the earlier discussion.

She barely remembered anything, but something felt suspicious.

That vague memory suddenly crossed her mind vividly.

Yoshida's behavior and conversation, which she couldn't be sure were truthful, seemed to indicate that he was an honor student. While feeling dizzy and overwhelmed, Nishino used her tablet. Somehow, she managed to finish using the tablet before time ran out...

*'Nishino-san has made an incorrect nomination and will lose one life.'*

It was a reckless move to suddenly nominate an honor student. As a result, she lost one life. Sanada silently watched Nishino's condition and didn't follow suit, choosing to calmly avoid nominating.

"They weren't an honor student... ugh... I don't get this at all..."

Perhaps out of panic, a loud muttering reached Sanada's ears. Since the teacher role had successfully blocked the nomination by an honor student, only one participant was required to leave this round.

With 13 participants remaining, the second round of discussion began, but Nishino was still in almost the same mental state as she was in the first round, showing no signs of improvement and aimlessly wasting time.

Not knowing what to do, Nishino finally strayed from looking back and forth between the monitor and the tablet and looked at Sanada. Noticing her, Sanada pretended not to see Nishino's gaze and continued to act as if he was about to nominate, but chose to pass instead.

Sanada wasn't particularly good at acting, but it was effective enough for Nishino at that moment.

That seemed to have confirmed her choice, as Nishino once again made a baseless nomination.

*'Nishino-san has made an incorrect nomination and will lose two lives.'*

Nishino had again nominated the wrong role, repeating the same pattern as the first round but with more severe consequences. Fukuyama's dismissal from the room was decided.

Now, Nishino had lost a total of three lives. She was all too quickly pushed to a situation where, without it even needing to be an honor student, any successful specific role nomination from Sanada would decide her defeat.

Sanada decided it was best to continue primarily through passing.

Considering the possibility that Nishino might become defeated by self-destructing herself was part of his decision.

However, by the third round, Nishino had mostly lost the courage to nominate.

Thus, both passed, and an honor student nominated Isoyama to leave.

Sanada, who had been watching the participants' discussion, noticed that Nishino's gaze was fixed only on the participants from the rival class, Class A.

Caught in the absolute structure of Class A versus Class C, she couldn't see the whole picture.

But Sanada realized it was also important to consider which class the participating students belonged to and deliberately decided not to focus on Class C students. If Nishino was only looking at Class A, Sanada, who knew the students well, had a significant advantage.

Then, in the fourth round, a significant development occurred in the discussion.

Here, Shimizu, who claimed to be a graduate, stated that Kinoshita wasn't an honor student.

But at that moment, Yoshimoto declared that he was the real graduate, and reported that Kinoshita was an honor student. At that point, it was certain that at least one of them was lying.

The time for the representatives' fourth round of nominations came.

Here, Sanada used almost all of the allotted time to decide upon his fourth pass.

He was tempted to nominate, but he hadn't reached a conclusion yet. On the other hand, for Nishino, who was out of options, that precious information was too valuable to carelessly waste. If Sanada had discerned the roles, she would likely lose, so she had no choice but to make a risky nomination.

If she could definitively declare that Shimizu, who made the claim first, was a graduate, it would be ideal. However, considering the worst-case scenario, she decided to stop trying to assess whether they really held an executive role or not.

The result was—

*'Nishino-san has made an incorrect nomination and will lose two lives.'*

The self-proclaimed graduate, Shimizu, was actually an honor student. It had been a major self-destruction. Meanwhile, Sanada, without losing a single life, successfully defeated the vanguard, Nishino.

*'As this brings her lives to zero, Nishino-san, please leave the room.'*

"What's going on, this makes no sense...!"

While feeling irritated with the exam and herself, Nishino was ordered to leave the room without even having time to feel frustrated.

"Phew... While I'm glad that it was Nishino-san..."

Sanada had won by only passing without ever stepping forward to nominate.

"In order to win, taking it slow is definitely the best approach for me....."

Having observed several discussions, he realized that discerning truth from lies through the monitor wasn't easy. He prepared himself to tackle the next match calmly, waiting in the same room for the next battle.

However, during the recess interval, complex emotions began to bubble up inside Sanada.

He couldn't wholeheartedly rejoice over the fact that he had completely defeated Nishino.

Even after being at this school for two years, he still couldn't sincerely get used to winning.

Light and shadow, there must always be a loser on the other side.

(TL NOTE: 'Light and Shadow' (光と影), Light and Shadow refer to winner and loser here.)

That was why he struggled to face this reality.

“This is no good... I must do my best for the sake of the class...”

About five more minutes passed, and a middle guard belonging to Ryūen’s class entered the room.

Shaking off the gloomy feelings, Sanada stood up and greeted the person with a smile.

“Katsuragi-kun, please take good care of me.”

Sanada greeted him politely, just as he had done with Nishino.

“It’s been a while since just the two of us talked.”

“That’s right. The last time we talked was quite a while ago.”

The two of them, who used to share the same classroom in Class A, weren’t particularly close friends, but they hadn’t quarreled either. They were just ordinary classmates.

“When I heard about the rules for this special exam, I thought you would definitely be a representative.”

Hearing those words, Katsuragi stopped walking and sensed the intention in his expression.

“It seems you were easily able to defeat Nishino.”

“...Rather than easily, it’s that I didn’t particularly do anything. It seems she was just overwhelmed by the exam. Before the discussion starts, I have one question: why was Nishino-san chosen as the representative? I thought there were more suitable students in your class, Katsuragi-kun... Of course, Nishino-san tried hard and there are many good things about her, but...”

He stressed that he wasn’t looking down on Nishino, but he couldn’t help wondering if there was someone more suitable. He considered the possibility of her being a substitute representative, but since there were no absentees from Ryūen’s class, that possibility was ruled out.

“Well, even if you ask me, I can’t answer. Ryūen chose the representatives.”

“I see. So if I defeat you, I can get the answer.”

“That’s right.”

Katsuragi resumed walking and slowly sat down in his prepared seat.

“But you should expect that it won’t be easy. Just as you want to ask Ryūen about the reason for choosing Nishino, I have business with Sakayanagi waiting ahead.”

Katsuragi declared that he’d defeat him, and then defeat Kitō, who was waiting for his turn, next.

“Please go easy on me.”

Soon, the room fell silent. From then on, they had no private conversation and waited for the signal to start the discussion.

## [First Discussion]

### Participants:

#### 2nd Year Class A

Satonaka Satoru, Tsukasaki Taiga, Sugio Hiroshi, Morishige Takurō,  
Tanihara Mao, Tsukaji Shihori, Yamamura Miki

#### 2nd Year Class C

Ibuki Mio, Inoue Toa, Okabe Fuyu, Suzuhira Miu, Morofuji Rika, Yajima Mariko, Yūbe Yoshika

*'Please start the first discussion.'*

As everything was ready, the silence was broken by the monitor's voice connecting and announcing.

Participants were captured from various angles by numerous monitors.

Both of them silently stared at the monitors, listening intently to the discussion involving the 14 participants.

The participants had all changed from the previous discussion, and it was the first time for these new participants.

In other words, the situation was exactly the same as the first discussion, and trying to rummage for information was an awkward process.

Therefore, it wasn't easy to determine who was holding what role.

It was a tense, probing, and dense five minutes. Although few clues could be obtained from the first discussion, they would still closely pay attention to even the smallest blink. Sanada, having focused only on his own classmates in the latter half of his battle with Nishino, chose to return to the basics and observe the whole group this time.

The seemingly long yet brief time for the discussion ended, and it was time for the representatives to make their moves.

*'Please proceed with nominating or passing. You have one minute.'*

The first nomination period arrived. Unless some very revealing information came out, Sanada had decided to adopt the same strategy as when he completely shut down Nishino.

If he carelessly rushed to nominate someone, there was a high possibility of him self-destructing and losing lives as Nishino did.

He had five, untouched lives. The vanguard had less leeway than the middle guard, but still, the fact that Sanada still had a good amount of lives firmly remaining was a significant factor. Even if Katsuragi hit an honor student, he'd still have two lives left. With two remaining, he'd have a chance to counterattack.

However, he wouldn't hastily choose to pass here either.

While giving him time to think carefully, he would hint at making a nomination.

On the other hand, Katsuragi, facing his first battle, stared openly at him.  
“Having experienced the exam first—is it... an advantage?”

“I wonder if that’s the case. However, there was certainly information to be gained from the current discussion.”

He mixed in such a lead, having grasped the few available hints.

But perhaps him being unaccustomed to acting backfired, causing Katsuragi’s eyes to momentarily narrow at his words.

He tried to read Sanada’s approach—what he was thinking, what kind of strategy he had. Neither of them completed what they were doing on their tablets, and only the countdown of the available time for nomination continued.

“Are you wondering whether to nominate?”

Katsuragi pointed out that Sanada’s fingertip had stopped on the screen.

“Yes. There are participants I’m concerned about, so making a bold nomination might be an option.”

He used up all the allotted time, continuing to act as a student considering a nomination.

He was hoping that Katsuragi would be provoked and impatiently rush into a nomination.

“Have you decided what to do, Katsuragi-kun?”

“I can’t answer that. But since you’ve already fought Nishino, you must understand the situation better. Feel free to nominate.”

Katsuragi, in a special exam where getting struck first could be troublesome, urged him to nominate.

*Is he still not understanding the essence of the special exam, or are his words calculated?*

As the time limit approached, he relaxed his shoulders.

“No, I’ll stop. It seems difficult to narrow it down, at least for now.”

He chose to pass, putting an end to his nomination period, and soon after, Katsuragi also finished.

Without rushing, he could strike from the second round onwards. He nodded internally at his own decision.

However—

“Is that so? Then, I’ll feel free to go ahead.”

“Eh...?”

*‘Katsuragi-kun has successfully identified Morishige-kun as having an executive role, so Sanada-kun will lose one life.’*

Katsuragi, who he expected to be on the defensive, made a decisive nomination in the first round.

The announcement played, and before the second round came, one of his lives was lost.

“How... did you know?”

“Rather, how didn’t you know, Sanada? Morishige is a student from your class, right?”

Katsuragi had been watching students from Sakayanagi’s class, not his own, during the first five minutes. Sanada hardly knew the students from Ryūen’s class, and it was difficult to discern their habits in just about five minutes.

At first, he broadened his view, believing that observing everyone was certainly correct.

“There were students among the participants who were suspicious, but it seems you didn’t notice.”

What he did was the same as Nishino, but the accuracy was on a different level.

“...Did you completely discard half of your view?”

“The group I chose for the discussion could act reasonably well. I figured they wouldn’t easily show their tails in the first five minutes. On the contrary, it wasn’t the case for you. Did you overlook that it was written on Morishige’s face that he was given a special role?”

Indeed, Morishige had been restless since entering the room.

He didn’t make eye contact with any specific person, just occasionally raising the corners of his mouth.

Katsuragi, who had been focusing only on the participants from Class A, didn’t overlook Morishige’s behavior as he pondered whose role to discern. Of course, there was no definite guarantee, and he couldn’t narrow down what role he had. However, Katsuragi prioritized the importance of striking down his opponent’s life in the first move, leading to him nominating Morishige as having an executive role.

“You’ve skillfully defeated me. But it won’t go the same way next time.”

He strengthened his focus before the second round began, staring intently at the monitor.

However, his unsettled heart hadn’t yet decided where he should look.

*Should I look only at Class A, as Katsuragi did?*

*Or should I focus on Class C because of the lack of information?*

*Or should I once again carefully observe the whole scene?*

Unable to settle on a strategy, the five-minute discussion started again.

“Your strategy is pretty predictable, given the time it took to finish the game and the fact that you completely won against Nishino. It probably ended with Nishino self-destructing without you nominating even once, right?”

Faced with the sharp remark, he could only give a wry smile. He intended to focus on the ongoing discussion, but he couldn't help but be distracted by numerous stray thoughts. Then, five minutes passed.

*'Please proceed with nominating or passing. You have one minute.'*

"I'll pass."

As the announcement was made, Katsuragi deliberately declared his intentions and quickly finished using the tablet. Sanada wondered whether his statement and action were true or false.

"...I'm forced into a difficult decision."

No new, clear information had emerged from the discussion, but there was a student who slightly caught his attention. It was unlikely that Katsuragi had overlooked this realization. Considering his initial decision, there might be a possibility that he'd continue to nominate students as having executive roles. Thus, Sanada couldn't completely discard the possibility that he was lying.

Sanada realized that being the first to lose a life was more damaging to his spirit than he thought.

*'Perhaps, I should take some risks and attack as well.'*

Such a psychological state was at play.

Even in the worst-case scenario, the nominating representative would only lose one or two lives.

"If you've stepped back, Katsuragi-kun... then I will make my move."

Deciding to show an aggressive stance like Katsuragi in the first round, he decided to nominate.

The number of participants had decreased to twelve. One person with an executive role had definitely been eliminated, but there was still a chance of winning. The question was whether to target the honor students, play it safe with someone holding an executive role, or specifically target a particular role.

To balance the situation, he wanted to hit an honor student and reduce his opponent's lives by three.

*Morofuji Rika from Class 2-C, honor student, confirmed.* He used his tablet and touched the confirm button.

After sending, a brief silence followed as the nomination was evaluated. And then...

*'Sanada-kun has made an incorrect nomination and will lose two lives.'*

"Was I wrong...?"

The result was a merciless failure. Morishita left the room looking frustrated.

It was frustrating to end up with that result, especially since his belief that she had a special role was correct.

His lives were reduced to two.

“That’s not like you, Sanada. It’s not like you to step in with uncertain information.”

Katsuragi spoke as if they were still classmates.

“Morishita-san’s gestures seemed a bit suspicious.”

“That might be true. But how well do you know Morishita? You probably don’t know anything, do you? You should think carefully about where those gestures come from. If Morishita had been an honor student, it would’ve meant that she had an ally. Whether she was in this alone or with someone on her side, it would’ve greatly affected her state of mind. If it were me, I would’ve only gone as far as nominating her as having an executive role.”

Receiving what felt like guidance, he managed to suppress his disturbed heart.

Indeed, it wasn’t a trivial mistake, but Sanada hadn’t run out of lives yet.

If he could make a successful nomination in the next round, he could still inflict a serious wound on the opponent.

However... in the following third round, Inoue and Tanihara started accusing each other of being an honor student due to some baseless accusation that a girl started. It was a back-and-forth exchange about who was more suspicious and who wasn’t. From there, the discussion continued to delve into unrelated topics.

Suddenly, it became disorganized, but there were no rules against unrelated topics in the room, and they wouldn’t be interrupted unless someone violated a specific rule.

Sanada couldn’t afford to take any reckless actions here, so reluctantly, he chose to pass in the third round. Meanwhile, Katsuragi, not focusing on the two conspicuous participants, nominated Tsukaji as someone with an executive role. However, he ended up getting it incorrect, reducing his lives from seven to six. After that, it seemed like either Inoue or Tanihara would be eliminated by an honor student’s nomination, but instead, Satonaka was ordered to leave. The fourth round also ended mostly with Inoue and Tanihara’s conversation. And here too, Okabe, who was neither of the two, was chosen by an honor student and left.

Then, only seven students remained.

But since there was hardly any progress in the discussion, there was nothing much to be done.

When nominating a student as having an executive role, the representative could find out whether they had such a role or not, but they couldn’t find out whether students dismissed by the honor students were ordinary students or students holding such roles.

Thus, it was impossible to definitively determine how many executive roles were left.

Sanada wanted to make a move here, but making any mistake now would weigh heavily on him.

*I want to observe one more round. Maybe I can narrow it down by then.*

Such feelings surged more than in the previous round.

*Surely, Katsuragi must be thinking something similar.*

He imagined such a conveniently favorable scenario.

Sanada had an overwhelming feeling that made him want to pass.

Overwhelmed by this feeling, he touched the ‘pass’ option displayed on the screen. The final confirmation screen with two options appeared.

“It seems you’ve chosen to pass. Then, let me take the offensive.”

Sanada was about to confirm the pass, but he stopped his finger at Katsuragi’s words.

It was a prematurely made statement, mistakenly believing that Sanada had completed his pass.

Now that Katsuragi had made his move, if he was correct, Sanada might not receive another turn to attack. He quickly canceled the option he had just selected right before it was confirmed, tentatively choosing the student’s name and firmly selecting the ‘executive role’ to confirm his choice.

*‘Sanada-kun has made an incorrect nomination and will lose two lives. As this brings his lives to zero, Sanada-kun, please leave the room.’*

The announcement played, and he realized the contradiction between Katsuragi’s statement and the result.

“Honor student... That backfired as well... But what about Katsuragi-kun, did you end up being right or wrong?”

“It seemed like a wise choice, but you were just being swayed by the situation, Sanada.”

“What does that mean?”

“I chose to pass this time.”

“Eh...?”

“My previous statement was a lie. I figured it would be better to have you attack me than for me to attack you. It seems you didn’t see through it.”

“Is that so? I didn’t even realize that.”

Sanada replied weakly. He had only now realized that his heart had been beating rapidly this whole time. Initially, he hadn’t noticed because Nishino was more nervous than him, but he was also in a considerably nervous state.

Sanada had hoped to chip away at Katsuragi’s lives a little and perhaps even secure a victory if he was lucky, but Katsuragi, having made up his mind, was precise and efficient in his decisions, and he also had the courage to step into the fight from the start.

Feeling completely outclassed, Sanada was left with no recourse, and Katsuragi had defeated him.

As if switching positions from when he had entered, Katsuragi saw Sanada off as he left the room, and took a breather.

“I’ve only lost one life. No problem... I just need to proceed calmly...”

Crossing his arms, Katsuragi suppressed his rising emotions.

Before thinking about revenge or anything grand, the task at hand was to defeat the opponent’s middle guard.

Only after dragging out the general, Sakayanagi, was it time to let emotions run high.

# 1

Kitō quietly appeared and glared at Katsuragi before taking his seat.

The battle between the middle guards seemed to be headed for a quiet start, with neither party exchanging a word.

However, the situation quickly began to escalate.

Right after the first round of discussion ended, Katsuragi chose to pass, and Kitō immediately made a decisive nomination. He gambled on identifying one of the two honor students hidden among the fourteen participants without any hints.

*'Kitō-kun has made an incorrect nomination and will lose one life.'*

The announcement was made. Kitō quietly clicked his tongue, but his expression showed no signs of darkening.

The probability was about 14.3%. He took a high risk to steal a life.

He was prepared to make mistakes, so he was able to remain calm.

"That's typical of you, Kitō. Quite a bold move. But what will you do next?"

"There's only one thing to do. Keep moving forward..."

Despite losing a life in the blink of an eye, Kitō continued his aggressive approach in the second round, attempting to target an honor student again. This time, the probability was about 16.7%.

*'Kitō-kun has made an incorrect nomination and will lose two lives.'*

Another miss. Moreover, the targeted student was a teacher or a graduate, costing him two lives.

Katsuragi even gasped slightly at the reckless assault.

"Now you have four lives left. Are you still planning to continue these reckless nominations?"

"...Of course."

"This special exam clearly isn't your forte. It must not be pleasing for you. I figured your options would naturally be limited, but to resort to such a kamikaze tactic. Did Sakayanagi give you permission? Or was it her instructions?"

Kitō deliberately chose not to answer. His strategy was indeed as Katsuragi pointed out, something Sakayanagi instructed, hoping for him to get even a single successful nomination.

Having volunteered as a representative, Kitō was expected to produce results no matter how challenging the exam was. The success rate per nomination wasn't high, but whether he missed and lost one or two lives, increasing the number of attempts before the opponent could start nominating was what Kitō could do.

His course of action was decided from the start. Naturally, it'd be frustrating if things didn't go well.

He slammed the desk with the tablet on it, showing his irritation.

Katsuragi, ignoring his agitated neighbor, continued to focus solely on the monitor to advance his deductions.

Meanwhile, Kitō, listening to the conversation, hardly made any inferences. He simply observed the students' emotions and reactions, searching for those who responded appropriately. In the third round, Kitō made another incorrect nomination, resulting in losing another life. Now he was down to just three lives, continuing to dwindle his remaining lives through self-destruction.

In the fourth round, Kitō, undeterred, targeted only honor students again.

Katsuragi considered passing at first but then reconsidered.

Kitō had missed three nominations so far, but as the number of participants decreased, the success rate gradually increased. It could be 25% this time.

Katsuragi, having grasped the tendencies of the students Kitō had previously nominated, identified a person who might be an honor student among them.

Even if Kitō forcefully nominated that one person, if Katsuragi also made the same nomination, it could lead to a draw. Getting the wrong person would only cost one or two lives. After considering various angles, Katsuragi, though ideally wanting to observe another round, greedily launched his attack to obtain his victory.

The result was...

*'Katsuragi-kun has successfully identified Yamawaki-kun as an honor student, so Kitō-kun will lose three lives. As this brings his lives to zero, Kitō-kun, please leave the room.'*

Kitō, a middle guard with seven lives, was defeated in four rounds without landing a significant blow.

"Why... Damn it!! Why can you get it right but not me!!"

More forcefully than ever before, Kitō slammed the desk, openly displaying his anger.

"This isn't an exam you can win without a plan. I can fight so well because I know everyone."

Katsuragi's high accuracy was built by his experience belonging to both Sakayanagi's and Ryūen's classes. At a certain point in time, he served as the leader of Class A, requiring him to closely observe his classmates. That was why he could see through the participants' expressions, tones, and gestures throughout the whole process.

"Leave the room, Kitō."

Katsuragi declared, glaring at Kitō.

However, Kitō didn't move. He remained seated, pounding his fist on the desk twice, then three times.

*'Kitō-kun, please leave the room immediately.'*

Despite the urging announcement, Kitō still didn't rise, and he just continued glaring at Katsuragi.

"Delaying won't change anything. The outcome has already been decided." Those words were the trigger.

Kitō, with a voice clouded by anger, stood up and confronted Katsuragi.

"The exit is the other way."

"Katsuragi...!"

Calling his name, he reached out his long arms and grabbed Katsuragi by the collar.

Facing that nearly murderous rage head-on, Katsuragi also stood up and met his gaze directly.

"Stop it. Acts of violence are strictly prohibited."

Katsuragi advised Kitō in a calm tone, without panic.

However, the strength in Kitō's arms didn't lessen, showing no signs of letting go.

"I respect your abilities. But you just weren't suited to be the representative for this special exam. That's all."

Kitō felt his own immaturity in losing to Katsuragi, and was unable to contain his irritation. Though, in truth, there was no need to suppress it.

*'Immediately release him and step back. Should any further action be observed, even slightly, we will deem your actions to be violent, Kitō-kun.'*

The mechanical words from the staff in charge came through the speaker.

Though furious, feeling this was the limit, Kitō managed to restrain his anger and shakily released his grip from Katsuragi's chest.

"...This is my defeat..."



Bitterly muttering, Kitō turned his back on Katsuragi and opened the door somewhat roughly.

“I thought your anger was pointed towards me, but were you also looking past me, at Ryūen, Kitō?”

Katsuragi spoke to the departing loser, but Kitō slammed the door shut and left.

He watched Kitō’s back as he left, then took a moment to breathe in the now-empty room.

Katsuragi wasn’t aware of the specific exchanges, but apart from being from another class, Kitō tended to be extremely hostile toward Ryūen.

Perhaps he had set a goal to defeat Katsuragi and then bring down Ryūen himself.

There was a ten-minute recess interval before the next representative appeared.

“Did you manage to make it here...?”

The next representative to open that door and enter was Sakayanagi Arisu, the Class A leader.

At the time of enrollment, they were in the same class and competed for the leader position.

It wouldn’t pan out like it did with Sanada or Kitō. Katsuragi resolved himself for that.

And finally, the moment Katsuragi had been waiting for had arrived.

“I’m surprised you only lost one life while both defeating my vanguard and middle guard.”

Sakayanagi appeared quietly, showing no signs of being flustered.

“Choosing Kitō as the representative was a clear mistake.”

“It was his own wish to directly defeat Ryūen-kun himself. Besides, as long as the general isn’t defeated in this special exam, there’s no problem. I judged that it was fine to discard two slots regardless of the content of the exam. That’s all.”

“Such complacency might lead to your defeat.”

“Heh. First, let me praise you. I’ve revised my view of you a little, Katsuragi-kun.”

Even though he was the only student with experience in two classes, Sakayanagi hadn’t expected Katsuragi to defeat Sanada and Kitō so easily. Such praise was given based on those results.

Katsuragi solemnly voiced the thoughts he’d been harboring while listening to her words.

“I have been striving for this day—to avenge a grudge.”

“A grudge? I see, you mean Totsuka Yahiko-kun, whom I drove to expulsion?”

Katsuragi clenched the fists on his lap. That was his answer.

“If it were the old me, it would’ve been difficult to understand your feelings, Katsuragi-kun. But now, I can understand a little. Perhaps we should’ve chosen a different method to determine who should’ve been expelled.”

“Tell me, are you saying you’ve changed your mind?”

“You can take it however you like. Your anger is justified, but your revenge won’t be fulfilled. Now that I’m here, things won’t go your way.”

While enrolled in Class A, Katsuragi, despite his reluctance, acknowledged Sakayanagi’s abilities, having been ousted from the leadership position in the past. The rules of this end-of-year special exam were undoubtedly in Sakayanagi’s favor. Moreover, his lives put him at a disadvantage, with it being six compared to Sakayanagi’s ten lives.

Yet, Katsuragi was sitting there, ready to cut through flesh to break the bone.

“Let’s start the next discussion—”

As the announcement came, both parties closed their mouths and straightened their postures.

The battle between Katsuragi and Sakayanagi began.

## Chapter 6: Tears of Regret

A TEN-MINUTE COUNTDOWN set for the recess interval began.

The seconds on the digital timer ticked down one by one on the monitor.

Having defeated Hamaguchi without a scratch, Horikita was now waiting in her chair for their middle guard, Kanzaki.

Even if Kanzaki arrived within the next 10 minutes, until the count reached zero, this period effectively served as a break. During this time, Horikita was reviewing the rules of the special exam in her mind.

The amount of lives given to the middle guard was seven. Apart from the reductions caused by the opponent's own mistakes, the maximum lives that could be reduced at once was three.

While it was natural to want to take the initiative, nominating someone early on came with risks.

However, it was true that continuously passing would also put her on the defensive.

In reality, Hirata's defensive approach led to his defeat.

Horikita imagined what type of player Kanzaki Ryūji might be.

He seemed to prioritize defending, much like Hirata or Hamaguchi...

"But, there's also a good chance he might go on the offensive to change the flow..."

The words in her mind inadvertently slipped out.

If the opponent decided to continuously nominate, ready to harm themselves, it would be difficult to avoid any consequences.

That would make the fight against the general even tougher.

Horikita tried to come up with ideas to defeat Kanzaki without getting inflicted with any damage.

But no matter how much she strategized, her options were limited.

*In the end, is it all about having the eye to recognize the roles first?*

*Or perhaps, if I can cleverly lead him to keep on passing...*

As she hadn't settled on a strategy for the next battle, the classroom door opened, and Kanzaki appeared.

The timer had just under four minutes left.

Kanzaki silently surveyed the classroom, then sat down in his seat and took a breather.

"I'll be in your care"

Horikita tried to offer a basic greeting, but Kanzaki looked at her sternly.

"Whose idea was it to put Ayanokōji as the general?"

"That's quite a sudden question."

“You, Horikita? Or was it Ayanokōji himself? Why did Ayanokōji accept it? When was it decided?”

He stared intently, his questioning beyond the limits of mere inquiry

“Whoever decided to make him the general, for what reason, and when, is our choice to make, isn’t it?”

“The Ayanokōji I know isn’t the type to put himself forward. Someone must’ve put him up for it.”

“Maybe. Perhaps even he’s changing little by little.”

Though not explicitly mentioned, Horikita, sitting as the middle guard, had accepted Ayanokōji’s wish and proposal to be the general. Of course, this included his desire not to stand out later, so it wasn’t far from the Ayanokōji that Kanzaki knew.

“Are we done here? I’d like to focus on the exam.”

“...Right.”

As the announcement signaling the start of the discussion played, Horikita looked down at her tablet.

Then, she selected a new group from the ones that had been formed.

As rounds progressed, it was natural for the participants’ roles to be revealed through discussion, but the more skilled and capable students were also better at hiding their roles.

On the other hand, the opposite was true for students who were bad at lying or weren’t good at discussions. Whether to choose a student hard to read or deliberately choose one that was easy to read varied per representative.

The game began with the selection of which seven-member group to participate.

### [First Discussion]

#### Participants:

*2nd Year Class B*

*Ijūin Kou, Sudō Ken, Miyake Akito, Ichihashi Ruri, Onodera Kayano, Nishimura Ryūko, Matsushita Chiaki*

*2nd Year Class D*

*Norihito Watanabe, Yonezu Haruto, Sumida Makoto, Aragaki Itsuki, Iguchi Mashiro, Himeno Yuki, Ninomiya Yui*

Horikita chose students who were calm, bold, or had a poker face—seven members suited for a battle of discussion.

On the monitor, following the instructions, the 14 participants sat down at the round table.

The tablets on the desk now displayed the roles assigned to each participant.

Both representatives kept a close eye on the entire monitor, checking for any students who behaved suspiciously or made eye contact with specific participants.

However, no student showed any overt behavior; they all acted cautiously, observing their surroundings with a serious look on their faces.

Horikita suddenly felt pleased seeing Sudō, who maintained his composure on the screen.

He wouldn't have even been a candidate for a group like this in the past.

He had grown so much in the past two years; Horikita was momentarily enveloped in a parental-like emotion. Watching over Sudō warmly yet sternly, she continued to observe the entire discussion as the five-minute countdown began.

With many composed students, few made mistakes even in their first discussion, and both Horikita and Kanzaki chose to pass. Rounds one and two saw little progress, resulting in only two students being dismissed by the honor students. However, they couldn't remain bystanders forever.

In the midst of this, round three began. Miyake, claiming to be a graduate, pointed out that Norihito was an honor student. Naturally, a debate ensued with Norihito denying it, leading up to the third nomination.

Passing here could carry high risks, but it also offered an opportunity.

Whether to trust Miyake, who claimed to be a graduate, would be the first focal point.

Kanzaki judged that Miyake was a graduate and nominated Norihito as an honor student.

Meanwhile, Horikita decided that Miyake was an honor student and Norihito was something else, nominating Miyake as an honor student. Both of their decisions to avoid passing were clearly divided.

*'Horikita-san has successfully identified Miyake-kun as an honor student, so Kanzaki-kun will lose three lives. Additionally, Kanzaki-kun has made an incorrect nomination and will lose one life.'*

A slight difference in judgment and their total lives changed drastically, from 7-7 to 7-3.

Miyake was an honor student, and Norihito wasn't. With this, only one honor student remained. The participants realized something about this discussion—unlike in similar games, announcing your role doesn't always lead to the expected outcome. The only risk for executive roles to come forward was the risk of being nominated. Furthermore, because it is extremely difficult for honor students to win, a different strategy arises where they can gain rewards if

the representatives, or they themselves were to nominate someone with an executive role. Miyake seemed to have opted for the latter this time.

However, the main focus was still the special exam. The true goal was for the representatives to win, not just for participants to gain private points, and the executive roles coming forward spurred discussions and facilitated smooth progress.

This series of nominations greatly influenced the next round, as Miyake's departure visibly unsettled Ninomiya. Everyone, rather than thinking that this was an act, firmly believed that he was the other honor student. Horikita and Kanzaki, both convinced by his reaction that he was the other honor student, nominated him without fear of making a mistake. As expected, Ninomiya was revealed to be an honor student, and the discussion ended quickly with a victory for the ordinary students.

“...May I speak with you for a moment?”

Having lost four lives in the first discussion and moving on to the next, Kanzaki approached Horikita.

“Sure, what is it?”

Glancing briefly at the ten-minute recess interval countdown displayed on the monitor, she braced herself, considering that Kanzaki might be aiming to shake her up psychologically. Kanzaki, looking solemn, stood up from his chair and walked towards her.

“I have a favor to ask... I know it’s strange to ask this, but I can’t afford to be picky anymore. Could you possibly concede the victory of this end-of-year special exam to us, Class D?”

Horikita intended to calmly handle whatever words came her way.

However, Kanzaki’s request was unexpectedly and unimaginably strange.

“Are you serious? Sorry, but those words are difficult to believe.”

Asking for the opponent to concede in a serious confrontation, a special exam that would determine the crucial class rankings, was a concept that even if easy to grasp, was hard to digest.

It wasn’t a statement made with any real expectation of her accepting it.

Suspecting this, Horikita wore a stern expression.

“It may sound like an absurd request, but I’m serious. There’s nothing left for us in Class D. If we lose this end-of-year special exam, there will be a critical gap between us and the upper classes. It’s as if we’ve crossed the final line.”

If Sakayanagi’s class won and Ichinose’s class lost, the gap with Class A would be depressingly vast.

Even with one or two sweeping victories within the special exams, the likelihood of closing that gap was slim.

“The good thing about this special exam is that the losing class doesn’t lose class points. That means your class still has chances next year. Even if Sakayanagi wins as expected, a year is enough to close that gap.”

Kanzaki, unable to afford any pretenses, pleaded, considering the high confidentiality of the situation, and discarded all his pride to prove his sincerity by bowing deeply before Horikita.

“Even if you bow, it’s not something I can just agree to because you asked. If it were a matter between just us, maybe there’d be a slim chance. But this is a battle between classes. Just like you’re fighting with your class on your back, I’m fighting with mine on my back too.”

“Of course, I understand.”

“If you understand, then you shouldn’t be making such an impossible request in the first place.”

“I know, but I have no choice but to do it... Of course, I don’t intend to ask you to hand over the victory for free. I’ll definitely make up for it in a way that matches the cost. I’ll support and cover your class in the third-year battles... Normally, you might not trust such a thing, but if it’s Ichinose, you should be able to trust her.”

Kanzaki mentioned his class leader’s name as if it were a guarantee.

“Indeed, Ichinose-san might not be someone who easily betrays others. However, it only becomes effective when she herself asserts it in her own words, and isn’t it inappropriate for you to negotiate on your own, using that trust? Did you even get permission in the first place?”

“That is—”

“If you lose, Kanzaki-kun, Ichinose-san will inevitably come forward. Your pleas would be far more likely to work if you discussed it then. Not doing so means that everything you’re talking about now is just your own decision, right?”

Receiving a clear and explicit point, Kanzaki let out an audible reaction.

“You’re not even the class leader, and yet you’re unilaterally guaranteeing full support for next year. That’s just too reckless. I can’t trust that at all.”

“Ichinose... regardless of what she truly thinks, isn’t the type to ask her opponent to concede a win. But even though she doesn’t say it, she must feel the same as me. With Ayanokōji coming up later, there isn’t a single chance of winning...!”

If he wanted to pursue victory, Kanzaki had to defeat Horikita at all costs and reduce Ayanokōji’s lives even a little.

However, currently, he was unable to inflict any damage on Horikita and was in a dire situation.

“You’re giving Ayanokōji-kun quite a high evaluation.”

“...Yes. Ayanokōji is formidable. That’s why the outcome is almost clear.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Don’t like...? What don’t you like? I’m just stating the facts.”

“I’m not saying it’s not a fact. But I don’t like it.”

Seeing Kanzaki already accepting defeat, Horikita felt both disappointment and anger.

It was true that the ally waiting behind her was strong.

It was also true that people being fearful because of it was welcomed.

Yet, Horikita put herself in Ichinose’s shoes, thinking from the perspective of a classmate.

“You’re underestimating Ichinose-san, who’s the leader of your class. The moment the details of the special exam were announced, I thought she would be a formidable enemy more than anyone else. Her network and insight are not to be taken lightly. She might be a more troublesome opponent than Sakayanagi-san, Ryūen-kun, or even Ayanokōji-kun.”

Kanzaki, who settled into the class strategist position, trusted Ichinose less than anyone.

Ichinose must’ve trusted Kanzaki and entrusted him with the middle guard position.

That was why Horikita disliked his attitude.

“If you ask me, the situation is still even.”

“Even, even, huh...? I wonder.”

Despite the explanation, Kanzaki didn’t change his attitude at all.

“...Let’s end this. Continuing this conversation is unpleasant.”

*Go back to your seat*, she communicated with her gaze.

But Kanzaki didn’t move, his feet still planted.

“That’s not possible... If we lose, it really is the end for us...!”

“So you’re continuing with the pointless whining?”



Horikita replied without raising her voice.

Yet, slight ripples stirred on the surface of her mind.

“I don’t care how I’m perceived. I can’t let our dreams of Class A be crushed here.”

Other students would have looked on in dismay and anger, yet Kanzaki persisted.

He was fully aware that it was an unreasonable request.

Even if it added to his shame, Kanzaki couldn’t back down due to the situation his class was facing.

“...Your resolve has certainly come across. Normally, you wouldn’t want to bow your head and beg like this. However, I’m not interested in negotiating.”

Horikita could sense how much courage this took.

A painful appeal. Although she was predominantly angry, she still felt some slight room for sympathy.

However, that didn’t mean she would hesitate or compromise with Kanzaki, nor would she give out an overly optimistic decision.

No, it would be more accurate to say she couldn’t.

“It’s unpleasant to deny a request, no matter what it is.”

“I know it may be bothersome...”

Kanzaki’s head remained bowed, utterly still. He was trying to reform and gather students who weren’t just captivated by Ichinose but students who were starting to take action. However, it would take time for those efforts to bloom.

A major defeat along the way would render the reform meaningless.

He thought that if Ayanokōji didn’t make a move in the end-of-year special exam, there still might be a chance.

But today, Ayanokōji came as the general.

“Please—!”

Kanzaki strained his voice. No matter how many times he pleaded, his proposal was unlikely to be accepted by the other party. He must’ve known that from the start.

Still, despite knowing that, Kanzaki continued to plead repeatedly.

“I won’t hold back. I also value your abilities, Kanzaki-kun, and so does Ichinose-san. It’s my job now to fight with all my might, no matter who the opponent is.”

No one liked to bow their head willingly.

Yet, Kanzaki bowed his head for the sake of his class, and Horikita showed him the utmost consideration.

That meant fighting with all her might and responding with results.

“...I see...”

Only a bit of time remained in the recess interval. Kanzaki, with his head held low, returned to his seat.

Soon, the monitor lit up, and a new discussion was about to begin.

Horikita looked away from Kanzaki and back to the monitor. She couldn't afford to focus solely on Kanzaki any longer. What she needed to do now was to discern the participants' roles from the discussion unfolding on the other side of the monitor. The new discussion was beginning. Kanzaki seemed to be looking at the monitor, but his gaze wasn't really on it.

When the round ended, she chose to pass. Kanzaki also passed, his movements slow.

The discussion started once again, but Kanzaki still wasn't seriously engaged.

It seemed like he was just waiting to lose.

"Have you given up?"

Horikita asked, her voice piercing over the sound coming from the monitor.

"...No matter what results I achieve here, the outcome is already clear."

It turned out that Kanzaki had abandoned the idea of fighting seriously from the very start. Even if he had defeated Horikita, the middle guard, he realized that it would only mean negotiating with Ayanokōji instead of her.

Unable to stand his listless appearance any longer, Horikita stood up amidst the discussion and confronted Kanzaki.

"You were chosen as one of your class's representatives, weren't you? Then you should face this special exam with the resolve to defeat me and Ayanokōji-kun alone. That's the courtesy you owe your classmates."

"You're the one who's acting strange. Don't send salt to your enemy... just leave it be."

(*TL NOTE: A Japanese idiom that means to show humanity even to one's enemy, or to help one's enemy during a difficult time.*)

"...You're right. That's exactly it."

The match was decided. From this point on, the discussion and rounds proceeded without tension, just going through the motions.

Kanzaki continued to pass without nominating anyone, having completely given up.

Horikita reminded herself not to sympathize with him and resolved to make her second nomination without being careless.

*'Horikita-san has successfully identified Mine-kun as an honor student, so Kanzaki-kun will lose three lives. As this brings his lives to zero, Kanzaki-kun, please leave the room.'*

Even after the results were announced, Kanzaki didn't move right away.

Rather, it seemed like he hadn't heard the announcement.

"Kanzaki-kun."

Horikita called his name. For a moment, Kanzaki's eyes focused sharply, and he looked at her.

“...Ah, right. I just lost...”

He muttered as if it concerned someone else, then scooted back his chair and stood up.

Horikita hesitated to call out to Kanzaki as he left but stopped herself.

The winner and the loser—at least here, that had been decided. There was nothing she could say to Kanzaki now that would have a positive impact.

Up to this point, she had focused solely on her victory.

But behind every victory, there was a defeat.

Alone in the room, she stared at the monitor, displaying the now unoccupied discussion room.

“I’m fighting to move up to Class A. That’s my goal...”

For Horikita, graduating from Class A held significant meaning.

Not for her future, but to gain recognition from her brother.

She wanted to be praised for leading Class D into becoming Class A—that was her greatest motivation.

*What about Kanzaki? Was it to aim for a better future, like college or job prospects?*

*Or was it to bestow those benefits on his classmates?*

As someone with little connection to him, she couldn’t understand the true intentions behind the loser’s desire to achieve Class A.

*However, it’s certain that he, too, has a strong reason. Just like me.*

While waiting for her next opponent, Ichinose, to appear, she continued to ponder this.

# 1

Meanwhile, in the match between Katsuragi and Sakayanagi, the discussion progressed smoothly, and the first round ended without incident.

Katsuragi carefully observed both classes but couldn't grasp any decisive information.

"Everyone in the discussion is acting quite convincingly. It seems difficult for both of us to narrow down the roles from the current situation."

"...Perhaps so."

Sakayanagi also seemed to be at a loss, something that would normally bring relief. That was good—the opponent hadn't been able to grasp anything yet. But the opponent was none other than Sakayanagi. It wasn't easy to discern what was true and what wasn't. Thinking that, Katsuragi discarded any feelings of relief.

"If you think you're being lenient towards me, you'd better stop."

"I see. So you're suggesting that I might've already deduced the roles, keeping it in the back of my mind."

"Our positions may differ, but if you let your guard down, you'll be swept off your feet."

"If that's what you think, then there's no need for you to go out of your way to warn me, is there?"

Katsuragi tried to probe Sakayanagi to draw out clues from her behavior, but it wasn't easy.

He judged that it was dangerous to carelessly enter the opponent's territory and decided to step back.

Katsuragi still had plenty of lives left—it wouldn't be too late, even after examining Sakayanagi's moves.

"Unfortunately, I got too few hints in this round. I'll let you take the first move."

Katsuragi, holding cautious views, also withdrew his hand early.

"That's typical of you. When it's difficult, you play it safe. You want to defeat me with your own hands, yet even with the advantageous experience of this being your third battle, rather than being prepared to self-destruct while going for the victory, you're going to shift to steadily reducing my life."

"That's the standard for me. Getting worked up leads to carelessness."

"How very noble of you. You're not getting worked up at all against me, are you?"

Katsuragi felt slightly caught by her emphasis on 'at all.' It's not like he wasn't getting worked up at all, but his instincts told him that he couldn't admit here that he was getting even a little worked up.

“Not at all. It’s true that I’m here to defeat you, but unlike Kitō, I don’t intend to fight with my personal feelings at the forefront. This is a team battle.”

He claimed that he wasn’t getting worked up. That was how it should be here.

“Fufufu.”

Sakayanagi, laughing amusingly, slowly raised her thin arm and pointed at Katsuragi’s neck.

“What...?”

“Such a joke, saying you’re not getting worked up at all. You actually want to let your emotions surge and defeat me without considering your teammates, fighting as you please, and directly taking me down yourself. Isn’t that what you’re really thinking?”

“I won’t fall for that, Sakayanagi. Sorry, but *you’re* mistaken here..”

(*TL NOTE: you’re* (貴様) is a particularly aggressive way of saying ‘you’ here.)

“Is that so? Then, for now, how about you straighten that sloppy tie?”

“...Tie?”

Katsuragi looked down, pulled back his chin, and noticed his tie.

Then, he realized that the tie, which should’ve been tied tightly, had become terribly loose.

*When did that happen?* While thinking so, Katsuragi took a deep breath and gently tightened his tie.

“If you were the always calm and collected Katsuragi-kun, you would’ve noticed that your tie was a mess immediately. However, when faced with your sworn enemy, who was yet to enter, your gaze and attention were constantly on that doorway. During the not-so-short, ten-minute interval, you spent all that time just staring at it, right?”

Sakayanagi laughed, showing off her insight as if she had been watching through the surveillance cameras.

“To say you’re not getting worked up at all—what a transparent lie.”

“...That’s a wild guess. You have no way of knowing when my tie loosened.”

Katsuragi answered, trying to maintain his composure.

However, Sakayanagi had anticipated Katsuragi’s response from the beginning.

“It looks like you’re getting agitated, following you getting worked up. You should calm down and think about what caused your tie to become disheveled. Was it because Kitō-kun, entrusted as the middle guard, was defeated and lashed out at you in frustration?”

“Ryūen was his direct target. That was his goal.”

“Yes, but did he act out of mere frustration? What if it wasn’t just that? What if I had instructed him to mess up your tie when defeat was certain?”

The new representative wouldn’t know about the battles that took place before in this room. Therefore, they would be one step behind the representatives who fought earlier in terms of information warfare.

Anticipating this, Sakayanagi had set a small trap in advance. If Kitō were to lose to Katsuragi, she had instructed him to grab and mess up the tie, something easy to miss.

Messing up the tie itself wasn’t significant; rather it was used as evidence to expose Katsuragi’s true feelings and motives. Even if it didn’t help in the match, this move was connected to the meaning behind Kitō’s selection. A student like Sanada could never substitute for this role.

Katsuragi had managed to stay one step ahead, calmly handling both Sanada and Kitō.

He tried to fight Sakayanagi on equal or better terms with that momentum, but that mental leeway was, in turn, buried with this exchange by the end of the first round, and the tables were turned.

The formidable enemy before him seemed to see through everything, and he was made to become aware of this.

Sakayanagi smiled and looked toward the monitor.

“Then, as we both still don’t know anything, shall we proceed to the second round?”

Voces could once again be heard from beyond the monitor, and the discussion among the 13 participants resumed.

## 2

Horikita had easily defeated Kanzaki. Fortunately, including the one with Hamaguchi, in all three battles, she was never pushed into a corner. Especially in the third battle, Kanzaki couldn't concentrate on the exam, so it didn't even become a serious competition. About five minutes later, the door to the representative room opened, and Ichinose finally appeared.

"Amazing, Horikita-san. To defeat even Kanzaki-kun without a scratch."

"...It's just a coincidence."

Horikita humbly replied, while Ichinose smiled and took her seat. Horikita observed all her movements, unable to detect any impatience or nervousness. There seemed to be no anxiety about being the first general to come out.

"Let's each give it our all and do our best."

"...Right."

Horikita, who should've already experienced discussions before, seemed unusually tense.

At this point, she considered whether she should ask Ichinose about Kanzaki. There were still a few minutes left in the recess interval, and it was possible to talk about how he lost during the passing moments. Whether he spoke honestly about his almost surrender-like defeat was unknown. No, it was more likely that he hadn't talked about it. If so, this could be used as material to disturb her—

"By the way, I feel like your image has changed a bit from before, Horikita-san."

As she hesitated, Ichinose started a conversation as if she were making some casual small talk.

"Is that so? I don't think I've changed at all... If there's anything different from before, maybe it's just the length of my hair?"

"No, not the physical appearance. It's more like... your presence has softened, and you seem kinder. You've become much easier to approach than before."

"...Really? It's not my intention to be like that."

"But you speak and go out with both guys and girls more often than before, don't you think?"

"...That is... well, yes. Maybe I have compared to the past."

It was something Horikita couldn't have imagined in the past. She could agree with that.

"I've been hearing a lot about you lately, Horikita-san."

Groups were chosen, and a new discussion was about to begin.

"You hear a lot... from whom?"

"Hm? From everyone."

With a smile, Ichinose stared at the monitor.

"I think it's wonderful to be able to close the distance with classmates and deepen your friendships. I've been interacting with everyone to try to get along with them. I didn't intend to use that for anything, but I guess accumulating it on a daily basis does pay off."

It was truly a trivial conversation. However, Horikita couldn't help but feel a sense of unease.

As the discussion began in earnest, they stopped exchanging words.

For the next five minutes, Horikita quietly observed the 14 participants' discussion.

Up to that point, there was no difference from the time with Hamaguchi or Kanzaki; it was the same special exam.

Horikita, who'd been carefully observing, of course, had yet to reach a conclusion regarding their roles.



Naturally, she first considered safely passing, but she still first tried to gauge Ichinose's approach.

Horikita tried to see whether she would show signs of nominating someone or unhesitantly passing. Either way, since no significant information had emerged in the first round, Horikita decided that passing was the only choice.

After waiting a while, as time was running out, Horikita chose to follow through with her plan to pass.

However—

*'Ichinose-san has successfully identified Chiba-kun as having an executive role, so Horikita-san will lose one life.'*

Without knowing how Ichinose arrived at that answer, she had already made a successful nomination.

"That's right. I thought so about Chiba-kun."

Her words flowed smoothly.

Without a hint of hesitation.

As if it were obvious, she mentioned that student's name again.

Up to this point, there hadn't been any nominations in the first round when she was facing Hamaguchi and Kanzaki, and everyone, including Horikita, had chosen to pass. Although she wasn't clear on the details, Hirata, who'd been defeated earlier, was probably no exception. Whether an announcement urging Class D's Chiba to leave was made in the room or not, the students on the other side of the monitor seemed slightly flustered.

It was because they didn't know the basis of her nomination.

"...You did well, figuring it out."

Horikita couldn't help but mutter in admiration.

"I've been observing people more closely than anyone else. Even without hearing words directly from Chiba-kun, there are moments when I can tell if he's lying or telling the truth based on his gestures."

She made a statement, seemingly saying that she knew everything about her close friends.

"You were particularly close with him then, right?"

"Particularly close? Not really. I guess I can understand this much about the others as well. I felt like I was slightly starting to see which other students might've been assigned executive roles while watching their discussion, but i'm not confident yet so I'll wait and see."

Horikita felt a chill run down her spine at that statement she just casually made.

Just from observing one discussion, she claimed to have discerned several students as having executive roles.

If Horikita's opponent were someone like Sakayanagi or Ryūen, she would've strongly suspected them to be bluffing.

But this was a statement made by someone none other than Ichinose.

She was tempted to believe it might be true.

"I see. If that's the case I'll be cornered soon enough. Only *if* that's true, though."

Feeling dissatisfied about the suddenly grim situation, Horikita straightened her posture as if to resist the pressure.

A student who didn't easily lie.

That was why a bluff here would be incredibly effective. If Horikita believed Ichinose's statement to be true, she might've rushed to nominate someone in a panic, but if it was a lie, nothing would be more foolish than acting prematurely.

In truth it was impressive to be able to distinguish someone with an executive role, but she still had doubts about how much of it was due to Ichinose's insight. Unlike the honor students, among the 14 participants, there were four students who could potentially be named for having executive roles, so the odds weren't that bad.

It could've been a coincidence or perhaps she simply took a gamble and succeeded.

Horikita reminded herself that there could be various different patterns behind Ichinose's correct answer, as a way of self-restraint.

Even if she panicked, the probability of hitting the mark wouldn't change right now.

However, it was still a bit too risky to gamble on such low odds.

Instead of being swept away by the situation, she thought about what moves would lead directly to victory.

Losing one life wasn't seriously damaging, which was significant.

First, she settled down. She'd seek results in the next round.

The second round began. Horikita wanted to find clues from the participants' behaviors before Ichinose did.

She hoped for this outcome during the next five minutes of discussion, but she could barely find any hints and time flew by quickly.

The time for nominations came. She hadn't obtained enough information for a decisive move.

However, she had to stop and think each time whether it was okay to pass again.

She wondered if there was something in that last discussion that could prompt Ichinose to nominate during this round.

Whether the statement she made at the end of the first round was true.

Horikita hadn't found enough material or evidence to go on the offensive yet...

Two people had already been eliminated due to nominations made by both Ichinose and one of the honor students. She decided that wherever it seemed suspicious, she'd try her hand at hitting an executive role.

*'Ichinose-san has correctly identified Minami-san as having an executive role, so Horikita-san will lose one life. Additionally, Horikita-san has made an incorrect nomination, so she will lose one life.'*

Horikita had decided to nominate someone, but the situation worsened.

Not only did she get it incorrect, but Ichinose continued successfully nominating someone.

The only consolation was that she had nominated a regular student, so the damage was minimal.

"Did you really know that *Minami-san* had an executive role?"

"Yes. She was one of the few that I was hesitating on in the first round."

Ichinose confidently identified an executive role among the 12 remaining participants.

Moreover, her tone suggested that she still had other candidates in mind.

Feeling that it was true, Horikita felt a slight dizziness.

"...Then, are you saying that the scope of who you can nominate has increased during these two rounds?"

"Yes. I still haven't grasped the distinction on who the honor students are, but there are three new people."

Ichinose looked at Horikita with straightforward, unquestionable eyes.

That wasn't a lie. Ichinose would surely continue to make nominations calmly and methodically.

She might even find the honor students next.

This meant that Horikita might only have one more round left at the earliest.

It was impossible not to feel dizzy about this.

*Even if it had been anyone else in my position right now, wouldn't she be an opponent you can't win against?*

Horikita couldn't help but feel a sense of dread at Ichinose's remarkable insight.

During the whole ten minutes of discussion, she didn't think she obtained any significant hints.

Even as Horikita looked back wondering if she had overlooked something, focusing only on the two names Ichinose had mentioned, she found no clues.

"I was lucky. The two people I identified were friends from my class."

With those words, she regained a bit of composure. If there was one difference, it was that point.

Horikita wasn't well acquainted with the students in Ichinose's class, far from it.

On the other hand, Ichinose understood her classmates better than anyone else.

Still, there wasn't much time left.

That was why Horikita decided to continue aggressively attacking from here on out.

She thought that if she continued to fight in a straightforward manner, her opponent would continue to dominate.

If she was inferior in terms of social connections and observational skills, she had no choice but to shake things up and confuse her.

"I was splendidly defeated. But having fought earlier, I sense something about this special exam. From the perspective of fairness, I think that the executive roles are almost evenly distributed between the two classes. If that's the case, there might be two executive roles among my classmates rather than yours. Even for you, it might be difficult to identify the remaining roles."

Horikita deliberately aimed to draw Ichinose's gaze to her own classmates.

By doing so, if she could narrow her field of vision even slightly...

"Horikita-san, if what you're telling me is true, it would mean giving me a hint, wouldn't it? Why did you tell me such an important piece of information, one that you've gathered because you experienced the exam first, so easily?"

She wasn't doubting whether it was true or false; she was simply questioning the reason for her kindness.

"You were able to guess correctly twice in a row because the executive roles were your classmates. I just wanted to tell you that it won't be so easy next time."

Of course, that was clearly a lie.

It probably sounded like a desperate excuse, but that was fine.

Even if Ichinose thought that there was a 99% chance it was a lie, it would be good even if it made her feel as if there was still a 1% possibility.

In fact, it was unclear how the school chose the executive roles, but it was safe to assume that the exam wouldn't be blatantly unfair. Even if one discussion led to an extremely biased result towards one class, going through all the discussions should eventually result in an equal bias, with a distribution close to 1:1.

"Then I'll have to put more effort into it."

Ichinose nodded and shifted her gaze to the monitor with an unchanging smile throughout.

The rocky third round came to an end and the time for nominations arrived.

*'Horikita-san has successfully identified Hatsutori-kun as an executive role, so she will gain one life.'*

Ichinose, who had guessed correctly twice in a row, chose to pass.

Relieved, Horikita also identified an executive role. However, she ended up hitting an underclassman, so she couldn't inflict Ichinose with any damage.

At this point, it was known that there were two honor students remaining, three executive roles had been nominated by the representatives, and the remaining executive role might've already been dismissed by the hands of an honor student.

The total number of participants was steadily decreasing, and it was doubtful whether the discussion could last an additional round.

Horikita currently had only one option.

If put in a situation where she couldn't afford to care about appearances, Horikita had no choice but to bring up *that* topic.

"When I fought Kanzaki-kun earlier, I completely won, didn't I? That was more because Kanzaki-kun let himself lose rather than a matter of his skills. Did he report that to you?"

"No, Kanzaki-kun didn't say anything."

"Is that so? Then do you understand what I meant by my words?"

Horikita tried to pique her interest by gradually releasing intriguing information.

But Ichinose answered without a change in her expression.

"I understand. Kanzaki-kun must've despaired early on about Ayanokōji-kun's presence after you, Horikita-san. He probably thought he couldn't win... so he tried to do his best as the middle guard, but you took the initiative, and his hopes faded. That's why he lost his will to fight."

Horikita was surprised by the accuracy of her remark but calmly processed her words.

"...You're being mischievous, aren't you? You heard from Kanzaki-kun, didn't you?"

It was the only explanation for her understanding.

"I didn't hear anything. I also knew that Ayanokōji-kun was participating, and it's not like I wasn't concerned about the outcome of the class competition. That's why I understand Kanzaki-kun's feelings well."

She reiterated that it wasn't a lie and explained the reason for her deduction.

Horikita was about to express her doubts, but stopped herself, thinking that she couldn't break through from that angle, and adjusted her approach.

"So, you also think you can't win against him?"

"That's right. Honestly, I do think that it'll be tough. But now that I've started the exam as the representative, I'm convinced—I'll be okay in this special exam."

"You won't lose against Ayanokōji-kun either...?"

Within less than 20 minutes, Horikita and Ichinose's positions were completely settled.

Like a fish in water, this was a special exam where Ichinose was overwhelmingly advantageous—she was convinced.

“I can defeat Ayanokōji-kun.”

Ichinose showed her confidence in winning.

Horikita intended to disturb her, but she ended up being countered.

She desperately tried not to let her quickening heartbeat show, shifting from the reassurance of having Ayanokōji to the fear that Ichinose might actually defeat him.

If an honor student was identified next, Horikita's lives would be pushed down to two.

What Horikita hoped for now was to find decisive evidence to definitively identify an honor student. Or at the very least, she wanted to bring it to a draw and start over with a new group. She stared at the monitor with a praying heart, but Ichinose's silent demeanor caught her attention, and she momentarily let her gaze drift away.

“...!”

Their eyes met.

It was as if Ichinose had anticipated Horikita peeking and was waiting for it.

Then, she softly smiled and didn't look away. It was a crucial moment, and it would be strange if she wasn't intensely watching the monitor.

“What are you... intending...”

Captivated, Horikita couldn't look away and questioned her.

“What do you mean?”

“Why aren't you looking at the monitor...? Don't you need to look for the honor student?”

“Ah... Yeah, I'm fine.”

*I'm fine?* What does that even mean?

Horikita tried to ask that back, but the words wouldn't come out.

Instinctively, she didn't want to hear what came next.

But mercilessly, Ichinose naturally continued.

“I've already figured out who all the honor students are.”

Beyond chills and fear, Horikita just felt her senses fading.

Those were words spoken with conviction, without a single lie.

Talk of monitors or remaining discussion time was now meaningless.

Horikita knew that her defeat was almost fated, a certainty.

Yet—

Horikita looked away from Ichinose and slapped her own cheeks.

She couldn't afford to be swallowed up in disgrace any longer.

Even if defeat seemed likely, she couldn't give up until the end.

If she didn't give up, there was still a chance.

There was still a good possibility of bringing it to a draw.

For Ayanokōji's sake too, she had to chip away at the opponent's life, even just a little.

Horikita opened her heavy eyes and looked back at the monitor.

The opponent wasn't a machine. *Ichinose must make mistakes*, she told herself.

# 3

The match between Sakayanagi and Katsuragi had moved into the second round of discussion after the first had ended.

With a strategic move by Katsuragi, who had correctly nominated an executive role, Sakayanagi's total lives were reduced to nine. However, he was then overwhelmed by her attacks, and before he knew it, Katsuragi was pushed down to his final life.

“...Phew...”

He took a deep breath and looked at his options. Should he pass and gamble on the next round, or go for a do-or-die counterattack? There was limited information gathered from the discussion, and passing here seemed like a wise choice.

However, sitting beside him was Sakayanagi, his sworn enemy and greatest threat.

If she nominated a student with an executive role or an honor student, defeat would be inevitable at that point.

For Katsuragi to guarantee a chance to continue onto the next round or beyond, at least a draw was required.

The only information he had at the moment was that there was only one more honor student.

As the number of participants decreased, he decided that if there was a time to take a risk, now was the time...

Katsuragi considered his next decisive strike.

“You've been thinking for a long time, it seems.”

“If you've found someone, just hurry up and nominate them.”

Katsuragi had been constantly checking to make sure that Sakayanagi's fingers weren't moving on her tablet.

“I haven't been participating in this battle as a representative for long, but I've realized something.”

“Realized what?”

Katsuragi, desperate for any lead, responded to Sakayanagi's words.

“When making a nomination, you basically need to tap the student's name, then their specific role or the executive role, and finally confirm with ‘yes’ and ‘no’, touching the screen three times in total, right? Similarly, when passing, you also need to tap the pass option, confirm, and finally, reconfirm again, requiring three taps overall.”

“This was done to prevent the opponent from discerning whether you've chosen to nominate or pass.”

If the number of taps differed, for example, three for a nomination and two for a pass, even without seeing the screen, you'd be able to tell that a student who finished in three taps had made a nomination.

"Whether you nominate someone or pass, the school has taken measures to ensure that it wouldn't be obvious. That's why there's an anti-peaking film on the screens."

"That's obvious. What about it?"

"While they've taken great precautions to prevent cheating, did you realize that there's a way to know beforehand, and for certain, what the opponent chooses to do?"

"...What?"

It was hard to believe at first, but if true, this couldn't be ignored.

Katsuragi felt the saliva accumulating in his mouth as he stared at Sakayanagi.

"Let me tell you how to do it. The method is quite simple and clear."

Having said that, Sakayanagi gently tapped the screen twice and held the tablet with both hands, turning it towards Katsuragi.

"What—"

The screen he directly faced was clearly visible, displaying Sawada's name and the label of an honor student.

"See, this way, your opponent's choice is completely exposed, right?"

While saying this, Sakayanagi kept the screen facing towards Katsuragi and tapped the 'yes' button to confirm her selection.

As if to say there was no further need for the tablet, she placed it on her desk.

"What are you trying to do?"

"Well, it seems you didn't know who the honor student was. Since we've come this far, wouldn't you want to enjoy the game a little longer?"

If Sakayanagi's choice was correct, then Katsuragi would have to nominate the same honor student at the very least to survive this round. If Sakayanagi was right, any other choice would mean defeat.

However, if that were a bluff, both would lose at least one life due to the nomination error.

"You've seen my answer. Hasn't it become considerably easier for you?"

Sakayanagi clearly understood how this would affect her opponent's mental state.

"Is this a lie to lure me out?"

What Sakayanagi wanted to avoid now was a one-in-eight chance of Katsuragi correctly nominating the honor student.

If losing three or more lives was the result, then it was best to draw Katsuragi in with a false nomination and defeat him. Katsuragi concluded that this sequence of events made sense.

“A lie? That’s an outrageous assumption. You should graciously accept the kindness of others.”

“I’m not falling for that trick.”

Cutting off any wavering feelings, Katsuragi chose to pass. If his opponent decided to self-destruct, then he might be able to inflict significant damage in the next round.

He tapped the tablet three times and confirmed the pass.

Katsuragi decided to play it safe by rejecting Sakayanagi’s strategy.

*‘Sakayanagi-san has successfully identified Sawada-san as an honor student, so Katsuragi-kun will lose three lives. As this brings his lives to zero, Katsuragi-kun, please leave the room.’*

A merciless announcement was heard.

“...How idiotic. You were telling the truth...? What benefit was there for you to expose such a thing!?”

“Indeed, there is such a benefit. You might think I want to win quickly, even at the cost of my own lives, but that’s where you’re mistaken. Do you think I would allow you to take even one more life from me? I disclosed the answer to avoid getting hit myself. If we both reach the same answer, then it can lead to a draw and we would carry over to the next match.”

“How is that advantageous to you...?”

“You adopted quite a straightforward strategy. As the total number of participants decreases, you’re more likely to switch to a self-destructive attack while being prepared for defeat. It wouldn’t be fun if my lives were reduced by such a boring method.”

Even Sakayanagi, who was confident in her ability to read her opponents, wasn’t infallible.

This prolonged discussion, evident by the decreasing numbers of participants, might lead Katsuragi to launch a final, self-destructing attack..

On the other hand, if the number of honor students reached zero, resulting in a draw, a new discussion would start again from round one.

Then, information on the participants would be obtained by observing them for two or three rounds.

From start to finish, it was a strategy that saw through Katsuragi’s thoughts.

Katsuragi, having exhausted all strategies, slumped weakly in his chair.

“You did well, considering your position. Despite being a middle guard, you managed to reduce one of my lives.”

Katsuragi managed to defeat the vanguard and middle guard by himself, only losing a single life.

Although he succeeded in reducing one of Sakayanagi's lives, he was subsequently defeated as she continuously took his lives.

His pursuit for revenge abruptly ended.

Was it simply due to bad luck, or was it a significant gap in skills?

Katsuragi, showing his frustration, was painfully aware that it was at least the latter.

*'Katsuragi-kun, please leave the room immediately.'*

As the announcement echoed, Katsuragi slowly stood up.

"I wanted to reduce your lives a bit more, but it was my own mistake to be caught up in the situation."

"It's good to see you can still analyze your defeat calmly."

Biting his lip, Katsuragi started to walk towards the exit when Sakayanagi called out to him.

"Compared to when we were in the same class, you seem much more lively. Ryūen-kun and I are both aggressive types, so fundamentally, you should have bad compatibility with him."

"With how you're saying it, you make it seem like I'm compatible with Ryūen. I'd like that corrected."

"I can't help how it appears."

Having his pleas ignored, Katsuragi left the classroom as the loser to those final words.

Classes A and C were finally set for a showdown between their generals.

# 4

The monitor in the waiting room switched.

It seemed that the battle between Horikita and Ichinose had already been decided.

*Result:*

*2nd Year B Class - Middle Guard Representative*

*Name: Horikita Suzune*

*Remaining Lives: 0*

*2nd Year D Class - General Representative*

*Name: Ichinose Honami*

*Remaining Lives: 10*

*2nd Year B Class - General Representative*

*Name: Ayanokōji Kiyotaka must move to the classroom immediately*

*Remaining Recess Interval Time: 10:00*

Horikita lost to Ichinose.

Although it could've dragged on longer, as the result and the time it took to reach that result showed, she was completely defeated.

Yōsuke, who had been sitting next to me watching the situation, gave a deep sigh.

“If only I had fought a little better...”

“No, that would be irrelevant. Horikita’s complete defeat wasn’t just a coincidence. This special exam isn’t entirely devoid of luck, but concepts like draws and cancellations exist when it comes to nominations. This result is clear proof that Horikita was no match for Ichinose.”

Even if Yōsuke had defeated Hamaguchi and Kanzaki, the outcome would’ve likely been similar.

“That just shows how formidable Ichinose-san is.”

“Yes. She is undoubtedly the toughest opponent in this special exam.”

“...Right. Do you think there’s any chance of winning?”

“I wonder. For now, I don’t want to waste any time; I’ll go and see Horikita.”

“Okay... good luck.”

As I left the waiting room, Ryūen also quickly followed me out into the hallway.

“The bathroom is the other way.”

“She lost in such an anti-climatic fashion too. It was right not to entrust her as the general.”

Ignoring my remark, Ryūen reflected on the outcome of the confrontation.

“Did you chase after me just to say that?”

“No? Well, she fought well enough. It’s understandable that she lost. Ichinose right now seems quite formidable.”

It seemed he wanted to say that things had turned out just as he had warned.

“Just as I thought, she was chewed up completely. Totally like how a cornered rat will bite a cat. It wouldn’t surprise me if you ended up the same.”

(*TL NOTE: a cornered rat will bite a cat* (窮鼠猫を噛む), a saying that basically means ‘despair gives courage to a coward.’)

“So you were worried for me and came to talk to me?”

“Hah.”

Ryūen briefly laughed and approached me.

“It’s a pity I won’t be able to directly see how you’ll challenge the current Ichinose.”

“You should worry more about yourself.”

After giving that advice, Ryūen laughed again and returned to the waiting room.

Ryūen probably shouldn’t be spending too much time dealing with me right now.

Katsuragi had swiftly defeated the vanguard and middle guard, but it was still uncertain how well he would fare against Sakayanagi. Ryūen’s turn would undoubtedly come soon.

On my way to the room, I saw Horikita coming towards me, feebly walking down the hallway.

However, she was about to pass by without noticing me.

“You returned quite early. I thought you might bring back the generals head.”

When I called out to her, her downcast face lifted.

“I’m sorry.”

Without getting angry at the sarcasm, Horikita briefly responded.

No, that was about all she could muster.

“I lost so badly that it’s understandable if you laugh.”

“But you defeated both the vanguard and middle guard, didn’t you?”

“Those victories felt like they were handed to me. Nothing to be proud of.”

Apparently, she had lost a significant amount of confidence. She was so distraught she might not even realize that showing such a weakened state might even lower her allies’ morale.

“Ichinose must have been tough.”

“...Yes. More than I had anticipated... No, she might be in a completely different league.”

With the highest praise, Horikita continued.

“In the rules of this special exam, she is invincible. She has a breadth of vision and the ability to read others that would effortlessly defeat anyone, whether it’s Sakayanagi-san or Ryūen-kun.”

She bit her lip hard, lamenting her powerlessness. Horikita had been leading the class while fighting the pressure, but the result of a complete defeat seemed to have inflicted more damage on her heart than a mere loss. It was undoubtedly a significant defeat in this battle where mental strength was also tested. The outcome of the special exam depended on my actions as the general, but the damage Horikita took might linger for a long time to come.

“I’m sorry... really. If only I could’ve reduced her life even just a little—”

“You might not have been able to beat Ichinose. But you defeated the vanguard and the middle guard, bringing it back to an even result. That alone made it a sufficient fight.”

“...But... that wasn’t enough.”

I could hear her unspoken voice saying, *I wanted to win with my own strength.*

As a leader, she aimed for greater heights as someone who would guide the class.

“I had to win... for the class, I had to win...”

Crushed by regret, Horikita continued.

“It wasn’t just for the class. I wanted to win and be acknowledged by you. I wanted to defeat Ichinose-san and be praised for doing well...”

Horikita spoke her true feelings and thoughts she had for this special exam. The half-hearted result might’ve hurt her heart even more.

“I understand the pressure you were under. Sure, the direct confrontation might have resulted in your loss, but there were the differences in your lives and your constraint, not being able to use the traitor.”

“Stop... comforting me like that is just useless.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s the truth. Besides, this loss is a good experience. I think it will be a catalyst for significant growth. If the same exam were to happen again, you’d achieve better results next time.”

That wasn’t a lie. Facing a significant obstacle is painful, but it was a necessary process to overcome.

“...But...”

“Fortunately, there’s no one here now. There’s no need for you to put on a brave front. Even if I don’t know the details, I can clearly tell by looking at you —you fought well.”

I sincerely comforted Horikita, gently pulling her into an embrace.

“Eh...!?”

There was no need to keep up a brave front when you’re by yourself.  
Weak people should lean on someone and be supported.

“Ah, Ayanokōji-kun, wh-what are you...!”

As Horikita weakly tried to pull away, I kept holding her back.

“For the past two years, I’ve probably watched you closer than anyone else.  
I think I know all your strengths and weaknesses.”

Horikita tried to object, but no words came out.

A sensation as if trying to firmly endure something, along with body heat,  
transmitted through her body.

“You have allies. Don’t forget that.”



“Allies—”

“Yes. You’ll likely face similar situations in the future. When that happens, don’t bear it alone—always rely on your classmates. They will surely become a great strength.”

I said that and gently let go of Horikita, starting to walk away.

“...Ayanokōji-kun...Ichinose-san is—”

To Horikita, who was anxious about the outcome of the match, there was only one thing that could reassure her now.

“Just leave the rest to me. I don’t intend to let your class lose in this special exam.”

The moment I decided to participate in the special exam, the outcome was determined.

Horikita’s class would win, and Ichinose’s class would lose.

With that thought, I stood there, and then I started walking forward.

I arrived at the battlefield where Ichinose was waiting.

*What would Ichinose look like beyond this door?*

*She’s probably a little nervous, but likely—*

I opened the door.

And immediately, as I expected, Ichinose’s smile came into view.



## Chapter 7: Ayanokōji's Strategy

AS I ENTERED THE classroom, Ichinose remained seated, gently waving her hand in a small gesture, welcoming me.

“I didn’t expect you to completely defeat Horikita. It seems you handled it perfectly.”

“I was just lucky. I did better than usual, for my own standards.”

As she humbly said this, I sat down in the empty seat.

“There’s about four minutes remaining for the recess interval. Can we chat for a bit?”

“Yes, of course. I also wanted to chat with you, Ayanokōji-kun.”

She showed no signs of nervousness for the upcoming battle.

It didn’t matter who the opponent was; she was ready to do what she could, an indication that she had prepared herself mentally.

“First, let me apologize for lying. I said I wouldn’t participate in the exam, but in the end, I ended up taking part as the general.”

“I wasn’t worried about that from the start. We’re opponents, after all; we can’t always speak our true feelings.”

Ichinose forgave me and showed understanding.

“I appreciate you saying that.”

“But can I ask you one thing? Ayanokōji-kun, what are you feeling right now?”

“Nothing much, just scrambling to think of how to face a formidable enemy. I talked briefly with Horikita on the way here, and she was completely exhausted.”

“That was really an overperformance from me. I have no idea if it will go that well again.”

“I hope so.”

“Ayanokōji-kun... You don’t seem to feel any pressure or nervousness.”

“You seem calm too. It’s the same thing.”

“I am... very nervous. Just being together like this with you naturally makes me feel this way.”

If anyone were to hear such a statement, it might come as a shock to them.

Indeed, the examiner standing with a stern face showed a puzzled look for a moment.

“But at the same time, I feel a strong sense of security. It’s strange and contradictory to feel supported by someone who’s supposed to be an opponent.”

Right now, my presence wasn’t a hindrance; rather, it seemed to be helping her.

With less than three minutes left in the recess interval, it was imperative to make good use of the limited time remaining.

“This is just my speculation, but you believe that you can win against anyone right now, right?”

“I wonder. But it’s not that I’m lacking confidence, I guess.”

“That’s what I thought. However, at the same time, I can see that there’s one thing you’re anxious about. No matter how confident you are about having an advantage, there’s always the possibility that there will be a sudden comeback in this special exam.”

It was easy for her to understand what I was getting at.

“Yes. The existence of a traitor is the only unpredictable element.”

This system, labeled as the traitor role, was ultimately introduced by the school as a way to maintain the possibility of turning the tables around with one move, and how to incorporate it in a balanced way was well thought out. There was a premise, that if possible, traitors were supposed to lie for their own sake as well as their class’s. However, while that may be true, this didn’t necessarily increase the risk of expulsion. Even if someone with thick skin carried the risk of expulsion and stuck to their lies, could the representative have easily concluded that? No.

Once a traitor who’s caught lying is identified, that student would be expelled. In other words, that person would be forcibly removed from the class. Few leaders would welcome this.

The reward for traitors was merely a facade, and acted as a role of uncertainty in the battle between the representatives, to give the disadvantaged side a defined chance.

Ichinose, who likely had sharp observational skills, might easily be able to recognize a traitor’s existence, but there was still no guarantee that it wouldn’t lead to a student’s expulsion.

It was 99% safe, but not 100%. Such was the system of the traitor role. So, caution should be taken.

“Before we get into our match, I have one suggestion that would benefit us both.”

“A suggestion? What is it?”

“It’s about the traitor role I was just referring to. There’s not much time left, so I want to clarify this: the students assigned as traitors in this special exam are the only ones who risk expulsion. Though, since the payoff is huge, it’s not unreasonable.”

“That’s true.”

“Given this, the traitors will be under a lot of pressure. Even if they intend to confess, they might still end up trying their best to strive for the reward of

class points, a troublesome rule indeed. And honestly, I think this rule is unnecessary in our current battle.”

“I agree. Being misled by the traitor system is scary, and I’d like to avoid causing trouble for everyone if possible.”

“However, since we both recognize the role as a powerful weapon, we’ll use it if we’re at a disadvantage. If you don’t mind agreeing, how about we both assign a traitor, tell each other who we assigned, and then identify them through the interrogation system, eliminating the need to focus on such unnecessary things? So, for our initial discussion, we won’t fight. Instead, we’ll drop nominations and use up the round on the traitors.”

“Not a bad proposal. But... the traitor rights are also important. Are you okay with giving that up, Ayanokōji-kun? It’s essential for a comeback.”

For those who felt like they were at a disadvantage, it was an option meant for a last-ditch effort.

It was natural for her to have doubts about me wanting to give it up.

“Also, are we even allowed to share information about traitors?”

“Of course, there should be no problems with this exchange. Showing your opponent your tablet to inform them of their class’s traitor doesn’t violate any rules, right?”

I called out to the examiner watching us from the corner of the room.

“Y-yes. Of course, I don’t think it would violate any rules but...”

Whether they hadn’t anticipated someone using this rule in such a way, or they hadn’t expected to be questioned about it, the examiner nodded, albeit a bit perplexed.

“Please check just to be sure. There should be no problem, but still.”

When I urged him, the examiner began to confirm the details through the earpiece he was wearing.

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“Mutually giving up the traitor rights, huh? I didn’t expect such a proposal.”

Normally, this development should be welcomed by Ichinose.

“There’s only one reason why I wanted to abandon this system. It’s to ensure that no one from this class, or from your class, gets expelled.”

“That’s true. Indeed, if there are no traitors, then I wouldn’t have to worry about that...”

What would Ichinose’s answer be? There was less than 30 seconds in the remaining countdown.

“What if I add a little condition? I agree that we don’t need the traitor rights, but, if we could end the discussion while both the traitors still in it, we would be able to secure the reward. So, rather than abandoning the system, we’d

overlook it. It would be better for our classes since we can definitely both bring back 50 points.”

If the premise was to cooperate, then it would be ideal to end the discussion while holding onto the traitors. The reward is a choice between 5 million private points and 50 class points, but just being able to choose a trustworthy student who would prioritize class points was good enough. I didn’t touch on it, but naturally, she’d realize it.

For Ichinose, who believed she couldn’t lose if she fought fairly, the presence of a traitor was her only concern.

A way to use it up that both of us could agree on would be the ideal development.

*‘The discussion will now start.’*

The announcement declared, but I continued talking without concern.

“Alright, I can accept that condition. But I don’t want the other students to know we’re cooperating. To cooperate and use up such an important way to turn the tides—it wouldn’t be funny if I lost. I don’t want to leave behind a situation where it’s said that I couldn’t find out who the traitor was.”

“So you want to find and eliminate the traitors through interrogation?”

“Yes. That’s why I plan to call them out during the discussion.”

I conveyed that there were things I prioritized over class points and headed toward a successful negotiation.

“Our goals are different, but we’ll use up our rights based on our mutual interests. Will this be acceptable?”

“Yes. But, do you really want to invalidate the traitor rights to the point of making such a proposal to me?”

She asked, perhaps because I didn’t show any resistance to her class gaining 50 points.

“Unlike your class, which is more cohesive, Horikita’s class is still a bit fragile. I’m sure you’ve also considered it, but for example, if Kōenji becomes the traitor, he might betray us without a second thought for his own benefit. And a one-on-one interrogation with Kōenji could turn into a troublesome negotiation. Also, students like Ike or Hondō might be lured in by sweet temptations and could slip up. If such a situation occurs during a serious match, it might force us into making tough decisions.”

*To protect one’s allies*—for that reason, we wanted to eliminate the traitor system.

Ichinose, using her imagination, firmly nodded as if she painfully understood the situation.

“You’ll keep your promise not to fight in this initial discussion, right?”

“Of course. I’ll show all the steps necessary on the tablet right in front of you.”

“Alright, let’s eliminate the traitor rights here.”

As it was time to decide the groups, I stood up with my tablet in hand and stood next to Ichinose, showing her all five groups.

“Let’s discard the entirety of the first discussion round to eliminate the traitor system. So, choose any student you like to become the traitor. Then, the proceeding interrogation will go smoothly.”

“Then, I guess I’ll go with Mako-chan.”

Following her request, I used my traitor rights in front of her and set Amikura Mako as the traitor.

“Now, you know for sure who the traitor is.”

“Yes. Now, who should I pick for you?”

As Ichinose showed me her tablet, I instructed her to specify the student I wished to select and confirmed it. This way, both of us knew who the traitor was as we entered the discussion.

I then returned to my seat, lifted the back of the chair with my hand, and placed it in front of Ichinose to sit down. In order to put the monitor behind me, I moved to a position where I couldn’t see the screen showing the discussion. From Ichinose’s perspective, my presence would make it difficult for her to view the monitor.

“Move your seat back immediately. This is an act of obstruction.”

“Whether it’s taken as an obstruction depends on the other party. As you’ve heard before, I intend to give up on this discussion to eliminate the traitor. I moved my seat to reassure Ichinose that I won’t betray her, showing her that I’m not watching the discussion unfold. Is there any problem, Ichinose?”

“No, not at all. I also won’t do anything in this discussion. That makes us equal.”

A student who turned his back to the monitor that everyone would’ve been closely watching.

A student who accepted the proposal and looked only at me instead of the monitor.

For the examiner, such a development would be beyond imagination.

A discussion just between the participants began without the aspect of a representative’s nomination being present.

“Ichinose, since you’ve decided to overlook it too, you should exercise the right to initiate an interrogation at least a few times haphazardly. Since it’s not unnatural for a representative to attempt to eliminate the traitor.”

“Ayanokōji-kun?”

“I think I’ll call out the real traitor around the third round. I’ll pretend to struggle to find the traitor, setting up interrogations with unrelated students in the first and second rounds.”

Calling out someone who wasn't the traitor won't result in you losing your lives due to penalties.

"Then, for fairness's sake, I'll tell you the information I'll gain from the traitor's effect until it's over."

"You don't have to go that far, I trust you."

"No, I wouldn't be satisfied otherwise."

Thus, after five minutes of discussion, Ichinose and I chose our actions while showing each other our tablets. As for the interrogation, I called up Okitani, who was unrelated to this affair, and Ichinose also called up someone who was unrelated.

We both left the classroom and moved to a separate room. A male examiner, whom I was seeing for the first time today, joined us and entered with me. He seemed to be there to monitor the interrogation.

The room only had two chairs facing each other, and like a normal classroom, there was just a teacher's desk. Okitani, whom I had called, arrived here without incident. There was nothing special about the following process. I told him that I had called him because I suspected him of being a traitor, but of course, Okitani denied it. Since I knew his true identity, I declared that he wasn't a traitor.

*'Ichinose-san, Ayanokōji-kun, both of you have failed to identify the traitors, so both traitors will remain.'*

An announcement played when we returned to the playing field.

The students participating in the discussion and the other representatives waiting in the waiting room had no idea that we were taking such unexpected actions.

"Ah... so this is how the messages arrive. I just got this on my tablet."

After saying that, Ichinose showed me a message, informing her that Mitarai was an ordinary student due to the traitor role's effect. In the same way, I showed her my tablet.

The second round proceeded similarly.

We summoned unrelated students and confirmed their lack of involvement through discussion.

And after they pleaded innocence and we declared them not to be traitors, we listened to the announcement that played and returned to the room.

"Welcome back, Ayanokōji-kun. An announcement was made while I was waiting."

Ichinose, who'd returned earlier than me, gave a report.

"It seems that announcements play even in separate rooms."

Then, Ichinose informed me of the second student's role, and we moved on to the third round.

I could only hear voices, but the discussion seemed to be heating up nicely.

However, with the traitors still remaining, the Class B students wouldn't be at ease.

After five minutes of discussion and choosing to pass, we stood up.

"I'll go settle the matter of eliminating the traitor rights now."

"Okay. I'll be waiting."

In the third round, I would determine the real traitor and see the discussion through to its end, then it would get to the real deal. But before that, I had to finish what needed to be done.

I exited this room for the third time and headed towards the classroom that was specialized for the interrogation.

The traitor, Maezono, showed up ahead of me.

"Is it my turn this time?"

"Sorry. I'm completely lost on who the traitor is, and I'm just running around in circles."

Maezono, looking somewhat uneasy, sat down in the seat prepared for her.

"There might be a lot you want to ask, but let's focus on the interrogation for now. That's our main role here."

"That's fine, but... don't forget that we participants are anxious because we don't know anything about the situation at all. Also, I'm not the traitor, so don't mistakenly conclude that I am, okay?"

The traitors themselves didn't seem to fully understand how much their presence was hindering their representatives.

But when it comes to the interrogation, lying while being determined as a traitor would carry the risk of expulsion. She understood that much.

"I understand. I haven't suspected you from the start, and I won't conclude that either. It's just that I haven't found any clues, and I'm just randomly calling different classmates. I hope you can forgive me for that part. During the interrogation with Hondō before, he said that you seemed suspicious."

"What? Hondō-kun said that? Ugh, that's super annoying."

"Is there anything you can think of that might've led him to say that?"

"...Hmm... maybe, but... No, sorry, I don't know."

"I see. Four more students to go, looks like I'll keep on patiently searching."

"That might be good. Well, if the traitor isn't found and the match ends like that, then we'll get class points, and if we don't lose the game, it might be better to just leave it as is."

"Right. For the sake of progress, let me formally confirm things.

Participants can't end the interrogation without confessing whether they're the traitor. Maezono, you're not the traitor, right?"

I repeated the same lines I had told Okitani and Hondō word for word.

“...Hey, if I was the traitor and was found lying, what would happen to you? You wouldn’t lose, right?”

“It would be somewhat disadvantageous, but it wouldn’t cause any major problems, and you wouldn’t be responsible for it at all. No, rather, it might be convenient if the traitor lied.”

“That’s about the class po—”

“Yeah. But it’s better not to talk about it much. The interrogation’s rules forbid us from going too deeply into the details of the special exam, right?”

“...Right.”

“Anyway, you’re clear now. Feel free to speak your mind without hesitation.”

Having confirmed my intention, an announcement came from the school side.

*‘Maezono-san, please confess whether you’re a traitor.’*

“Mhm, I’m not the traitor. So, Ayanokōji-kun, do your best as the representative.”

With this, the participant’s testimony was completed.

Maezono took a deep breath and stood up, turning her back on me. At the same time, the examiner began preparing to leave the room.

I sat and stared at the now-empty chair, taking another short pause.

“I’m convinced and want to declare that Maezono is this class’s traitor.”

That was my answer.

A moment of silence followed.

“Huh...?”

Expecting to be let go, Maezono, who seemed unable to understand, turned back with a puzzled look.

“Eh, what...? What did you just say?”

“Didn’t you hear me? I said that you are the traitor.”

“Wait, huh...? No, I mean, I told you that’s not it... Why...? I haven’t shown any suspicious behavior... no, I mean, eh, if you’re declared a traitor, you get expelled, right? Eh? Huh? That’s not right, is it? That’s not what this is about, right?”

There was no surprise as to why Maezono was flustered.

If a traitor lied about their identity and was exposed by the representative, they would be severely punished and expelled from school.

Therefore, you wouldn’t normally be able to lie so casually.

Representatives also couldn’t simply declare suspicious students as traitors in order to protect their classmates.

But this was also a bit of a contradiction.

Traitors were offered lucrative rewards, and thus the desire to lie would continue to persist.

If they knew that they would never be exposed, lying would be more beneficial overall.

That rule, which was based on the presumption of good faith, had a ‘major flaw.’

If you wanted to abuse it, you could exploit it for cruel and vicious purposes.

“It’s okay, it makes no difference. You’re now confirmed for expulsion.”

Stopping in her tracks, Maezono turned back, her emotions intensely surging.

“Huh, huh!? That makes no sense! I only lied for the sake of the class because I thought you didn’t suspect me! You said you wouldn’t declare it!”

“Participants confess whether they are a traitor first, then the representative decides to declare them a traitor or declare them innocent. These are the interrogation’s rules.”

What I said before Maezono confessed didn’t matter.

“Huh? Huh? Huh? What, huh? Okay, I’ll come clean now then!”

“It’s too late to confess now. Examiner, could you please have Maezono leave the room?”

I urged the stunned examiner, but an unexpected response came back.

“...Are you really okay with this? Do you understand that your classmate will be expelled this way? To avoid something like that happening in the first place, this special exam was hastily—”

The examiner, who shouldn’t have intervened, held back as if restraining himself from saying any more.

Like a child, he covered his mouth, desperately holding back the urge to continue.

The examiner glanced at the camera and bowed his head as if to apologize for the rudeness.

Seeing his panic, sure enough, it seemed that this way of utilizing this rule wasn’t anticipated.

Judging from his foolish slip of the tongue, there might’ve been some special circumstances involved in this end-of-year special exam. The rules weren’t disclosed to the students until the very last minute. Representatives and participants were completely isolated from sharing information with one another. And above all, if tackled the proper way, no one would be expelled, a measure that stuck out as too lenient.

*Well, let’s shelve that issue on the side for now. I need to proceed with what’s in front of me.*

*‘...I will confirm with you once again, Ayanokōji-kun. Would you like to restart Maezono-san’s confession?’*

Surprisingly, it seemed like they were willing to give me another chance to redo it. How kind.

“I see. Then Maezono, could you please return to your seat? It seems I get to decide whether to grant the right to restart it, so I might consider a redo.”

Maezono, though angry, hurried back to the chair and sat down.

*What does she intend to do while looking at me with eyes full of rage as if she wants to kill me?*

It didn’t seem like she was angry at herself for lying without first considering it deeply. If it had been Ryūen or Sakayanagi instead in front of her, she would’ve confessed no matter what anyone said.

“Actually, there is a reason why I wanted to expel you. It was previously informed to our classmates that I would participate as the general in this special exam, and the class was asked not to tell it to anyone outside. However, this information, which should’ve been kept secret, somehow managed to leak to Ichinose’s class. How do you think it leaked?”

“That is...”

“Because someone leaked the information. And that someone was you, right?”

There was no benefit in lying here.

It was clear that, if she upset me, she wouldn’t be given another chance to confess.

“Indeed, I might have... leaked it... But I didn’t think it would reach Ichinose-san’s class! Really!”

“Who did you leak it to?”

“...That is—!”

“Should I name the person you leaked it to? It’s someone from Class 2-A  
\_\_\_”

Realizing that the class had already been identified, Maezono shouted as if resigned.

“Masayoshi! I told Masayoshi!”

“That’s right, Hashimoto. It’s fine for you to date whoever you want, but as long as you’re in different classes, there are lines you shouldn’t cross, even if your lover asks you to. Isn’t that right?”

“I understand, but... but this information wasn’t even that important! I don’t even know why Masayoshi leaked it!”

From Hashimoto’s perspective, if he had to choose whether Horikita’s class should win or lose, he would naturally prefer them to lose. If by some chance I broke through to Class A, and even if Sakayanagi gets taken out, a new obstacle would still remain. In such a case it wouldn’t be weird to think that the chances of me transferring classes would decrease. He probably contacted the Class D students to let them know that I was going to be a representative so that they

wouldn't be upset on the day of the exam. At least, it wouldn't hurt him to do something like that.



“Whether it’s a big deal or not, you’re not the one who decides the value of that information. At the very least, Horikita must’ve conveyed it as a very important piece of information.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! I won’t do it again! Just this once! I didn’t understand!”

“Do you think this was your first offense? What about the fact that you gathered only a few of our classmates to spread unsettling information about me and confuse them, and then passed that information onto Hashimoto? Did that not happen either?”

“Uh—”

Even though it occurred at the end of the year, there was no way she could forget that she’d done it at Hashimoto’s request.

“That, um... how did you find out about that...?”

“How I found out about it is irrelevant right now.”

“Okay, okay, I get it! I absolutely won’t do anything like that anymore!”

“Down the road, if Hashimoto tells you to betray someone in order to be with him, you would do it without a hint of hesitation, wouldn’t you?”

“I wouldn’t do that! There’s no way I would!”

“I’m afraid I don’t believe that at all.”

That was how I answered, but you could say that Maezono had learned her lesson the hard way.

She would probably behave more quietly from now on, always thinking about her own class first.

“I said I wouldn’t! I’ve already told you the truth, so please forgive me already!”

“That’s true. Any more would be a waste of time.”

I decided to wrap it up and turned my gaze towards the camera.

“My judgment remains unchanged. There’s no need to redo the confession. Maezono is a traitor.”

I reiterated that there was no need to reverse my decision.

“That’s not fair! What are you!? What right do you have to do something so unfair!?”

“The participants confess whether they’re traitor, and the representative declares whether that is true or false. Nothing more, nothing less.”

I reiterated what the rules of this interrogation were.

‘...Maezono-san is to leave the room.’

The staff, having given her another chance, began to make their judgment as they could no longer take up any more time. It was the right decision to dispose of Maezono here. However, she naturally refused to budge.

‘Ayanokōji-kun has successfully determined the lying participant to be the traitor, so Maezono-san is to leave the room and be expelled.’

As the announcement was made, Maezono screamed.

“No! I won’t leave until you take it back!”

“All you can do now in this special exam is hope that Hashimoto gets expelled. Then maybe there’s a path left for you two to be together after you leave here.”

Though, in my personal opinion, that future was very unlikely. Whether Hashimoto got expelled or not, he probably didn’t see Maezono as a romantic interest. He only approached her to gain an advantage for his graduation from Class A. Once he could no longer extract information from her, she would become worthless and there wouldn’t be any reason to keep her.

A person who’d lost their value would be discarded.

“Take it back! Take it back right now!”

Whether Maezono needed to be expelled was something many would question.

Explaining to her that she was being used by Hashimoto and lifting his brainwashing wouldn’t be too difficult.

The act of leaking information should be condemned, but it certainly wasn’t worth expulsion.

However, for me, it was just convenient in many ways.

I was merely making effective use of Maezono, a tool that happened to be at hand.

That was all it was.

“I will never forgive you!!”

Ignoring Maezono’s continued screams, I decided to finish everything and head back first.

Maezono, who chased after me, was stopped by the examiners just before the door closed.

As it had happened before, the results of the interrogation would’ve reached Ichinose’s ears through the announcement.

The answer was clear from her expression.

The gentle expression she had always shown was now subdued, like that of a different person.

“Ayanokōji-kun... why... why is Maezono-san being expelled?”

As a representative, she should’ve understood what happened.

However, she couldn’t possibly imagine the process that went into it.

“Ah, she didn’t confess. That’s why I concluded she was guilty. As a result, she was dealt with.”

“But, but, you already knew, right? Then why did you do such a thing...?”

“Why...? I said I would remove the traitor system—my purpose in doing so was to expel Maezono. That’s all there is to it.”

If we hadn't cooperated, the chances of Ichinose choosing Maezono as the traitor would be extremely low. That was why I proposed that we align our interests and give up our rights. I even let her decide who the traitor would be. Then Ichinose would have no choice but to do the same. Since the first party did so, the same action was required from the other party to maintain fairness.

"We both fulfilled our promises to eliminate the traitor rights. You've also gained 50 class points without having to point out a traitor. So there shouldn't be any problems between us. Naturally, this won't hinder the serious match that follows."

While I hadn't explained everything, I hadn't done anything that would cause a disadvantage to Ichinose's class. Rather, it could be said that I've given them an advantage instead.

But the outcome of the match between me and Ichinose was greatly shifting.

Ichinose should be happy that another class had an expulsion, but she wasn't.

She would regret having unwittingly contributed to Maezono's expulsion. Moreover, she even gained class points.

However, this traitor matter is just the beginning of my strategy.

The strategies I would use to win started from there.

"Thank you for cooperating, Ichinose. Thanks to you, it was easy for me to dispose of the defective tool."

*That's terrible.* She wanted to say such words, but she couldn't.

Because she genuinely harbored affection towards me, she couldn't bring herself to utter such harsh words.

While our conversation continued elsewhere, the discussion resumed.

However, since we discarded the whole discussion this time, this was now time we could freely spend.

"It seems we have some time until the next discussion, shall we talk for a bit?"

"Talk...?"

Ichinose couldn't get Maezono out of her head, but she had no choice but to move forward now.

She wouldn't be broken by something of this magnitude.

Ichinose had become such a formidable presence.

In the special exam, only having one necessary ability isn't enough to win.

It wasn't hard to imagine how Horikita's and Ichinose's class representatives had been fighting up to this point. They must've been keenly observing their allies' and enemies' every word and action through the monitors.

The subtle changes in classmates' expressions could be an especially big hint for a representative.

Of course, it wouldn't be possible to start without it.

That was why Horikita perceived Ichinose's overwhelming ability to observe her classmates as truly formidable.

They competed and Horikita was subsequently defeated. That was basically the same for Sakayanagi and Ryūen's classes.

However, fighting with that aspect alone wasn't everything when it came to winning.

The rules weren't just about appointing honor students and executive roles.

It was also possible to make the other nominate unrelated students or lure them into self-destructing.

So, some representatives might've tried to mentally shake their opponents up a bit.

*Are you sure you should nominate that student?*

*Isn't that student over there suspicious?*

Such words were meant to cause confusion.

If you increased the choices from two to three, the chances of making a mistake increased.

For students not accustomed to the big stage, such words might have some confounding effect.

However, for people like Ryūen, Sakayanagi, and Ichinose, it hardly worked.

Rather, they might become more cautious and see through things they couldn't before.

So how could you confuse the minds of such leading figures and take away their ability to make sound judgments?

If their minds were occupied with the special exam, the answer lies outside of it.

It was crucial to chip away at their sharp thinking with something completely unrelated.

If you knew your body was getting targeted, anyone in this case would prioritize guarding it.

But if their legs were unexpectedly targeted instead, naturally, it would be difficult to immediately respond.

"Do you remember? Last year, a minor incident occurred in our year. It was exposed that a female class leader had shoplifted in the past, and it came to light."

"It's about me, isn't it?"

Without pause, I dragged Ichinose, who still hadn't taken in the current situation, into the darkness.

“The incident was partly caused by your trusting nature, as you confided in Sakayanagi. But was it really Sakayanagi’s doing that it got exposed to the entire school?”

“...What do you mean?”

“The accusatory letter found in the dormitory’s mailbox—did you ever doubt whether it was really Sakayanagi who planted it?”

Ichinose fell silent, perhaps recalling that time.

“Before it was revealed, some nasty rumors about you had already started circulating. They were about violence, compensated dating, and a history of theft. You thought that it was probably Sakayanagi who spread those rumors, but at that point, they were just rumors mixed with many lies. That’s why you could bear it.”

Ichinose eyes were downcast, but I didn’t hesitate to continue.

“What if I was working behind the scenes to give it one final push? What if it was me who planted that letter in the mailbox to mentally corner you and prompt a confession?”

“What are you saying...?”

Even when I explained it clearly, Ichinose seemed unable to understand the implications. It wasn’t surprising.

Not just Ichinose, but other students believed it was Sakayanagi’s doing too. Using Kiriyama to blatantly spread rumors about classes other than Class A, including Horikita’s class, also played a part.

“You might think it’s a bad joke, but can you say for sure that it isn’t true?”

I crossed my legs and questioned Ichinose, who had built up such a strong protective barrier over time.

In the past few months, Ichinose had undergone a unique mental change.

It gave her some kind of composure, allowing Ichinose to progress through the exam on a strong path.

However, one of the underlying reasons for that was because of my presence.

What if that presence turned out to be someone much more unforgivable than imagined?

What if she knew I was a person who could betray without hesitation and push Maezono to expulsion?

“But... Ayanokōji-kun... There was no benefit in it for you to be doing something like that...”

“That’s not true. At that stage, Sakayanagi might’ve only intended to warn you and later use it as blackmail material. However, by forcibly getting involved at that time, I could take that material away. By helping you, my credibility inevitably increased. No matter how you look at it, I have sufficiently benefited.”

“...I can’t believe it...”

“I understand that you don’t want to believe it, but it’s the truth. If you want, ask Sakayanagi, ‘Was it you who put that letter in the mailbox?’ after the exam ends. If you tell her what I said, she might give you an honest answer.”

All that was left was to carefully finish everything up.

“Everything I’ve been involved in regarding you had an ulterior motive. Even during the deserted island exam and the night of the school trip, I acted solely for my own sake. You were just being used by me. And the promise from a year ago—”

Ichinose no longer knew what was right, even the words that were confirmed on the bench just before the exam.

The promise certainly existed, but now there was nothing left to believe in.

The first discussion had ended, and the recess interval for the next discussion began.

*‘…Representatives, please select a new group.’*

Following the modest announcement, I chose a suitable group.

Ichinose also used her tablet, albeit belatedly, but her expression was empty.

It couldn’t be helped. This special exam had already been pushed to the back of her mind.

The darkness she was dragged into was deep.

Even the matter of Maezono’s expulsion now seemed like a distant past, almost obscured.

The man before her was not an ally. He was not an understanding person.

The more rational a person was, the more they were drawn into the darkness.

I pulled the chair back to its original place.

The light and vitality that had been in Ichinose’s eyes while looking at the monitor were gone.

Even while looking at the monitor, the conversation from earlier was heavily entrenched in her mind.

Truth and falsehood. Reality and lies. Even if she didn’t want to think about it, she couldn’t help it.

Even when putting their thoughts into words, humans were creatures that couldn’t easily empty their minds.

The more she tried to focus on the exam, the more her stray thoughts grew.

Occasionally, a sensation of her mind going blank must’ve assaulted her.

Her vision definitely captured the monitor, and her hearing was still functioning.

Yet, that information wasn’t reaching her brain properly.

This was no magic.

It was the structure, the mechanism of the human body.

Her heart rate and blood pressure rose, and her peripheral blood vessels constricted.

Her pupils dilated, narrowing her field of vision.

And consequently, the functioning of her prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for relatively rational processes, declined.

Recovering from this state wasn't easy under the current circumstances.

After that, it was simple.

I leisurely observed the discussion, deduced, and identified the honor students.

My opponent no longer had the trump card of sending a traitor.

The discussion could continue without any issues.

Even without spending much time, that moment would eventually arrive.

*'Ayanokōji-kun has successfully identified the honor student, so Ichinose-san will lose three lives. As this brings her lives to zero, Ichinose-san is defeated... please leave the room.'*

Without facing any significant difficulties, Horikita's class had secured a major victory.

## Chapter 8: The Awaited Opponent

ALTHOUGH IT WAS ONLY by one point, Katsuragi managed to reduce Sakayanagi's life to nine.

With about five minutes remaining, Ryūen entered the room somewhat forcefully.

"Welcome. Please, have a seat."

Sakayanagi, still seated, politely gestured to an empty chair.

Ryūen glanced at Sakayanagi and, without parting his lips, sat down and crossed his legs.

"Today marks the beginning of your departure on a new journey. Please, make the most out of your time."

"That's my line, Sakayanagi. I'm the one who's going to win."

First, to keep each other in check, they lightly pushed their sentiments against one another.

"Even if you were to defeat me, would you really be fit to serve as an opponent to Ayanokōji-kun?"

"There's no one more suited for that than me. To defeat him, you need to be able to embrace evil without hesitating."

"I see. You seem to be under the misconception that you're an anti-hero."

"Huh?"

In stories, characters who performed heroic roles were called 'heroes.'

Heroes were fundamentally moral beings based on high ethical standards, always helping the weak and punishing the wicked, embodying goodness and justice.

However, among such heroes, there were those who also possessed the opposite nature, evil.

An anti-hero was defined as one who mercilessly took the villains' lives and rampaged for money and property without hesitation, not being confined by common sense or ethics.

"If they are a villain, then they will simply be defeated, but an anti-hero is also granted the role of a hero. In other words, that also makes them serve as the leading role."

Sakayanagi conveyed this information to Ryūen in a somewhat roundabout way.

"However, you are not fit to become the leading role. I shall teach you that now."

"Aren't you mistaking yourself as the heroine here or something?"

"Rest assured. I am not the heroine, but the leading role."

It was a childish exchange of taunts, but this was merely a gentle form of it, like an extension of their greetings.

“Was this special exam favorable for you, or was it rather unfavorable? Since the contents of the exam were not disclosed in advance, you weren’t able to prepare any distasteful strategies beforehand, and at the same time, Hashimoto-kun, who could’ve been used as a spy or a back-stabber, was unable to be used efficiently. On the other hand, you managed to avoid the types of exams that would require knowledge and academic abilities—lucky for you.”

Sakayanagi said with a smile, and Ryūen suddenly remembered.

“You said you were like childhood friends with Ayanokōji.”

“Indeed, what about it?”

“I can’t imagine what he was like as a kid.”

Before he even spoke, Ryūen had tried to imagine it many times, but couldn’t even conjure a single image.

Not only was Ayanokōji’s fighting prowess immeasurable, but his mental capacity was also beyond normal.

And yet, he could act without hesitation, performing actions that others would balk at.

“It’s understandable that you’re curious. Ayanokōji-kun is a very special person.”

Seemingly even happier than when she was being praised herself, Sakayanagi had a fond look of joy on her face.

“But I won’t tell you. It’s my precious secret.”

Sakayanagi joyfully refused to answer, and Ryūen gave a slight glare.

“Compared to him, it’s easy to imagine what you were like as a child.

Rebelling against those around you, mistakenly thinking that you were the center of the universe, and ruling everything with violence. Dismissing intelligence and reasoning as meaningless weaknesses. No matter how many defeats you suffer, it’s fine as long as you win in the end—”

“That’s me.”

“Hehe, I’m not saying that it’s bad. That’s why you’re thinking of challenging Ayanokōji-kun again. Ordinary people, whose hearts are easily broken, wouldn’t even have the desire to do so. However, I don’t have that loser mentality.”

“Then you think you can beat Ayanokōji? Sorry, but I don’t see it.”

“How rude. I may look like this, but I think I’m better than him. And in order to prove that, you, who’s standing in my way, must be eliminated.”

Sakayanagi had always aimed to meet Ayanokōji from a higher position.

Meanwhile, Ryūen sought to climb up from below and drag Ayanokōji down.

Their positions were completely opposite.

The recess interval timer reached zero, and the time for group selection arrived.

Looking at the tablet, which showed five different groups, Sakayanagi immediately chose to exclude one group.

It was the group that Hashimoto Masayoshi belonged to. She made it clear to the vanguard and middle guard not to choose his group either. Hashimoto was bound to betray her, but if he couldn't be selected, he couldn't betray her. From her perspective, the rules of this special exam were indeed favorable for Sakayanagi.

“I will now use my right to select the traitor.”

In the first discussion within the generals' battle, Sakayanagi had decided to make her move.

Was it because Sakayanagi disliked the fact that the game started with her having nine lives and Ryūen having ten, meaning that he had a slight advantage in terms of numbers alone? Or was it some other reason? In any case, it was a preemptive strike, aiming to take advantage of Ryūen's unfamiliarity with the environment of this special exam.

“Kuku, this as the first move, huh? You're really out for blood.”

“I have no intentions of dragging this out. I will settle our match in the first discussion.”



“Don’t you get it? That there is a theory out there, stating that whoever uses their trump card first loses.”

“Then, shall we overturn that theory?”

With a resolute gaze, Sakayanagi looked towards the monitor where the battle was about to begin.

# 1

## [First Discussion]

### Participants:

2nd Year Class A

*Yanagibashi Motofumi, Ishida Yūsuke, Shimazaki Ikkei, Toba Shigeru,  
Tamiya Emi, Morishita Ai, Takanashi Kō*

2nd Year Class C

*Ishizaki Daichi, Kaneda Satoru, Komiya Kyōgo, Nakaizumi Shōhei,  
Suminokura Mami, Takarajima Miko, Hatake Kaoru*

The beginning of the important general's battle began with the first discussion, and the traitor rights were immediately used.

At this point, there was already a traitor hidden amongst Ryūen's class.

In a situation where everyone seemed hesitant to speak first, it was Class A's Morishita Ai who had made the first move.

"Ishizaki Daichi, could you first prove to us that you aren't an honor student?"

"Hah? Eh? Me!? Why me all of a sudden!?"

"Whether you're a police officer or detective, approaching suspicious individuals first is something you'd consistently be doing."

Though the presence of a traitor was concerning, no one wanted to touch on that matter.

As if following the flow, everyone's gaze, including Morishita's, was focused on Ishizaki.

"No way... I mean, I'm not an honor student!"

"So could you prove that?"

"How can I prove that!? How should I prove it!"

"Maybe you could promise to bite your tongue and die later if you turn out to be an honor student?"

"Ha, what!? Don't talk nonsense!"

Morishita relentlessly cornered the bewildered Ishizaki, but Kaneda quickly intervened.

"Please wait, Morishita-shi. Ishizaki-shi, you don't need to answer her. Such forceful approaches aren't acceptable. Let's stick to the discussion at hand. If we were to follow the basic principles of a detective or criminal investigator, then we would suspect the person who spoke up first. I would like to ask you to provide definite proof that you're not an honor student."

After saying this, Kaneda adjusted his glasses and shifted the attention that had been on Ishizaki to Morishita.

“There’s no way to prove it definitively within the rules of this discussion, is there?”

Morishita, who had just demanded solid proof from Ishizaki, answered nonchalantly.

“So you were just trying to impose an impossible task on Ishizaki-shi?”

“Because he looked like a fool who might slip up.”

“Who did you say looks like a fool!?”

“Please calm down. In order to defeat Sakayanagi-shi, we will need to use the appropriate measures. On the other hand, it’s equally challenging to defeat Ryūen-shi. Morishita-shi is provoking you to help allow her class leader to win. If you wish for Ryūen-shi’s victory, who is fighting from behind the camera, you must remain calm. Being misled by her words is exactly what the opponent wants.”

Kaneda had successfully calmed the indignant Ishizaki.

“I’ve been watching everyone’s discussions, and I noticed that honor students seem to make eye contact with one another. Komiya-kun and Takanashi were looking at each other just before the discussion started, right?”

Class A’s Tamiya overtly directed a suspicious gaze at the two.

“Ah, indeed. I also felt that was suspicious.”

Nakaizumi agreed, nodding repeatedly. Although Class A and Class C were enemies, it didn’t seem like it, considering their mutual agreement.

“Right? When everyone’s attention was on Ishizaki-kun, didn’t Komiya-kun seem relieved?”

Tamiya intensified her assertion that these two were the honor students.

Whether it was her true intention or a diversion from herself.

Even though it was her first time participating in the discussion, she had learned how to conduct herself by observing as a bystander.

The skilled students used their experience in order to advance the discussion.

The presence of a traitor was a disadvantage in the representative battle, but it brought significant benefits to the traitor and their classmates. That was why neither class’s participants decided to pursue it too aggressively.

## 2

The discussion, initiated by Morishita's surprise attack, had reached the five-minute mark, and it was moving on to the representatives' nominations.

"The discussion turned quite tumultuous from the start, didn't it?"

"Looks like it."

Both Sakayanagi and Ryūen, after carefully watching the discussions, chose first to share their impressions.

"So... what will you do, Ryūen-kun? There were a few hints that seemed promising."

Just like when taking the initiative by using the traitor rights, Sakayanagi made a move here first.

In the earlier discussion, several pieces of information, possibly serving as leads, had already emerged.

Komiya and Takanashi exchanged glances as mentioned in Tamiya's testimony. And it was Tamiya and Nakaizumi who pointed out those glances. It's quite possible that one of these sides could very well be the pair of honor students.

However, of course, there were no guarantees. It would be quite risky to start from the first round, given that there were only a few hints given, no more nor less than that.

But if Ryūen decided to pass here, at the end of the first round, Sakayanagi would automatically receive information about a random participant due to the traitor role's effect. To prevent this, he had to initiate an interrogation to eliminate the traitor. Moreover, even if Ryūen were to forcefully make a nomination, he absolutely must avoid the traitor. A wrong accusation would cost him two lives, and the traitor rights would be restored to Sakayanagi.

That would inevitably make it difficult to nominate students from his own class.

Ryūen reflected on the earlier discussion without uttering a single word.

Who was lying, and who was telling the truth.

For the past two years, though he had temporarily stepped down, he continued to reign as the king of his class.

Now, his true worth was being tested.

Having used all the given time to make his nomination, the time to check his answers had finally arrived.

*'Ryūen-kun has made an incorrect nomination and will lose one life.'*

While Sakayanagi chose to pass, Ryūen chose to nominate, knowing the risks, and appointed Tamiya as the honor student. However, he didn't consider it a setback, treating it as a necessary expense instead.

Since the opponent had made a move with the traitor's rights, he had to go onto the offensive.

"Unfortunately, it seems you missed."

"It's no big deal. But for someone acting all high and mighty, you ended up on the back foot too, didn't you?"

"Hehe, maybe so. Haste makes waste, after all."

Sakayanagi nodded honestly without denying his claim, but she felt no sense of urgency.

Rather, she even thought it was a waste to guess the participants' roles prematurely.

In that sense, it was undesirable for the discussion to progress too quickly.

However, in the first round, two possible honor student pairs had unexpectedly emerged. If an honor student was identified at that point, another would likely be targeted in the next round, making a draw very possible.

Considering that her traitor rights were used up, an early nomination didn't seem worthwhile.

On the other hand, Ryūen wanted to either reset the discussion as soon as possible or find the traitor.

And how he'd exercise the right to an interrogation was also a pressing question.

It was natural for Sakayanagi to choose to wait, aiming to increase the opportunities to think and torment Ryūen.

*'Ryūen-kun will now temporarily leave the room for interrogation.'*

Ryūen, having chosen to initiate an interrogation without a delay, immediately took action to expose the traitor.

"Best of luck to you."

If Ryūen made a wrong judgment here, he could lose even more lives.

Sakayanagi had chosen Takarajima Miko as the traitor, and Ryūen had chosen Nakaizumi for the interrogation. At this point, the search for the traitor in the current round was bound to fail. Ryūen returned to the classroom just two minutes after leaving.

Just asking 'Are you the traitor?' was enough to get an answer.

If you were to lie to Ryūen here, there was a risk of getting expelled on the spot.

For such a risk, there were no private points or class points worth protecting.

Since he declared that the participant wasn't the traitor, he didn't lose a life, remaining steadily at nine lives. Although an honor student was supposed to nominate someone to leave the room, the teacher was able to successfully block it, and it was reported that there were no dismissals. Afterward, Sakayanagi, who

still had the traitor in the discussion, was given information about one participant's role.

Sakayanagi's tablet displayed that Morishita Ai was a graduate. The discussion was making progress, but this revelation was good news. If the capable Morishita continued to use her abilities carelessly, the discussion might progress too quickly, requiring an urgent nomination.

As the second round began, Morishita's pursuit started again. The monitor couldn't show who she investigated, but actions indicating that she was searching for new roles were beginning to show.

When the time for the representative nominations came, Sakayanagi unhesitatingly nominated Morishita as a graduate, deciding to eliminate her this turn. Ryūen also nominated Morishita, but only declared that she wasn't an honor student, avoiding unnecessary risks.

*'Morishita-san has successfully been identified by Ryūen-kun as an executive role, and by Sakayanagi-san as a graduate, so Ryūen-kun will lose one life.'*

Both had identified her, but Ryūen's lives slowly decreased to eight as he had not identified her specific role.

Sakayanagi, who wouldn't touch the Class C students where the traitor lurks, and Ryūen who couldn't touch his class due to the dangers of the traitor.

Next, Ryūen called Kaneda out for the interrogation, returning after a similar amount of time had passed. Unable to eliminate the traitor, the roles ability revealed to Sakayanagi that Shimazaki was an underclassman.

Here, Sakayanagi took a moment to reorganize her approach. While the traitor provided useful information, she wanted to have Ryūen find them before all honor students or ordinary students were eliminated. If the traitor survived, he could gain a substantial amount of private points or a non-negligible amount of class points.

At this point, the dismissals thus far included Tamiya, whom Ryūen had failed to nominate correctly, and Morishita, who had been a graduate, leaving behind only 12 people. Ryūen would undoubtedly make a nomination in the next, third round.

His insight was accurate, and he nominated Class A's Shimazaki as having an executive role. Sakayanagi also nominated Shimazaki as an underclassman. By nominating the same student, a strategy that prevented an honor student from eliminating another participant was successfully implemented.

*'Shimazaki-kun has been successfully identified by Ryūen-kun as an executive role, and by Sakayanagi-san as an underclassman, so Sakayanagi-san will gain one life.'*

Since Sakayanagi realized who the underclassman was, she should've recovered two lives, but since Ryūen had also succeeded in his executive role

nomination, balancing out, Sakayanagi's lives had only increased by one. As a result, she was back to having ten lives as Shimazaki left the room.

From there, Ryūen nominated Suminokura for the next interrogation. Another miss.

The next role revealed to Sakayanagi was that Kaneda was an upperclassman.

In the fourth round, Sakayanagi thought this was a critical turning point and nominated Kaneda as an upperclassman. On the other hand, Ryūen had made his move again, nominating Takanashi, who had been suspicious from the start, as an honor student.++

*'Ryūen-kun has successfully identified Takanashi-san as an honor student. Additionally, Sakayanagi-san has successfully identified Kaneda-kun as an upperclassman. Therefore, Sakayanagi-san will lose two lives and two new roles will be randomly disclosed to her.'*

Although her lives had decreased to just eight, the information about the new roles were immediately reflected on her tablet, disclosing the roles of the two participants.

It was revealed that Komiya and Toba were both ordinary students. Following the previous announcement, this made their lives now eight to eight.

In the fourth interrogation, Ryūen finally called Takarajima out and successfully identified the traitor.

Among the remaining participants, Sakayanagi narrowed down the identity of the remaining honor student, and in the fifth round, nominated Yanagibashi as an honor student. Meanwhile, Ryūen chose Ishida as having an executive role, resulting in zero honor students and ending the discussion.

It was fair to say that Sakayanagi's preemptive attack yielded some results. It left Ryūen with six remaining lives, while Sakayanagi had eight.

Considering the start, it meant she had turned the tables and taken the lead.

During the discussion, there was almost no conversation between the representatives, and both sides fought a battle of silent nominations.

"In the next discussion, you should definitely use the traitor rights. It would be a shame to let it go to waste like this."

"Well, let's see."

Of course, the traitor rights was a system used to give an advantage to its user, but Ryūen had a reason why he couldn't use it, even if he wanted to. He wasn't keeping it as a trump card; for a certain reason, he had decided to impose a restraint on himself and seal it away.

In the next discussion, where Sakayanagi would no longer have the traitor rights, she would have to compete on equal or better terms.

## [Second Discussion]

**Participants:**

*2nd Year A Class*

*Shimizu Naoki, Machida Kōji, Yoshida Kenta, Fukuyama Shinobu, Motodoi Chikako, Yano Koharu, Rokkaku Momoe*

*2nd Year C Class*

*Kondō Reon, Suzuki Hidetoshi, Tokitō Hiroya, Nomura Yūji, Asagaya Mai, Shiina Hiyori, Fujisaki Rinna*

The group containing Shiina, which Ryūen deliberately chose not to represent to gain an advantage, was selected.

Along with his selection, he had also desired for it to change his unfavorable situation

Contrary to those expectations, Sakayanagi smiled upon seeing that selection of students from Class C.

It was unclear how things would turn out, but the chance to detonate the bomb she had planted had come.

### 3

The second discussion began. The first minute was no different from any other discussion, but a certain statement made by Class A's Shimizu would drastically change the atmosphere.

"We don't know how our discussion affects the representative battle. That's why we should do what we can—that's the battle for us participants. Let me say just one thing that I've been thinking about. Seems like Sakayanagi used the traitor rights in the previous discussion, but I thought it would be used in this one. There's a rumor that you hate Ryūen to death, Tokitō."

"Why does it matter if I hate Ryūen? What does that have to do with the current discussion?"

"I'm not saying it does. I just thought the traitor role suited you, that's all."

The discussion wasn't about Class A or Class C. It was all about fulfilling your role.

However, Shimizu mentioned the now non-existent traitor as if it were relevant to the discussion.

"Isn't that irrelevant now, Shimizu-kun?"

Since this was the second time this group participated, they were more composed than the first-timers from Class C, and Fukuyama interjected.

"Can't help it, I just thought of it. Maybe Tokitō thinks it wouldn't be fun even if Ryūen wins. Or is it just because that guy's scary that you keep meekly obeying him?"

A clearly cheap provocation. He wasn't using abusive language, yet he mixed in claims that belittled Tokitō.

"Shut up, Shimizu. Be quiet."

"Sorry, but I won't stay quiet. The discussions allow free speech. I judged that this is necessary to deduce the participants' roles in my own way. You seem pretty suspicious, don't you think?"

The atmosphere in the room gradually became noisy.

Provoked by Shimizu's taunts, Tokitō approached, and it seemed like a fight could break out at any moment.

Motodoi from Class A, who was closest to both, hurriedly tried to stand up to stop them, but Machida stopped him. His expressions suggested that leaving them be was the best course of action.

"What about me seems suspicious?"

Clearly showing anger, or rather, overwhelming displeasure, Tokitō glared. Yet Shimizu didn't ease his claims against Tokitō.

"You know it without me having to say anything. You often clash with Ryūen."

"It makes no sense. So what if I clash with him?"

Tokitō pointed out that it was irrelevant to the discussion. Shimizu, however, didn't back down. He had set his sights on Tokitō from the start, knowing that it was unrelated from the beginning.

"You know, there's a rumor saying you teamed up with other classes just to take down Ryūen."

"Eh... Is that true? Tokitō-kun, are you serious right now?"

Fujisaki, who'd been listening without interrupting until then, couldn't help but ask.

"Shimizu is obviously lying."

"Really, a lie? You guys should be careful with your classmates. Tokitō will definitely betray you."

"Shut up. What's with you all of a sudden!"

"This is a discussion. It's natural to grill suspicious people with questions, isn't it?"

"This has nothing to do with the discussion!"

As the discussion heated up, Tokitō raised his voice. Shimizu, feeling that he was getting a good response from his provocation, threw more bait to toy with Tokitō.

From there, the exchange between the two devolved into what was nearly a meaningless shouting match, endlessly repeating the same thing over and over again.

Many of the others could only watch them with troubled expressions, not being able to stop them.

Who are the honor students and who have the executive roles—such talk was not heard even once during these five minutes.

## 4

Watching the tumultuous end of the first debate, Sakayanagi smiled.

“So, what do you think, Ryūen-kun? The second discussion’s first round has ended... Are you not planning to nominate anyone anytime soon? Or could you not find any clues to nominate someone?”

Wanting to see her opponent’s reaction, Sakayanagi didn’t touch on the tense atmosphere between Shimizu and Tokitō, and instead, she threw taunting words.

“What about you, Sakayanagi? Don’t just watch me, nominate someone. It should be easy.”

“That won’t do. If I proceed with the nomination, the number of people dismissed will rapidly increase. That wouldn’t be fun, right? Or do you want to deal with any suspicious individuals sooner rather than later? Fortunately, I’ve already used up my traitor rights.”

“Was Shimizu part of your setup?”

“Not just him. I had the chance to talk with various classmates before the special exam, so I let them know that Tokitō-kun could be a weak point.”

Shimizu, wanting to be useful to Sakayanagi and the class in any way, persistently attacked Tokitō.

“Unfortunately, under the current rules, it didn’t have the intended impact, but I still want to commend his obedient actions in following my sincere advice.”

Though the audio was now cut, Tokitō was clearly growing more irritated by the minute.

“His rampage won’t have much of an impact on our battle. However, depending on Tokitō-kun’s actions, which your participating Class C classmates can see, may lead to some lingering resentments later on.”

In the first round, neither Tokitō nor Shimizu, the one who attacked, were suspicious. Currently, it wasn’t possible to determine whether they held a position. However, there was a strong possibility that they still had remaining feelings towards having to deal with this troublesome matter.

“However... nominating Tokitō-kun would make it obvious that you dislike him, Ryūen-kun.”

After Sakayanagi finished using her tablet, Sakayanagi looked at Ryūen, who was hesitating with his decision.

Nominate Shimizu or Tokitō, someone else, or safely pass.

Ryūen made his decision... and gently tossed the tablet onto the desk.

“Did you pass? At this stage, nominating those two wouldn’t suit your pride, would it?”

“I’m not falling for your cheap provocations.”

“So, did you nominate one of them?”

The announcement that followed revealed the answer both had chosen.

*'Sakayanagi-san, Ryūen-kun, both of you have successfully identified Asagaya-san as an executive role, so this nomination is a draw.'*

"It seems you didn't overlook it. In the earlier discussion, both Shimizu-kun and Tokitō-kun stood out conspicuously, but Asagaya-san's reaction was clearly out of place. She must be thankful that her presence was diminished."

While Ryūen couldn't ignore Tokitō's uproar, he was still observing the whole view. Sakayanagi hinted at a pass, but she made her decision without being swayed.

"However, if the two noisy ones remain, they will continue to be a problem in the next rounds."

"We'll see. Over here—"

As Ryūen started to say something, Sakayanagi questioned him, but Ryūen just smiled and returned his gaze to the monitor, implying that the answer lay beyond the screen.

## 5

The second round began again with Shimizu targeting Tokitō.

“I still think you’re suspicious, Tokitō. You’re an honor student, aren’t you?”

“No...”

Having had a break, Tokitō regained some composure and denied it.

However, Shimizu persistently provoked only Tokitō.

Even when other students tried to speak, he interrupted them, repeating, “Tokitō, Tokitō, Tokitō.” If Class A joined together to do the same thing, it might’ve become an issue, but it was only Shimizu.

“Cut it out, Shimizu!”

“W-What, you’re scary. I’m just discussing here, and you’re being suspicious.”

“Then tell me the reason!”

“Reason? A reason, huh? How about not hesitating to betray your own class? It seems you tried to expel Ryūen in the unanimous special exam. That’s not something you should do to a class leader just because you don’t like him.”

“Who told you such a thing?”

Machida asked in a tone, clearly suggesting that he was speaking based on the assumption that he already knew what happened rather than genuinely wanting to know where it came from.

“I can’t say who told me, but there are a lot of talkative people in Ryūen’s class. Even so, it’s amazing you can still come to school after failing to overthrow him. I might be too embarrassed to even show up—”

“Cut it out.”

Tokitō had been trying to endure it, but perhaps he’d reached his limit as he suddenly stood up. Ignoring his own chair falling over, he approached Shimizu, who wouldn’t stop talking from a distance.

“...This is a discussion, Tokitō. I’m just talking within the rules to find out your role. You have no right to stop me.”

Despite being intimidated by Tokitō’s intensity, Shimizu didn’t back down.

In fact, he decided to keep provoking him until the very end, thinking that if he could incite Tokitō to violently act out, then it would definitely serve the class.

“You’ll be the next one to be cut off anyway. Why not betray Ryūen before that?”

Unable to stop him with his words, Tokitō swung his fist with great momentum.

If he could bring his fist down on Shimizu, he could silence him. Ryūen would receive a penalty, but seeing someone he disliked in trouble—

“Tokitō-kun, could you please lower your fist?”

No one sided with Tokitō.

In such an atmosphere, Shiina, who had silently appeared next to him, gently stopped his trembling fist.

“Shimizu’s words are infuriating, but half of it seems to be true. I don’t like Ryūen. I hope this exam ends up being a mess.”



With him having made a reckless remark, he then glared at Shiina to move away.

“Then you could just forcefully shake me off, couldn’t you?”

“Do you want me to do that?”

“Only if you can, that is.”

“Then...!”

Tokitō clenched his fist even harder, but Shiina didn’t flinch at all.

His intention to make it seem like he might really shake her off didn’t get through to her.

“You aren’t that kind of person.”

“How would you know something like that...”

“Ryūen-kun said that you’d never be rough with girls.”

“Huh? Ryūen said that...?”

“It’s no coincidence that you and I ended up in the same group.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think Ryūen-kun placed me in this group just in case this happened.”

“He did...!?”

He was momentarily surprised, but quickly rationalized the reason.

“So he couldn’t trust me to begin with. Perhaps he wanted you to keep an eye on me for this exam.”

“Is it really because he doesn’t trust you? Couldn’t you consider that he arranged it so that you could be helped if you were in trouble? If he really disliked you, there would be no need to nominate this group for such an important special exam.”

“That is—”

Indeed, while other groups were being called, he was thinking.

*If there’s no obligation to use my group, then there would be no need to participate in the exam.*

“You are needed here, Tokitō-kun. If you lash out and receive a penalty, you’ll not only lose Ryūen-kun’s trust but also your place in the class.”

“...A place for me... as if...”

“You have one. You always have and always will.”

The fist he had clenched to hit Shimizu loosened.

Given the room’s atmosphere, Shimizu hesitated to provoke Tokitō again.

Still, he thought of making him angry one more time, preparing to retaliate if a student from Class C tried to push responsibility onto him.

“Then let’s at least make Shimizu apologize.”

Kondō complained as if he had been wronged.

“I won’t say that Shimizu has no fault in this, since he was the one who instigated things, but I’m sure that’s because Sakayanagi-san’s shadow is behind him. It feels a bit wrong to blame him.”

Shiina didn't criticize him, and considered Shimizu's circumstances as well.

With that one statement, it became difficult for Tokitō, Kondō, and Shimizu's side to go on the offensive.

"Well, we still have some time. Shall we discuss?"

The atmosphere in the room, which had frozen over, shifted to a more relaxed mood. Without saying a word, Tokitō bowed his head to Shiina, apologizing, and then pulled up the chair he'd knocked over to sit back down.

## 6

A dangerous situation. The second round carried risks of violence and penalties, but it was averted thanks to Shiina's devoted actions.

Sakayanagi quickly understood that this wasn't merely a miracle brought about by chance.

"...I see. Tokitō-kun has grievances with your class. You anticipated that I would exploit this and placed Shiina-san in the same group as Tokitō-kun for that reason."

"If Tokitō goes on a rampage, stopping him isn't easy. As you can see, anyone else would just add fuel to the fire. Whoever you send, it's basically the same."

"Why could Shiina-san stop him?"

"Kuku. He's sweet to women, especially ones he's into. He doesn't have the guts to strike a woman with a raised fist."

"Didn't you consider disposing of the rebels beforehand?"

"Tokitō's rampage is just playing with fire, not really a rebellion."

"You're giving him a chance to grow—you're surprisingly kind, contrary to your appearance."

"Somebody seems to like that sort of thing."

Using the environment to foster growth in others was a method Ayanokōji often employed.

Though they were entirely different people, Sakayanagi felt a hint of Ayanokōji in Ryūen.

She realized that she was enjoying the battle with Ryūen more than she'd imagined.

"However, I wish it was only your birthdays that were the same."

Ryūen laughed at the unexpected jab.

"Ha, that's none of my business. That must be him copying me."

The group was able to take advantage of Shiina, who had been excluded from the representative role, and anticipated that Class A would exploit Tokitō's position. Sakayanagi genuinely admired Ryūen's strategy.

Of course, it wasn't without its dangers, but that too was typical of this man.

Regardless of whether it directly affected the specific outcome of this special exam, at least from the perspective of Classes A and C, it appeared that Ryūen's side had gained momentum.

*'Both parties have chosen to pass, so we will move to honor the student's nomination.'*

This round ended with both representatives choosing to pass. Shiina became the target and was dismissed. In the third round, Shimizu would again

challenge Tokitō, but this time, Tokitō showed no irritation. He couldn't betray Shiina's expectations, a resolve that was evident even through the screen.

*'Ryūen-kun, Sakayanagi-san, both of you have successfully identified Machida-kun as an honor student, resulting in a draw.'*

After they both passed on the previous nomination, with them getting the same nomination correct this time, the two drew again. The discussion, which had been stagnant, accelerated with the immediate exclusion of Shiina, who'd supported Tokitō.

"It seems we can't avoid nominating Shimizu-kun now."

"I was thinking the same thing."

Both of them exchanged a few words.

The nomination for the next round came.

*'Sakayanagi-san, Ryūen-kun, both of you have successfully identified Rokkaku-san as an honor student, resulting in another draw.'*

Contrary to their declarations, it wasn't the conspicuous Shimizu but the honor student Rokkaku who was correctly identified.

With that, the second discussion ended, and both sides maintained their lives in a rare development.

The situation remained unchanged as they entered the third discussion at a stalemate.

From the first and second rounds, both sides continued to pass, but from the third round, they simultaneously switched to the offensive, nominating executive roles in consecutive rounds and drawing. In the fifth round, Ryūen nominated an underclassman as an executive role, recovering his life to seven. In the sixth round, both sides passed again, resulting in another draw.

"I didn't think your persistence would last this long."

"I've misread you too. You weren't just all talk."

They praised each other's tenacity in what turned out to be a prolonged battle. Sakayanagi hadn't crossed any dangerous bridges in this discussion and hadn't nominated any specific role names even once. She took a stance to avoid attacking where she smelled trouble.

As a result, the rounds were tangled and dragged deep, showing a rare pattern where all the ordinary students left, and the remaining honor students won.

"Can't you at least provide some water?"

During the recess interval, Ryūen had made this demand, and the examiner hurriedly brought a plastic bottle. Ryūen forcefully grabbed it, opened the cap, and gulped down about half its content.

"Hydration is important. You're not used to using your brain this much, and I'm sure it's unexpectedly draining your energy more than you thought it would."

It was a sarcastic remark implying that she didn't need it, but Ryūen didn't care.

"Do you really want a rematch with Ayanokōji-kun that badly? You can't win against him."

"Not now. But if I continue relentlessly targeting him, he'll surely show an opening somewhere."

"I would hope so. Ayanokōji-kun isn't such a lenient opponent."

Despite choosing not to elaborate, she came off as taking the upper hand in this conversation.

"What an unpleasant woman."

"Thank you very much."

The time for the fourth discussion was finally approaching. Both sides were seriously trying to crush each other.

During the new discussion, as soon as Sakayanagi identified someone with an executive role, Ryūen made a wrong nomination and lost two lives. It seemed that the tides were turning in Sakayanagi's favor, but in the fourth and fifth rounds, they both correctly guessed the executive role and the honor student consecutively, leading to an unpredictable series of draws. After both had passed in the sixth round, in the seventh round, Ryūen and Sakayanagi both correctly guessed the honor student again, swiftly ending the match.

From when the battle between the generals had begun, more than three hours had already passed.

The discussion was about to enter its fifth phase.

"We can't seem to be able to deliver a decisive blow to each other."

"I guess so."

Ryūen had five lives while Sakayanagi had eight.

They kept nominating one after another, neither giving an inch.

Yet, a gap was forming.

In the second round of the fifth discussion, Ryūen, with an incorrect nomination, had reduced his lives to four.

Ryūen had been conducting himself calmly up until this point, fighting with vigor that he received from Tokitō. However, he was continually forced to struggle with frustration, one crucial step away from reaching Sakayanagi.

In the midst of that, there was something he couldn't help but think about.

The reality was that his predictions couldn't surpass Sakayanagi's.

Indeed, Sakayanagi hadn't made a single decisive mistake.

She hadn't suffered even a single incorrect nomination, while Ryūen was gradually losing lives due to minor mistakes.

He felt increasingly cornered, as if being pushed to the edge of a cliff.

"What are you able to see, Sakayanagi?"

“I always see what you see, but there are things I notice that you don’t. Isn’t that all there is to it? However, you are also very patient. Perhaps it’s about time you exercised your traitor rights to shift the momentum?”

Given that Ryūen was slowly losing lives, the situation was undeniably disadvantageous.

The quickest way to shift the momentum was to use the right that only Ryūen had left. Sakayanagi had anticipated that he’d use his traitor rights much earlier, so she was puzzled by it.

With more than half of his lives gone, it was conceivable that Ryūen could be defeated in the next discussion. If that happened, his defeat would be decided without even using the right.

Naturally, he wanted to avoid that at all costs.

That was why he was going to lay the groundwork for the fifth discussion and for the sixth discussion beyond that.

Having been suggested that it should be used, he conversely aimed to preserve it.

In the fourth round, Ryūen made his move.

Who among the remaining participants could be considered an honor student?

He trusted the answer that his eyes saw, his ears heard, and his brain deduced, and he made his move.

*‘Ryūen-kun has successfully identified Nishi-san as an honor student, so Sakayanagi-san will lose three lives.’*

Ryūen took the initiative and successfully found the first honor student.

“...I’ve finally closed the gap.”

Ryūen smiled slyly, welcoming his slightly quickened heartbeat warmly.

“That seems to be the case. It looks like you drew a slim chance.”

In this discussion, there were many students who hadn’t spoken much, and neither side had any decisive clues.

“No, it isn’t that simple. At least in this nomination, your insight surpassed mine.”

When it was time to acknowledge her opponent, it must be done. Ryūen was a student worthy of that.

The blow was undoubtedly significant, but the opposite would happen in the next round.

*‘Sakayanagi-san has successfully identified Hoashi as an honor student, so Ryūen-kun will lose three lives.’*

Using the hint from Ryūen’s previous nomination, Sakayanagi had noticed the other remaining honor student.

“Damn you...”

“Thanks to you, I was able to find the remaining honor student. I offer my thanks.”

Thanks to Ryūen showing that Nishi was an honor student, Sakayanagi was able to find an answer she hadn’t been able to arrive at before.

The brief joy was gone, and now Ryūen only had one life remaining while Sakayanagi had five. Although both succeeded in nominating honor students, unlike a draw, the mismatched nominations accelerated the situation. The discussion ended, and the recess interval began.

“Now you are truly in a situation where you cannot afford a single mistake.”

Sakayanagi, seeing her path to victory in the next discussion, resolved to defeat Ryūen without getting complacent.

Meanwhile, Ryūen closed his eyes and looked up in frustration.

He absolutely had to prevent Sakayanagi’s next move.

He managed to nominate an honor student, which brought him a slight sense of relief.

He decided to wait and see, and that decision turned out to be a mistake. But it was too late now. The faint signs of a comeback were fading.

*Is this it...? Is this all?*

To demonstrate his abilities to Ayanokōji, he challenged Sakayanagi head on.

He threw all his cunning and strategies at her.

Yet, he fell short, and the gap didn’t close.

The next discussion would undoubtedly be the final battle.

Given a chance, Sakayanagi would nominate without fear of risk and chip away at his life.

Had he used his traitor rights, could he have made it a more competitive match?

He thought so for a moment, but he also realized that even that wouldn’t have been enough to even the odds.

From the way things had gone, Sakayanagi would’ve been able to quickly eliminate any traitors.

He had no moves left.

All that remained was to nominate the honor student lurking as the two out of fourteen participants and believe in a miracle.

Even if that miracle worked once, it was unlikely to work a second time. However, he had no choice.

Regardless of whether he would leave the final outcome up to chance, there was no doubt he had been continuously overpowered by sheer ability.

He wondered what it would feel like when he’d lose, but he himself seemed rather relieved.

It was because Ryūen had to acknowledge it at this point.

The small student in front of him, contrary to her appearance, was a true monster.

Her ability to foresee the trials ahead, her broad perspectives, and above all, her flawless defense.

If Ryūen primarily used bluster, bluffing, and intimidation tactics, Sakayanagi fought with the conviction within herself. When he challenged her in an honest fight, he realized he still fell short in many areas compared to Sakayanagi.

“—Damn, I didn’t expect it to turn out like this.”

Ryūen’s at one life remaining, Sakayanagi’s at five lives remaining.

No matter how many times he looked at the monitor, the current situation with their lives wouldn’t change.

“You only have a limited number of moves left, don’t you? Let’s use your right first.”

To keep the possibility of a comeback, he had to sneak in the ‘traitor’ that he’d been saving.

Sakayanagi advised him to use it, but Ryūen saw through it as a lie.

“Even if I use the traitor here, it won’t be able enough to turn the tables. It would only lower my chances of winning. We’ve been fighting to the death up to this point, but I haven’t fallen so low that I can’t see the battle situation, you know?”

As much as it could be used as a trump card, it was already too late.

Using the traitor now would create a desire to pass and advance the round.

Even if he wasn’t able to hit the honor student, which was already a situation with low odds, his heart would sweetly drift towards thinking it might somehow work out.

In other words, even if he exercised the traitor rights, it would take time to feel the benefits. Even if the information of one or two participants was disclosed, in the end, he would have to blindly go for two consecutive honor students. Even if that bet succeeded, Sakayanagi would likely block at least one of them.

And then she would find an executive role in the discussion and defeat him first.

It was clearly the endgame.

“I see. You still had some wisdom to foresee that.”

Perhaps it would be more like Ryūen to go out in a blaze of glory without using the traitor rights.

“You’re strong—”

He caught himself mid-sentence and felt a pang of regret.

“This match... I’ve lost.”

He dragged out his true feelings with an early declaration of defeat. It was hard to say it, but once he did, a sense of relief washed over him. It was undeniable proof that he felt Sakayanagi was one step above.

“It seems you’ve also seen the checkmate of this battle.”

“Yeah. I admit it.”

“You fought well too. I honestly acknowledge that you were a worthy opponent.”

Indeed, Sakayanagi felt regret that the match was ending.

She had wanted to see more of Ryūen’s way of fighting, almost like a parental emotion.

Even as she received her opponent’s declaration of defeat, Sakayanagi wasn’t complacent or arrogant.

She considered the possibility that he might be feigning death, aiming for a comeback. Glancing at the sharp gaze, Ryūen couldn’t help but burst out laughing.

“You’re a tough woman to beat, even down to the way how you don’t let your guard down.”

“Of course. I won’t ease up one bit until the results are out from the school.”



There were about three minutes left until what would likely be the final discussion. One life and the traitor rights remained.

“Tch...!”

Suddenly, a click of the tongue slipped out.

“What was that click for?”

“No, it’s nothing... maybe he predicted I’d lose like this.”

As Ryūen reflected on today’s events, a click of the tongue came out unconsciously.

“Are you talking about Ayanokōji-kun?”

“Yeah. This morning, after receiving the explanation on the special exam, that guy called me out.”

“I knew Ayanokōji-kun had his eyes on you, Ryūen-kun. You both went to the bathroom together. I imagine there was some exchange.”

Naturally, Sakayanagi, who was aware of this, nodded as she recalled.

“At that time, he asked me, if I ended up losing, to pass you a message.”

“I see. So that’s how he saw it, then.”

Just as Ayanokōji had predicted, Ryūen was pushed to the brink of defeat.

“Let’s hear it. What message did he leave for me?”

Whether the story about the message was true or false could be judged by its content.

That was why Sakayanagi was interested. However, an unexpected response came from Ryūen.

“I dunno. All I know for sure is that Hashimoto has that message.”

“Hashimoto-kun has...?”

“Moreover, it’s a message that can only be understood in this special exam. I don’t even know if it’s true or not.”

Given such a statement, it was impossible for Sakayanagi not to be interested.

“If you choose Hashimoto’s group in the final discussion, I’ll exercise the traitor rights.”

Since the start of this battle, the group belonging to Hashimoto, whom Sakayanagi had been excluding so far, would be employed.

As the game seemed to be concluding, a new development emerged, which involved using Hashimoto from Ayanokōji’s message.

It was impossible not to sense that something was fishy.

“Are you saying you haven’t given up on the game yet?”

“If you think that’s the case, do as you like.”

Sakayanagi’s instinct was telling her, ‘Do not take this offer.’

In that situation, where the probability of winning was nearly 100%, taking any action that could slightly reduce that chance was foolish.

However, she didn’t think Ryūen was lying.

She felt that it really was Ayanokōji's message, which was why her sense of caution immediately heightened.

But at the same time, her desire to know Ayanokōji's message emerged.

"If you're saving the traitor rights for this moment, it means you were fighting me at a disadvantage. I don't quite like that."

"It was a complete failure. I should've used it sooner."

He had intended to win without using the traitor rights, but there were times where he could've used them before being overwhelmed. Yet, he hadn't fully utilized the rights because he was concerned about Ayanokōji's message.

The odds of Sakayanagi employing Hashimoto's group were highly unlikely.

That was why he genuinely regretted it, showing a self-mocking laugh as he shook his wrist.

"However, a message through Hashimoto-kun—what was he thinking?"

"I don't know either. But if I were to make a wild guess, it'd be a setup. The traitor is the only one at risk of expulsion. If Hashimoto plays innocent, he can be pushed to expulsion."

Ryūen would designate Hashimoto as the traitor, and Sakayanagi would call him out in the interrogation.

And if Hashimoto were to be overlooked, he would gain a large sum of private points.

On the other hand, if she knew his identity, Sakayanagi would decisively expel Hashimoto without any hesitation.

"He thinks he won't be chosen as the traitor. He might even feign ignorance even if you try to sway him."

"Indeed, if he takes that approach, then there is a risk of expulsion, but it will be difficult to do so."

The role of the traitor was extremely disadvantageous.

Once their identity was exposed, they would likely confess if nominated.

Of course, if the nominated student wasn't the traitor, the representative would receive a penalty, but it was just losing one life, which wouldn't be a significant disadvantage.

Hashimoto himself probably didn't think he was likely to be picked as the traitor, but if Ryūen exercised his traitor rights, he could unexpectedly be chosen. Even if the conversation hadn't happened, Sakayanagi would still suspect him and would at least call him for an interrogation.

"When I call him, he will definitely confess. There's no need to worry about the decision on my end, as refusing to admit he's a traitor would mean his expulsion from the school."

If Sakayanagi had only one life left, then the situation might be different. However, with five lives remaining, there was no choice but to make a declaration against Hashimoto, regardless of his innocence or guilt.

“If you’re harboring any faint hopes, it’s futile. Regardless of whether Hashimoto-kun is innocent or guilty, I will declare him a traitor.”

“I know that. Now then, show me the skills you’re so proud of. If you can convince Hashimoto that you won’t declare him a traitor, he might fall along with me.”

At times like this, she considered the “what if.”

*What if Ryūen had already made a deal with Hashimoto?*

*What if this was a trap set by Ryūen from the beginning?*

However, the details of this special exam were only revealed this morning. By that stage, representatives and participants were completely isolated, with no chance for any interaction.

The possibility of making a contract to save him from expulsion if he continued lying as the traitor was non-existent.

No—she didn’t dismiss the possibility outright; Sakayanagi was truly considering the “what if.”

*What if the rules of the special exam had been leaked in advance?*

*Whether Ryūen had proposed such a contract to Hashimoto or not.*

No, that was 100% impossible.

Regardless of whether Hashimoto confessed or not, Sakayanagi would simply declare that he was the traitor.

Without thinking about anything else, that was the only choice, and there would be no comeback.

Perhaps this incident was not caused by Ryūen but was orchestrated by Ayanokōji.

“Shall we check if there really is a message from Ayanokōji-kun?”

Sakayanagi chose Hashimoto’s group for the discussion.

And Ryūen randomly picked a group, exercising his traitor rights.

This was an action made following Ayanokōji’s message, without any deception.

The discussion began.

But Ryūen wasn’t even looking at the monitor where the discussion was taking place; his eyes were closed.

“It’s kind of you to show that you aren’t playing any tricks.”

“I don’t hate struggling in vain, but I can’t forgive myself for falling for Ayanokōji’s smooth talk.”

This time, Ryūen had declared to Ayanokōji that he would overpower Sakayanagi with his own abilities.

Since that didn’t happen, the match was already over.

Sakayanagi, just to be sure, reviewed the discussion.

The information gained in one round was limited, but she sensed several participants' potential roles.

And she was fully prepared for when the time to initiate the interrogation arrived.

Holding her cane, Sakayanagi slowly left the classroom. Watching her leave, Ryūen looked up at the ceiling and slammed his fist down onto his knee.

He regretted allowing Sakayanagi to lead throughout.

“Damn it...”

He didn't want it to end here.

If it ended this way, his growth would stop here.

But that wish was no longer attainable.

*Ryūen Kakeru had lost.*

## Epilogue: The Truth Is...

**B**EFORE THE SPECIAL EXAM started, I arrived at the restroom first and leaned against the door at the far end of the row of stalls, waiting for Ayanokōji.

With my arms crossed and my guard up, I decided to focus on the battle against Sakayanagi. The rules had just been disclosed, so I kept simulating in my mind with methods to fight her.

Since the representatives and participants were completely separated, most of the strategies I'd prepared in advance were unfortunately unusable, but Sakayanagi was under the same conditions. I didn't have the right to complain.

If it'd been a contest of academic abilities, the outcome would've been almost certain. It was safe to say I'd passed the first hurdle.

It was interesting precisely because there were no absolute guarantees.

After a while, I was enveloped by a sensation that prickled my skin.

It was a gamble, and if I lost to Sakayanagi in the exam, that was that.

If necessary, my revenge against Ayanokōji could even be carried over outside the school.

After a slight delay, he arrived.

His usual expressionless face, that eerie atmosphere surrounding Ayanokōji was something I couldn't sense back then.

But now, I could feel his abnormality all too well.

“I see you noticed my call.”

“Get to the point. I don't have time to deal with you today.”

Even with my pressuring, Ayanokōji didn't even twitch an eyebrow.

“During the special exam, I want to send a message to Sakayanagi through you.”

“Huh? A message? Then say it yourself. Are you kidding me?”

Sakayanagi had been quiet in the waiting room from the group selection until just now.

There were plenty of opportunities to talk to her.

“It's a special message. I want it delivered only during the special exam.”

A message that made sense only once my one-on-one with Sakayanagi was established.

“Hah! I don't get it.”

“It's fine if you don't understand. The message just needs to reach her.”

*What was he planning?*

*It's unlikely, but could he be in cahoots with Sakayanagi?*

“Don't worry. I'm not your ally, but I'm not Sakayanagi's ally either. I'm just a bystander.”

He added that, reading my thoughts as I observed the situation.

“Are there any benefits in it for me for cooperating with something so troublesome?”

“Sorry, but not particularly. If you don’t like it, feel free to refuse. Besides, if you end up defeating Sakayanagi, this message won’t be necessary.”

I wasn’t inclined to cooperate with Ayanokōji, but his last remark wasn’t something I could just ignore.

“You think I’d lose?”

“I didn’t say that. This message is just a bit special.”

He kept saying things I didn’t understand.

“If you decide you can’t win, just remember our current conversation then.”

I didn’t like what he said, but this guy has an uncanny ability to see ahead. At the very least, this wouldn’t be a meaningless action.

“I have no plans to lose, but I’ll listen. What should I tell her?”

The content he wanted to convey to Sakayanagi through such a roundabout way piqued my interest.

But—

“The content of the message is only known to Hashimoto.”

“What?”

Ayanokōji, once again, said something beyond my expectations.

“So, just tell Sakayanagi to hear the message from Hashimoto.”

“Are you kidding me? How do you plan on letting them talk during the exam?”

“It’s simple. Just make Hashimoto the traitor. That way, a one-on-one interrogation situation will arise.”

He kept spouting such ridiculous nonsense.

“Don’t make me laugh. Hashimoto is a backstabber that no one trusts. There’s no way Sakayanagi would use his group in her match against me.”

Using the right to select Hashimoto as the traitor seemed foolish, but even the premise itself shouldn’t have been possible.

“It depends on the situation. Depending on how things unfold, it might not be that difficult.”

*Force it if you have to*—he didn’t seem to urge me quite to that extent but he still was an incredibly irritating bastard...

“It’s a lost cause. Not sure if there will be any meaning at that point, but convey her that message yourself after the exam. There should at least be enough time for you to meet.”

“It’s a special message that only Sakayanagi can understand during the special exam.”

“You’re not planning to let me use the traitor rights?”

Sakayanagi probably wouldn't use Hashimoto, but in case she did, I had to keep the traitor rights available, or this message would become impossible.

"That might be the case."

"Don't make me laugh. That message will never reach Sakayanagi."

Thinking seriously about this made me feel stupid, so I pushed Ayanokōji's riddle to the back of my mind.

"Use it whenever you like if you want to. I won't force you."

Leaving those words behind, the man quickly finished up and left, and I clicked my tongue sharply.

"What kind of message is that? Damn it, making it unnecessarily difficult to convey to her."

Despite being forced into a tough battle, he made such an outrageous demand.

# 1

Ryūen used his traitor rights, and a representative interrogation took place.  
“This feels kind of bad, doesn’t it?”

Hashimoto, who’d arrived earlier, muttered this with a laugh as Sakayanagi showed up in the room.

“The moment my group was chosen, Ryūen used his traitor rights. The timing was bad.”

Saying this, Hashimoto leaned back deeply in his chair.

Sakayanagi walked in with a cane and took a seat in front of him.

“I can’t ask about the representative battle, but this looks like the climax either way.”

“How so. Unfortunately, I can’t answer that here.”

He had expected a development where Ryūen was gaining the upper hand —that was the *answer* Hashimoto had hoped for.

However, the Sakayanagi seated across from him seemed to give off a calm air.

“Well, that’s fine. We won’t know the details until it’s over anyway. But why did you select my group, Sakayanagi?”

As if running away from the reality of that *answer*, he slightly tried to shift the conversation.

“Oh. Now that you see me as an enemy, you’ve decided to drop the honorifics?”

“We’re alone in here, after all. I have no intention of putting on airs.”

“Very well. I understand that you’ve prepared accordingly.”

Hashimoto kept a cool front, but his heartbeat was far faster than usual.

Desperately moistening his dry throat, he pretended that everything was normal.

“You chose to team up with Ryūen-kun. It’s a pity that the special exam turned out to be one where you can’t make a move.”

“Exactly. I was hoping to turn the tables by backstabbing you, but it ended up being quite the opposite.”

He exaggerated his disappointment due to the almost opposite outcome.

“Why did you select my group? Even if I can’t interfere in this exam, you wouldn’t show any openings. You never know what might happen in this world.”

There were no advantages to using Hashimoto’s group, only disadvantages.

“That’s right. As you might’ve expected, I wasn’t planning on selecting your group for this special exam.”

“Then why? What’s the purpose of this interrogation? You’re not going to say you plan to expel me here, right?”

That was absolutely impossible. Hashimoto was naturally convinced.

“I won’t be able to meet your expectations, so shall I quickly confess? I’m the traitor.”

“That would be rather troublesome. I have no interest in your confession. I called you here to find out about the message you heard from Ayanokōji-kun.”

“...Message?”

“Since it’s just you and me here, there’s no need to hide it, right?”

“Wait a minute. I don’t understand what you’re talking about.”

Showing confusion, Hashimoto crossed his arms and thought.

“Didn’t you meet Ayanokōji-kun before the special exam started?”

“I did meet Ayanokōji, but I didn’t receive any message for you.”

“Time is limited. If you were entrusted with his message, I don’t see the need to meaninglessly keep me in suspense.”

“No, no, I seriously have no idea. Just wait, I’ll remember.”

Hashimoto had indeed met Ayanokōji. However, he truly had no recollection of being asked to pass a message to Sakayanagi. He desperately dug through his memory.

“Ah, no... could it be... that?”

“It seems you do recall something.”

“No, that definitely wasn’t a message. It’s just...”

Just as he was beginning to speak, he then closed his mouth.

“What is it?”

“I was only given one piece of advice when facing this special exam—don’t lie to yourself.”

“You are a liar, after all. Perhaps that was what his advice was about.”

However, considering that Hashimoto had hesitated to say, it certainly wasn’t the message meant for Sakayanagi.

“See? Honestly, there’s nothing else. There is no message.”

Sakayanagi thought it over. It didn’t seem like he was lying about this matter. On the other hand, it also didn’t seem like Ryūen was lying. The fact that he’d given up on the exam was clear since he hadn’t even attempted to watch over the discussion. Thus, there was only one answer left.

“You were entrusted with a message from Ayanokōji-kun. However, you were not informed that it was a message. That’s why you can’t find the answer even if you search your memory.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? If that’s the case, there’s nothing I can do about it. I really have no clue.”

“Don’t worry. I will find that message for you.”

To do that, she would need to make the most of their interrogation time.

“Examiner, I’ll inform you first. I will ask him now whether he is a traitor, but at this stage, I’ll only listen to what he has to say. Please do not take his words as a confession.”

After telling the examiner not to seek a confession just yet, Sakayanagi faced Hashimoto.

“Could you tell me if you’re a traitor or not?”

Hashimoto glanced at the examiner and they slightly nodded, promising that whatever Hashimoto said next wouldn’t be taken as a confession, whether it was true or false.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I thought we should talk. You said earlier, didn’t you? Ayanokōji-kun told you not to lie to yourself. I want to verify if that’s true. If you’re siding with Ryūen-kun, then there should only be one right answer here.”

“Even if you’ve notified the examiner, I won’t trust you so carelessly. So let me put it this way. If I were asked to confess now, I might answer that I am not a traitor.”

By deliberately being ambiguous, he had also insured himself. This way, it wouldn’t be taken as a confession.

“I see. So you were just called here while having a different role, right?”

“Yes. I’ll speak my mind.”

“Then for now, that stance is fine. If you can speak honestly, I feel like we will arrive at the message eventually.. Let’s talk a bit before the confession.”

A direct, one-on-one conversation between Sakayanagi and Hashimoto that had nothing to do with the exam began.

“So, what do you want to ask me about?”

“Please tell me about things that I couldn’t ask before. Usually, I wouldn’t have been interested in others’ histories, but I think your personality and thoughts are based on past experiences.”

“Well, maybe, maybe not.”

“Even if you’re not lying, can’t you just answer honestly?”

“We’re not in a relationship where we can freely share our pasts.”

“Then let me delve a bit deeper. I’ve thoroughly investigated both friends and foes. I know you have a strange habit. When you’re troubled or worried, you tend to hide in a toilet stall, don’t you?”

As she pointed this out, he instinctively twitched his shoulder. He hadn’t intended for anyone to notice that habit, but Sakayanagi knew about it.

“No, that was really surprising... How and when did you find out?”

“You must have realized by now, but I had Yamamura-san investigate various things for a long time. Since you were regularly in contact with Ryūen-kun, she also spent time watching you.”

“If that’s the case, did you let Yamamura enter the men’s restroom too?”

“Looking back, I did impose quite a harsh task on her.”

Without denying it, Sakayanagi nodded, acknowledging the fact.

“Using the toilet stall without needing to, whether it was a place to seek time alone to think or to escape from reality—I think it’s the latter.”

Despite not having many clues, Sakayanagi was slowly finding the keys to unlock his hidden heart.

“Whether it was in elementary or middle school, there must’ve been an incident that caused this behavior. Considering your personality—there are things that become visible.”

Hashimoto clapped his hands nonchalantly and, laughing, he spoke.

“It’s not an unusual story. Back in the day, I was often chased around by people who didn’t like me. There was this dirty, deserted restroom on the school grounds, so I would often hole up in there and think about various things by myself. I just haven’t been able to shake off that habit.”

Hashimoto could’ve lied, but he figured this much truth was okay.

After all, he’d been warned by Ayanokōji. He didn’t want to mess up and spoil her mood.

“You’re speaking very positively, but it must’ve been a tough past, wasn’t it?”

“...Maybe.”

Hashimoto evaded the question. Answering it would naturally bring back unpleasant memories.

“You realized something through those experiences, didn’t you? You believed that betraying before being betrayed was right, and that lying was a way to survive and win. That’s you, Hashimoto Masayoshi.”

“Don’t talk like you know me. People who’ve never seen hell won’t be able to understand.”

A slight anger welled up, and Hashimoto unconsciously slapped his knee.

“I don’t care if it’s a message from Ayanokōji or whatever, it’s none of my business. I have to graduate from Class A. I need results to prove to those who think I’m nothing but trash wrong.”

Whether it was Sakayanagi, Ryūen, or Ayanokōji, he didn’t care.

*I will graduate from Class A.* That was the only goal Hashimoto continued to fight for.

“Enough already. Let’s get on with the confession.”

“What will you do after shifting to the confession? You were told not to lie to yourself, yet you plan to confess, betraying Ryūen-kun?”

“Of course. If I even as a joke tried saying I’m not a traitor here, you’ll declare me as one like you’ve caught a demon and expel me from school. I won’t let that happen...”

“That’s right. I’m not going to say something like ‘I absolutely won’t declare you as a traitor’ either. The answer regarding your fate is already determined.”

“Then that’s it, this conversation is over. I am—”

Hashimoto, in an attempt to end this interrogation, lost his words when he looked into Sakayanagi’s eyes.

“What... Why are you making that face?”

Sakayanagi had a calm expression that she had never shown before.

It showed no signs of mocking him, rather, it was a warm smile like a mother watching over her child.

“Maybe I’ve come to understand you better, Hashimoto-kun. I promised Masumi-san I would expel you. But... I might reconsider that now.”

“Huh? There’s no way I can believe that.”

“I’m not saying I’ll take it back. If you continue to betray the class, the outcome won’t change. But if you trust and follow me, it won’t necessarily be the same.”

“...You think I’d believe that? It’s obvious I’ll be betrayed.”

“What do you think?”

“You’re trying to deceive me and take revenge, aren’t you?”

“That’s for you to think about, Hashimoto-kun.”

“I’m definitely going to be betrayed... I have to... defeat you...”

Suddenly, a tear rolled down Hashimoto’s cheek.

“What...?”



Hashimoto didn't understand what was happening.

It was only when he wiped it away that he realized it was his tears.

"What's this? There's absolutely no reason to cry... What's going on?"

Hashimoto couldn't help but laugh at his body's current abnormal state.

"Until now, no one understood you. You thought there would be no one else like that in the future either. But maybe your instincts realized that it was wrong?"

Looking at Hashimoto in front of her, Sakayanagi also reflected on herself.

Thinking back, she'd never trusted anyone.

She'd only believed in her own thoughts and pushed others away.

But as a result, she lost Kamuro due to her immature heart.

The darkness that Hashimoto carried.

The past that must've made him resort to any means necessary to survive.

Maybe if she closed the distance between them further, perhaps he would talk about it one day.

Sakayanagi had thought so.

It was hard to forgive him, but she herself was also largely responsible for Kamuro's expulsion.

*Maybe it's okay to give him a chance.*

*Maybe it's okay to win this special exam and bring Hashimoto back into the fold.*

Such thoughts circled in her head.

Hashimoto confessed and admitted to being a traitor.

If so, all that remained was for Sakayanagi to make the decision, and with that, this conversation would end. Hashimoto would just lose his reward.

She would return to the discussion, find the student with the executive role, and deplete Ryūen's lives, thus closing this special exam.

However...

Sakayanagi stopped.

*...What did Ayanokōji want to convey?*

*What was the message he said he had passed on to Hashimoto?*

*Was it a message to forgive the man before me?*

While reaching her answer, Sakayanagi still felt a strong sense of discomfort.

Sakayanagi quietly closed her eyes.

This was different from the message she should've gotten from Ayanokōji.

Whether to forgive Hashimoto or not wasn't necessary in this special exam.

It could've been answered even after Ryūen's expulsion was confirmed, not in this ambiguous situation.

Therefore, you couldn't say that it was a message that carried meaning only now.

In this situation, what he wanted to convey...

With her superior thinking that others did not possess, she probed.

*Think. Think. Think. Think. Think.*

“Ah...”

And finally, Sakayanagi’s thoughts reached the hidden message, her final answer.

“Is that what it is...?”

No. She didn’t want to admit it.

She didn’t want to acknowledge such a message.

That was why she added a question mark.

Despite questioning it, her mind was convinced it was the correct answer.

What was the message that Ayanokōji had sent to her?

This message was something that neither Ryūen nor Hashimoto could ever hear.

Ayanokōji’s true intention, visible only after fighting Ryūen.

It was a message too cruel for Sakayanagi to bear.

“He’s also... a liar, isn’t he?”

A battle staking the expulsions of Sakayanagi and Ryūen.

The true purpose of such a battle was to fight Ayanokōji to her heart’s content.

Thus, a match was established in order to eliminate those who could interfere.

And knowing this, Ayanokōji decided not to take sides with either student.

Despite deciding so, he had an answer when asked as to whom he wanted to remain.

*The person Ayanokōji was waiting for was Ryūen Kakeru.*

Of course, he had no intention of interfering in this match. He hinted he would give advice to repay a debt, but it was a mere formality, as it was obvious that Sakayanagi would refuse.

The entire sequence of events was his way of modestly helping someone who was in for a likely defeat, turning the tables for Ryūen.

Sakayanagi had always been waiting for the real battle with Ayanokōji that awaited her.

But what was Ayanokōji thinking?

She knew he was acting with the balance of the four classes in mind.

She had interfered with Ayanokōji’s plans, wanting to see his troubled face.

But at its core, she knew it was because Ayanokōji was waiting for the time of the final battle.

Sakayanagi believed and hoped that she was that worthy opponent.

After all, it was merely Sakayanagi’s one-sided feelings.

A certain future visible only to Sakayanagi, who possessed superior thinking.

Ayanokōji intended to continue watching Ryūen's growth closely and wanted to accept his challenge.

Just as Sakayanagi felt she wanted to enjoy the match with Ryūen even more in this battle.

It was easy to deliver the final blow to Ryūen.

Just one more push and her victory would be assured.

And then she could say she had interfered with his plans again and request a battle.

But... what a ridiculous sight that would be.

*Sakayanagi Arisu is not desired by Ayanokōji Kiyotaka from now on.*

The reality that even if Sakayanagi won, Ayanokōji wouldn't be pleased. She could see far beyond what anyone else could, and for the first time in her life, she even hated this thought process of hers.

She wanted to remain unaware, not realizing how ridiculous she was.

If she thought about her class, then she must prioritize winning here.

Images of Yamamura and her classmates flashed through her mind. Maybe there was a future where she'd fulfill her promise with Kamuro, or join hands with Hashimoto again.

Continuing school life wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

But what 'Sakayanagi desires' wasn't waiting ahead.

For Sakayanagi, it was an irreplaceably harsh reality.

'Please lose here.'

That was the message from Ayanokōji.

Sakayanagi definitely received the message that no one else could notice.

Even to the cruel words from her beloved, Sakayanagi smiled faintly and closed her eyes.

Otherwise, she felt that tears would naturally start flowing like they did with Hashimoto.

'It's time now. Please confess, Hashimoto-kun.'

The examiner signaled the end of the interrogation.

Until now, Hashimoto had been honest with Sakayanagi.

The answer he was asked for.

"Ah... The traitor's—"

Sakayanagi quietly stopped Hashimoto as he tried to voice what shouldn't be said.

"Is that so? The traitor's not you. Right, you are not a traitor."

Hashimoto's eyes widened.

"Hey, Sakayanagi...? What do you mean—"

At that point, it was unclear what Hashimoto had intended to say next.

He might've admitted to being a traitor to avoid his own expulsion, or he might've remained honest to the end, continuing to side with Ryūen and denying being a traitor.

But none of that mattered anymore.

*‘...Whether Hashimoto-kun’s confession is one way or the other, the judgment will—’*

As the announcement about their suspicion was about to be made, Sakayanagi stopped it.

“How tactless. He clearly said he is not a traitor. Checking again would yield the same result. And I will not change my answer either. Right? Hashimoto-kun.”

“Why, you... why...”

“...Because this is a message from Ayanokōji-kun. That’s all there is to it.”  
Sakayanagi concluded.

Even if the announcement asked again, her thoughts wouldn’t change.

Eventually, the judgment was made.

*‘...Sakayanagi-san will lose five lives for failing to identify the traitor.’*

New departures from the school emerged as the end-of-year special exam concluded.

Ryūen Kakeru lost.

And Sakayanagi Arisu also lost.

Within that contradiction, there were indeed winners and losers.

## Author's Postscript

It's been five months. I am Kinugasa.  
My hernia is completely healed!  
...Would be what I'd wish to report, but unfortunately, the situation has not improved at all.

Somehow, I managed to release this a bit late, but I can't promise what will happen next time, given the current situation. Sorry!!

I didn't want to make you wait a long time after Volume 11 for Volume 12, so I pushed myself. The backlash is that I'm in much worse shape now than right after writing Volume 11... It took five months, but it was twice as hard as when I wrote in four months... I need more time.

I tried writing while lying down and standing up, experimenting with various postures, but I couldn't find any position that surpassed 'sitting and writing' (obviously). It's pointless to dwell on dark topics for too long, so I'll just keep improving for now.

This time, with Volume 12, the third term has ended. Next will be Volume 12.5 during the spring break, which will also mark the end of the second year. The second year seemed long yet passed by in a blink for me, but how about for you all?

Before the start of You-Zitsu, my daughter, who wasn't even born yet, now heads to school alone with a backpack, making me intensely aware of how fast time flies. Even though I feel I've written enough during this time, looking back, I wish I could have written more about the behind-the-scenes of the story.

I won't touch on the contents of Volume 12 this time. It seems tactless to hint at anything strange. I'll talk more deeply about it when another opportunity arises.

Anyway, I'll do my best to deliver the next volume as soon as possible. I've aged quite a bit, but my creative desire hasn't faded at all... If only my body could keep up, I'd like to write even more.

Summer is approaching, but please be careful about heatstroke this year as well.

Well then, everyone, I hope to see you again within this year, bidding you a temporary farewell!

## Ichinose Honami's Short Story: Approaching Promise

IT WAS MORNING. I arrived earlier than the proposed meeting time and sat on a bench.

I had some time today to talk with Ayanokōji-kun later.

Just thinking about him filled my heart with comfort and happiness.

But, that's something I really shouldn't do.

Ayanokōji-kun currently has a girlfriend named Karuizawa-san.

*I must accept that as a human being and make a calm judgment.*

*That's why I can only enjoy this date within my heart.*

*Here, I can experience the feeling of waiting for a loved one as a lover.*

“Kiyotaka-kun.”

Alone on the bench, I muttered those words.

If we were lovers, we'd be much closer and call each other by our first names.

*Ayanokōji-kun too might start addressing me as Honami.*

Just the thought had made my heart pound heavily.

I never thought that my unrequited love would change me this much.

The only question is... how much longer I can suppress this one-sided love.

From the corner of my eye, I saw him approaching.

I cleared my mind and straightened my back, being careful so as not to lose my sense of self.

“Good morning.”

Ayanokōji-kun greeted me, and I responded.

“Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun. Is it okay? Calling me out to a place like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is a public place. If Karuizawa-san or the others around see us, won't they get the wrong idea?”

I actually wanted someone to see us.

Such feelings got in the way, but they were clearly wrong.

“No need to worry. I've already talked to Kei about today. Careless secrets and clumsy lies only become shackles in maintaining relationships.”

“What will you do about the special exam, Ayanokōji-kun?”

After that, I briefly discussed the special exam with Ayanokōji-kun.

We were in a position to compete.

Because I was burdened with a battle I couldn't afford to lose.

That's why, At least during this exam, I must seal away these thoughts.

And that's why I quietly wished to feel happiness, even if it was just for now.

## Horikita Suzune's Short Story: Familiar Everyday Life

AFTER SCHOOL AT THE cafe. I usually felt calm here, but today, my heart was rapidly beating, albeit faintly.

*It must be because the end-of-year special exam was announced.*

It was dangerous to be optimistic, but depending on how things unfold, we might end up moving up to Class A.

When I first learned what being in Class D meant, I wondered what would happen to me, but I've made it this far.

*I think I've been able to contribute to the class in my own way, but I shouldn't be conceited.*

The results so far were because of my classmates' significant cooperation.

As the appointed time approached, he arrived.

“Is something wrong?”

His first words upon arriving were unexpected.

“...What do you mean?”

“I just felt like you might be worried about something. I hope I'm mistaken.”

Apparently, what I had been thinking about so deeply had shown on my face.

“Is it that obvious?”

“It is.”

“I see. No, I was just thinking about next week's exam. Sorry if it bothered you.”

I apologized and tried to regain my composure.

“Are you nervous about it already?”

“It can't be helped, right? The fluctuation in class points will be significant. It's a major turning point whether our class moves up or down.”

I couldn't help but think about the exam. However, continuing to touch on that topic here wouldn't solve anything... I searched for a different subject to discuss.

“By the way... have you noticed there are fewer first years around?”

“Yeah. It seems the first years are finally facing the challenges of the end-of-year special exams.”

“Time seems to pass slowly, yet flies by so quickly. It's already been a year since they enrolled in this school.”

Two years ago, following my brother, I enrolled into this school as well. Back then, I hadn't even thought about making friends or having fun. I was just focused on pursuing my grades. Recently, however, I found myself spending more and more time idly with Kushida-san and Ibuki-san.

*Well... I wonder whether counting those two as friends is appropriate.*

And the Ayanokōji-kun in front of me—I felt like we had been together for quite some time.

I could now confidently say that the everyday life I had grown accustomed to had become indispensable.

I felt a little embarrassed yet proud of my changing self.

## Ryūen Kakeru's Short Story: True Intentions

IN THE SILENCE OF an empty karaoke room, I waited for him. During that time, I glanced at the grape juice on the table and imagined myself spilling it all over him.

If the juice doesn't catch his attention, I planned on doing it.

*He'll probably notice though, so I won't do it.*

If I kept on setting traps for him, his guard would only increase.

Then he showed up, looking stupidly serious.

"None of your lackeys are around today, huh?"

"Well, ain't that a surprise. You wanted things to get lively up in here or something?"

"I was just thinking that if Ibuki or Ishizaki were here, then they would've been able to do something about this tense atmosphere."

He didn't change his expression at all, even when he was talking to me.

It was infuriating how composed he was.

"You sure are spewing quite a lot of shit being the one who called me out here."

"Well, you're right."

"Well, it's fine. I was thinking of contacting you myself this time. I'll let it slide."

It had saved me time.

"If that's the case, it seems we'll be discussing similar topics."

I gestured Ayanokōji to sit as I started the conversation.

"Don't be shy, sit down."

"I'd prefer to refrain if possible. Are you planning on pouring grape juice on me this time?"

*Tch, so he noticed it after all?*

I decided not to do anything at this point.

"You're reading too much into it. Besides, you could avoid it anytime if you wanted, right?"

While continuing this pointless conversation, I was preparing to speak my true intentions in front of Ayanokōji.

There was something I had to tell this man.

Staking my progress on the battle with Sakayanagi wasn't a big deal.

What mattered was what came after—making him acknowledge me based on my results.

It wouldn't be bad to employ any means necessary for that.

However, this time that would be a hindrance.

“I’ll show you and Sakayanagi what my serious effort looks like. It’s not like me, but I’ll overpower her fair and square.”

Whose potential was greater needed to be made clear.

That was the most important thing.

For that reason, the vow made here would take on significant meaning. I had to convey my true, undeniable intentions in preparation for the revenge that awaited against Ayanokōji.

## Sakayanagi Arisu's Short Story: Wavelength

FEELING SLEEPY, I CRAWLED into bed and put my phone close to my ear.  
“Fufu...”

I couldn't help but smile even though the call hadn't started yet.  
After all, I was about to spend time with Ayanokōji-kun.

I made the call, and soon, Ayanokōji-kun answered.

“I'm sorry for being late. Is it okay to talk now?”

‘Yes, it's fine.’

It was Ayanokōji-kun's usual voice.

*Why does his voice always calm my heart?*

It was the perfect wavelength.

“Seems you wanted to speak with me...”

No matter how trivial the topic was, I was happy just to have the chance to talk to him.

‘Simply put, I heard you've accepted a challenge from Ryūen, staking expulsion.’

“Was that it? I thought it would only be a matter of time before you heard about it, but who told you? No, perhaps it's rude to ask.”

I wouldn't be surprised to know wherever he got his information.

If he set his mind to it, he could make anything happen.

‘Given the position of Class A and the presence or absence of Protection Points, the terms are exceptional.’

“Looking at the terms alone, that might be the case. However, I will not lose to him, and Ryūen-kun is merely tightening the noose around his own neck.”

*No matter the special exam, my superiority is irrefutable.*

That was why I could always keep my usual composure.

“You didn't call out of concern for me, did you?”

‘Is concern necessary?’

“Not at all. Just witnessing the outcome of the battle will suffice.”

Still, if Ayanokōji-kun was worried about me, I wouldn't mind.

I had always imagined it. Since the day I reunited with Ayanokōji-kun at this school, I knew there would come a day when we'd seriously compete against each other, each desiring the other to exert their full abilities to see who was superior.

That day was definitely getting closer.

*But I won't mention it now. First, I must defeat Ryūen-kun and prepare for it.*

But once that was over, I wanted to express all my feelings.

Feeling happy over the phone, I gradually succumbed to sleepiness.

## RoyalMTLs Afterword

Cast here! Thanks to all of you that made it to the very end. I wonder how many of you actually read this part... Anyways, this volume may have been one of the best we've ever translated in my opinion. We had a really good and hard-working team for this volume, and I want to give them a big shout out to thank them for their efforts. Kiyotaka really put the work on everyone this volume which was good to see. Feels like we haven't got to see him really shine in a long time.

Looks like there may be another delay for volume 12.5 due to the authors health still being an issue. Please pray for Kinugasa to make a speedy recovery. I hope that we can still get the next volume later this year, but only time will tell.

Once again, thank you so much to the author, Shogo Kinugasa, for writing this series that we all love. Everyone, please consider buying one of the official copies for Classroom of the Elite so that we may be able to support the author even more.

Hope you guys enjoyed this volume and thank you for your continuous support! Keep checking in on our website to be updated on Classroom of the Elite translations and consider joining our discord events and leaks!

-Cast (Translator)

<https://royalmtls.com/>

<https://discord.com/invite/royalmtls>

Also follow us on Twitter for updates and potential leaks.

<https://twitter.com/royalmtls>

## Credits

Yasaseru – Japanese Editor

“Kinugasa really cucked Arisu so hard that she had to drop out, just so he could have his Ryuumen x Ayanokouji Yaoi Fanfiction.”

Jera – Japanese Editor

“The sky is full of anxious words.”

Kondo – Japanese Editor

“I need an Arisu in my life.”

不幸だ – Japanese Editor

“read umineko.”

Mako – Editor

“Every main heroines' stock = plummeted. Long live Hiyori Shiina!”

Spoopykay – Editor

“Thugging it out.”

Dosomething – Editor

“Eff Ayano x Hori, where's my Sudo x Onodera? I won't accept any other relationship.”

Meyobos – Editor

“Chapter 8 was a fiasco but we pulled through, shout out polyphilia goated band.”

Gaynesis – Editor

“Monumenta is a Free Complete-The-Monument MMO RPG Minecraft Server. It has hundreds of hours of exciting adventures that awaits you. Join now at.  
[https://playmonumenta.com/”](https://playmonumenta.com/)

Budos – Editor

“Please be kind to each other. RIP Hana Kimura 5/23.”

Unknown – Editor

“Adios.”

Ash – Editor

“Meh.”

Shawarma – Editor

“Standing on business.”

Shido Itsuka – Illustrator

“The illustrations are as beautiful as always. Arisu shall prove Victorious”

Faultycelery34 – Illustrator

“Check out my YouTube - <https://www.youtube.com/@FantasyFolklore>”

Snort Nesquick – EPUB Maker

“Brug #4”