

NOVEL

3

STORY: SYOUGO
KINUGASA

ART: TOMOSE SHUNSAKU

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE 2 YEAR



Table of Contents

[Character Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Table of Contents Page](#)

[Chapter 1: Nanase Tsubasa's Soliloquy](#)

[Chapter 2: Everyone Has Their Own Strategies](#)

[Chapter 3: The Curtain Rises on the Uninhabited Island](#)

[Exam](#)

[Chapter 4: Traveling Companion](#)

[Chapter 5: What It Means to Like Someone](#)

[Chapter 6: Unseen Enemy](#)

[Chapter 7: The Aloof Child Prodigy of Class 2-D](#)

[Chapter 8: The First-Years on the Move](#)

[Chapter 9: Identity Revealed](#)

[Chapter 10: Seeds of Unrest](#)

[Postscript](#)

[Newsletter](#)



CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

NOVEL 3



"Can I ask you one question?"

"Sure, what is it?"

"That's a pretty cute swimsuit you picked out. Any reason why you picked that one?"

"A reason? Well, I figured that this was the kind of swimsuit you'd see people wearing when they're playing beach flags, like you see on TV. So, I thought it might be kind of weird to play that while wearing a school swimsuit.

Did I misunderstand something?"

ANDOU SAYO

A member of the volleyball team. Tall, athletic, and quite confident in her physical strength. In truth, she's in love with Shibata.



MINAMIKATA KOZUE

Not particularly studious, but an exceptional athlete. She doesn't discriminate and is able to be frank and open with everyone and anyone.



HAMAGUCHI TETSUYA

One of his class's chief strategists of sorts. Although suffice to say he struggles with sports, he excels in academics and in conversation. He's popular among the girls and is someone who doesn't make them think he's a typical guy.





"Ugh! Let go of me!"

"Nope, not gonna do that, I'm afraid."

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

"Wow, this sure is weird, don't you think? I can't believe that you're trembling in fear of a girl younger than you. But you know, I really think it'd be better for you to cherish this feeling, Kushida-senpai."

A B C D E F G H I J

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10



UNINHABITED ISLAND EXAM (2ND YEAR)

EXAM OVERVIEW

- Survive for up to two weeks on an uninhabited island.
- Because of the variety of skills needed, groups with a higher level of overall ability will have an advantage, but cooperation is important.

REWARDS

1ST PLACE GROUP

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

2ND PLACE GROUP

200 Class Points, 500,000 Private Points

3RD PLACE GROUP

100 Class Points, 250,000 Private Points

GROUPS IN THE TOP 50% (INCLUDING THOSE IN 1ST–3RD PLACE)

50,000 Private Points

GROUPS IN THE TOP 70% (INCLUDING THOSE IN 1ST–3RD PLACE)

10,000 Private Points

- ※ Class Points awarded to the groups in the top three places will be transferred from the grades of the groups in the bottom three places. Class Points will be divided evenly by the number of classes, regardless of the number of the students (rounded).

PENALTIES

Students in the five lowest-ranked groups will be subject to expulsion. In the event that a student receives this penalty, that student can be saved by paying a lump sum of 6,000,000 Private Points.

- ※ The 6,000,000 point fee will be divided equally based on the number of people in the group.
- ※ Students will not be allowed to loan or borrow Private Points after the exam has begun, so each student must make sure that they have the necessary points on hand before departure.

DISTRIBUTED CARDS

BASIC CARD OVERVIEW

HEAD START: Points available at the start of the exam are multiplied by 1.5.

BONUS: Whoever owns this card gets double the Private Point rewards.

HALF OFF: Halves the number of Private Points that needs to be paid out for a penalty. Only valid for the student who owns this card.

FREE RIDE: At the start of the exam, designate a specific group. You will receive half of the number of Private Point rewards that the designated group will receive. This effect disappears if you join the group you've designated.

INSURANCE: If the owner of this card would normally be disqualified from the exam due to poor health, they are instead given one full day to recover. Not valid in the event of disqualification due to cheating, etc.

SPECIAL CARD OVERVIEW

ONE MORE: The owner of this card can join a group as a seventh member. It takes effect once the main portion of the exam has started and is not affected by the gender ratio rule.

NULIFY: The Private Points that need to be paid out for a penalty are reduced to zero. Only valid for the student who owns this card.

TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS: Using this card entitles you to be able to earn 1.5 times the Class Point rewards for the special exam. However, if your group fails to place in the top 30%, then your group will be penalized. The school will cover the increased reward amounts.

3

WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

NOVEL 3

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku



Seven Seas Entertainment

YOUKOSO JITSURYOKUSHIJOUSHUGI NO KYOUSHITSU E 2NENSEIHEN
VOL.3

©Syougo Kinugasa 2020

First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form without written permission from the copyright holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. Any information or opinions expressed by the creators of this book belong to those individual creators and do not necessarily reflect the views of Seven Seas Entertainment or its employees.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to Marketing Manager Lianne Senter at press@gomanga.com. Information regarding the distribution and purchase of digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Timothy MacKenzie

ADAPTATION: Harry Caitlin

COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Meg van Huygen

PROOFREADER: Stephanie Cohen

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: T. Burke

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Jules Valera

PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold

PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-63858-642-5

Printed in Canada

First Printing: November 2022

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2 ③

CONTENTS

1. NANASE TSUBASA'S SOLILOQUY
2. EVERYONE HAS THEIR OWN STRATEGIES
3. THE CURTAIN RISES ON THE UNINHABITED ISLAND EXAM
4. TRAVELING COMPANION
5. WHAT IT MEANS TO LIKE SOMEONE
6. UNSEEN ENEMY
7. THE ALOOF CHILD PRODIGY OF CLASS 2-D
8. THE FIRST-YEARS ON THE MOVE
9. IDENTITY REVEALED
10. SEEDS OF UNREST
- POSTSCRIPT



Chapter 1: Nanase Tsubasa's Soliloquy

I STILL REMEMBER the shock of what happened back then quite well. The cruel reality that had confronted me without warning.

An old apartment, filled with the last rays of the setting sun before dusk. A long, large shadow gently rocking from side to side, like the pendulum of a large clock. I couldn't look directly at it, nor could I understand. A warm hand gently patting me on the head. A gentle smile that soothed my heart. A serious gaze that instilled within me a feeling of admiration.

That silent, impassive expression filled me with despair. A strong, gentle person, who worked harder than anyone else and never gave up. It wasn't right that a person like that shouldn't be able to attain their dream.

I'm well aware that I'm contradicting myself, of course.

And yet, I can't forgive what was done. It's hard for people to forge onward while harboring feelings of guilt, which is why they try to claim a sense of legitimacy under the banner of "justice." As long as they have their own sense of justice, and can embrace that conviction, they can continue to fight.

The fragile heart I used to have—the old me—couldn't support that kind of "justice." However, the new me will.

And by embracing that conviction, I...can most definitely defeat Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. I can send him back to where he belongs. If I don't, there could be a second or third victim, and that is something I must avoid at all costs.

Ayanokouji stared at me as I stood there before him. If I was going to bring this all to an end...it was going to have to be right here and now. Then, I could move on to the next step.

My real objective lay *after* defeating Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

Chapter 2: Everyone Has Their Own Strategies

JULY 20. An uninhabited island of everlasting summer stretched before us, as far as the eye could see. Endless azure skies above a clear, boundless ocean. It had been decided that this was where we students would spend the next two weeks.

The sight of the starry sky on a cloudless night would probably be enough to take your breath away. Chatting with friends, sitting shoulder to shoulder with your special someone. Huddling around the fire, dancing, being in high spirits. This place could be a textbook example of what youth should be.

Having heard all that, you might mistake what lay before us for the kind of summer vacation anyone would envy. But for the students at the Advanced Nurturing High School, this uninhabited island was just one big testing ground.

"Mashima-sensei explained as much to us already, but wow, this island really is much bigger than the one we went to last year, isn't it?" remarked Hirata Yousuke, who stood beside me.

That fact was obvious at just a glance. This island was certainly considerably larger. And the content of the exam had been similarly scaled up, as well.

"Even the simple task of trying to survive for two weeks on this island might be enough to force some students to drop out," I replied.

"Yes, and I think it's highly likely some unforeseen situations might develop. I would say securing a water supply would be the most important priority," answered Yousuke.

We could feel the intense heat from the sun even while on the boat. It was obvious that the sun's blazing rays were scorching the sandy beach. On this particular day in late July, the temperature had reached nearly forty degrees Celsius. Yousuke was right to be concerned; staying hydrated would be essential,

as would taking care to avoid heatstroke and dehydration. As we approached the island, the big picture started becoming clearer and clearer.

"I wonder if people used to live here...a long time ago," said Yousuke.

"Maybe," I replied.

We gradually started to approach a rather well-maintained harbor, which gave off an entirely different impression than the rest of the island. Rather than circling around the perimeter of the island, the ship seemed to be headed straight for the harbor. Despite the gentle expression on his face, Yousuke gripped the deck railing tightly. We were now in the final moments before the special exam would begin.

Over these next two weeks, things were probably going to change quite a bit for our entire school. Classes in each grade level might change positions. Students in some grade levels might be expelled. It wouldn't be strange at all if those things happened because of this exam. It was quite possible that, when they returned to school for the second semester, students would find themselves in completely different environments.

This was not a good development for Yousuke, who desired peace and tranquility. No wonder he was unconsciously gripping onto the railing so tightly.

At last, an announcement came over the ship's PA system, telling all the passengers to prepare to disembark.

"Are you ready, Yousuke?" I asked.

Since the peace that he was determined to protect was being threatened right now, I deliberately called out to him in a forceful tone. Yousuke, feeling uneasy, looked me straight in the eye and nodded once.

"I'll do everything I can to make sure that I don't have any regrets. That's the only thing I can do for our class," he said.

He didn't want anyone to get expelled. But it wasn't like there was any way to reduce the probability of casualties among

our classmates all the way down to zero. With that in mind, we got off the deck.

2.1

JULY 19. The day before we landed on the uninhabited island. It was 12:36 p.m. The *Saint Venus*, a luxury liner with a total of twelve decks in all, was sailing south-southwest through the waves. Up on the aft deck, where there were relatively few people around, my girlfriend, Karuizawa Kei, waved to me and beckoned me over. After we made sure that no one else was nearby, the two of us stood side by side, gazing out at the sea.

"Such an incredible view, isn't it?" said Kei.

The sun shone down on the surface of the water, making it glisten like jewels. Kei looked out at the waves with a romantic smile.

"Didn't you see this last year?" I asked.

"Well, a little, but taking in the sights was kind of a distant second for me at the time, in terms of priority. I spent all my time hanging out with my friends inside the ship," admitted Kei, sounding a little embarrassed about it.

Well, that was understandable, I supposed. For many students, that would have been their first time on a luxury cruise ship. You could easily imagine that most people would want to spend as much time as possible hanging out with their friends on the ship rather than leisurely taking in the scenery. The *Saint Venus*, which we boarded this year, was a cruise ship that could carry more than 700 passengers, and apparently, it was the third-largest Japanese-registered ship.

Starting from the entrance lobby on the fifth deck, there was a reception desk, and then the upper decks above it came fully equipped with a movie theater, a swimming pool, a gym, a café, a restaurant, a public bath with an observation platform with a panoramic view, and even an arcade. The amenities offered to us this year were as extensive as last year and then some. It would probably take more than a day or two to fully enjoy everything there was to offer. There was also an infirmary and a

sickbay, of course, as well as contingency measures in the event of unforeseen circumstances.

"You know, I have to wonder, though, is it really safe for us to go on a date in the middle of the day like this?" said Kei as she scanned the environs, seemingly anxious.

"I can't give any guarantees that no one's going to run into us here, but it seems safe for the time being," I replied.

The lunchroom opened today at eleven o'clock this morning, and the first-year students would eat first. It was an early lunch, since they were going to have an informational orientation meeting at noon. On the other hand, the lunch periods for the second- and third-year students came slightly afterward, starting at noon. Many students were still smacking their lips and savoring their sumptuous meals. Right now, this brief time before one o'clock in the afternoon, could be called the few precious moments that we could be alone.

"Well, there are lots of people this year, after all, so I guess they'll need to explain everything beforehand," said Kei.

"That might be true, but I don't think that's the only reason," I replied.

The orientation information session was scheduled for one hour, which was considerably longer than last year's. Perhaps they weren't going to hold this orientation session on the beach this year, in consideration of the hot weather conditions. It was inevitable that several students would collapse from heat stroke if they had to listen to a lengthy breakdown of the rules for a long period of time while standing out in direct sunlight. The decision to do things this way was probably more a matter of safety than an indication of the meeting's importance.

"For some reason, this all doesn't feel real yet..." said Kei.

"Well, it's not every day that you get an opportunity to ride on a cruise ship, I suppose. So, it's understandable that you'd feel like it hasn't really sunk in yet," I replied, offering a calm, collected analysis.

Kei sighed in response, exasperated.

"That's not what I meant... I was talking about how you and I are going out, Kiyotaka. That's what doesn't feel real yet. You're really smart, but when it comes to this kind of stuff, you're totally hopeless," she said.

Kei and I had started dating earlier this year, during spring break. Several months had already passed, but we still hadn't actually gone out on a real date. A normal high school student would probably go to and from school together each day with their significant other, or hang out every day after class and go places. But since we were trying to hide the fact that we were going out from everyone else, we interacted far less frequently than other couples.

Even when we were trying to be alone like this, just the two of us, we had no choice but to arrange clandestine meetings. So, I supposed that the situations in which we could really feel like we were dating were extremely limited.

"What about you, Kiyotaka?" asked Kei. "Has it sunk in for you yet? Like, does it all feel real to you?"

"Well, I'm not sure," I answered. "If I had to say anything, I guess I'd say it both does and doesn't at the same time."

"What is that supposed to mean?" said Kei.

Kei and I had become lovers. That was a fact. Yet, even now, it wasn't like anything had changed significantly, or even visibly.

"I mean that for the longest time, I couldn't really imagine the two of us meeting outside in secret like this," I replied.

"Well, yeah, I guess," said Kei, letting out another deep sigh as she stared off far into the horizon.

"Depending on what they tell us this special exam is going to cover exactly, I may need to ask you a favor," I told her.

"I know," said Kei. "As long as it's something I can do, I'll do it."

That was the main reason I had wanted her to come out and meet me. That being said, since I was allowed to use my

phone as much as I wanted today, I could have easily given her all the necessary details that way. There was no need to take on the risks that came with going out to meet in person. I thought it was interesting that we were meeting in person simply because we were lovers.

A short time later, an announcement could be heard throughout the ship, telling us that the informational meeting was over.

"Sounds like the first-years are all done. Since we can't go together, I'll head back first," said Kei.

Since we would have aroused suspicion if we went together, Kei took the initiative and went back inside first. It was now the second-year students' turn to gather in the movie theater, since the first-years were finished. When we got inside, we were told that there were no assigned seats, and that we were free to sit wherever we pleased.

Some students sat down wherever, not really caring where they sat. Some students gathered with their close friends. The people who stood out, though, were the ones who clustered in groups. I supposed that made complete sense; it was a matter of course. It was far more efficient to attend this informational orientation meeting that way, exchanging opinions with the allies who would fight alongside you for the next two weeks, starting tomorrow. That was a better use of this time. As someone who was participating alone, I naturally sat down in an empty space between groups. I wasn't seated towards the front, of course, but instead towards the back, remaining inconspicuous.

"Ugh... Why are *you* sitting here?"

Unsurprisingly, another student who was participating in this exam alone had also had the idea to take a seat in this empty area between groups. Apparently, I had sat down next to Ibuki Mio, from Class 2-B.

"You're not doing this on purpose, are you?" she huffed.

"Not at all," I answered.

I guessed that it was simply the fact that we had the same line of thinking that led us to sit in the same place.

"I'm going somewhere else," said Ibuki. "Don't follow me."

Apparently, she couldn't stand the idea of sitting next to me, so she got up and tried to put some distance between us. I didn't intend to stop her, of course, but many of the seats were already starting to fill up. Whether you looked to the right or the left, all you could see were groups of people chatting. Ibuki, who had just noticed what was going on, froze.

There was no longer any escape for the solitary student. She had no other choice but to take the other empty seat just one spot away from me, but moments before she could, Kitou Hayato, from Class 2-A, plopped down in that spot first. Ibuki made no attempt to hide the fact that she was glaring at him, but Kitou simply sat there, arms crossed, not reacting to her at all. She had two choices: either she could come back and sit down next to me, or she could try and blend in with a group.

After agonizing over her options for a little while, she reluctantly returned to her seat next to me. In the end, she had opted to listen to the announcements while seated between Kitou and I. With that in mind, it seemed like while she didn't want to sit by me, she disliked the idea of trying to sit with the rest of the crowd even more. Otherwise, I supposed she wouldn't dare to try and take this test alone, despite being a girl.

In any case, I decided to put the matter of dealing with Ibuki aside and tried to focus on the rules for the uninhabited island exam. I turned my attention towards the front of the room, where things seemed to be getting quite busy.

Like last year, Mashima-sensei, the instructor of Class 2-A, was the one in charge of explaining the rules to us.

"Now, then," he said, "I'd like to begin explaining to you the rules for the special exam being held on the uninhabited island." While standing in front of the screen, microphone in hand, he began the proceedings.

"Your stay on the uninhabited island will last for two weeks, starting tomorrow. Just like last year's exam, essentially, you are expected to go about your days freely on the island. If you become injured or fall ill during the exam, or if you commit a serious violation of the rules, you will be eliminated from the exam. No ifs, ands, or buts. As I'm sure you very clearly remember, we asked you to form small groups of up to a maximum of three people prior to this point. Once the special exam begins, small groups will be allowed to band together. Following certain conditions, small groups will be allowed to merge into larger groups, up to a maximum of six people. If all members of a particular group are eliminated, then that group will be disqualified, and their final position in the rankings will be determined," explained Mashima-sensei.

All the students in the groups that placed in the bottom five spots in the rankings would be expelled from the school. However, a group's expulsion could be avoided by paying six million Private Points. Someone acting on their own, meaning a one-person group, would need to pay all six million points by themselves. That same fee would be split up three ways in a three-person group, but only the students who were able to pay their share would be saved from expulsion. Since the number of students who had large sums of points at their disposal was extremely limited, this option was of little concern to most.

However, there was another aspect to this exam, wherein Class Points of the classes tied to the three groups that placed in the bottom of the rankings would be cut significantly. Not only would the students in those groups be expelled, but they would also end up causing a great deal of trouble for their classmates who remained. I was sure that everyone, from every group, was thinking that they had to avoid placing in the bottom five positions in the rankings, no matter the cost.

"Starting tomorrow, you're going to be living on an uninhabited island for two weeks. But now I'm about to go over the important part," said Mashima-sensei.

That's right. We hadn't been given any explanation whatsoever as to how the rankings were determined yet.

"Each group will fight in order to collect 'points,'" Mashima-sensei continued, "which will determine the rankings."

There were over 150 students packed inside the theater. All of us looked up at the giant screen.

OVERVIEW OF THE UNINHABITED ISLAND SPECIAL EXAM

For a period of two weeks, groups will compete with one another to earn points in a survival exam

In the event that all members of a group are eliminated during the exam period, that group will be immediately disqualified

(All points that group has collected up until that point will be invalidated and their ranking will be determined immediately)

This meant that even if you had collected many points, it would all be for nothing if your entire group was eliminated. While it was important to collect points, the number one priority was to avoid getting eliminated. You had to hang in there for the entire duration of the test.

A map of the uninhabited island where we would be making landfall tomorrow was displayed on the screen alongside the test overview. A grid of horizontal and vertical lines divided the map into evenly spaced cells.

"There are two ways in which you can collect points," Mashima-sensei explained. "The first method by which you can collect points is via the 'Basic Movement' rule. The island has been divided into a total of one hundred areas, and you will be instructed to head to specific areas at regular intervals. For example, let's say that the starting point is Area D9, where the port is located, but Area C8 has been designated as your destination. The groups that arrive first will receive an 'Early Bird Reward,' with the first group who arrives there being awarded ten points. The second group to arrive will receive five points. The third group to arrive will receive three points. In addition, everyone who arrives at the designated area within the specified

timeframe will be given an equal 'Arrival Bonus' award, in the amount of one point per person. For example, let's say that a three-person group arrives at a designated area first. They would receive ten points for the Early Bird Bonus, and in addition, they would receive three points for the Arrival Bonus. As you can see from this example, it's possible to earn thirteen points all at once this way. If we were talking about a two-person group, they would get two points for the Arrival Bonus, so their total would be twelve points."

It was possible that some groups might do some reckless things in order to get first place. But we weren't competing in a city; we were doing this on an uninhabited island. It was easy to predict that there would be few flat paths and many obstacles in our way. It was even possible that injuries could occur due to unforeseen circumstances. No matter how many points you collected and how quickly you collected them, if you and the rest of your group got eliminated, you'd all be immediately disqualified. Your points would be forfeited, and your efforts would all be for nothing.

"Designated destination areas for the Basic Movement system will be announced three times on the first and final days of the exam period, but four times for the other twelve days," Mashima-sensei went on. "Goal times are from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m., and 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. Then there will be a two-hour break, followed by additional times from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., and 3 p.m. to 5 p.m."

So, this was a system where we would earn points by reaching designated areas during each of the set two-hour time periods. It sounded like the school administrators were taking into consideration the dangers of moving about when it was dark, since the last segment ended at 5 p.m.

"Something you must keep in mind: if you fail to reach the designated area three times in a row, your group will lose a point. And the penalty gets more severe each additional time you fail to reach a designated area by an additional one point every time. The fourth consecutive time you fail to arrive at the area, you'll lose two points. The fifth consecutive time you fail to arrive, you'll

lose three points, and so on. If a group fails to reach an area consecutively, the penalty will also increase by a point each time. However, should a group manage to break this streak, their penalty counter will be reset, so the next time they happen to fail at reaching a designated area three times in an hour, they will start back with a one-point penalty," explained Mashima-sensei.

So, that meant that if people ran out of stamina or if they found themselves stuck, they wouldn't be able to get to the areas that they needed to reach and they would continuously lose the points that they had collected. Or if, for example, a group were to try to simply coast through these next two weeks camping out by the starting area, not exerting themselves at all, and only collecting points from hitting the designated areas that appeared within a short distance of their camp, then... Well, if a group did try something like, they wouldn't get very many points. If no other groups got disqualified from the exam, any group who tried to adopt this kind of strategy and didn't do anything else to help themselves would probably fall to the bottom of the rankings. They would end up getting hit with both expulsion and the Class Point penalty for their respective classes.

"Regarding the issue of reaching the areas, though," Mashima-sensei added, "your group will be safe if at least one person from your group reaches the area in time. In other words, this means that it's not necessary for all members of a group to reach the designated areas. However, the Arrival Bonus will still only be distributed based on the number of people who reach the designated area."

The students started to murmur among themselves a bit when they heard that part. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that just one person from a particular group managed to reach the designated area. That meant that their group would only be awarded one point for the Arrival Bonus, but the group wouldn't be hit with the penalties that came with failing to reach the area at all. This meant that when it came to collecting points, simply having more people in your group gave you an overwhelming advantage. Even if those who were going it alone or those in a two-person group were managing to reach areas repeatedly in a

similar fashion, larger groups could pull ahead by a significant margin of points.

"There is one caveat, however. The Early Bird Bonus, which is awarded to the first three groups to arrive, will only be awarded to groups that haven't had any members eliminated, and all members of that group must have arrived at the designated area. In addition, the arrival time of the final student in a particular group is what will determine that group's time of arrival in the rankings," explained Mashima-sensei.

That sounded like a reasonable rule, I supposed. If groups were given those rewards even if only one person from their group made it to the area, then it was possible that they could try to make power plays, like sending their most physically capable members to patrol the areas. Or, every member of the group could be constantly split up, acting separately, waiting at various spots for new designated areas to pop up. In that case, the smaller groups would have virtually no chance of winning. However, by taking the rankings only after all members of a group arrived, those who were acting alone still had a slight chance of winning. Still, even with all those factors taken into account, the groups with more people in them most definitely had an overwhelming advantage.

"As you can see on the map, some of the areas are clearly inaccessible. For example, areas B1, C1, F10, and G10 are out in the water. These locations will never be selected as designated areas."

Some of the areas on the map shown up on the screen, the ones that were impossible for us to reach, were marked off in red. This indicated that they were being excluded as possible selections.

"There are certain rules that determine the selection of designated areas. Three out of the four times an area is selected per day, the next designated area will be within two spaces laterally or one space diagonally of the previously designated area."

If a designated area came two spaces laterally or one space diagonally from the preceding one, it wouldn't be that difficult to reach. Since we had a full two hours to get to each area, you can imagine we'd be able to move around with time to spare. However, there were four designated areas that we had to reach in a day. Which meant that there was one remaining area that this rule wouldn't apply to.

"There is one exception to this system," Mashima-sensei confirmed. "Namely, once per day, the aforementioned rule isn't applied in the selection of a designated area. We do not know which location could be set as the designated area. It'll be selected at random. Meaning that it's entirely possible for D9 to be selected as the next designated area when the previous one was at D2. However, random selections will never be made twice in succession. That still applies even in cases where the fourth and final designation was made randomly on a given day. In that case, the first designated area of the following day will not be selected at random."

Even though that was only happening once per day, the fact that we wouldn't always know where we could be assigned to go next was a major concern. If the previous location was at the northernmost point and the next one was at the southernmost point, there was no way you could get there in two hours. No matter how physically capable you were, you would have no choice except to give up. If you deliberately pushed yourself anyway and tried to reach a far-off designated area, you would probably end up collapsing from exhaustion or have an accident that would render you unable to move.

If that happened, not only would you fail to reach the area, but you'd also be very likely to fail to reach the next one, and the one after that. Then, not only would you be subject to a penalty for failing to reach the destination three times in a row, but you would also most likely fail to reach any of the subsequent designated areas later in the exam. If that happened, you couldn't even think about trying to gain a point lead. It would be difficult enough to simply hold onto the points that you already had at that point.

This presented some incredibly frightening possibilities, so we absolutely needed to commit this rule to memory. You could either move about recklessly and keep trying to reach the designated areas, or you could occasionally avoid danger, move about more carefully, and be willing to accept failing to reach an area in time. Ultimately, groups would need to adapt to the situation and respond based on their teammates' abilities.

"While the same location will never be selected as the designated area multiple times in succession, it is entirely possible that D2 could be selected, followed by D3, and then it could be D2 once again, and so on. Furthermore, please note that if you are already in a location when it is selected as a designated area, you'll still receive one point per person for the Arrival Bonus. However, you will not be able to receive the Early Bird Bonus," said Mashima-sensei.

So, that meant if a group were after the Early Bird Bonus, there'd be some risk in moving about the island carelessly. To get the Early Bird Bonus for the next location, the only choices were for a group to wait within the previously designated area, or, better yet, move somewhere out of range of the possibilities for the next location. That would mean anywhere other than a space that fell within two spaces laterally or one space diagonally of the prior designated area. Of course, in the latter case, the risk of accidentally entering a space that could be selected at random was still unavoidable.

BASIC MOVEMENT RULE OVERVIEW

Designated areas will be announced four times per day. On the first and final day of the exam, only three areas will be selected, and none of them will be selected at random.

The target times are 7 a.m. to 9 a.m., 9 a.m. to 11 a.m., 1 p.m. to 3 p.m., and 3 p.m. to 5 p.m.

Three times per day, the location of the subsequent designated area will be within two spaces laterally or one space diagonally of the previous area. Once per day, a designated area

will be selected at random out of all accessible areas. (Random designation will never occur twice in a row.)

The first three groups to arrive at a designated area will receive points: the first will receive ten points, the second will receive five, and the third will receive three.

The time when all members of a group have arrived is what will determine that group's position in the rankings and determine the Early Bird Bonus.

Every person who arrives at the designated area within the set time will receive one point as an Arrival Bonus.

If you are already in a location that has been selected as the designated location when it is announced as such, you will still receive the one-point Arrival Bonus, but you will not be eligible for the Early Bird Bonus.

Groups will be subject to penalties if they fail to arrive at designated areas three times in succession. Points will be deducted based on the number of misses. However, once the group breaks their streak, the penalty counter will be reset to zero.

The overview shown up on the screen broke down the rules just as Mashima-sensei had explained them to us.

"Before I explain the other method by which you can acquire points, I'd like for you to take a look at this," said Mashima-sensei, accepting something being handed to him by Hoshinomiya-sensei, Class 2-C's homeroom instructor.

He held up the item he had gotten from her, showing it to us. It appeared to be a digital wristwatch.

"Starting tomorrow," he told us, "when the exam officially begins, you will all be asked to put these watches on and to keep them on for the entire duration of the exam. You will also be provided with a tablet that pairs with the watch, but we'll explain more on that later."

A magnified image of the watch with detailed information about its functions was displayed on the screen.

"This watch isn't just for checking the time. It is also an indispensable piece of equipment used for earning points. That is because all your points, such as those gained from the Basic Movement system mentioned earlier, will be tallied with this watch. It also comes equipped with convenient functions, such as giving you notifications when you have entered a designated area within the set period. Please note that it's possible there could be a slight time delay, so in the event you just barely manage to get to the area in time, or if you exit the area immediately after entering, your score might be considered invalid. I ask that you please be sure to check your watch notifications to confirm whether you've scored or not," said Mashima-sensei.

In any case, from the sound of it, if we didn't have the watch, we wouldn't be able to gain points.

"In addition, these watches allow the school to constantly monitor each student's body temperature, heart rate, blood pressure, blood-oxygen level, sleep cycle, stress level, and so on. If any abnormalities are detected in any of those areas, then a 'Warning Alert' will sound."

Mashima-sensei temporarily handed the microphone over to Hoshinomiya-sensei and went to put on the watch that he had received from her earlier. I'm guessing that the watch had been designed in such a way that a person couldn't put it on themselves because a staff member was using a tool to help him put it on. Not long afterward, he finished getting the watch on his wrist, and the different metrics that he had mentioned, such as his heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature, were shown up on the screen in real time. This meant that the school could monitor the health conditions of all students simultaneously.

"Now, I'll show you an example. Let's say that my body temperature happened to go beyond thirty-eight degrees Celsius," said Mashima-sensei.

Shortly afterward, a high-pitched alert sound could be heard coming from the watch.

"This is the Warning Alert. This alert is, as its name suggests, meant only to serve as a warning. So, it is designed to automatically stop sounding after five seconds."

After five seconds had passed, the high-pitched alert stopped.

"However, if abnormal readings are still detected, the Warning Alert will go off again ten minutes later," said Mashima-sensei.

To demonstrate, the Warning Alert sounded a second time. It was a little louder and higher pitched than the last time. I guessed that this alarm also must have been designed to end after five seconds had passed, because it soon stopped.

"What you heard just now was the second Warning Alert. If abnormal readings are still detected another five minutes after that, then—"

The third alert started to blare loudly, and was the loudest and most high-pitched sound we had heard so far.

"This final sound isn't a Warning Alert anymore. It's changed to what's called an 'Emergency Alert.' In the event that this alert is triggered, you will be required to return to the starting point to undergo a medical examination within twenty-four hours. If you ignore this warning, or if you fail to reach the starting point, you will be penalized, either with elimination or other measures, depending on the circumstances. The Emergency Alert will continue to sound until it is manually shut off. If this alert is not stopped within five minutes, a faculty member and a medical crew will rush to the location of the student, based on the watch's GPS coordinates," said Mashima-sensei.

This meant that if by some chance you were to suffer a severe injury that rendered you unable to move, or if you lost consciousness, help would come to you. Of course, the most important thing was to make sure you didn't trigger the alert in the first place.

"As you most likely noticed for yourselves when I put this watch on, they're designed in such a way that specialized tools

are required to put them on or take them off. This is meant to prevent fraudulent activity. Even if the watch were to be forcibly removed somehow, the watch will automatically stop its score count function."

This meant that you wouldn't be able to cheat by doing things like having someone take your watch and score points on your behalf if you happened to fall ill, or if something inconvenient happened.

"In addition, if this watch is physically damaged due to a strong impact or some other reason, even if that damage is sustained through the normal range of use, the score count function will be turned off. In such cases, the student will need to go back to the starting point and ask for a replacement."

Even though we wouldn't be penalized in the unlikely event that our watches happened to break, not being able to score points would be a pain. And on top of that, it was frustrating that we'd have to go all the way back to the start to get a replacement.

"Well then," said Mashima-sensei, "now that we've given you a primer about the watches, let's get back to talking about the Basic Movement system. During the exam, groups will not all be going to the same designated areas. These watches are programmed with something called a 'Table.' There are a total of twelve Tables in all. Let's say, for example, that my watch is set to Table A right now. These internal Tables are what determine which areas you need to reach, from the first day all the way to the end of the exam. So then, my first destination is D8, followed by D7, and then C6, and so on. On the other hand, Hoshinomiya-sensei's watch is Table B. In her case, her first destination is D10, followed by E9, then F8, and so on and so forth. As you can see, the designated areas that we need to reach differ."

That was something I had been wondering about ever since I had first heard about these designated areas. If this were nothing but a game where students from all groups had to continuously reach for the same destinations, then everyone would be competing to see who was faster or slower on the same

route. But if there were twelve different routes, then that would obviously be a different story. Even though people in Table A would be competing with others in Table A, their destinations might sometimes overlap with those in Table B or Table C. In a sense, you would have multiple competitions going on at the same time. After just three days, I guessed that groups would probably be scattered all over the island.

"It should be obvious that everyone within a given group will be in the same Table, of course. In the event that some small groups merge to form a large group during the course of the test," Mashima-sensei added, "everyone in that group will be reassigned to the same Table. There won't be any issues with teaming up."

Conversely, the fact that there were twelve distinct tables with their own separate patterns also meant that collaborating with students from other tables to earn points via the Basic Movement system would be virtually impossible.

I imagined myself wearing the watch, lowering my gaze to look down at my left arm. If the watch I was wearing had been tampered with in some way, then it was possible that someone from Tsukishiro's side could intentionally trigger a malfunction and sabotage my efforts to get points. However, that wasn't a move that could be pulled off very many times. If they tried it once or twice, they could play it off as simple coincidence. But three or four instances of repeated malfunction, without any discernible reasons as to why, would invariably lead to suspicion. If Tsukishiro did try to pull something like that, it would only be once or twice.

Although there was a risk that it would cause me to fall out of the running if the competition for the top spots was particularly fierce, I probably wouldn't sink all the way to the bottom of the rankings as long as I continued to steadily accrue points. It was necessary for me to keep that information tucked away in my mind for now, but it probably wasn't serious enough for me to be alarmed.

WATCH OVERVIEW

Students' health conditions will be monitored twenty-four hours a day via their watches.

If a student's watch becomes damaged or if any abnormalities are detected in the student's health readings, points can no longer be obtained, and the student will need to undergo a medical examination.

The watch will notify the student in the event that any health issues are detected. Warning Alerts can be ignored, but in the event that the Emergency Alert is triggered, the student must go back to the starting point. Failing to report back within twenty-four hours may result in elimination.

Watches are programmed to follow one of twelve Tables; the sequence in which designated areas are selected differs for each Table.

If the Emergency Alert is triggered and isn't disabled by the student within five minutes, a medical crew will be dispatched to the student's location. In the case of emergency situations such as cardiac arrest or a sudden drop in blood pressure, a crew will be dispatched for immediate rescue.

This method of collecting points by going to designated areas was something that anyone in good health could manage. But physical abilities such as speed and stamina would have a major impact on who would get the Early Bird Bonus, which would net students higher scores. With that in mind, the students who weren't extremely confident in their physical abilities probably wouldn't have much of a chance of winning. In other words, there must have been some other way of scoring points that relied on using your head.

"Next, I'll explain the second method by which you can acquire points," Mashima-sensei continued. "This is by completing certain 'Tasks' that are set for you throughout the uninhabited island. Tasks will be offered at various locations around the island, from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Although the map is divided into one hundred distinct areas, it is possible that multiple Tasks could be

in the same area. First, have a look at this," he said, showing us some example Tasks displayed up on the screen.

A red dot appeared at one of the locations, inside area C3.

"These red dots represent where Tasks are, and they can only be seen on the tablets. Students will not be able to predict when or where these red dots will appear, or what kind of Task they represent. You can only find out what these Tasks are once they appear," said Mashima-sensei.

TASK: MATHEMATICS TEST

Classification: Academic Ability

Participation Conditions: Students must register within sixty minutes of this Task appearing.

No. of Participants: One per group. Once ten people have registered, no further registrants will be accepted.

Victory Conditions: Students will compete based on how many points they can earn within a set time. (Test content will vary based on grade level, but the difficulty level will be scaled to the same equivalent standard.)

Rewards: Five points for first place, three points for second place, one point for third place. All award-winners will also be given one day's worth of food.

TASK: SHOT PUT

Classification: Physical Ability

Participation Conditions: Students must register within thirty minutes of this Task appearing.

No. of Participants: Three per group. (Groups with four or more people may still participate, but may only register three people from their group.) Once a total of six groups have registered, no further registrants will be accepted.

Victory Conditions: Students will compete based on the total distance thrown by their three-person team.

Rewards: Ten points for first place, five points for second place, three points for third place. All participants can choose one gift as a participation prize.

TASK: FISHING

Classification: Other

Participation Conditions: Students must register within 120 minutes of this Task appearing.

No. of Participants: Two per group. (Groups with three or more people may still participate, but may only register two people from their group.) Once a total of eight groups have registered, no further registrants will be accepted.

Victory Conditions: The student who catches the largest fish within one hour will win.

Rewards: Fifteen points for first place.

"These Tasks are broken up by classification," Mashima-sensei told us. "Of these Tasks, 40 percent will be testing your academic ability, while 30 percent will require physical ability, and the remaining 30 percent are listed as 'Other.' Please keep in mind that the Tasks classified as Other can vary from those that require specific skills to those that simply require luck. And, of course, the same Tasks may be offered more than once."

I was very keen to find out what kind of additional point-scoring method they were going to announce. But, wow, I didn't expect them to have planned out such in-depth rules. With these Tasks, abilities other than physical skills would play a huge role in the exam. The balancing of the available Tasks was also excellent, with only 30 percent of them related to physical ability.

However, whether you were talking about Tasks or the Basic Movement system, it still seemed to be the case that the fewer people you had in your group, the tougher the exam would be.

"A member of the faculty or other qualified member of staff responsible for administering this test will always be on standby at

the location where the Task is being held. If you wish to register for a Task, speak with the person in charge, and they'll register you via your watch and tablet," said Mashima-sensei.

"On your tablets, you can view all this kind of information displayed up on the screen right now, including the Task location, the participation conditions, and so on. You should also keep in mind that once a Task is completed, the Task information will disappear from your tablet," he explained.

This meant that as long as a Task was in progress, it would still be shown on our tablets, indicating that we were able to register for it. In other words, it was also possible to spend a great deal of effort reaching the Task location displayed on your tablet, only to find you were unable to register for it because the maximum number of participants had already been met.

"Starting on day four, some Tasks that offer a different kind of reward will become available. The reward in question will be the ability to increase the maximum number of members in a group. Getting first place will increase the limit by three persons, second place will increase it by two, and third place by one. If a person who is acting solo wishes to form a large group of six people, he or she will first need to finish in first place once and then in second place once. In the case of a three-person group, they would need to finish first place in one of these Tasks once. Groups that have increased their maximum number of members up to six will not be eligible to attempt these Tasks thereafter," explained Mashima-sensei.

While we had heard the words "large group" several times already, from the sounds of it, we only gained the right to form those groups through these Tasks. Even if we weren't getting points or goods, the ability to increase the number of people in your group was very important.

"In the event that you have completed the Task assignment and have met the conditions to increase your maximum group size, the group that wishes to bring in new people can initiate the process by way of the Main Link function on the watch," explained Mashima-sensei. "The group that wishes to join that starting

group would activate the Pair Link function via the watch, and then they need to have the Pair Link watch make a physical connection with the receiving Main Link watch. Link approval takes about ten seconds. The process can be canceled during that period."

I guessed that if two groups formally came together and formed a large group, they would then also be re-assigned to be in the same Table as Mashima-sensei had mentioned earlier.

"However, there will not be that many Tasks that will allow you to increase the maximum number of people in your groups. Most likely, out of the entire pool of participants, only about 20 to 30 percent of groups will be granted the right to form a large group. At any rate, students from every grade level will work to collect points via the two aforementioned methods and compete for the top spot in the overall rankings. Oh," he added, "and if two groups do merge together, their point totals will be averaged together at that point."

That meant that while it was possible to bring a student who was struggling into your group to rescue them, you needed to consider the fact that you'd be taking on a proportionate degree of risk in helping that person. If a single person had thirty points and a five-person group had 120 points and they merged, they'd have an average score of seventy-five points. Unless both groups had the same score, one group would basically lose points.

Merging could be extraordinarily difficult for students who were working alone. Unless that student was exceptional, there wouldn't be any incentive for another group to take them on and lower their score.

TASK OVERVIEW

Tasks may become available at any time from 7 a.m. until 5 p.m. each day. (On the first day of the exam, Tasks will start appearing at 10 a.m., and on the final day of the exam, they will stop appearing by 3 p.m.)

Tasks are divided into three classifications, and the same Tasks may appear multiple times. (40% Academic Ability, 30% Physical Ability, 30% Other)

Task appearance times are unpredictable. In order to find out the status of a Task, students must physically go to the Task location.

For finishing in the top spots in these Tasks, students may be rewarded with points, food, or the ability to increase their maximum group size.

At any rate, based on what we'd heard, it was fair to say that the actual content of this uninhabited island exam was quite simple. All we needed to do was build up points by repeatedly scoring in these two systems. We would go to designated locations and complete Tasks over and over.

"Next," said Mashima-sensei, "I'd like to hand things over to Acting Director Tsukishiro, who has a few words to share with you."

Tsukishiro walked up to the stage, and Mashima-sensei handed over the microphone. With his usual faint smile plastered on his lips, Tsukishiro slowly scanned over the second-year students.

"Hello, I am Acting Director Tsukishiro. This uninhabited island exam certainly seems to be quite unprecedented. It's the largest-sale special exam you've seen yet, no? While naturally we ask you to brace yourselves for what's to come, I'd also like to ask that you please do not forget what it means to conduct yourselves as students."

Even though he was addressing all of us in the audience, he fixed his gaze in my direction for just a brief moment. It was such a slight pause that it went unnoticed by the other students.

"Also, there is one matter that I would like to bring to everyone's attention. Just something for you to keep in mind. This school has an obligation to protect you all, our students, as our position dictates. And we will do our utmost to maintain safety

and order to the best of our ability. However, even with that being said, we will not be able to keep watch over you at all times during the course of this exam on the island. One problem that is likely to arise is, ahem, a sensitive matter that can occur between men and women," said Tsukishiro.

The school administrators who were listening to what Tsukishiro was saying seemed a little shaken by what he had just brought up.

"In the event that any sexual misconduct should occur, we will not hesitate to dole out strict penalties, including immediate expulsion. Furthermore, if we deem that the act was committed with malicious intent, we will notify the authorities. I ask that you please keep this in mind."

While he didn't come out and say it directly, he was giving us a strongly worded warning to not do *that*, basically. Expulsion alone was a serious matter, but if he was telling us the authorities would get involved, then that alone should deter people from trying anything.

"Oh, there's one more thing I'd like to say," continued Tsukishiro. "I'm sure that it is understood that the longer your stay on the uninhabited island, the more frustrations you'll have. The lack of food and water can sometimes lead to little skirmishes between students. And on that note...I am willing to allow it, to a certain degree. That's my stance on the matter."

It wasn't just the students who were visibly shaken when they heard what Tsukishiro had just said. The teachers and staff were as well. That proved that Tsukishiro's stance on the matter differed from the school's policies. Mashima-sensei drew in close and whispered into Tsukishiro's ear. If I had to guess, I would assume he said something like "*Please do not make such inconsiderate remarks.*"

After Mashima finished speaking to him, Tsukishiro politely instructed Mashima to go sit back down.

"I have just been asked to retract my previous statement about allowing disputes between students," said Tsukishiro. Rather than hiding what he had just been told, Tsukishiro

explicitly told us what Mashima-sensei had said. "However, I will do nothing of the sort. Because it is virtually impossible to guarantee that disputes won't occur. There is bound to be trouble."

When Mashima-sensei heard that, his expression turned even more stern.

"Of course, even though I've said that I will *allow* such things, it's not as though I am *endorsing* anything. I will only be looking the other way when it comes to incidental disputes. The school will not hesitate to intervene in any problematic situations where we have determined that there is malicious intent. Looting or using someone's personal belongings without their consent will not be tolerated, as per the rules. In some cases, these kinds of actions will result in immediate disqualification, and possibly even expulsion, depending on the circumstances," explained Tsukishiro.

He was basically telling us that we were by no means allowed to freely do whatever we wanted. These words of warning, which had come directly from the Acting Director, might have instilled in the students a renewed sense of urgency. At the same time, what he just told us could also be interpreted as him issuing me a challenge.

"That is all I have for you today. I humbly ask that you please conduct yourselves in a manner befitting a student from the Advanced Nurturing High School," said Tsukishiro.

After concluding his short speech, Tsukishiro immediately handed the microphone back to Mashima-sensei.

"Thank you very much, Acting Director Tsukishiro," Mashima-sensei said. "Well then, for the final part of this presentation, I would like to move on to an explanation of the food and the tools that will be essential for you in going about your lives on the uninhabited island. Before we get into that though, I will explain the points required for shopping, which can only be used on this island."

Mashima-sensei, microphone in hand, gestured for someone to come forward, and then a large cart piled high with various goods was pushed up on the stage.

"Each of you will receive a base amount of 5,000 points," he told us. "You are free to use these points to purchase any of the items you see listed in the catalog. Please note that students who have the Head Start card will receive an additional 2,500 points."

Just as Mashima-sensei had finished saying those words, thick manuals were passed out to us, starting with students sitting in the front rows. These catalogs listed the items that we could purchase during this exam. It would take a considerable amount of funding for the school to offer such an extensive catalog. A cursory look revealed that not only were there products from major manufacturers, but there were also products from brands we had never heard of before. We could probably assume that these businesses were providing these products as a form of sponsorship. I guessed that, in addition to being under the direct control of the government, this school might also serve as something of a product testing center for private manufacturers.

"All of the available items you can purchase are listed in the Uninhabited Island Manual, which we are handing out to all of you now," explained Mashima-sensei. "You may discuss what to buy amongst your group or you may simply decide for yourself. The choice is yours. Purchases will be accepted starting from now until 6 a.m. tomorrow morning, but you may also choose to save for your points for later if you wish. Additional purchases can be made at a shop that will be set up at the starting point, near the port, during the exam. However, purchases made on the island will cost twice as much. Please keep this information in mind."

So, we could set points aside for now in order to purchase essential items at the shop in an emergency, such as food or water. But at twice the cost, it would be by no means cheap.

"There will also be restrooms and showers that can be used free of charge at the starting point, as well as a potable water station where you can re-hydrate from the second day onward. So, if you do happen to stop by this area, feel free to make the most of these amenities. However, water must be drunk at the starting point location. It cannot be taken from the site."

I'm sure it was reassuring for the students to have a place that they could stop at in case of emergency.

"Furthermore, necessities such as toothbrushes, shirts, underwear, and so on will be distributed free of charge. If you run out of any of those, you can return to the starting point, and we will provide you with as many of these items as you need."

From the looks of things, various essential items such as portable toilets, insect repellent spray, sunscreen, and feminine hygiene products would also be handed out to the students free of charge.

First, I decided to take a closer look at the list of the products and their prices in the manual that I had been given. The variety of items available for purchase seemed much larger than what was offered last year, and included everything from tents to fishing rods, transceivers, food, and water. As expected, there was quite a wide selection of items meant for play, as well.

There were fashionable swimsuits, balls, floatation rings, and the like. It looked as though there was a daily rental system for certain items in the catalog as well, providing students with the opportunity to borrow items at a lower cost if they needed something for a short period of time.

Still, fun and games aside, if we were going to be living on an uninhabited island for two weeks, making sure we had food and drinking water was imperative. That was especially true for drinking water, which was essentially our lifeline. 500 milliliters of water cost a hundred points. One liter cost 150 points. Two liters cost 250 points. If we bought those later on the island at double the cost, they would be quite expensive.

We could also purchase water purifier filters that could be put inside of bottles. Normally, it would be dangerous to try and drink water straight from rivers, so you would need to sterilize it by boiling it beforehand. But this product claimed to eliminate more than 99.9 percent of bacteria like *E. coli*, as well as parasites like echinococcus, and so on. It looked like this would make the water completely safe to drink.

But it also cost 4,000 points, so there was absolutely no way that a student acting on their own could get their hands on something like that. For a three-person group, just one purifier would be plenty, because they could filter about 150 liters of water with just one. Of course, no matter how many times you say that something has been filtered, more than a few students would have some reservations about drinking river water. And there wasn't any proof that it was completely risk-free, either. In the unlikely event that it stopped working for some reason or went missing, then it would end up becoming a useless investment.

As for the backpacks we'd need to carry around our various tools and equipment, it looked like we could pick them out at no charge. The options ranged from small 20-liter backpacks to large backpacks that could hold over 80 liters. We were basically able to choose one backpack of any size we wanted, and for free. Simply put, larger backpacks were convenient because they had a greater load capacity, allowing you to carry around more things. But as you carried more stuff, that meant more weight, so you would need to choose carefully. Also, if the backpack didn't fit your body type well, it would sit awkwardly and cause strain.

Meat, fish, and other perishable items were also available for purchase, but they were expensive and wouldn't keep for a long time. You'd probably only be able to keep it for an extra day, even if you put it in a cooler with some ice. Therefore, canned goods would most likely be the most useful option. There was a wide range of available items that included everything from yakitori grilled chicken to lunch meat, mixed vegetables, fried burdock root, corn, and even pork miso soup. In terms of cost, these were cheaper than the to-go meals as well.

However, it would take some time and effort to prepare meals with individual ingredients and canned goods, so to-go meals might be more convenient if you were going to focus on getting around the island quickly.

A single-person tent cost 1,000 points. A two-to-three-person tent cost 1,500 points. And you could purchase the largest size, a six-person tent, for 2,500 points. This meant that the more

people you had in your group, the more cost-effective your purchases were. However, there were some risks involved if you were buying a tent for multiple people right from the start. You'd be in for a miserable time if you couldn't get your group together in it, and on top of that, lugging around that much weight was a critical concern.

Also, men and women were strictly forbidden from sleeping in the same tents. Even if you had a tent that six people could sleep in at once, you would inevitably need separate tents for men and women anyway.

Mashima-sensei spoke up once more, adding some additional comments for us students as we were reading the manual.

"Just for your reference, let's say Group A has some food. They can choose to hand over the food they've obtained to Groups B or C, which they have no affiliation with. These sorts of instances could very well happen on the island. It is the school's policy to allow you to do whatever you wish with the items that you have obtained. We take no issue with it."

So, we were allowed to share with groups that were struggling to find food. While there wasn't any need for us to help students from other grade levels, when it came to people in our same grade, it was probably best for us to help each other whenever we could. We should aid a classmate in trouble, if we could manage it. That being said, there were no guarantees that we'd be provided with such an abundance of food that we could go around sharing it without a care.

"Now, then," said Mashima-sensei, "in addition to the wristwatches, you will all be provided with a tablet. As these tablets are essential for accessing basic information, you will be able to charge it both at the starting point and at Task locations. Now, up on the screen, I will show what you can do with your tablets."

TABLET OVERVIEW

Every student will be provided with a small tablet.

Provides a map of the island that you can view, allowing you to check designated areas and your current location in real time.

Can be used to view Task locations, detailed rewards information, etc.

Starting from the fourth day of the exam through the end of the twelfth day, students can view the group member list and scores for the top and bottom ten ranked groups. (Users can only view total score breakdowns for the top and bottom ten ranked groups, as well as their own group.)

Starting on the sixth day of the exam, the GPS search function will be unlocked, allowing users to view the current locations of all other students. (However, each search costs the user one point.)

The school may send you a message via your tablet in certain instances, such as in the event that a problem that impacts all students arises.

In the event your tablet's battery life has run out, you can recharge it at the starting point, or at specific locations on the map. (Tablets have approximately eight hours of battery life when you are continuously using the map application during the test.)

While I appreciated the fact that we didn't have to worry about charging our tablets, it would be safer to buy an external battery, because the internal battery would continue to drain over time even if we weren't actively using the tablet. Not being able to use your tablet, which could tell you where you were on the island, would be fatal. Besides, even though we were being told that we can charge the battery at the starting point or at certain other locations, we'd be missing other opportunities while we were stuck at one spot, charging our devices.

Then, there was the part about being able to check information on the top ten and bottom ten groups. In some ways, this was an exceptionally useful feature since it could help us analyze which groups were at the top, how they were collecting

points, and why certain groups were sinking down to the bottom of the rankings, but... Considering this feature, I supposed I'd best tread carefully. I also needed to keep in mind that this feature wouldn't be available during the first three days of the exam, or during the final two days.

From the looks of it, the function to check the current location of all students was going to be unlocked on the sixth day of the exam, but it seemed likely that it would mainly be used for the purpose of joining up with a group or meeting up with a teammate who had gotten separated. Since it cost points to check other student's locations with it, it was unlikely this feature would be used often.

"We've provided some sample products for you to check out so you can see how much the backpacks can carry. Please feel free to peruse them as you wish. Sample products will be available in a separate showroom area that you can visit starting now, and they will be available until midnight tonight," announced Mashima-sensei.

Mashima-sensei switched off the microphone after saying that last piece, so I guessed that must've been the end of the school's presentation. Students began gathering in the front of the theater to check out the items that the school had laid out for us. I stared at the spectacle and wondered what I should do. While I would have loved to physically touch the products myself, I didn't have the courage to jump into the crowd. I wondered if Ibuki had felt the same way, considering that she was just gazing blankly ahead. Perhaps having noticed that I had been watching her, Ibuki turned towards me and glared.

"What?" she snapped.

"Well, I was just thinking," I started. "I guess we both have kind of — How do I put this? Difficult personalities, I guess. We have a tough time jumping into a crowd."

"Huh? Don't lump me in together with you," Ibuki replied. "Besides, I could totally do it if I wanted."

It seemed like she was displeased at me suggesting that we were similar. With an intense, determined spirit, she thrust herself

into the crowd of people. I wasn't sure whether Kitou, who had been sitting in the next seat over, had seen what happened or not. He was just quietly flipping through the manual. For Kitou, who was taking this exam alone, like Ibuki and me, choosing items would spell the difference between victory and defeat.

I was impressed by the way he had competed with Sudou in the basketball match we had during last year's final exam. He had played exceptionally well against an opponent who practiced basketball daily, even now. Kitou hadn't lagged far behind Sudou in their game at all. That suggested that he had a high level of physical ability. Whether he planned to join up with another group of people during the exam or not, he'd still be a tricky opponent.

"G-gaaaaahh!"

A loud, wailing shout came from the front of the theater. It had come from Ishizaki, from Class 2-B. He was struggling to stand up straight while wearing the largest backpack, knees wobbling.

"What is he doing?" asked one of the other students standing nearby.

"Looks like he stuffed the backpack with tons of water bottles," replied another.

Ishizaki had apparently thought of a plan to try to carry a large amount of water bottles. But water bottles were heavy. While drinking water was a valuable resource, that didn't exactly mean that carrying a lot of it all at one time was a great idea. Even though we weren't going mountain climbing or anything, weight was most definitely our enemy here. It was important for us to try and lighten our loads as much as possible so that we could move around without wasting energy.

In other words, we needed to take every opportunity to get water, which was vital to simply go about living. The only ways for us to do that were to either procure and use rainwater or seawater while we were on the island, or to acquire water in the form of rewards from completing Tasks. Or, supposing you had an organized group, it would be possible to designate one person to function as a kind of custodian, and have that person carry

around large amounts of water. If that group chose to stay at a particular location for a long time, that would certainly be a viable strategy.

The tools and the quantities we would need depended on how we were going to fight this battle. There were no clear right answers. I broke down the rules for this special exam in my head and went through everything again, starting from the beginning. The rules stated that the rankings would be determined by way of a competition for points during the two weeks that we'd be living on this uninhabited island. But no matter how many points you accumulated, if your group was eliminated, it was all over.

The groups in the top and bottom ten would be revealed starting on the fourth day of the exam. Furthermore, there was the fact that, starting on the sixth day of the exam, we could find out the position of any student we wanted by spending one point. I figured that I'd make a comprehensive judgment call and choose what I needed.

Chapter 3: The Curtain Rises on the Uninhabited Island Exam

IT WAS 8:40 in the morning. The ship slowly started the docking process. Putting it another way, this meant that the curtain was finally about to rise and our special exam on the uninhabited island was about to begin. There was a total of 157 groups participating in this special exam if you included everyone, from those acting solo to people in four-person groups. The breakdown was as follows: thirty-six groups of four, eighty-one groups of three, thirty-two groups of two, and eight people acting on their own. The people going it alone still counted as individual groups, even though they were by themselves. Out of all those groups, five would be expelled.

After the students had all met together with their classmates, everyone was feeling increasingly nervous whether we wanted to admit it or not. Then, we all headed towards the ramp. Since everyone seemed to be heading out as a class rather than forming an orderly line, it didn't seem as though the school had given any explicit instructions yet on what order we should disembark in. It appeared like we were allowed to chat with whoever we liked while we waited for what came next.

The starting point for all students was D9. No designated areas would be randomly assigned on the first and last days of the exam, so any of the spaces within two cells laterally or one cell diagonally from the starting point could be chosen. That made for a total of twelve possible spaces. That being said, the area two spaces to the south was outside of the accessible zone, so technically, there were only eleven possible areas.

This first day of this special exam could be thought of as an opportunity for us to get accustomed to the environment, since we didn't have a feel for our surroundings yet. We listened to the announcements from the teachers as we waited to disembark from the ship. We also had all of our gear, which we had just received a short time ago. Incidentally, the gear I had chosen

included a tent, two liters of water, three 500-milliliter bottles of water, twelve to-go meal sets, a flashlight, a portable battery pack, a pot, a lighter, and a set of paper cups. Overall, that came out to a total of 4,960 points.

Even with those bare minimum essentials, I still had plenty of space left in my backpack. I probably wouldn't have to worry about not being able to carry anything more with me, even if I cleared some Tasks and earned some rewards.

We set foot on the island in the same order that we had attended the informational orientation meeting the other day, starting with the first-year students.

The clock was about to strike nine in the morning right as the last of the first-year students left the ship and touched down on the island. The first designated area was about to be announced. We could guess that the first-year students were allowed to set foot on the island first to give them a slight advantage. The second- and third-year students, conversely, would be at a disadvantage, albeit just this one time. On top of that, Class D had the biggest disadvantage here, since Class A could disembark first. The total time difference was only about fifteen or thirty minutes, but when you took into account the fact that travel time was a factor in this competition, it was a harsh setback.

While I waited for my turn to get off the boat, I heard Horikita call out to me from behind. She was wearing her backpack on her back.

"Good morning. Did you sleep well last night?" she asked.

"I slept like normal, I guess," I replied. "How about you? You're not feeling sick, are you?"

"Are you seriously still criticizing me over what happened last year?" she replied.

"It's not like I'm criticizing you. I'm just messing with you."

She looked at me with exasperation, as if she were telling me that it was the exact same thing.

"You sure seem rather carefree, even though a difficult special exam is about to begin," said Horikita.

"There's no point getting so worked up at this point, is there?" I said. "If anything, it'd just be a waste of energy. Come to think of it, did you hear about the third-year guy who got sick?"

"Yes, I have. I'm glad that it wasn't one of our own classmates, at the very least," said Horikita.

If you fell ill right at the start, you'd be eliminated without being able to take part in the exam. The third-year student that had been eliminated was going to be confined to the infirmary or the sickbay for the time being, until his health improved. And even after he fully recovered, the only thing he could do was wait on the boat and pray that the other members of his group fought well. Fortunately for him, he was a member of a three-person group.

You could say that the fact that he hadn't gotten expelled from school was the silver lining in an otherwise unfortunate situation. I supposed from the perspective of students in other grade levels, though, it would've been better if his group had been eliminated immediately. That would've meant that one of the bottom ranks would've already been set.

The first-year students had almost finished disembarking, and it was just about time for the second-year students' turns.

It was nine o'clock when I heard the first alert of the exam buzz from my wristwatch. Not only me, but every other student around also took out their tablets and immediately started checking out the details of what had just been announced. If we had waited to do that after disembarking, we would have lost precious time.

The first area that I should be heading towards was...D7. That was north from the starting point. When I tilted my tablet's screen to show Horikita, she told me what her designated area was.

"Mine's F9. Apparently, we're in different Tables," said Horikita.

"Looks that way," I answered.

Since we were all starting from the same place, I supposed that it was possible that our designated areas might overlap even if we were in different Tables. But from the looks of things, Horikita and I were going to be taking completely different routes. There were a total of twelve Tables. If all the designated areas were different for each Table each time, then we would basically only be competing with approximately thirteen groups over the course of the exam. In reality, though, we could expect that our designated areas would overlap quite a few times.

At any rate, it was important that I kept accumulating points one by one, even if I wasn't going to break into the top three. I also wanted to avoid a situation where I'd get blindsided by completely random designated areas just popping up suddenly.

"I'm not going to worry about you anymore. All I ask is that you get a high ranking," said Horikita.

"As much as I'd like to do that, I have to say, it wouldn't exactly be a laughing matter if I ended up being the only one who got expelled," I replied as I put my tablet into my backpack.

"Well... To be honest, that would certainly be troubling," said Horikita, saying that she didn't want me gone. "I just lent you some points the other day, after all. I'd be upset if I didn't get those back," she added.

"That's what you're upset about?" I asked.

Horikita cocked her head to the side, puzzled, as if to say, "*What other plausible reason could there be?*"

"I understand that you have money issues because you have a contract with Kushida-san, but hurry up and do something about it," she said.

"That really hurts to hear," I replied.

If I needed to pay for some sudden expenses that came up, I wouldn't be able to just magically make money appear. I wasn't even able to produce the funding to protect Kei from the expulsion penalty on my own either.

"Don't overdo it," I told her. "This is going to be a tough fight for a girl going it alone. Either join up with a group somewhere relatively early on, or create a situation where you can bring someone into your own group."

"I'll interpret what you said as welcome advice," said Horikita.

Judging from her tone, she seemed to find what I said questionable, but she didn't seem too worried about what lay ahead. Unlike a year ago, Horikita should be able to determine where her limits were now.

"At any rate," she said, "it seems like the conditions for joining up with a group are quite strict, so yes, we do need to be a little careful."

"You mean about how points get averaged out?" I asked.

The later you joined up with people, the more difficult this issue was likely to get. But if we could increase our maximum number of teammates early on, then we'd have an advantage that we could carry through to the end of the exam. Earning six points just for reaching one designated area was a huge deal. And if a student got the One More card and joined that group, they could get seven points. When you considered that, by comparison, a person acting alone would have to struggle tooth and nail for every single point, the difference was astounding.

The first-year students had all disembarked from the ship by now and didn't hesitate for a moment in setting out onto the island, beginning their adventure. Since no Tasks had appeared yet, the second- and third-year students were going to do the same thing. We needed to head for the designated areas first. When I set foot down on the harbor, though, I decided to watch the whole scene play out, without rushing to depart just yet.

I needed to set aside about an hour to an hour and a half for travel time just in case, but if I calculated things out working backwards, waiting about thirty minutes or so shouldn't cause any problems. If I wasn't trying to go for the Early Bird Bonus points, then there really wasn't any difference in point value whether I

arrived at the designated area in the first hour or in just under two.

"It doesn't seem like any of the groups in our grade are in much of a rush," Horikita said to me as she joined me on the dock. "Well, I suppose it's not a clever idea to try to compete over the very first designated area, anyway. Even if we hurried and tried to catch up with the first-year students after they got a head start on us, they still had more than a ten-minute lead. Closing that much of a gap would consume a fair amount of stamina."

"It's only natural for people to realize that there's no benefit in panicking over the first move, I guess," I answered.

Class 2-A, which had disembarked immediately after Class 1-D, might have a slight chance to make up for the difference in time and catch up, but there was no indication that they were going to try and push themselves to go on the offensive.

"Anyway, though, it really is hot out... I'm glad that I packed a hat. Are you all right?" asked Horikita.

"I didn't have enough points left to get a hat myself, but I'll manage somehow," I answered.

While Horikita and I were talking, a young man briskly walked past us. I saw his side profile for just a moment, but he had a big grin on his face. It looked as though he was going to try and enjoy these grueling next two weeks to the best of his ability.

"Do you think he's going to take this exam seriously?" I asked. "Kouenji, I mean?"

"Who knows?" replied Horikita. "While he accepted our wager, I really have no idea what he's going to do."

"I'd say chances of him taking this seriously are about fifty-fifty," I said.

Kouenji had promised Horikita that if he didn't manage to get first place in this special exam, he would cooperate with her in future special exams. A promise like that was basically a pretense, though. There was no guarantee behind it, so if Kouenji decided that he wasn't going to honor his promise, then that'd be the end of it. Still, it was also true that if he betrayed the trust of Horikita,

the person who was increasingly becoming recognized as the leader of our class, no one else in our class would help him out when he faced difficult exams in the future. An outcome like that wouldn't be desirable, even for someone like Kouenji.

I wanted to pay particular attention to how Kouenji performed in this special exam.

"Awright, let's go!" shouted a male student a slight distance away from us. "Startin' now, I'm shootin' for number one!" With that, he broke into a run towards the sandy beach.

It was Ishizaki from Class 2-B. He was free to shout and holler loudly if he wanted to, I supposed. Nishino leisurely trailed behind, not really making any effort to chase him. Tsube was also watching him go, with a warm, pleasant smile.

"Hey, come on, hurry it up, Nishino! You too, Tsube!" shouted Ishizaki.

"It's hot out, so don't ask for something ridiculous," said Nishino. "Besides, we can't catch up to the first-years anyway right now."

Tsube gave Nishino a somewhat exasperated look. "Well, don't you think that Ishizaki-kun's passion is one of his good qualities?" she said, trying to keep the peace.

I had heard that Nishino was a bit of a loner in her class, but it looked like Tsube was going to be able to get along with her quite nicely.

"Hey, if we give up, it'll be all over!" said Ishizaki. "And hey, those first-years might even slip up, ya know!"

"You seriously want to try and catch them? Forget it. That would be just an insanely massive waste of energy," said Nishino.

"Hey, come on!" shouted Ishizaki.

In contrast to Nishino and Tsube, Ishizaki was eager to go.

"How about you go on ahead yourself?" asked Nishino.

"If I do that, we ain't gonna get the Early Bird Bonus thing!" Ishizaki said. "Sides...it'd be tough if we got split up."

At the moment, the only location we could check on our tablets was our own. Even if you just wanted to look for members of your own group, that wouldn't be possible until the GPS search function was unlocked on the sixth day. If your group got separated before that point, trying to reunite would be quite an ordeal. Not noticing that I was around at all, Ishizaki gave up and decided to head back towards where Nishino and Tsube were, matching their pace. I could understand that he was enthusiastic, but there wasn't any need for him to go running off right from the start.

Then, without warning, we heard someone shouting in an aggressive tone, their words sounding almost angry.

"There you are!"

The owner of the voice approached us, glaring at Horikita intensely.

"What do you want?" asked Horikita.

"Want? I don't really want anything. I'm just letting you know that I am definitely not going to lose to you!" shouted the new arrival—it was Ibuki.

Apparently, she had come over just to say that, because she then immediately started walking north, all by her lonesome.

"For the love of... I wonder if she really understands how difficult this exam is?" said Horikita.

"She does seem to be motivated," I said. "It's nice, having a rival."

In response to my flippant teasing, Horikita let out a long sigh.

"I don't even think of her as a rival at all, though," Horikita said. "At any rate, she's heading north, and I'm going east. We seem to be in different Tables, so that's a relief, at least."

If they were in the same Table, they might have run into each other at times during the day. One of the few benefits of working solo was the way the Early Bird Bonus for the designated

areas worked. The key to victory lay solely in how well you moved, because you didn't need to wait for any other teammates.

"Well, it's about time that I should be off too," said Horikita.

She put her hat down firmly on her head and started walking east towards her intended designated area. Not long after she started walking, though, she briefly turned back and looked my way for some reason. I had thought maybe there was something left for her to say, but then she faced forward and started moving again.

After I watched several students walk off, I realized that I hadn't seen any third-year students yet. Even though I expected that I'd start seeing them coming off the ship about this time, there still weren't any signs of anyone coming this way.

When I turned back to look, though, I finally saw the third-year students walking this way. None of them looked like they were panicking at all. Even from a distance, I could tell that they were calmer and more composed than the first- and second-year students. I kept a look out for Nagumo. Judging from the number of people who had disembarked so far, I had assumed that everyone from Classes B and C had already gotten off the boat by now, but I couldn't see any sign of Nagumo.

While I was looking for him, several third-year students had caught up to where I was standing and had started overtaking me.

"You're still here at the starting point, eh, Ayanokouji?" called one of the third-year students.

Hearing someone call my name, I turned to look for the source of the voice.

"Good morning, Kiryuuin-senpai. Is it especially odd that I'm still here? I'm sure more than a few groups would want to refine their strategy at the starting point," I answered.

"But you're working alone, aren't you?" she replied. "You should be fine thinking of something while you walk," she replied, doubtful about my apparent decision to stay here at the starting

point. I already knew that she was far from ordinary, but I had to hand it to her: she really did have exceptional insight.

"If there's something you want to know about, I'll tell you," added Kiryuuin.

"Thank you, but I'm all right," I replied. "Besides, you're a third-year student, Kiryuuin-senpai. I'm a second-year. We're supposed to be enemies."

After I politely declined her offer, she said nothing more about that matter and simply changed the subject.

"There's something rather enchanting about this spectacle," she said nonchalantly, as she watched the rest of the students make their way onto the island. "Every student in school is scattering to all corners of this island, all at once. There are over 400 people here, but when you consider the vastness of the island, we're more like grains of sand."

Despite the fact she was a third-year, she was also one of those who had decided to tackle this island exam solo. It wasn't going to be an easy battle for her by any means, but I wasn't getting any impression that she was feeling anxious or panicky. In fact, if anything, it seemed like she might even be looking forward to what was coming.

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

"D7," I said.

"Oh? Well then, it would seem that our destination is the same, at least this time, anyway," she replied, seemingly pleased, flashing her white teeth with a broad smile.

"Please don't go too hard on me," I answered.

"Right back at you. Well, I'll be off, then. Are you coming with?" she asked.

"No, thank you, but I'll pass," I answered. "I don't think that I can keep up with your pace, senpai."

"I suppose I'll find out whether that's true or a lie soon enough," Kiryuuin said. And with that, she set out towards the sandy beach by herself. I stuck around for a little while longer, but

in the end, I didn't see any sign of Nagumo. Several minutes after Kiryuuin left, I decided to start making my way toward the beach. For the time being, I was going to just leisurely make my way to my first designated area.

One of the most important factors in this special exam was making sure not to miss out on collecting points for reaching designated areas. It was possible to earn five to ten points all in one go if you successfully completed a Task or got the Early Bird Bonus, but that would require an appropriate mixture of physical ability and academic ability as well as a good degree of luck in facing off against the right rivals. That was precisely why I felt like the real essence of this exam lay in collecting points methodically, one by one.

With that in mind, I once again took out my tablet, and opened the map. The entire map was divided into a total of one hundred individual spaces, with each space measuring 500 meters from north to south, and 700 meters from east to west. My first move was to go from area D9 to area D7. Since I was already somewhere near the center of D9, the distance I had to cover was about 750 meters if I were to travel there in a straight line. If I calculated my travel speed as eighty meters per minute on foot, then that meant I should be able to reach the designated area in about nine minutes if I didn't take any external factors into account.

It went without saying, though, that the path ahead was neither flat nor straight. There were trees, steep slopes, and cliffs that would block the way. If I were to run into obstacles like those, my travel time could quite possibly become many times longer than my base estimation. After all, the highest point of elevation on the island was nearly 300 meters above sea level, so a certain amount of gradation, either uphill or downhill, was to be expected.

Furthermore, the more time went on, the more I would feel the weight of my backpack; my stamina would wear down, and that would impact my ability to keep traveling at a good speed. So, it would probably be better for me to assume that even if everything went smoothly, it would take me about three times

longer than my original estimation. That would be somewhere around thirty minutes. And if I had to take a more roundabout route, one that was more demanding, it wouldn't be surprising if the total travel time would be an hour or more.

Apart from the first and last days of the exam, there would be four designated area assignments each day. It was quite possible that the same route could be taken several times. I decided I ought to make detailed mental notes about how I traveled and how much time it took me to reach each spot.

3.1

BEFORE LONG, the path was no longer flat, and thickly overgrown trees started to close in. As I entered the woods, I remembered what it was like on the island last year. I hadn't really taken much notice of it since we were working through that exam as a class, but I had to say, it wasn't that easy to make your way through the woods to get to the designated area. Just as I had expected, it was difficult to keep going in a straight path in the first place and finding proper footing in the woods was proving rough. The fact that such a huge port existed here suggested that the island wasn't always uninhabited, that some traces of human presence could remain. Even so, it was probably a long, long time ago.

Taking a cursory glance around, I spotted some large spiderwebs. I assumed they must have been spun by quite gigantic spiders, measuring several centimeters in size. I supposed that students who weren't fond of dealing with insects and such were in for many hellish trials here. I recalled then that there were words of warning in the manual telling us to look out for wild animals.

It was impossible to reach your destination simply by taking the shortest distance between two points on the map. And if you took any detours, you would undoubtedly lose your sense of direction. It would be difficult to reach the designated area at all with no tools. What made the journey possible was this tablet that I now held in my hands. Being able to constantly check my exact location on the uninhabited island was indispensable in this exam. As long I kept the GPS on as I traveled, I would always be able to find a path ahead.

That said, for this initial trip, even if I didn't have my tablet, the odds of me getting lost would have been slim. In my field of view, I could see several groups fumbling their way through the woods. I could hear people making conversation behind me too, so obviously several groups were basically taking this same exact

route for our first destination. Following the students walking a little ahead of you would also lower the risk of getting injured, swarmed by bugs, or other such incidents.

Few groups would have the courage to just recklessly plunge themselves into the wilds of the forest without taking the time to look around for anyone else. Those students who had discarded the idea of trying to arrive at their destination first and getting the Early Bird Bonus simply continued walking on ahead, almost as though they were on a field trip.

I spotted Haruka, Airi, and Akito up a little further ahead. They had stopped and were looking down at their tablets. It looked as if they were discussing something, occasionally looking around to check their surroundings as they talked. As I started getting closer, I started to hear them exchanging opinions about their next designated area.

"You guys talking about your next area?" I asked, inserting myself into their conversation.

The three of them nodded in response, almost in unison.

"Our first area was D8, so yeah, we're pretty much done with that already," said Haruka.

You got to area D8 pretty much as soon as you set foot in the forest. Apparently, they were able to score early. I didn't need to ask them what their results were, since I was certain that they had gotten three points for the Arrival Bonus.

"There wasn't any shade down on the beach, and it's hot out. So, we figured we'd take some guesses about what our next designated area was gonna be, since we were talking anyway," added Akito.

It was true that it was better to try and figure out where your next designated area was going to pop up, for sure.

"Where is your area, Kiyotaka?" asked Haruka.

"One space north. D7," I answered.

"I gotcha. A bunch of students have already got there, but still, a point's a point," said Haruka.

"If we were in the same Table though, we could've all been together..." Airi mumbled quietly. She sounded a little disappointed.

It was surprising. Even though we were in separate groups, there were a number of ways in which people could cooperate with one another in this exam. For example, we could share food with each other or borrow and lend tools between different groups. And if groups were in the same Table, their destinations would basically be the same, so it certainly would be easier to work together in that case. But, of course, there were dangers too.

The more groups you had together at once, the more difficult it would be for everyone to keep pace with each other, and there would be as many opinions as there were people. This kind of collaboration would also inevitably increase the degree of competition when it came to who would get the chance to participate in Tasks. Also, if you didn't discuss in advance what you would do when you encountered a problem in which only one group could participate, that would become cause for conflict.

In this case, I could say that it was fortunate that we weren't in the same Table. I absolutely had to avoid working together with teammates that could potentially hinder me. This turn of events simply saved me the hassle of turning them down.

"Well, there are twelve Tables, after all. Doesn't seem like we would've gotten put under the same Table so easily," I said. "Anyway, for the time being, I think that I'm going to go ahead and make my way to my designated area right away so that I can score."

"Yeah. That sounds like a good idea," said Akito. "We're going to our next area too, so yeah, go on ahead."

"We will miss you though," said Haruka. "It'd be nice if we could meet up somewhere down the road and chill a bit."

But she wished me well as she watched me go.

Airi seemed to be giving me well wishes too, waving me goodbye. And so, I put my back to the three of them and

continued on my way towards D7.

After slowly making my way forward for about thirty more minutes, I arrived at my first designated area. Not long afterward, a quiet beeping sound started coming from my watch. Checking my notifications, I saw that I had been given one point for the Arrival Bonus.

It looked like I could adjust the volume on the watch, but I decided to leave it as it was for the time being. Just to be safe, I opened the app on my tablet and found that the point, which I had received as the Arrival Bonus for getting to my designated area, had been logged in my history. Each individual area didn't look that big when viewed on the map, so it was easy to be under the impression that you could run into people at any time. However, once you started moving around on the island and through the various areas, you saw that the reality was entirely different. Even if you had many students exploring all corners of the island all around you, it would be difficult to see anyone through all the trees.

Although I couldn't spot anyone other than me around right now, I was sure that there must have been quite a few people in my same area. In that case, they were probably further in. They had most likely moved towards the center of this area, thinking about the next designated area. Heading there would be helpful when it came to gathering information too.

Keeping that assumption in mind, I looked for a clearing, and when I found it, it became easier to get a hold on my surroundings. As I expected, many students had gathered together in one place. The next designated area was going to be a competition between all grade levels. Meeting up like this was a natural course of action, since it would increase your chances of winning, even if only by 1 percent.

On top of that, the only way to narrow down the list of rivals who were in the same Table as you was to keep an eye out yourself and notice the other people that were moving alongside you. By keeping track of that continually, you could get a general idea of who exactly was in your same Table. Based on what I

could see right now, I could confirm that there were twenty-nine people here, including myself. And from what I could tell, it was safe to say that there were actually many more students staying in this same area, as well.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-senpai."

As I took mental notes and matched names to faces of the students present in the area, a female student noticed me and approached. It was Nanase Tsubasa, from Class 1-D. I couldn't see Amasawa or Housen, who were supposed to be in her same group, so I figured that either they must have been out for a stroll nearby, or they had some strategy in mind and had left the area.

"Where are the other two people in your group?" I asked. "Aren't groups generally supposed to stick together? It seems like that'd be a good idea, anyway, especially at the start." I was curious how she was going to respond.

"They said that they were going to investigate the area, so we all split up. I decided to come over this way and see how many other groups were here," said Nanase.

That meant that she had decided to do the same thing that I had. Since I arrived later than she did, I guessed she probably had a better grasp on the competition than I did. Nanase was still a complete mystery to me at this point. It probably wasn't the best idea to stick around here for too long, for the time being.

"I think it's about time for me to get going," I told her. "No harm in taking a look around."

"All right," said Nanase. "I'm sure that it must be difficult for you, senpai, being all alone. So please take care. Goodbye."

She readily let me go, and then she walked off towards where the other first-year students had grouped together. After I finished my brief exchange with Nanase and found another spot a little way away, I decided to take off my backpack and sit down. I wanted to avoid wasting energy for no good reason. I pulled out my tablet. It had taken me roughly fifty minutes in total to arrive at my designated area.

Even though the location for the next designated area wasn't going to be announced for another three hours or so, Tasks would start appearing before long. I patiently kept watch of the time, waiting for 10 a.m. to roll around. I wanted to be able to check the location of Tasks on the map as soon as they started showing up, as well as see their descriptions and rewards lists. Depending on what the Tasks were, I would have to decide whether to head towards my next designated area, if I should aim for a Task instead.

When they did show up, I saw that there were fourteen Tasks in total. One red dot appeared in the upper left corner of D7, the area I was already in, and it was the closest Task to me. I could already see students in my field of vision quickly walking northwest, presumably checking Task descriptions as they walked.

The Task in question was listed as "Building a Fire." Apparently, five points would be awarded to the first group that successfully managed to build a fire, using the specific tools provided. There were no rewards for second place or below.

There was also another Task that had appeared a slight distance away, in the center of E7. That Task was labeled "English Test." It was possible for two people from the same group to participate in that Task, and first place received five points. Second place got three points and third place got one point.

It seemed like more students were heading for that Task than in the direction of the Build a Fire Task. Well, I supposed that was probably because it wasn't easy to build a fire with special tools when you didn't have any experience in that area. It was something of an unknown quantity for many. It was only natural that many would go for the English Test instead, no doubt determining that was the more reliable way of getting points.

A third nearby Task was the "Geography Test" in D8. But there was only one group of students headed in that direction. The difference in the number of people aiming for that test versus the English test was most likely attributed to the fact that they had shown up in different areas. D8, an area that students from other Tables have already gathered in, would still take some time

to get to from here, despite the fact it was just one space over. It was unlikely that you'd beat the students who were already in the area.

The registration period for all those Tasks was sixty minutes, but they were probably all going to fill up quickly. There was also a Task in C6, a location that I could realistically shoot for, although it was a little further away. That was "Grip Strength Examination," wherein men and women would compete separately. The registration period for that Task was longer too, set at 120 minutes.

While it certainly was something I could manage to reach, I could also expect that students who couldn't register for the Build a Fire Task once it filled up would probably head that way. Plus, if the next designated area happened to appear somewhere in the east, that would mean I'd have to travel quite a long distance.

Of the fourteen available Tasks, the one that was furthest away appeared in G3 and was called the "Miscellaneous Trivia Test." One person from each group could participate, and the first-place winner would score ten points. Since there was a time limit of 180 minutes, there was a good chance that I might run out of time before I even arrived there to sign up. On top of that, it was very possible that I'd end up abandoning my chances of reaching my next designated area by going to this test in G3, so I couldn't just casually head over there without thinking about it. However, if I performed well in the test, I could manage to score an easy ten points just from one Task.

"What an interesting exam this is," I said to myself.

When you thought about it, you were allowed to make any choice you wanted. It all came down to your mindset. There would be three full hours before the next designated area was announced, so I decided to get up and head towards the Grip Strength Examination Task in C6. Students who decided to head towards the Build a Fire Task first to see whether they could participate there would inevitably lose a little bit of time in doing so. I figured I would be able to outpace any of those groups.

As I walked toward my intended Task, I carefully checked through the list of Tasks that I wasn't planning to participate in so that I could commit the important details to memory. In particular, I noted what those Tasks were, and where they appeared.

3.2

“OH, HEY THERE, Ayanokouji-kun!”

When I arrived at the Task location in C6 roughly forty minutes later, I found Class 2-C’s homeroom instructor, Hoshinomiya-sensei, already there. She was standing by in a tent so that she could escape the blazing heat. Aside from her, I could see that there were nearly twenty students here, from all grade levels.

“I’m surprised that you came all the way here, Ayanokouji-kun. Unfortunately, the registration filled up about five minutes ago,” said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

There was another adult nearby, a man. I wasn’t familiar with him. It looked like he was in the midst of explaining the Task to the students who had gathered here.

“Seems that way, from the looks of it,” I agreed.

That being the case, there wasn’t really any point in staying around here any longer. I didn’t exactly like the idea of getting involved with Hoshinomiya-sensei all that much, so I tried to leave, but she firmly grabbed me by the arm as I tried to do so.

“There’s no need to be in such a rush, right? You are free to sit back and observe, you know,” she said.

“Don’t you think it’s problematic for a teacher to steal a student’s time away from them for the sake of their own convenience?” I asked.

“Hey, come on, don’t you think that’s going a little too far? You do have a lot of time after all.”

As an instructor, she should be aware of the nature of this exam. That is to say that a split-second decision could very well spell the difference between victory and defeat. But...well, she didn’t seem to be intending to let me go.

“My first designated area was D7. It’s entirely possible that my next one will be C6. If that happens, will you accept

responsibility if I happen to lose out on the Early Bird Bonus as a result?" I asked.

When I said that, she hurriedly let go of my arm and put some distance between us.

"J-jeez, Ayanokouji-kun, there's no need to get nasty, seriously," she said. "I was just thinking I wanted to chat with you a little bit is all. I've just been feeling kind of frustrated lately, so I was hoping you'd lend me an ear."

Even though she had physically let go of me, it seemed like she still intended on continuing this conversation. I reluctantly decided to hang back and talk with her, at least for a little while.

"We haven't talked one-on-one like this since the end-of-term exams last year, have we, Ayanokouji-kun?" said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

"Yeah, you're right," I replied.

Considering the fact that she saw how I competed in that exam up close back then, and in light of my recent perfect score in math, it wasn't difficult to imagine that she was probably feeling even more wary of me now.

"Anyway, wow, you really have been getting lots of attention lately, haven't you? I thought you were the type who didn't like sticking out."

"That's right, I don't like it," I answered.

"Okay, but in that case, why'd you get a perfect score in math? I mean, I think it's pretty crazy that you were able to solve problems that I couldn't even solve myself super easily. Like, wow," said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

I could understand that from Hoshinomiya-sensei's point of view, as someone who (maybe?) saw herself as a rival to Chabashira, this wasn't a laughing matter, but I felt like she was taking everything out on me.

"Really? I think there would definitely have to be more than a few students in this school who could solve those problems though," I replied.

"There are? I dunno, I have to wonder about that... Well, if we suppose so, I guess...maybe? But even if we suppose there were, I think they'd be from Class A or B. What class are you in again, Ayanokouji? That's right, say it with me now. Three, two, one... Yep, Class D. I'm really sorry to say this because it sounds mean, but when people talk about your class, a lot of times they say things like it's full of 'defectives,' and stuff. I think it's a class that attracts a lot of problem children, to the point it's almost ridiculous. And yet, in that class full of so-called 'defectives,' is it really okay to just accept there's someone like you, with ridiculously outstanding abilities, mixed in with the rest?" she answered.

"While I don't really know about me, I think there are quite a few excellent students in Class 2-D. Besides, even if you look at Class 1-D, don't you think there are lots of excellent students there?" I asked.

I wasn't especially informed about how things were with the third-year students, so I deliberately chose not to make mention of them.

"Well, sure, I suppose that's true... But I have to say, things at this school have changed a bit since last year. Dontcha think?" she asked.

There was no way I'd be able to answer a question like that. While we were having this pointless conversation, the Grip Strength Examination Task had started. A third-year student named Oshio was the first one to step up. It seemed likely that students were competing in the order in which they had registered for the Task. Among those who had registered was Sudou, one of my classmates. Since his fellow group members Ike and Hondou were nowhere to be seen, I had guessed that he must have either rushed off to do this Task on his own, or he worked it out with his group and went on ahead to make sure that someone from his group was able to register for the Task.

"As for what you were saying before," Hoshinomiya continued, "yes, I do think there are certainly some exceptional kids in your class. But I didn't get the impression that it was

enough to really bring everyone in your class together. Instead, I've gotten the impression that in your case, you've changed your surroundings."

I'd changed my surroundings? If you were looking at our class from an outsider's perspective, though, you shouldn't be getting that impression. Hoshinomiya-sensei seemed to be very familiar with how things were going in our class. She must have gathered quite a bit of information without me knowing.

"Anyway," she went on, "I have to say, I really have my back up against the wall now. Like, jeez. This is the first time I've ever experienced dropping down to Class C. It's like, every year so far, there's been a typical way of how things go, like A and B compete, and C and D compete, y'know?"

If that was true, then I supposed that yes, that usual order of things had indeed broken down.

"I really thought this class could have made it to A, but... Oh, well," she added, openly expressing her disappointment with her current class, led by Ichinose.

"Isn't it your duty as homeroom teacher to do something about that?" I asked.

"Yeesh, that really stings," said Hoshimoya-sensei.

She covered both of her ears with her hands, as if she could block out what I was saying to her that way. She was like an adult who hadn't really grown up yet, someone who was still in their student phase.

"Oh, I got it! Hey, I got this totally revolutionary, awesome idea! Why don't you come over to my class, Ayanokouji-kun? Like how Katsuragi-kun went to Class B?" she added.

That wasn't revolutionary at all, though. Just in my own grade alone, that was the kind of idea that someone like Ishizaki would come up with.

"I was wondering what you were going to say. But wow, that was pretty out there," I answered.

"So, how about we shoot for Class A together? What do you say?" asked Hoshinomiya-sensei. She offered me her hand.

Judging from the way that she moved, it seemed like she was someone who saw physical contact with the other sex as one of her weapons. But just before we touched, she stopped to think. She seemed to have recalled my earlier warning, because she shook her head and then restrained herself.

"I wouldn't be able to produce the twenty million points for that even if I saved up until graduation day," I replied. "Besides, even if I did come up with a way to get that many points, there's no telling at this stage which class is going to end up as A. Don't you think it would be wiser to wait until the very last minute and see how things play out?"

Plus, there weren't that many students who would be thinking about moving to Hoshinomiya-sensei's class, considering they had just dropped down to C.

"J-jeez," she replied. "You don't need to say all that in such a cold, impartial way..."

If you did manage to get the right to transfer classes, it was common sense that you wouldn't go ahead and do it until right before graduation. That is, unless you happened to get headhunted by someone from another class, like what happened with Katsuragi... Still, since virtually none of the superior students would want to go to a lower-level class, chances are most offers like that would be rejected too. Even if a student did agree to such a proposition, whether or not that one student alone would be enough to help their new class get all the way up to A was a different matter.

In the blink of an eye, the students who were participating in the Task started to cheer and shout in unison. Oshio looked frustrated. Apparently he had come in second place.

"You know, Sudou-kun really has changed quite a bit, hasn't he?" said Hoshinomiya-sensei. "I wonder who made that happen."

"Not me, just for the record," I replied.

While I might have played a key role, it was Horikita who had essentially played the leading role in how Sudou had changed.

Everyone else had finished getting their grip strength measured, but no one was able to beat Sudou's record, meaning that he came in first place. And with that, Sudou's group earned another five points, on top of what they had already earned from arriving at their first designated area. That meant they probably had a total of eight points.

When you compared what Sudou's group had earned to what I had, having only earned one point in the same block of time, it would be fair to say that we were worlds apart.

As soon as the Task was finished, the students immediately started to scatter. No doubt they were flying from Task to Task like migratory birds.

"Well, guess I'll be going too," I said aloud.

Since Hoshinomiya-sensei couldn't keep me there any longer, she simply bid me farewell.

"We have two weeks until the end of the exam. I expect I'll get sent all over the place, so maybe we'll run into each other again," she said.

I really didn't want to see her if at all possible, though. With that thought in mind, I left.

3.3

AFTERWARDS, I went around to two other Task locations that had popped up, but both had quickly filled up with registrants. I ended up not being able to participate in either one. After lunch, one o'clock in the afternoon rolled around, I went to B7, my second designated area. I earned only the point I got from the Arrival Bonus. My third designated area, which I had just arrived at a short while ago, was back in D7, the same as my first designated area. Again, I only earned one point from the Arrival Bonus there too. I steadily but surely managed to accumulate two points that afternoon, by making my way to the designated areas like I had done first thing that morning.

However, my total score for the first day was only three points. I expected that undoubtedly put me among the lowest-ranking groups in the exam. Even so, there wasn't any need for me to be pessimistic at all. The students hadn't really spread out to all corners of the island yet right at the start of the exam, so it was understandable that competition in this immediate area was going to be fierce on the first day. It would've been difficult for me to score more points while working alone even if I tried pushing my luck and hustled around the island. And on top of that, I would have probably consumed a lot of my drinking water.

I had completed the three Basic Movement assignments for today; now, it was time for me to prepare for tomorrow. It was then that I ran into Nanase again, at a place much like the one where we bumped into each other that morning.

"Senpai," said Nanase.

"This makes twice now," I replied.

"Yes. Quite a coincidence, isn't it?" she answered.

She seemed to be acting alone, since there was no sign of Housen or Amasawa.

"How did it go today?" she asked.

"I did my best and got three points. You?" I asked in return.

"Well, the three of us managed to earn eight points for visiting the designated areas. I didn't manage to make it to our second designated area in time; however, I did take first place in a Task for which I had registered. That brought our group to a total of thirteen points," said Nanase.

"Sounds like you're off to a smooth start," I said.

Even though she said that she didn't make it to one of her designated areas, that really wasn't a significant problem. If you were in a group of two or more people, if someone from your group made it in time and set foot in the designated area, it technically wouldn't count as a miss. So, if you managed to score many points spending your time elsewhere like Nanase did, that would still be a plus.

"Well then," said Nanase, "if you'll please excuse me."

Our conversation sounded more like a status report. After that, we went our separate ways. It was a little before five o'clock in the evening right now. I started quietly walking ahead through the forest alone to decide where I was going to set up camp tonight. If my tent were exposed to direct sunlight, that would make the temperature inside the tent rise considerably. It was entirely conceivable that the heat could remain even at nightfall if I wasn't careful in choosing where to pitch my tent.

With that in mind, I figured I should probably search for a place that wasn't exposed to direct sunlight. Starting at a point in D7, I traveled east and stopped just before the boundary between D7 and E7. Between the students, the teachers, and the test administration staff, there must've been at least 500 people on the uninhabited island. But if you weren't in a designated area or at a Task site, you could go for hours without seeing anyone at all. That was just how deep these woods were.

Feeling the heat and humidity, I decided to pitch my tent in a somewhat open clearing. I took a two-liter bottle of water out from my backpack, poured some into a paper cup, and held the cup up to my mouth. If I were to drink directly from the bottle, there would be nothing to prevent bacteria from my mouth from contaminating my water bottle. And if I were to leave my water

bottles out in the heat, that could lead to other issues such as mold growing inside the bottles. If that happened, there was the risk I could get quite sick over something rather trivial. I absolutely couldn't let something like that happen during this exam.

Once opened, bottled water didn't actually have a very long shelf life. If I wanted to drink the water while it was in its best condition, then I should drink it all up by the end of today. However, I couldn't afford to do something like that in a situation where I wasn't able to see what was coming ahead. It wouldn't be difficult for me to get through the first two days with the food and water that I had already purchased right at the start of the exam. But from the third day and onward, once I ran out of the supplies I had on hand, my situation would grow increasingly dire.

Granted, I could go with a strategy to participate in some Tasks, and even if I didn't win for being in the top spots, I could at least go for participation prizes. But from what I could see on my tablet, there were only a few Tasks where I could get a participation prize. It was obvious just from a glance that the degree of competition to enter was higher for those Tasks than others.

I looked down at my tablet and reviewed what happened today. There had been a total of sixty-eight Tasks today.

I didn't know if students had been able to participate in all of them, but of those Tasks, fourteen of them presented opportunities to obtain mineral water in some form. That meant only about 20 percent of all Tasks offered water, which was not exactly a lot of opportunities by any stretch. What I found interesting, though, was the fact that these Tasks, which came off as relief measures for the students, were basically a form of competition in themselves.

The order in which students arrived at these Task sites was the order in which they were evaluated, with the first student to arrive receiving two liters of water. The second student to arrive received one point five liters. And the third student received one

liter. Everyone else, from the fourth to the thirtieth student to arrive, would be given 500 milliliters of water.

However, we didn't receive that many points for these Tasks. First place received three points, second place got two, and third place got one. However, it could still be said that these were extremely important Tasks as they ensured that we all had a safe, reliable supply of water, regardless of ability. It was also quite interesting to note that out of these fourteen Tasks that supplied students with the chance to get water, eight of them involved some additional kind of competitive element.

On the first day of the exam, not only were there eight Tasks with identical conditions being held, but also, the Task locations and time frames were neatly distributed as well. If this trend continued from the second day and onward, then...

Well, I supposed if I could consistently and reliably complete those Tasks, then I wouldn't have to worry that much about water issues, but...

Anyway, after finishing one of my to-go meals, brushing my teeth, and taking care of my bathroom business, I decided to get into the tent I'd set up and lay down. I wanted to avoid pointlessly wasting any of my energy, and I wanted to get ready for tomorrow. From the second day of the exam onward, I was going to focus on scoring points in earnest and getting my essential supplies.

3.4

I HAD GONE TO BED quite early, but I woke up in the middle of the night and sat up. From what I could see through the gap in the mesh material of my tent, everything was pitch dark. The cover of night was so intense that you couldn't even see one inch in front of your face. The only things I could hear were the buzzing of insects and the sound of something scurrying through the grass. When you were camping in the middle of the woods, it was a battle against solitude. This was probably quite a cruel, harsh environment for a girl going it alone, like Horikita and Ibuki. Even if they just had to use the bathroom, they'd have to go through the time and effort to put one together outside. Putting together even a simple one would be a challenge.

More importantly though...

I sat inside my tent with bated breath. Without a doubt in my mind, the most worrying part about all this for me was that Acting Director Tsukishiro was going to come after me and try to get me expelled. If his plan was to launch a frontal assault, he would need to get me to drop down into the bottom five of the rankings. However, a strategy like that wasn't very realistic. Students were basically in complete control of the number of points they could earn.

Even though you could say that all the students were fighting for their lives in this exam, I most likely wouldn't have to worry about sinking to the bottom five if I steadily went about my business, going to each designated area and completing Tasks. In that case, he would have to come after me with a different strategy. One not based around the idea of a frontal assault.

It didn't seem likely that he would attempt to make me lose out on points by causing my watch to stop functioning somehow. But I supposed it was conceivable that he might be able to employ some contrivance that would prevent me from scoring. If both the wristwatch and tablet provided to me had somehow been manipulated by someone on Tsukishiro's side, then it was

also conceivable that the scores I had earned, which were displayed on my tablet right now, could actually not be there at all.

Well, no, I supposed if there was a big discrepancy between the score I had actually earned and the score that was being reflected, I would obviously raise the issue with the school. I couldn't imagine that was something Tsukishiro would want to happen. Even supposing he managed to get me to lose out on three days' worth of points, it was still entirely possible that I could recover them. If Tsukishiro were to pursue a simple, careless course of action that could bring doubt down on himself, then he would end up making Mashima-sensei and the others start to suspect something was up.

Instead of going after me with such a harebrained strategy, it would make more sense for him to attack me from a different angle. What would be the best possible way to get me expelled if I were in Tsukishiro's shoes? If I were operating on the assumption that I could use the White Room agent at my disposal, then I could force an elimination through injury or illness. After all, if I were to suffer a severe injury like a broken arm, then school administrators would immediately determine that I would be unable to continue. In other words, I would have someone launch an attack out in the woods, where there was a distinct lack of surveillance.

That would be a simple and certain way of getting me expelled. Besides, even if I were injured, it would be difficult for school officials to determine whether my injury was caused by someone else. An agent from the White Room likely had the skills to make such an injury look like an accident.

Chapter 4: Traveling Companion

I WOKE UP AT 6:30 in the morning. Judging from how the radiant sunshine poured through and lit up even the inside of my tent, I knew it was going to be a sunny day. When I emerged from my tent, I felt the sweltering heat as a lush world of vibrant green stretched out before my eyes.

"Guess picking a spot away from direct sunlight was the right choice," I said aloud.

Even though I had to walk a little bit further to find this location, pitching my tent in a shady spot was the correct course of action. After I had a light breakfast consisting of one of my to-go meals and some water, I packed up my tent and waited for seven o'clock to roll around. Most students should already be awake by now, and they were likely waiting for the exam activities to begin.

Reaching the designated areas was my top priority, but I would keep my options open. I decided that should a Task appear nearby, I'd consider shifting my priorities around depending on the contents and rewards. When the clock struck seven that morning, I received a notification on my watch. I set my tablet on my lap and powered it on, and then refreshed the map.

My current location was D7. I wondered where I would be sent today. The location I should be heading to now was...E8, from the looks of it. My first designated location was the closest one to the spot that I had chosen to set up camp. So, you could say that I was in an ideal position to shoot for the Early Bird Bonus. I set out right away, not wanting to waste a single second.

I had spent the first day of the exam observing, but from today onward, I was going to gradually start picking up the pace, little by little. Shortly afterward, once I set foot in my designated area, I received a notification on my watch telling me that I had earned points. I had, in quite spectacular fashion, come in first

place, which meant my group had been awarded ten points. I had managed to make up for yesterday's deficiencies in one fell swoop. I supposed you could say that things were going almost too well.

I figured that it would be best for me to pick up some Tasks now, but...no Tasks that a solo participant could register for had appeared in the surrounding area. Even though there was one in B8, which was kind of close, I still would have to head all the way over to that section. Considering the amount of time that it would take for me to get there and come back, I figured it would be best to just skip it and see what came next. Since I didn't know when the next set of Tasks would show up, I decided to just wait until the map updated.

4.1

THE NEXT DESIGNATED AREA, which was announced at nine that morning, was area E6. I arrived there slightly later than I did with the first area of the day, coming in at second place, so I received a notification telling me that I had earned a five-point reward. Then, after the break, the third designated area for the day was announced at one o'clock that afternoon. That was area F7. Even though I was a bit to the southwest of the area, I managed to keep my streak going, and placed second once again, earning yet another five points.

Many of the Tasks that had appeared throughout the day so far required you to have two or more people in your group to register. I guessed it was likely that many students probably went to check out those Tasks. As someone who was working alone, I was grateful for this turn of events. I had scored twenty-three points just from today. Combined with the three points I earned on the first day, I now had a total of twenty-six.

While I was definitely making great progress, a three-person group could have earned eighteen points at minimum simply by racking up Arrival Bonuses. Even though I had gotten impressive results several times in a row, there would be hardly any difference in our scores. If I messed up even slightly, things would immediately start going sideways for me.

Besides, I had only managed to get second place twice in a row. Put another way, that meant that I had failed to get first place twice. While I didn't know who it could be, it was possible that there was some powerful rival in my same Table. I decided to return to area E6 and take a break and to wait for any Tasks that I could register for to appear.

The three designated areas that had appeared so far today had been selected normally, through the standard process. That meant that the remaining area, which was going to be announced at three o'clock this afternoon, would be the one that was

selected randomly. It would be the first random selection of the exam.

"Well, it would seem that we meet again, Ayanokouji-senpai."

It was Nanase; I had run into her once again after I stopped to take a breather. There had been six designated areas so far. And throughout all those travels, I had bumped into Nanase three times.

"Do you think that we could perhaps be in the same Table, by any chance?" she asked.

"Maybe," I answered.

It wouldn't be strange if our Tables did overlap somehow, considering that we just so happened to bump into each other repeatedly. It really wasn't that big a deal whether we were in the same Table or not. What *did* concern me was that we were encountering each other so often. Even if we were heading to the same areas, the chances of us running into each other directly were not that high. In addition to the fact that we were taking different routes in the first place, there should have been differences in our travel times and the amount of time we took when we stopped.

Since there was no indication that she was following me, I could conclude that this was simply a series of coincidences. But was that really true? Anyway, without any clues for me to go off of, it would be impossible for me to determine whether or not Nanase really was in my same Table. Nanase was in a group with Amasawa and Housen, meaning that if she were to entrust them with getting to the designated areas, their group wouldn't be penalized for her missing them.

While they wouldn't be able to collect the Early Bird Bonus, they could still steadily rack up points, two at a time. I could make some inferences based on alerts from her watch, but it was quite possible that she might have put hers on mute.

Our previous two conversations were quite brief, so I assumed she would be on her way soon this time too. However,

she paused and looked over at me.

"Excuse me, Ayanokouji-senpai, but I have a request."

"A request?" I repeated.

"If it is not too much of a bother, would you perhaps allow me to accompany you for a while, Ayanokouji-senpai?" she asked.

"Accompany me? What do you mean?" I asked.

Regardless of how likely it was that she and I were in the same Table, this special exam had been designed in such a way that it was basically impossible for students from different grade levels to work together. There were no benefits whatsoever for either party.

"To be honest, a problem came up last during a group discussion," said Nanase. "Both Housen-kun and Amasawa-san said that it would be better if we were to all act independently, so now we have gone our separate ways."

Even though they were in the same group, there weren't any rules that said that you had to work together. Of course, working together had many benefits, but I supposed you could say that working independently was one viable strategy for students who didn't struggle with going solo.

"I have met with you three times since yesterday, senpai. From what I have seen thus far, putting aside what was reported during our first encounter, I believe that you managed to reach your designated areas quite quickly—faster than I did the other two times we met. I worry that if I am acting alone, I will not reach my designated areas quickly enough."

"Don't you think it's possible that it might have been a coincidence that I happened to arrive faster than you those two times?" I asked.

"That might be the case, yes," Nanase said. "Even so, I have determined that you are still more capable than someone as inexperienced as myself."

Although she seemed to be praising me with her remarks, I couldn't imagine that was how she truly felt at all.

"I can't say it's a very good idea for students from different grades and separate groups to travel together," I said.

"Because of the impact that might have on claiming the Early Bird Bonus, and Tasks possibly becoming a point of contention, correct?" she answered.

"It's possible that conflicts could arise, yes," I replied. "Like if we come across a Task that only one more person could register for."

"I would not mind deferring to you in all such cases, Ayanokouji-senpai," Nanase said. "I will only set foot in the designated areas after you have entered and made sure you have claimed any bonus points. That way, there will be no disadvantages for you, Ayanokouji-senpai. Regarding Tasks, if only one person is allowed to register, I will defer all those opportunities to you."

So she didn't mind throwing away her chance of getting the valuable Early Bird Bonus or registering for Tasks? What she was proposing was not something I could possibly endorse; it was entirely ridiculous.

"You would inevitably earn fewer points though, Nanase."

"This is my first time participating in the uninhabited island exam, and you have already proven the extent of your physical abilities through your fight with Housen-kun, Ayanokouji-senpai," she said. "It would be extremely helpful for me if you could choose an appropriate route for us to take."

Even though she said it would be helpful for her, considering the fact she had been getting around without any problems on her own today: she was already doing fine. I could confidently say that there was no reason for her to deliberately take on the risk of accompanying me.

"Supposing even if I'm going to choose an appropriate route, are you able to keep pace with me?" I asked. "I might even choose some dangerous paths sometimes. Would you be able to keep up?"

I already knew her answer, but I deliberately chose to ask her anyway. I thought that her response might reveal the meaning behind her bizarre behavior. However, Nanase's reply was not what I had expected.

"I am confident in my physical abilities... You're hesitant to agree more because you are unable to trust me, instead of worrying that I will be a bother to you, aren't you?" said Nanase.

Nanase had worked together with Housen and Amasawa to try and get me expelled. So yes, it was certainly true that our relationship was far from being trusting. However, even if I rejected her proposal right now, she was free to follow me around anyway if she so chose. I couldn't stop her from doing that.

If a third party spotted us while she was awkwardly tailing me around the island, it would look unnatural. It wasn't like I couldn't shake her off my trail, but doing so would just be a waste of energy. And on top of that, there was no avoiding the fact we'd bump into each other again somewhere down the line if we really were in the same Table. All that considered, I figured that it would be less of a hassle overall to just agree to her request now and let her accompany me already.

"Fine," I said. "If that's what you want, I don't mind."

"Thank you very much," said Nanase, smiling happily before bowing her head deeply.

"We just need to make sure that we really are in the same Table though. Okay?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," Nanase agreed. "I suppose that the possibility that we've only just so happened to share the same designated areas through sheer coincidence is conceivable. With that in mind, confirmation would naturally be our first course of action. So, what do you suggest we do now? It seems that we still have some time before the next designated area is announced."

It was still just past 1:30 in the afternoon right now, so we had over an hour to spare.

"Yeah, I guess so... Oh, look at that, Tasks just popped up. Talk about good timing," I mused.

Several new Tasks appeared on the map. I checked which Tasks were in the surrounding area on my tablet and quickly decided on where we should go. Then, I showed Nanase my screen, and while pointing at the Task location that I had wanted to head towards on the map, I explained what it was about.

"Looks like a quiz Task appeared just under F8. I'm heading there," I told her.

"It's quite close, from the looks of it," said Nanase.

"Yeah. And afterward, if the next designated area happens to be in a location that is a little too far away, I'm planning to skip it," I added.

I wanted to focus on getting points through doing well on the Task, since it might not be possible for me to reach a faraway area in time anyway.

"I understand," Nanase said. "I will follow."

Actually, I had wanted to go for the "Kick-Ups" Task that appeared in E5. However, the path there was more challenging than going for F8, and not just in terms of obstacles but also in terms of distance. I figured I would see for myself how well Nanase could manage herself first.

4.2

“WE SHOULD BE ABLE to see it any minute now,” I said aloud.

“All right,” replied Nanase.

We set foot in area F8 with our sights set on the Task in that location. Tablets in hand to confirm the Task location, we kept moving forward.

“Come to think of it, senpai, this Task that we are intending to undergo does appear to be a little on the challenging side, don’t you agree?” said Nanase.

“Well, it’s a quiz, so it’s true that there could be a lot of questions on it that we might not expect or have covered,” I answered.

The “Quiz” Task was designed in such a way that the test questions would be taken from one of many possible subject matters. It was a multiple-choice format that

made it easy for anyone to participate, with four possible answers per question. On the other hand, it was probably going to be difficult to win if you didn’t have a solid breadth of knowledge in both humanities and sciences. Also, people would register for this exam as a group, and up to twelve groups could register. The more people you had in the group, the more heads you could put together, and therefore the more advantageous position you’d be in for this particular Task.

“Still, that being said, I should have a good chance depending on what subject matter is chosen,” I added.

“You may be right about that, but... You actually wanted to try your hand at the Task in E5, didn’t you?” asked Nanase.

I had deliberately chosen to alter my plans to accommodate her, as my way of compromising. But judging from what she said, it sounded like she saw right through me.

"To be honest, yes," I replied. "That Task was on the top of my list, but I was still fifty-fifty on whether I was going to go to it. It's nothing you need to worry about."

"I am glad to hear that. However, I am simply accompanying you through my own selfish desire to do so, so please do not deviate from what you would normally choose to do. All right?" said Nanase.

"You really don't need to remind me of that. Besides, the quiz is better in terms of rewards anyway."

First place earned eight points, second place earned four points, and third place earned two points. On top of that, additional rewards would be given out based on the number of people currently in your group. You could choose from a list of options that included food and water. It was an ideal way to replenish the supplies that I had consumed over the last two days.

When we reached a point where we could see the quiz Task location, it looked like a fair number of people had already gathered there.

"Yo, Ayanokouji! There's only three spots left, get a move on and sign up!" shouted my classmate Sudou, waving me over when he noticed I had arrived.

"Looks like we don't have much time then. Let's hurry," I told Nanase.

She nodded in response and the two of us ran over quickly. On arrival, we went through the registration process. They didn't disclose any details about what subject matter would be covered on the quiz, so I wondered what kinds of questions were going to be on it.

We had over thirty minutes until the registration deadline. We were on standby until that time, or until a twelfth group filled up the last remaining available spot. Ike was standing some distance away from the Task site, waiting for the quiz to begin. He wasn't smiling. He just stared off into space, looking completely out of it. Hondou seemed like he was having a tough time trying

to strike up conversation with Ike, so he ended up just killing time by himself.

You could say that Sudou's group's greatest asset was the sense of teamwork born from their close-knit friendship, but I had some doubts about how well that was working for them right now.

"Things going okay for you?" I asked, directing my question at Sudou, as he seemed to be the only person in his group that was in high spirits.

"Well, for points, we're doin' pretty good," he replied. "We showed up third at our first designated location today and got first place in two Tasks today too."

"I couldn't sign up for it in time myself, but I saw that you placed first in the grip strength Task. And you won by a mile too," I told him.

"Aw dude, you were plannin' on signin' up too? Well, if ya did and I was slackin', you would've definitely given me a serious run for my money!" said Sudou, making a slightly exaggerated show of wiping sweat from his forehead. "I guess I lucked out pretty hard."

"How about your group? Having any problems?" I asked.

"Well, feels like we're runnin' low on water faster than we expected, I guess... Kinda get the feeling we've been flyin' all over the place a little too much," explained Sudou.

Apparently, he was starting to see the negative effects of going all out and running everywhere as fast he could over these past two days.

"I gotta say, sure am glad that we can get stuff back as rewards for these Tasks and junk. So that's good. Right now, I'd say we're pretty much okay." He looked a little conflicted though, and a moment later, he added, "Though, well, Ike's been kinda down."

"Any reason why?" I asked.

"Dunno man... He was actin' a little weird before the exam started, but he just dodges the question every time, sayin' nothin's wrong," said Sudou.

From the sounds of it, the whole incident with Shinohara must have had a powerful, lasting effect on him. The uninhabited island exam was already underway, and we were now more than halfway through the second day of it. During that time, Shinohara, the object of his affection, had spent all her time together with his rival Komiya. It was perfectly understandable why he couldn't stop worrying about it.

"Well, that does sound concerning, but a Task is a Task. I'm sure that if you three work together, you won't have trouble coming out on top," I told him.

"Thanks, dude. Oh hey, come to think of it, you're alone, ain't ya, Ayanokouji? You gonna be okay?" asked Sudou.

"Well, that all depends on if they select a subject that I'm good at, I guess," I replied.

Suddenly, Sudou shot a glance over at my side, having noticed Nanase standing there.

"Oh, hey, uh... Yer a first-year, right? What was your name again...?" asked Sudou.

Sudou had been there during that incident with Housen before, so it made sense that he'd recognize Nanase.

"My name is Nanase, Sudou-senpai," she replied.

Far from going starry-eyed and ogling the cute girl that stood in front of him, Sudou's expression instead turned stern.

"Hey...come here for a sec, Ayanokouji," he said, suddenly wrapping his arm around my neck and pulling me aside, putting some distance between us and Nanase.

"Dude, it looks like you two came here together, but she's the enemy, ain't she? Whaddaya doin'?" asked Sudou.

"She just told me that she wanted to accompany me. Since there's a good chance we're in the same Table," I replied.

"Say what? Dude, even if you're in the same Table, what's the point of having her tag along with you? She's been workin' with that Housen guy to get you kicked out of school, right? This is dangerous, man," said Sudou. It sounded as if, in his own unique way, he was worried about me.

"You might be right," I told him. In truth, I wasn't so thoughtless to believe that she was accompanying me for no real reason.

"Seriously, man, it's like you ain't got no nose for danger or anythin'... Well, I'm sure you're probably all calm 'cause you can manage just fine, just... If you have any trouble, give me a shout, okay?"

I nodded in response to Sudou's sentiment. Though he was reluctant, Sudou did look like he was at least somewhat convinced.

"If she was hasslin' you, I was thinkin' I'd go tell that Nanase chick off and really let her have it. But if you say it's all fine, then I'll just let it go," said Sudou.

Just then, the final group must have finished registering, because preparations for the Task to begin were underway.

"Anyway, dude, we can chat more later," said Sudou. "Like ya said, a Task is a Task. Let's give it our best shot."

Sudou walked back over to join his teammates Ike and Hondou. Each of the twelve participating groups then took their tablets, which they had used to sign up for the Task, and prepared themselves for the questions that were about to appear. When the time finally came, the subject matter for the quiz was displayed on all our tablets simultaneously.

"Category: Anime"

Huh? Anime? Before my mind could even wrap itself around the words that had appeared on the screen, the first question already appeared.

"Question 1: Which of the following is the correct title for episode 13 of the TV anime series *Mobile Samurai Bombdam*?"

1. Farewell, Bombdam
2. Burn! Bombdam
3. Shout! Bombdam
4. Bombdam's Tears

"...What in the hell?" I muttered aloud, the words spilling out of my mouth before I could even think.

It clearly had something to do with anime given the category and the question text, sure, but I had absolutely no clue what the correct answer was.

"Dude, for real?! This is like crazy easy!" shouted Hondou nearby, gripping his tablet, his voice filled with excitement.

Easy? This question was easy? What did "Bombdam" even mean in the first place? Bombdam? What was that?

Well, this was certainly outside of my area of expertise, but even so, I had signed up for it, so I'd just have to do my best. I just needed to stay calm and not panic. Since there were four possible answers, there was a 25 percent chance I'd get the right one even if I picked at random.

If I were to hazard a guess, I would say that unlike the titles in answers one through three, answer number four was the only one that had the word Bombdam right there at the beginning. Perhaps that was some kind of hint? I decided to go with that assumption and chose answer four. Shortly afterward, the time limit was up, and the correct answer was displayed.

"Correct Answer: #2, 'Burn! Bombdam.'"

My best guess had been an exercise in futility. My answer was wrong. While I was feeling mildly dizzy from being out under the blazing sun, I focused my attention onto the second question.

"Question 2: Which of the following artists sang the opening theme for the TV anime series *De-Tuna*?"

Reality was cruel. I was once again faced with the fact that I knew nothing about this subject and was unable to choose anything. I had no idea what the answer was. And this time around, each of the answers looked virtually the same. It was at

this point that I realized trying to actively participate in this Task any longer was simply a waste of time. I proceeded to select answers for each question totally at random, praying that by some miracle that I would get successive correct answers.

After spending ten minutes going through the total twenty questions, I quietly closed my tablet. I had managed to get only four questions right, which meant that I had answered correctly for just 20 percent of the quiz. In all likelihood, I had scored well below average. The group that had managed to place first was, surprisingly enough... Well, no, actually it wasn't very surprising. It was Sudou's group. They had gotten an astounding 95 percent correct.

I supposed that was because Ike and Hondou were most likely quite knowledgeable when it came to this subject. It wasn't simply academic or physical ability that could be useful. Various miscellaneous bits of knowledge could also be useful too. This seemed to be a perfect illustration of exactly what Chabashira had told us about before.

"Those were rather tough questions, weren't they?" asked Nanase.

Having gotten only 25 percent correct, she was in nearly the same boat as me. Basically, it seemed safe to say that she knew almost nothing relating to anime. Judging from everyone else's scores, I got the impression that most of the groups that had participated in this Task had a similar experience with this Task as my own.

"Hell yeah, Kanji!" shouted Sudou. As a member of the winning group, he apparently wanted to celebrate the moment by high-fiving his pals Ike and Hondou.

"...Yeah," said Ike, listlessly.

What he gave hardly constituted what you'd call a high-five. He basically just touched hands. After seeing this spectacle, I felt a little concerned myself, and I agonized over whether I should talk to Sudou about what was troubling Ike.

While we just so happened to run into each other two times now, including our encounter today, there wasn't any guarantee that we'd meet again. If Ike were, for example, to find out that Shinohara and Komiya started dating during this exam, or even that they had simply started becoming closer to one another, I could assume he would probably be really shaken up by it.

However...the question remained of whether or not Sudou was the right person to support Ike right now. Sudou had shown remarkable growth academically, physically, and mentally. But whether he could provide someone with sensitive care and support was another question.

"Is something the matter?" asked Nanase.

Since the Task was over, there was no point in dwelling on it any longer. It was precisely because she knew this that Nanase must have felt like it was okay to move on, instead wanting to ask about what was happening with Ike.

Having been observing closely, she immediately came right out and asked. "Is there some kind of problem with Sudou-senpai's group?"

"As someone who doesn't know them, what do you see when you look at their group, Nanase?" I replied. "Well, I suppose even if I were to ask you that, it'd probably be hard for you to say much, considering that you haven't really met anyone from their group other than Sudou before."

"Yes, you are right about that. In that case, would you mind telling me about them?" she asked.

"The guy to the left of Sudou is Ike Kanji. The person to the right is Hondou Ryoutarou. They're both the type of people who tend to do stupid stuff and make themselves stand out, in a bad way... Or, I guess maybe I should say that they're the kind of guys who get carried away easily? But I suppose they're also the life of the party for our class." That felt like it was an oversimplification, but I probably wasn't wrong either. I kept that part to myself though.

"They have their fair share of concerns when it comes to academics, sure. They're not exactly on top of their studies. But Sudou has lots of physical strength, and Ike has the skills to camp out on an uninhabited island. And Hondou... Yeah, uh. He's a lively one," I said.

They weren't a bad combination at all if the idea was to have a fun time during the course of the exam.

"Ike-senpai and Hondou-senpai, hmm. They're...the life of the party, you say?" mused Nanase. "Well, from what I can see, Ike-senpai doesn't appear to be that full of life. Is he not feeling well, perhaps?"

Despite the fact they had never met before, Nanase was also clearly able to perceive something was amiss. It was certainly true that if your only impression of him came from what you saw just now, he didn't look like an outgoing guy at all.

"It's true that he usually livens things up in class. It just seems like he's a little down right now," I replied. "Physically, there's nothing wrong with him."

"So, *that's* what you're concerned about then, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Nanase.

After everything that had been said so far, Nanase had most likely inferred what was going on too.

"Well, yeah, it is what it is. It's a troubling situation, but I guess I can't just keep worrying about other people all the time. In that last quiz, I was far, far from placing in the top three. I was even in the bottom three. On the other hand, Sudou's group took first place. Questions about group composition aside, whatever group scores more points is the better one," I said.

Honestly, since they were scoring above me in terms of overall points, worrying about Sudou's group could easily be taken as me running my mouth.

"Well, the point of this special exam is to fight while playing to your strengths, wouldn't you say?" Nanase said. "You can get a feel for how much effort the school has put into this. They didn't simply rent this entire uninhabited island; they created a large-

scale competition out of it, designing it in such a way that they could highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the students."

While this might sound a little mean, there weren't many opportunities for Ike and Hondou to really play an active role back in the classroom at school right now. A student's focus was to study or participate in sports, and inevitably, students who were not good at either of those things would be buried. However, it was entirely possible that you could compete on other factors in this special exam.

I had felt anxious about the poor balancing in Sudou's group prior to the exam, but things seemed to be going well. It was precisely for that reason that the only remaining point of concern I had, Ike's emotional state, was such a tricky problem. If Ike were in peak condition, then he could have very well been the dark horse in this exam and turned around all the gossip and criticism about him.

Even so...

As I thought about what was going on with Ike, I cast a sidelong glance at the adults beginning the process of dismantling the Task site now that it was finished. Even though it was obvious that this high school was different from the norm, considering the cost of the large cruise ship, the equipment, labor costs, and so on, the sheer amount of funding that went into the budget for this single special exam must have been absolutely off the charts.

Last year's uninhabited island exam was certainly something, but this was well beyond even that. It wasn't just the financial aspect of this exam that was a step above. The content was quite different too. Last year, we were asked to work together as a class, but this time, we were told to split into multiple small groups, and to go back and forth all over this vast island. Minor disputes between students might even develop into major, unexpected incidents.

On top of all of that, injury and illness were serious concerns. While small scratches or a slight fever probably wouldn't be an issue, it was very likely that someone could suffer from broken bones or an even more severe injury. Until this two-

week long exam had ended without incident, the school administrators and other relevant parties probably wouldn't get any time to relax either.

"Well, think it's about time we get going," I said aloud.

I much preferred for us to get moving and either start heading towards the next designated area or towards another Task that we could register for, rather than standing around.

"Senpai, may I say one thing before we depart?" asked Nanase.

Just before I started walking, though, Nanase walked around in front of me, blocking my path. She looked up at me.

"Just to reiterate, please do not take my being here into account," she said. "I ask that you please choose your own ideal route, Ayanokouji-senpai."

This uninhabited island exam was designed in such a way that even if you did great here and there, you wouldn't necessarily have enough points to actually win. It would be difficult to place in the top of the rankings without consistently accumulating points over the course of the entire two-week-long competition. In addition, the more people you had in your group, the more advantages your group would have. However, if you were working alone, you had to work that much harder than everyone else to score points.

"All right, and I'll say this once more too. I'm not taking you into account when I'm making decisions, so don't worry about it," I answered.

I had already settled on my course of action for this battle. A course of action wherein I had unraveled both the rules for this special exam and the thought processes of the other students. Besides, if Nanase were somehow going to impede my plans, then I wouldn't have allowed her to accompany me in the first place.

"I'm relieved to hear that," said Nanase. "I sincerely look forward to collaborating with you."

I checked my watch and took out my tablet. It was just about time for the fourth designated area to be announced for the

Basic Movement system. This would be the last area of the day, as well as the first randomly chosen area of the exam so far. When the time came and the location was announced, I looked at the location on my tablet. My designated area was in I7.

If I wanted to take the shortest path there, I would need to cross over mountains. On the other hand, if I choose to go about things safely and take a detour, it would take quite a lot of time to reach my destination. However, since this wasn't an area that I absolutely had to reach, this was going to be a difficult decision.

"Shall we be on our way?" asked Nanase.

"Before we do that, I want you to show me your tablet, Nanase," I told her.

"Ah, yes, that's right," she said. "We still haven't confirmed whether we're in the same Table."

While I was expecting her to be somewhat resistant to the idea of showing me, Nanase took her tablet out of her backpack and showed me her map, without making any effort to hide anything from me. And lo and behold, her next destination was also I7.

"It would appear that you and I are in the same Table after all, senpai," said Nanase.

"Looks like it."

Though I couldn't deny the possibility that our designated areas had just so happened to overlap through sheer random chance despite being in different Tables, considering everything that has happened up until this point, it seemed safe to conclude that we were in the same one.

"Now that we've established that, let's move on to the issue at hand," Nanase said. "Will you be taking the shortest path to our destination?"

"No, I'm not going to push my luck by trying to get points for reaching that area. Tasks have popped up in both G8 and G9. I'm thinking of finishing the day by visiting those two areas instead."

Both of those Tasks centered around academic testing, the first being "Math Problems" and the other being "English Problems." If I could arrive there in time and register for them, I was certain that I could score some points.

"Well then, which area will we be making camp in today?" asked Nanase.

"Let's see... Our first area tomorrow will be selected based on I7 as a starting point," I observed. "If we carelessly pick something too close to I7, we might accidentally end up being in the designated area before it's selected. I'd like to avoid that, if possible."

If we weren't going to push our luck today, then I thought it'd be a wise choice to stick to H9, just to be safe.

"Once we're finished with the Tasks, I think we'll walk on over to H9 and set up camp."

Nanase, having finished listening to my entire explanation, nodded in agreement, without uttering any complaints.

Sudou was just about to get moving now that he was finished with the task, but he called over to me. "Yo, Ayanokouji, didja say you're gonna camp in H9 just now?"

"Something wrong with that?" I asked.

"Nah, man, just that our next designated area happens to be H9. Where you headed now, anyway?" asked Sudou.

"For the time being, we're going to stop at G8 and G9 for the Math and English Tasks," I said.

Sudou scratched his head. "Ugh, yeah, me and boys are definitely gonna avoid those two," he mumbled, as though this was obvious.

Most likely, Sudou and his pals were going to head over to the Task in E8, even though it was a little bit farther away.

"If you're okay with it, how 'bout we meet up later and camp together? Should be a lot more fun with good friends. I also wanna ask you for some advice, to hear what you think 'bout our strategies and if there's any problems," said Sudou.

That was an unexpected proposal coming from Sudou, but certainly not a bad one. If anything, I should be complimenting him on his initiative-taking attitude. Besides, the whole deal with Ike had been bothering me for a while now too. If we came together because of coincidence, Ike probably wouldn't feel like I had any ulterior motives in reaching out.

"It'll prolly be pretty hard for us to meet up in the woods, so how about we meet up on the beach in G9 instead?" said Sudou.

We wouldn't have any problems finding each other down on the beach, so that was probably the better choice.

"Got it. What time?" I asked.

"Well, it's close to our destination, so how about half past five?" Sudou suggested.

In that case, we should be able to meet without any issues after we'd finished our Tasks.

"All right. See you on the beach in G9 at 5:30, then," I agreed.

Sudou and his teammates headed off in another direction for the time being, looking to take on a different Task than the ones Nanase and I were shooting for. Well, I supposed it'd be unreasonable to expect his group to go for something related to math or English. It made much more sense that they'd choose something they were proficient in.

"Sounds like we're going to be spending the night with Sudou and the guys. Do you have any problem with that, Nanase?" I asked.

It wouldn't be surprising if she were resistant to the idea of spending the night with a bunch of guys. Though, I supposed she might still find it better than camping alone with me, at least.

"I'm fine," Nanase assured me. "If anything, I think it'll be a good opportunity to be able to talk with them."

I was glad that she seemed to be taking it well.

4.3

AT AROUND 5:30 in the evening, Nanase and I were waiting on the beach. Sudou and his teammates met us there, presumably coming from H9, their designated area.

"How'd you do?" I asked.

"Well, uh... Not good." Sudou was a little short of breath. "After we saw you last, some new Tasks showed up, so we went after three of 'em. We got third place in one of 'em, but the other two were so full of people that we couldn't even sign up for 'em." He clicked his tongue in frustration.

Since Nanase and I hadn't made it in time to register for our Tasks either, it was clear that there were still quite a few students in the surrounding area.

"It's still only the end of the second day, so don't get too worked up," I told him.

While they were certainly racking up points at a breakneck pace, there was no denying the fact that Sudou's team was taking things too fast, something that he even admitted to himself. I was glad to see that Sudou, someone confident in his power and stamina, was able to drag along a dispirited Ike, but they weren't going to be able to keep going at the same pace forever. Hondou in particular seemed out of it. He was battered, bruised, and gasping for breath.

I was sure that he didn't like this kind of strenuous activity, but judging from the fact that he hadn't uttered a single complaint, it was probably safe to assume that he had simply decided to clear his head of all thoughts and just follow along.

"Anyway, how about we find a place to set up camp for the time being? Whaddya think, Kanji?" Sudou asked Ike.

Ike, still staring off into space vacantly, simply pointed towards the woods.

"Let's head back to H9 for now," he said listlessly. "There was a clearing that we passed by a little while ago. That'd be a good spot."

We all went along with Ike's suggestion and headed in the direction he pointed us to.

"I really don't get the impression that he's as exciting a person as you said he is, senpai," said Nanase.

"He's got a lot on his mind," I told her.

"Oh?" she replied.

"I don't feel comfortable talking about it since it's not my business. If you're curious, you should talk to him yourself," I answered.

"I suppose you're right. I'll try asking him when I get the chance," said Nanase tactfully.

Whether Ike would answer her honestly was a different matter, though. After following Ike for about twenty minutes or so, we had arrived at the clearing. It looked like a good spot. There wouldn't be any space issues even if three or four groups decided to set up camp here.

"Welp, let's get these tents up quick and get to eatin'. I'm starved," said Sudou, patting his belly.

I was sure he worked hard today too, so he must have been famished. Both Sudou and Hondou cast glances over at Ike, their eyes full of anticipation. The reason for that was obvious if you saw the fishing rod in Ike's backpack, but Ike didn't seem to notice their expectant gazes, just standing around in a daze, like a space cadet.

"Hey, Kanji." Sudou pressed him more directly. "Ain't you gonna fish today?" He was full of expectation due to our proximity to the water.

"Huh? O-Oh, um, well... It's already pretty late, and I'm beat, actually," said Ike. "Sorry."

If he had planned on fishing, he probably would have stayed back on the beach when we all met up. Either that, or he just

didn't have the energy to think that far ahead.

"Welp, guess it ain't no big deal." Although he sounded disappointed, Sudou immediately backed off, not wanting to force Ike into anything. Ike quickly shook his head from side to side as if he were trying to shake off the fuzziness in his head and get focused, and then he proceeded to start setting up his tent.

"It seems like his mind is somewhere else," Nanase observed.

Even though she knew absolutely nothing about Ike's situation, Nanase was able to see what was going on. Considering that fact, it was obvious that Ike was looking off.

4.4

WHEN WE FINISHED eating dinner, the sun had gone down, and night had fallen. It was now around eight o'clock, and we were each freely passing the time on our own. Even though I said "freely," I couldn't exactly say that it'd be a wise choice for any of us to go out for a walk in the woods in the dark of night. Plus, with the abundance of insects like mosquitoes buzzing around, we were basically just staying inside our tents.

So, we inevitably started making conversation, our voices carrying through the mesh fabric of our tents. Nanase, Ike, and I had lined up our tents in a row. Hondou had set up his tent directly across from Nanase's, and Sudou's tent was right beside his.

"So, you're in Class D, Nanase-chan? I never would have guessed, seriously," said Hondou. I guessed he must have enjoyed talking with girls because he was talking to Nanase more than anyone else here.

"Oh, well, I'm not a very capable person myself, so... Class D seems like the appropriate place for me to start, I think," she replied.

"Huh? Yeah, I don't see it. 'Sides, I think if anyone's incapable, it'd be us guys." Hondou burst out in laughter at his own joke, but he was the only one.

Sudou's expression remained stern. He was laying down, looking up at the roof of his tent, without even trying to join in the conversation. While I couldn't see what Ike was doing, he didn't seem to be trying to genuinely engage in conversation either, only giving the occasional "Yeah" or "Okay" from time to time.

"Dudes, somethin' feels off here. Kanij, Ken, somethin' wrong?" Hondou asked.

"Nothin' really, no. But hey, Ryoutarou... You shouldn't go trustin' Nanase," said Sudou.

"Huh? Why not?" Hondou asked, pressing his face up against the mesh fabric of his tent to look at Sudou, unable to believe what his friend was saying about a cute younger girl.

"No reason, really," Sudou said. "I'm just statin' facts is all, that's it."

"I don't get you, dude," replied Hondou.

"It's all right, Hondou-senpai," Nanase interjected. "I did something quite rude to Sudou-senpai in the past."

"Somethin' rude?" asked Hondou, "Wait, it's not cause like—Ken, did you try to sexually harass Nanase-chan or somethin'?"

"Dude," replied Sudou. "You seriously think I'd do somethin' like that?"

Even though Hondou himself had been the one to suggest it, he immediately realized that it didn't sound right after Sudou denied it.

"Well, no. It is true that it seems like you're devoted to Horikita and all. But what in the heck even happened then?" asked Hondou.

"Ain't somethin' I can talk to you about," said Sudou.

Sudou turned around, so that his back was turned to the entrance of his tent. Housen Kazuomi from Class 1-D had something truly unforgivable to Horikita, the person Sudou had feelings for, and Nanase herself had been in collusion with him. From Sudou's point of view, as someone who knew the truth of what happened back then, it was exceedingly reasonable for him to be wary of her. If Horikita had been here, she probably would have said the same thing that Sudou had.

"All right, I guess..." Hondou probably wasn't convinced, but if Nanase herself didn't mind what Sudou had said about her, he must have figured he didn't have the right to hound Sudou about it. "Anyway, though, Kanji, you've seriously been out of it for a while now."

"M-me? N-nah, dude... I'm the same as usual," answered Ike, flustered at having become the topic of conversation.

"Dude, you ain't your usual self at all, come on. This is a good a chance as any, so I'm gonna come out and say it. Somethin' has been up with you even before this exam started," said Sudou.

"Yeah, I totally agree with him," Hondou said. "You've been down for a while now, dude."

Sudou shifted his posture so that he was facing the entrance of his tent now, most likely because he was also interested in this topic.

"Come on, what're you guys talkin' about?" said Ike. "L-look, there's nothin', really, I mean, this uninhabited island exam thing is... It's just, you know, I've been nervous 'cause it's possible I could get expelled."

"Nervous? The hell you talkin' about?" said Sudou. "Weren't you super psyched back when they told us about this whole island exam?"

Ike had experience camping, and he had played an active role during last year's uninhabited island exam. His best friends were well aware of these facts, so there wasn't any way that Ike could pull the wool over their eyes so easily.

"Well, uh, I mean, it's... It's just, uh..." he stammered, unable to come up with an answer.

Nanase, having noticed Ike struggling to produce anything, looked over in his direction. "Even though we have only just met, I did get the impression that there is something getting you down," she remarked.

"What do you think, Ayanokouji?" said Hondou, looking for my opinion on the matter, as I had just been listening this whole time.

I figured that, based on how this conversation had been going, it would probably sound more natural for me to just answer honestly and agree with them that something was off. "Something about him has been nagging at me ever since we met up earlier today too."

"See, man?" Sudou said. "All four of us here can tell that you're lookin' down in the dumps. What's goin' on?"

Ike had been driven into a corner. Unable to come up with a good excuse to get out of this situation, he could only babble incoherently.

"Earlier, Ayanokouji-senpai had told me that you two are the life of the party in your class, Ike-senpai, Hondou-senpai," Nanase said. "But every time I've seen you, it's looked like your mind has been wandering, Ike-senpai... Is there something troubling you?"

It wasn't difficult to imagine that Ike was shocked by the fact that Nanase, someone who knew nothing about him and what was going on, had managed to hit the nail on the head.

"Well, it's just, uh..." stammered Ike, struggling desperately to try to find the words.

"Dude, come on," said Sudou. "If there's somethin' buggin' ya, just hurry up and spill it."

"It probably isn't even that big a deal anyway, right?" added Hondou.

Hondou and Sudou were Ike's close friends and partners-in-crime, so to speak. They both seemed to feel that Ike's worries were something minor. It was precisely because they thought as much that they were urging him to just come right out and say it. However, at least in this specific case, that method seemed to only make it harder for Ike to say anything.

"It's nothin', really..." said Ike, trailing off.

"Would you please give him just a moment?" asked Nanase, whispering those words quietly to both Sudou and Hondou after seeing how Ike was struggling next to her.

For a moment, Sudou seemed indignant that she butted in like that. Then he looked over at Ike beside her and noticed how upset he looked. When he got a look at him, he realized that Ike might have been struggling more than he had imagined.

"Come on, Nanase-chan, there's no need for him to hold off," Hondou said. "I'm sure it's really not that big of a deal

anyway."

"No, actually, it might be a little too early for us to say that for sure. Come on, let's give him some time, Ryoutarou," said Sudou.

"Huh? O-oh, uh... Yeah, sure, okay," he replied.

Getting a sense for how others felt was by no means Sudou's forte. However, from the look of it, it seemed as though he was gradually starting to be able to notice his surroundings more and pick up on things. I was confident assuming that was yet another benefit of Horikita's tutoring.

The four of us all quietly watched Ike to make sure that we weren't making him feel rushed. Of course, it wasn't like it was going to be easy for him to speak anyway in this kind of situation, but at the same time, it wasn't like he could casually weasel his way out of it either. All that was left now was to wait and give him enough time to collect his thoughts and prepare himself.

Eventually, after close to ten minutes of silence, Ike seemed to have come to a decision and started to tell us what was on his mind.

"Okay, well... To be honest, there's this...girl that's been on my mind for a long while now."

Sudou and Hondou exchanged shocked looks between their tents, eyes wide. Hondou immediately got excited, thrilled that Ike had brought up such an interesting topic.

"Wait, what, seriously?!" he shouted. "Who, man, who?!"

"Let's wait until Ike-senpai is ready to tell us himself," said Nanase, tactfully stepping into the conversation to make the rather animated Hondou ease off with the questions.

It was difficult to imagine that Ike's current emotional state had been brought on simply because there was someone he had a crush on. Nanase had most likely understood that as well and reasoned that there was something more to the story than what Ike had just said.

"W-well, it's y'know, this kind of stuff is spicy!" said Hondou.
"It makes you wanna know!"

"Could we all please just calm down and wait for Ike-senpai to tell us his story?" Nanase asked. "I would think that rather than asking about who likes who, the question of how it relates to this current situation is the more pressing concern. Or am I wrong?"

Her quiet yet firm tone stopped Hondou's fervor in its tracks.

"Y-yeah, you're probably right," he agreed, scratching the back of his head awkwardly. After being chided by a younger student, Hondou had realized that he was being insensitive.

"The person I like..." said Ike.

Once he started to speak once more, his two friends were surely letting their respective imaginations run wild. Was this person in our grade level? Or was it an upperclassman, or an underclassman? If it was someone from our same grade level, then was it one of our own classmates? I was sure that girls who were popular with the boys, like Kushida and Ichinose, had likely jumped into their minds.

"The person I've had a crush on is... U-um, uh... It's Sh-Shinohara... Shinohara Satsuki," said Ike.

When Sudou and Hondou heard that name, the two friends seemed like they were genuinely unable to wrap their minds around it for a moment. After all, they surely had viewed Ike and Shinohara as nothing more than people who constantly bickered with each other. And in terms of appearance, she certainly wasn't the best-looking. Considering all of that, combined with the fact that Ike was regularly making bold claims about how he wanted to go out with cute girls on a daily basis, it was perfectly understandable why his friends would be so perplexed.

"B-but hold up, Kanji, don't you and Shinohara hate each other? You're always sayin' she's an 'uggo' and stuff," said Hondou, apparently unable to help himself from touching on the most glaring issue.

"D-dude, it's not like I've been thinking of her that way since the beginning or anything like that. I mean, at first, I hated her,"

Ike admitted. "But, it's... I dunno man, it's just like, at some point, I just got to be interested in her, and...I hate to admit it myself, but I think I just probably kept on pretending, acting like I didn't have a crush on her."

He most likely wasn't lying about all that. Hearing Ike and Shinohara fight with one another was basically an everyday occurrence in our class. As people who heard them fight so often, it was basically something we expected as a given.

"Well, if ya got a thing for her, why don't ya just tell her how you feel?" said Sudou, offering a suggestion that could be interpreted as somewhat crude and blunt.

"Can't really do that, though. Not anymore," said Ike, despair in his voice.

"Did something happen?" asked Nanase.

"Shinohara is in a group together with Komiya right now," Ike explained. "And he probably has a crush on her too."

After hearing that, Hondou and Sudou seemed like they started to understand what was going on.

"Besides, it kinda...seems like Shinohara sees him as someone special too," added Ike.

A boy and a girl who had feelings for each other, paired up in the same group, working together on this uninhabited island. The conditions were exactly right for strong bonds to be formed and deep feelings that weren't there before to awaken, precisely because this exam was an important battle with expulsion at stake.

"I only just realized that I liked Shinohara a little while ago... So, when we found out about this exam, I really did want to get together in a group with her before anyone else got there. But I just couldn't be honest with her about it, and... We just started fighting like we always do... I'm so pathetic... I've just been looking for Shinohara this whole time during this exam, even today..."

Ike had been staring off into the distance a lot during this exam. Which meant that he was surely hoping to catch some

glimpse of Shinohara.

"I dunno," he started. "Maybe I just got the wrong idea or something at some point. I mean, thinkin' that Shinohara might like me too somehow, even though we argue and fight all the time... God, I'm so lame. Even now, I still don't have any idea what I should've done."

It was true that there were times when you'd wonder if the feelings you had were mutual, just like Ike had said. Still, it was impossible for anyone to truly know how the other person felt deep down. I had experienced this firsthand when I had asked Kei out.

"Can't you just be honest with her, Ike-senpai?" said Nanase, after hearing his story. "I don't think that would be a dreadful thing by any means."

"But... I mean, Shinohara's with that Komiya guy right now," said Ike. "Meanwhile, I'm here in the friend zone."

"Well, I don't know about any of that. I can't say anything for certain of course, but...is it possible that she might be hoping you'll be the one to make things clear?" asked Nanase.

"Make things clear?" Ike repeated.

"From what I've been told, you're normally cheerful and jovial with everyone, Ike-senpai, and you're the sort of person who can easily say what's on his mind," Nanase said. "Of course, I think that Shinohara-senpai would also hold you in high regard because of that. But I would think she would surely wish for you to think of her as someone a little more special to you. Don't you think so?"

Ike casually said whatever was on his mind. Or, if you were to put that another way, that also meant that he often joked around too much, saying things without really thinking.

"Don't you think that she wants you to be more honest about how you feel?" Nanase went on. "That you like her?"

It was definitely true that Ike had feelings for Shinohara. And I thought that Shinohara certainly had some strong feelings for Ike too. Yet Ike constantly teased her, and sometimes he

would even make fun of her, treating her like one of his guy friends. As Nanase had said, doing that alone was probably not good enough.

"I..." stammered Ike.

"Ike-senpai, would you be happy if the girl you liked was so noncommittal with you and acted like how you've been acting?" Nanase asked. "Hiding your embarrassment is one thing, I understand that, but there's simply no point if you don't tell her how you really feel. Don't you want her to take you more seriously?"

She was telling him that by putting himself in Shinohara's shoes, he could see where she was coming from. What would he think if the person he had strong feelings for messed with him all the time?

"...Damn it," huffed Ike, hanging his head low, deeply upset.

Most likely, right now he was thinking back on how he had been treating Shinohara all this time, trying to understand how it would make him feel if he had been in her shoes in those situations; if he had been treated the way he treated her. Well, actually, I supposed he looked so upset now precisely because he was already beginning to understand.

"I won't say that being upset about this is a bad thing," Nanase added. "However, we are currently in the midst of a special exam where expulsion is a possibility. I'm sure that not only do you not want to get yourself expelled, but you also want to avoid dragging Sudou-senpai and Hondou-senpai down as well. I understand quite well that you have a desire to chase after Shinohara-senpai, but for the time being, your top priority is to make it through this battle and survive."

I just noticed that everyone present was listening to what Nanase was saying with rapt attention. That wasn't just because she was responding to Ike's troubles more sincerely than any of his best friends though.

"If you can't meet with her, if you can't be reunited with the person you love, then you'll never be able to tell them how much

you love them, ever again!" she wailed.

You didn't even have to be able to see Nanase's face to understand what kind of face she was making. You could hear it from the tone of her voice.

"Wh-why are you crying?!" said Sudou, panicking, despite still having been wary of Nanase all this time.

"Ike-senpai, you don't have the sort of time to get wrapped up in your own worries, do you?" she pressed, apparently not paying any attention to the fact that she was crying.

"...Yeah, you're right," Ike conceded. "First, I've got to make sure I make it through this exam in one piece."

What Nanase, an underclassman, had said had touched Ike's heart more deeply than we had imagined it would.

"Ken, Ryoutarou, I'm sorry, dudes. I... I know I probably caused you guys a lot of headaches over these past two days, haven't I?" said Ike, remorsefully.

"Nah, not really... Well, maybe just a little," admitted Sudou.

While he couldn't say that there hadn't been anything wrong whatsoever, if anything, Sudou's response was probably better.

"To be honest, I'm still anxious about everything with Shinohara," said Ike. "But... Well, it's not going to mean anything if we don't make it through this exam. If we don't pass this, then it'll all have been for nothing."

"Yeah, you said it, Kanji!" shouted Hondou cheerfully, agreeing with Ike and trying to raise everyone's spirits.

Sometimes partners in crime could be a nuisance, but other times, they could be truly irreplaceable. I had a feeling that was what I learned here tonight, through what I just saw and heard. And as for Nanase's tears, I couldn't imagine she had simply been acting, or that she had just gotten caught up in the moment.

Chapter 5:

What It Means to Like Someone

IT WAS A LITTLE AFTER SIX in the morning, when the inside of my tent began to heat up from the morning sun, that I heard a voice come from outside my tent.

"Um, excuse me, Ayanokouji-senpai? Are you awake?" asked Nanase.

"Hold on a second. I'll be right out," I said as I emerged from my tent to meet her.

"I'm terribly sorry to bother you so early in the morning," she said.

"I was already up, so it's all right," I assured her. "It's about time we head out anyway, so we need to get everything packed up. What's up?"

I spoke in a hushed whisper, because after looking around the campsite and seeing the other tents, I noticed that the guys hadn't woken up yet.

"It's regarding Ike-senpai. Do you feel that I said a little too much last night...?" she asked.

"Well, I'd have to say it felt like you called it exactly, actually, rather than saying too much."

While I did think that she had crossed a line and gotten too involved in Ike's personal business, it did seem like she had more or less been reflecting on it herself.

"Ike's back in action thanks to you, Nanase. Or, I guess I should say he finally learned to listen. I think he's grateful for what you said," I told her.

"You think so?" she asked.

I nodded immediately, but she still seemed somewhat unconvinced.

"I can't help but feel like Ike-senpai is in somewhat of a precarious state right now," she said. "I'm worried that what was said yesterday might backfire and cause him to do something reckless... That is why I'm feeling uneasy about whether we should split up now."

"Well, it's not like I don't understand how you feel, but..."

I agreed with her that Ike's emotional state was a point of concern, but traveling together with them also carried significant risk. Our groups were in completely different Tables, so there was no way to predict where our designated areas would be. Depending on what those were, we might have to head off in completely different directions.

I had to wonder, then: was Nanase's proposal born from a real worry? Or did she have some kind of ulterior motive? If it was the latter, then was she simply trying to make sure I didn't reach my designated areas? Well, no, a trap like that would've been far too weak of a play. I couldn't dismiss the idea that she might try to hinder me in any conceivable way she could, but...

"Yes, I suppose that it...probably isn't realistic," she agreed. "But if we do get separated, it would be impossible for us to meet back together again."

"Well... That's true," I replied.

I certainly couldn't say that sticking with them was a great strategy, but it wasn't like it was impossible to do something. I'm sure there was a method where we could stay on top of our own matters, while still keeping an eye out for Sudou's group.

"This is an extreme idea, but it wouldn't be that difficult, if we're just thinking about trying to join up with them in the future. All we need to do is decide where we want to rendezvous. Even if we're a long distance apart, it should still be feasible if we have the stamina to walk that far," I reasoned.

Whether it was the designated area assignments or the Tasks, our daily responsibilities always ended at five o'clock. Which meant that we were free to do whatever we wanted from 5 p.m. to 7 a.m. the next morning.

"Yes, I suppose you're right..." said Nanase.

Of course, while it was possible, the question of whether it was a good idea or a bad idea was another story. The further apart our designated areas for the day were from each other, the tougher it would be to pick a good spot to meet up.

"I think it'd be best to just wait and see what designated area their group has first then, for the time being," I said.

If their route was completely different from ours, then we should give up on the idea right away. By the time we finished packing everything up and having something to eat, it was seven o'clock in the morning, and the first designated area of the day had just been announced.

"H7, huh," I said aloud.

While I wouldn't go as far as to say it was the worst-case scenario, I couldn't exactly say it was an ideal area, by any measure. It was difficult to say if we could really make it there within the next two hours. However, if we ignored it, that would make our second miss in a row. In that case, if the designated area after this happened to be randomly assigned and was somewhere off to the west on the other side of the mountains, then we'd never be able to reach it and we'd suffer for it.

"It would be quite troubling if the area assigned to us at nine happened to be the random selection, wouldn't it?" said Nanase.

If we continued walking for two hours straight, starting now, even supposing everything went well, we would probably only end up being able to reach I8 or I7 at best. Of course, it wasn't impossible for us to reach H7 in two hours by any means, but... Well, dragging Nanase into something so extreme would carry considerable risks.

"We also have the option of missing the designated area for a second time, so we don't push our luck," said Nanase.

The point reduction penalty kicked in once you failed to reach three designated areas consecutively. So, even if we didn't manage to reach H7 in time, we should still be fine, but... Well, if we were to get bogged down somehow, finding ourselves in a dire

situation that we couldn't get ourselves out of, then there was a risk we'd continuously fail to reach our designated areas.

"Sudou, what's your designated area?" I asked.

"We got I8. If you're headed that way, we can go together. I'm psyched and ready to go, so let's get this show on the road," said Sudou.

Though our destinations were different, it sounded like we were basically taking the same route on our respective journeys then. However, this wasn't a convenient turn of events. If anything, I should consider it quite unlucky. This eliminated the option of taking tough measures. If I tried to get Sudou's group to go at my pace, Ike and Hondou would not be able to keep up.

"Yeah, we're heading in your same direction, so sure, we'll go with you for part of the way. If that's okay?" I asked in return.

I figured it'd be better to just go with Sudou and his friends after all since I probably wasn't going to be able to arrive at my destination in time anyway. Besides, there was still the whole issue of Ike, and this way we could work together if any problems arose along the way.

"Course it is, dude. Right, Kanji?" asked Sudou.

"Y-yeah, definitely," said Ike. He sounded somewhat embarrassed. Perhaps he was recalling last night's conversation.

Nanase's unexpected presence had pushed Ike forward. While this was a rather unlucky start to the third day of the exam, at least it didn't seem like it was all bad. Normally, Ike probably would have been messing around, telling Nanase that she was cute and trying to hit on her. But there wasn't any sign of that happening here. I supposed it would've been outrageous if he were to do those kinds of things the day after that whole conversation about Shinohara.

Maybe, I thought, the fact that Ike wasn't doing the sorts of outrageous things he was used to doing right now was a sign that he was trying to change.

"All right," said Ike. "I'll go ahead and take the lead, so you all follow me."

Full of vigor, Ike rolled his shoulders and stretched both arms out before taking up the position at the head of our party and leading the way forward. He seemed to have gotten much livelier since Nanase and I had agreed to work together with Sudou's group. Putting on a false show of bravado wasn't that different from a real show of bravado.

"You don't seem to be enjoying yourself very much, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Nanase. "You have a very stern look."

"This is just how I normally look," I answered.

"Oh, really?" replied Nanase.

It was true that I was worried about what was going to happen with our designated areas, but I didn't remember ever letting it show on my face at all.

"No point in worryin' 'bout it. Ayanokouji's face just always looks like that," said Sudou over his shoulder, backing me up.

I wasn't sure if I should have been grateful or not for his agreement on that point.

"There you go," I said.

I had some mixed feelings, but I decided to roll with it. I saw that Sudou had a mischievous grin on his face as he headed towards the front of the group and started talking with Ike.

"You're thinking that something is up with Ike-senpai too, after all, aren't you, Ayanokouji-senpai?" asked Nanase.

"You're being paranoid," I replied. "I'm happy to see that Ike is maturing. I'm honestly not sure what you're implying."

"Is that so..." she said.

Since I had determined that there was a chance Ike and Sudou might overhear us if we weren't careful, I decided to put a stop to that conversation right there.

As he walked on ahead of us right now, Ike certainly looked like he was more full of life than he had yesterday. So, I couldn't technically say that he hadn't grown up emotionally at all. With that point specifically, it wasn't my intention to lie to Nanase about it. However... Well, most of that growing up was still just purely for

show. This was nothing more than his very first steps on the path to change. Depending on how the situation played out, it was entirely possible that he might come to a standstill, or he might regress in a major way.

People aren't so simple that they can change just because they think they want to. Nanase was aware of that fact too, which was why she had brought it up to try and get me to understand. As Nanase walked beside me, her gaze followed Ike in front of us. I wondered how much thought she had been giving to Ike, how far ahead she had thought about what was going on with him.

Just up ahead, Ike and the other guys let out surprised gasps. Somewhere out in the woods, a wild bird spread its wings and flew off into the wide-open skies above. That was the kind of spectacle of nature in action that we'd only get to witness here on this uninhabited island.

At any rate, for the time being, if I was going to find out her true identity, I didn't have any other choice but to keep working with Nanase for as long as I could.

5.1

IT WAS JUST BEFORE NINE in the morning, and we were in the southeast part of I8. The path was rugged, but Nanase didn't seem to be out of breath in the slightest as she walked behind me. It seemed like she'd be able to follow me without any problems even if I continued to press on ahead. Sudou's group had been traveling together with us until just moments ago. As soon as we reached area I8, they immediately took off towards a Task that had appeared in I9, and in quite a hurry.

"For the time being, let's head on over to J9," I told Nanase.

"In order to lower the chance that we might be in whatever area is chosen as the next designated area at nine o'clock, I assume?" she said.

"Yeah," I replied.

From where we were now, we could reach area J9 in just a few minutes. While checking our location on the tablet, we managed to make it to area J9 just three minutes before nine o'clock. During those three short minutes, Nanase and I sat down on the ground to take a breather as we waited for the second designated area of the day to be announced. Nanase, sitting close by, peered over at the screen of my tablet. And seconds later, nine o'clock rolled around.

"Senpai..."

Upon seeing what the designated area was, Nanase looked up at me. This was the second time during this exam that an area had been selected at random. It was over in J5. It'd be a little tricky if we were to try and cut through the woods, but we could just keep going east towards the ocean, and then afterward head north along the beach.

Even if students from my same Table successfully managed to reach area H7, it would take them quite a bit of time to make their way through the woods. Nanase and I had more distance to cover than they did, but it was entirely possible that we could

shoot past our rivals in one go. Most importantly, though, we never knew where we'd be sent for randomly selected designations, so it was really quite fortunate that we had gotten one within an acceptable range.

We immediately started moving again without exchanging another word. It was understood that we would take the path towards the beach. Less than twenty minutes later, we arrived on the beach from the northeast corner of I8 and continued down along the shore. As we were making our way towards H7, we passed through area J6, where we just so happened to see several adults hurriedly trying to set something up. I cast them a sidelong glance as we passed by, and then proceeded to open my tablet and look at the Task that appeared.

"Beach Flags Showdown, huh?" I said aloud.

Well, you could certainly call that an appropriate event to have at the beach. Beach Flags was a sporting event originally designed to help lifeguards develop certain skills, like improving their reflexes and running speed. They were apparently looking for eight boys and eight girls to register for this event, and they'd be competing separately. Since only one person per group was allowed to register for this Task, that meant that a total of eight distinct groups per sex would register for this Task.

Only the person who placed first would receive points; six, in this case. There were several other prizes that the winner could choose from as well as an additional reward. Not only that, but everyone who participated would receive one 500 milliliter bottle of water as a participation prize.

We were notified about Tasks on our tablets, but it was possible that you could find out about a Task earlier if you happened to pass by as it was being set up like Nanase and I just had. While it was possible that you could register for it before anyone else, the problem was that you couldn't really find out what exactly it was like beforehand. Of course, if it was a Task with an easy-to-understand concept, then you could figure out what it would be like just from watching it get set up. But if it were a test focused in some area of academics, it would be difficult to guess exactly.

This Task had a registration period of sixty minutes. If we entered it right now, we would not be able to move from this spot. And on top of that, we'd basically be throwing away any chance of being able to get the Early Bird Bonus for our next designated area. So, I decided to ignore this Task and prioritize reaching the designated area, pressing on ahead.

Just as I was thinking we surely must have set foot in area J5, I received a notification on my watch.

"We did it, senpai," said Nanase.

It had taken us about an hour to reach our destination. Normally, taking that long to reach your area would only leave you with the Arrival Bonus alone, but apparently, I was fortunate enough to arrive first. Nanase and I had both gotten a point for the Arrival Bonus as well, so we were both able to get something. Whether Nanase's group would get the Early Bird Bonus points as well, though, I had no idea. That would depend entirely on Amasawa and Housen.

Now, then, the next thing was heading to where the Beach Flags Task was and sign up for it. Nanase and I headed back to J6, where the Task was, to try and score some more points. However, when we arrived, we saw that something unexpected was happening. A long line of new visitors, both guys and girls, had already formed, presumably to sign up for the Task. No one had been around earlier when we passed by as they were setting up. Did all these people show up in that short span of time?

"Maybe if we get in line, we'll manage to get in right before the cut off," suggested Nanase.

"Maybe. J6 might have been made the designated area for another Table," I reasoned.

"I suppose..."

"Anyway, let's head on over and have a look," I replied.

"All right," Nanase said.

5.2

WE HAD ENTERED AREA J6 and arrived at the Beach Flags Task location. It looked as though eight guys had already signed up to participate, but I couldn't be sure of that yet. Since only one person per group was allowed to register, I probably still had a chance. A male third-year student noticed Nanase and I as we approached. It was Kiriyama, the student council vice president. Up until just moments ago, he seemed to be happily chatting away with his friends. However, his demeanor had completely changed when he saw me. In a panic, he rushed over the person in charge of the Task and began talking to them.

While I was curious about this rather strange behavior on his part, I walked up to the person in charge as well. I said that I wanted to sign up, but they told me that, unfortunately, the third-year student who had just come up moments ago took the last remaining spot, meaning that they had a full roster. All the guys who had registered for the Task quickly proceeded towards the changing rooms. On the other hand, only seven girls had registered, so there was still one spot open.

"If you cannot register, Ayanokouji-senpai, then I will pass. I wouldn't want to keep you," said Nanase.

"Nah, I was planning to take a little breather anyway. It'd be better if you signed up, Nanase."

"But..." protested Nanase, trailing off.

"Since you basically handed opportunities to get the Early Bird Bonus over to me, the gap in points between us is going to continue to grow. Whether or not I think you can win is a separate issue here, so that's not what I'm talking about. I'm just saying that if you think you have an opportunity here, then you should sign up," I told her.

There were still about ten minutes left until the registration deadline. If Nanase entered, they'd have a full line-up, meaning that we could get this Task started without losing any time.

"Thank you. Well then, I suppose... I think I'll go and register," said Nanase.

If there was a good chance that she could swoop in and take those points away from another grade level, then she should be proactive and go for it. Even though she was the one who had asked if she could accompany me, she really needed to put her foot down and register for this instead of trying to be polite.

A tent had been set up nearby so that people could get out of the direct sunlight, so I headed over there.

There seemed to be several distinct kinds of swimsuits available for both men and women, in a variety of sizes. You could probably say that the competition really started with choosing the swimsuit that suited you best. Since there wasn't any need to specialize in swimming, though, it didn't seem to make a significant difference no matter what swimsuit you chose.

One by one, male and female students who had finished changing began to emerge from the simple, makeshift changing rooms. The guys generally seemed to be wearing loose-fitting swim trunks. The only real difference I noticed seemed to be in the patterns on the swim trunks. Students waiting nearby cheered and hollered as their friends from their groups had come back out onto the beach.

I decided to shift my attention towards the strange lineup of students who had registered for this Task. All the guys who had registered for this Task were third-year students. Similarly, seven of the girls who had registered for this event were also third-year students. Nanase, who had just barely managed to squeeze into the roster, was a first-year student. Only one person per group could register for this Task, which meant that there were at least fifteen separate groups of third-year students gathered here now.

Whether they were here because they had a designated location somewhere nearby or because of the Task, the fact that you couldn't see anyone from the other grade levels around was definitely not normal. With that in mind, Vice President Kiriyama being here had certainly caught my attention. If there was a large group of people going around, working together to make sure Kiriyama won, then...

Anyway, putting that line of thought aside, I saw that the guys had already finished getting ready, and they started their matches. They were simple tournament-style matchups, wherein students competed against each other one-on-one, and the winner would advance to the next round. Whoever won three times would take home the whole tournament. If things had been rigged in Kiriya's favor, I should be able to find out just by seeing how intense the matches were.

After all, if they were serious about trying to win, that would have a significant impact on their style of play. However, the competition was unexpectedly fierce, right from the first match. Kiriya was facing off against someone from his same class. The two boys had gotten up from their starting position, facing the ground and legs at the ready, and they broke into a sprint at almost the exact same time. Their dives for the flag were also nearly simultaneous.

You could even say that it was just the length of their arms that would determine who won and who lost. In the end, Kiriya had gotten a hold of the flag, winning the first match. And it wasn't just that first match of the tournament that was fierce either. I got the sense that every single third-year student had a burning desire to win when they played. It didn't even remotely seem like they were intentionally throwing matches for Kiriya or anyone else.

They could have been playing more seriously because I was watching, but that probably wasn't what was going on here. Kiriya wasn't *that* wary of me. And it was practically impossible that he would have been able to get every other student on the same page and follow his plan, if he were. So what explanation was there for how these third-year students were acting? Something beyond what I was expecting might be at play here.

Just as the boys' matches were heating up, the girls started to assemble on the beach, having finished changing. Five of the eight had chosen to wear standard school swimsuits, but I felt that the swimsuit Nanase had chosen was somewhat audacious.

It seemed like they were free to wait around on standby until the guys' tournament was finished. I approached Nanase and

called out to her.

"Can I ask you one question?" I asked.

Nanase was starting her warm-ups, clad in a bikini. "Sure, what is it?" she said, looking up at me with a puzzled expression.

"That's a pretty cute swimsuit you picked out. Any reason why you picked that one?" I asked. "If you wanted to keep it simple, there wouldn't have been any problem with the school swimsuit."

"A reason? Well, I figured that this was the kind of swimsuit you'd see people wearing when they're playing beach flags, like you see on TV. So, I thought it might be kind of weird to play that while wearing a school swimsuit. Did I misunderstand something?" she asked.

Well, I supposed if it was a question of what was shown on TV, then no, she wasn't misunderstanding anything. This was one of many forms of entertainment that people who came to the beach probably engaged in. Anyway, Nanase watched the ongoing matches play out while continuing to do her warm-up exercises. The boys' tournament had ended with Kiriyama taking the win in spectacular fashion. I supposed I should have expected as much from the person who was trying to challenge Nagumo. His physical ability certainly seemed to be in line with his B+ ranking in OAA.

The girls were up next, which meant that Nanase was going to be taking part. Her name was called right away for the very first match, so she went over and took her position on the beach. Her opponent was a third-year student named Tomioka. She had a decent level of physical ability with a C+ rating. Nanase, on the other hand, was a rank above that, with a B+ in physical ability. Of course, a higher physical ability ranking didn't necessarily lead to any guarantees of victory.

Overall ability was a principal factor, but each student would have their own individual strengths and weaknesses. Whether or not you had experience with Beach Flags was important, but without question, I would say that this contest simply came down to who had better reflexes and running speed alone. So then, who was better?

Nanase immediately took off from her starting position at the sound of the pistol, her legs kicking off from the sound and flying toward the flag swiftly.

The third-year student, Tomioka, had lost the match before it even started. You couldn't even say it was a close if you were being charitable. She stared up at the sky, dumbfounded. Getting your timing right when starting your sprint was a product of chance, but in Nanase's case, she had timed it perfectly. Clearly, her reflexes were several magnitudes quicker than Tomioka's.

The six other competitors who had been watching must have gotten a sense of just how formidable Nanase was, as well. After the next three matchups had finished, she had gotten into the top four bracket of the tournament. Still, Nanase seemed to stand a head above the rest in terms of both reflexes and speed. She couldn't afford to be careless, though. Carelessness, pride, or a variety of other factors could quite easily dull your reflexes. Also, no matter how confident you were in your speed, if your foot got caught in the sand and you tripped, that'd be the end of it.

Still, upsets didn't really happen that often. Nanase won her second match by a landslide and was on the verge of snatching away those points for herself.

"She sure is formidable," said Kiriyama, voicing his honest opinion of the first-year student, Nanase, after having watched her matches.

Of course, he wasn't directing his comments at me. He was talking to his friends in his group. The tournament continued to progress smoothly, and then Nanase's opponent for the finals had been decided. This time, she was going up against a third-year student named Tokunaga. Her opponent this time had a rating of B+ in physical ability, just like she did. Tokunaga had won her first two matches without a hitch, much like Nanase had with hers. She had cleared them by a country mile. This final match was going to be a showdown between two worthy competitors.

Nanase and Tokunaga approached their starting positions. The crowd had been quite lively up until this point, but everyone went quiet and waited for the starting signal. The staff member managing the Task fired the starting pistol. The moment the sound

of the pistol echoed out across the beach, both competitors reacted with similar timing, launching forward from their starting positions. They started out neck-and-neck at the beginning of the race, but it didn't last beyond that.

Nanase was faster taking that first step when they got up from their starting positions, and she launched herself forward with a much faster stride along the beach. Then, she dove, flying across the sandy beach beautifully, snatching the flag in spectacular fashion. Tokunaga was good enough to make it all the way to the finals, and considering that she had a perfect start too, she must have realized the difference in ability between her and Nanase. She realized that the difference between them was so great that she couldn't even feel resentful about it, she just smiled bitterly, astonished. Then, she asked Nanase for a handshake, paying respect to a student who was two years her junior.

After Nanase had finished washing the sand off herself, she returned from the competition area, water bottle participation prize in hand. After fighting three fierce battles in this sweltering heat, her body could probably do with some cold water.

"You won by a mile," I remarked, walking over to Nanase as she was trying to catch her breath after the competition had ended.

"Thank you," she replied. "I managed to come out on top, somehow."

Her shoulders were moving up and down slightly as she breathed in and out, trying to catch her breath. But even so, I hadn't really gotten the impression that she had gone all out. In fact, I thought she seemed to have won with energy to spare. In a contest between first-year and third-year students, at first glance, you might think that the younger student would be at a disadvantage. However, girls tend to reach their physical peak at a relatively early age. You could say there's hardly any difference between an eighteen-year-old and someone who's fifteen or sixteen. The main thing that would spell the difference between victory or defeat in this competition would have been prior competitive experience. However, when it came to Beach Flags, many people wouldn't be that experienced.

Wait, hold on... There wasn't any need to analyze this situation, was there? Nanase Tsubasa's physical ability was actually higher than was reflected in her evaluation in OAA. We had heard that the incoming students' ratings were based on data from during their third year of junior high, so they were immediately assessed based on that when they started here. But it was already summer now. Even so, Nanase's rating had not changed, staying at a B+. It looked as though it wouldn't have been strange for her to be capable of getting an A- or A rating, and yet...

"Um, Ayanokouji-senpai?" she asked.

"Hm?"

"Well, it's just, um, I feel like it's a little bit, well, unsettling, when you stare at me while standing so close..."

Nanase averted her eyes, looking somewhat uncomfortable.

"Oh... Uh, yeah. Sorry."

I supposed I would have plenty of time to analyze things later, after Nanase finished changing. Kiriyama and the other third-year students were getting ready to disperse now that the Task was over. They were probably about to get moving towards their next designated area or another Task. Then, Kiriyama approached me for the first time since I arrived.

"Ayanokouji. Don't say anything unnecessary. Got it?"

And that was all. He then directed his gaze towards the ocean, far behind me. I turned around, curious about what he was looking at, and saw several figures moving through the shallows. I understood then what Kiriyama meant. At some point during the competition, the Student Council President had started playing around in the water with some friends. Perhaps Nagumo had noticed that we were looking at him, because he waved at me, beckoning me to come over.

"I'll say just one more thing. Do not get in my way," said Kiriyama.

"I understand," I replied.

Kiryama, together with his friends in his group, left the beach and headed towards the forest, presumably to head towards

his next destination.

"Nanase, I'm going to talk with my senpai a bit," I told her.
"Take your time getting changed."

"Okay, thank you," said Nanase.

I couldn't exactly ignore Nagumo, so I figured I'd talk with him, at least a little. Besides, there was something I was wondering about anyway.

"From what I could tell, it looked like you weren't able to sign up for that Task," said Nagumo.

"So you tried to as well and couldn't? Or did you perhaps just come here because this was your designated area?" I asked.

"Well, who can say?" Nagumo dodged the question with a smug smirk. "Hey, why don't you come for a swim with us?"

"As much as I would love to, I don't have enough points to be able to rent a swimsuit like you did, President Nagumo," I answered.

It wasn't just Nagumo, either. Asahina and several other third-year students had also rented swimsuits. They even rented a ball to play with too, so it looked like they must be in a comfortable position as far as points were concerned.



"You seem to be laid-back about all this," I added. "I thought you would've been trying to rack up points in a frenzy."

"You've gotta take it easy sometimes too, right?" said Nagumo. "Besides... The real challenge starts tomorrow."

Tomorrow. Meaning, the fourth day of the exam, when things would really get started. That was when the top ten and bottom ten groups would become public information and be announced on our tablets.

"If any group outside my grade level has managed to slip its way into the top three, I'll make a move," Nagumo said. "It is impossible for the first- and second-years to stand up there on the winner's podium. You are no exception to that either."

That meant he must have some kind of strategy to make sure he wouldn't lose. Provided that he wasn't lying just now, of course.

"Thank you very much for your kind warning," I replied.

Still, Nagumo was the leader of Class 3-A, which stood at the top of the school. Moreover, he was the student council president, so it wasn't likely that he was just running his mouth.

"However," I added, "I should point out that I'm working alone. Rather than even thinking about getting into the top spots, I'd say you might be more likely to find my name at the bottom."

"Well, in that case, you ought to get with a group as soon as possible," said Nagumo. "Horikita-senpai would be pretty let down if you just arbitrarily blew yourself up and got kicked out of school, after all."

"Hey, Nagumo! Could you come here for a sec?" shouted a third-year student named Masuwaka, from behind me.

Nagumo responded with a gentle wave, and then proceeded to get out of the water and headed to where Masuwaka was. They were at a close enough distance to be able to have a conversation already before Masuwaka called him over, so I guessed it was something that they didn't want me to overhear. While this was going on, Asahina stopped playing with her friends and looked

over at us. After she made sure that Nagumo was an adequate distance away from us, she approached me.

"Hey there!" she said. "I hear you're going it alone, eh?"

"Yeah," I replied. "Well, I think you probably already heard, but yeah, it's a tough battle for me."

"I see... Well, maybe that's for the best this time, though. If you happen to catch Miyabi's eye, then... Well, it'll probably be bad news. You really should get as many people in your group as you can right now, Ayanokouji-kun, while—"

"Sorry Asahina, but it's time for me to be heading out now," I replied.

Asahina was about to whisper something into my ear, but Nagumo had returned, so she had to stop before she could get the words out.

"W-well, good luck," said Asahina.

"Thanks," I replied.

Even though Asahina wasn't able to finish giving me her advice, I could more or less infer what she was about to tell me. Nagumo Miyabi had a strategy that only he could pull off. A strategy that, if executed, would certainly make the battles ahead even more treacherous due to the unique nature of this exam. However, whether Nagumo would use that strategy on me for no reason was another matter. Besides, right now, I was completely harmless; someone who had no chance of taking any of the top spots.

5.3

OUR THIRD DESIGNATED AREA of the day was H5. We wouldn't be able to get there by walking along the beach, but I'd say that given the circumstances, it was a relatively decent location.

"It's a fair distance, but it's possible that we can make it there without any problems," said Nanase.

"We might be able to manage getting there in about an hour," I agreed.

Of course, if we were shooting for the Early Bird Bonus, we'd need to walk at a faster pace than we did this morning. Even if we did go for it, though, we'd probably only end up getting a single point each anyway. This was the kind of situation that made me want to give up on the designated area and head towards a Task instead, but most of the currently available Tasks were concentrated on the west side of the island. Since we were on the east side right now, there were hardly any places that we could feasibly go.

So, would we rush ahead, without giving up hope of snagging the Early Bird Bonus? Or would we take it slow and focus on getting the single point for the Arrival Bonus? It was already the third day since we had set foot on this otherwise uninhabited island. I supposed it was about time that we started being faced with these kinds of decisions.

"Nanase, how much water do you have with you?" I asked.

"I used up everything I had originally this morning," she replied. "All I have left is this one bottle I got from the Task earlier."

She and I were in similar situations. I only had a single 500 milliliter bottle myself. Even though we were trying to save water, if we kept having to travel long distances, we'd run out before the end of today. That would mean we'd be suffering from a water shortage. Back when the exam started, I had about three point five liters. Even if other groups were trying to use their supplies

sparingly like I had been, it was likely many students would run out of water today or tomorrow. It was unclear exactly what percentage of groups this statement would apply to, but it was expected that our days of suffering would begin here.

"The first turning point," I muttered to myself.

"We need to secure water somehow, don't we?" said Nanase.

If I were on my own, I would have made sure to reach all four of my designated areas throughout the day, and then complete Tasks during my free time. Then, I would return to the starting point to rehydrate and prepare for the next day. That was one of the strategies that I had intended to go with, but it'd be difficult for me to pull it off while I was together with Nanase. I'm sure that she'd tag along if I explained it to her, but if she were to fall ill because she pushed herself too hard, then she'd be eliminated.

I supposed that it wasn't necessary for me to pay any heed to an enemy underclassman though. For the time being, I was simply walking towards my destination.

"Ayanokouji-senpai. Why did you decide to take this exam on by yourself?" asked Nanase.

"I don't have many friends," I replied. "I couldn't find anyone to group up with."

"I can't imagine that's the truth," said Nanase.

"It is true," I said, "I don't have many people that I'm close with. There are very few people that I can call a friend."

"Even so, I'm sure you could have at least found someone," said Nanase.

"Are you really that bothered by it?" I asked.

"Yes, I am," she replied. "After all, I can think of a hundred risks from going alone, and it offers no benefits. Don't you think so?"

Nanase, who had been walking behind me before, quickly strode forward so that she could keep pace with me at my side.

Then she gave me a look, as though she were trying to ascertain my true intentions.

"When you were facing off against Housen-kun before, your movements were different from that of a normal high school student," said Nanase.

"You say that, but you're not a normal high schooler yourself, are you, Nanase?" I replied.

Nanase seemed like she had gotten somewhat flustered by my immediate response to her accusation, wearing a forced smile. She gently scratched her cheek, softly mumbling, "Well, I suppose you're right."

This was an opportunity for me to ask her a bunch of questions if I wanted to, but that depended on whether Nanase would tell me the truth or not. If she responded with some poorly thought-out lies, I could've seen right through her. But she probably wouldn't make a simple slip-up like that.

"It's true that there are a lot of disadvantages to working alone," I agreed. "It won't be that difficult for me to join with another group at some point during this exam though. It's not that high of a hurdle to cross. But if I don't come up with a decent number of points by that time, I'd just cause trouble for the other group."

"That's understandable, since even if that other group had three people, your total score and theirs would be averaged out," said Nanase.

"But it's obviously wrong for me to complain about that, don't you think? The school recommended that we form groups right from the start. So, I feel like those of us who decided to go it alone aren't really in any position to grumble about it."

Whether you were someone who didn't get a group together by choice, or someone who just wasn't able to, you should have at least been capable of coming to that conclusion. Even if the rules put you at a disadvantage and you ended up getting expelled, you only had yourself to blame.

"Still, it's not like I have absolutely no chance of winning, though," I added. "For instance, there's a chance I could have some unexpected synergy by joining a group that was struggling due to a lack of points."

"So, you...are fighting alone to bring about those kinds of synergistic effects then, Ayanokouji-senpai? Is that what you're saying?" asked Nanase.

"Well, I'm not so sure about all that," I said. "I'm just talking in a general sense. Despite your misapprehensions about me, you shouldn't be so quick to dismiss the possibility that I just couldn't manage to get a group together."

"He he, yes, I suppose you're right. You do seem like you'd be a little inarticulate at times, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Nanase. Though she still spoke in a reserved manner, she'd said something quite pointed. "Have you always been like that?"

"Isn't that usually how it is for people with personalities like mine?" I replied. "Like, we're generally this way from the start and stay this way?"

"I don't think so," said Nanase. "Isn't it possible for a gloomy, pessimistic person to become bright and cheerful for some reason? Similarly, someone bright and cheerful could turn gloomy and pessimistic."

While I understood what she was trying to say, to what extent could something like a person's core character really change?

"Even if I heard that an originally pessimistic person had become bright and cheerful, I couldn't help but think they were forcing it," I answered.

"But even though it might be forced, the fact that they can still act bright and cheerful is amazing," said Nanase.

"...I guess so," I answered.

If someone were to suddenly ask me to adopt a bright and sunny personality, I wouldn't have the confidence to go all the way with it. Of course, I could put on an act if I were dealing with people that I didn't normally interact with for a little while, but if

you were to ask if I could do it in front of my classmates who I had spent over a year and a half with at this point, the answer would be a resounding no.

"Yeah, that'd be impossible for me. Have you changed since junior high, Nanase?" I asked.

I thought I'd see what she said, since we were on the topic. I figured that it wouldn't be especially unreasonable for me to ask about her junior high school days, since that was tangentially related. Someone from the White Room wouldn't have attended junior high, of course. Nanase stopped and thought for a moment, pondering my question.

"I'm not sure, actually," Nanase replied. "I don't think that I've changed since back then, but I might have a little."

Which meant that there was something that made her think she had changed, if only slightly.

"In what way?" I asked.

"Well, I get the feeling that in the past, I...I used to smile more," said Nanase.

So, in her case, it was a change from light to dark.

"I think that I talk less with others and hang out with friends less now, compared to how I was in junior high," she added.

Was she just making up a story? Or was that the truth, perhaps?

"There was something that happened back then. Something that changed me, I feel..." Nanase said, her voice trailing off.

Something happened? I was somewhat afraid to inquire what that was, exactly. I decided it was better for me not to ask. She was the one who had brought this story up, and I got the impression that her intention was to try and get me to take the bait and pry further into it. Nanase waited for me to say something. Eventually though, she slowed her pace, and went back to walking behind me once again. I decided it was better to change the topic, so I brought up something else to talk about.

"By the way, how is your group doing, Nanase?" I asked.
"Are you getting more points?"

"Yes," she replied. "Even though I'm not sure who has been earning more between them, Housen-kun and Amasawa-san are both pulling in points from Tasks. It does seem like they're doing much more than I am, in either case."

If what she was saying was true, then Nanase's group was collecting a fair number of points. Even if we were just talking about the Early Bird Bonus, depending on what Housen and Amasawa were doing, it was entirely possible that they were still getting those points. That was difficult to determine, though.

"As for me, on the other hand, I might be in trouble," I mused.

While I was continuing to accumulate points to a certain degree, it was quite easy to imagine that I was sinking to the bottom of the rankings. A three-person group scoring point after point in a methodical fashion wouldn't have any difficulty in passing me.

"Well then, let's continue to do our best," said Nanase.

"Yeah," I answered.

Our first order of business was making sure we arrived at the next designated area safely. With that goal in mind, we continued forging a path ahead.

5.4

IT WAS 1:55 in the afternoon. We had arrived in our designated area, H5, in just under an hour. Although I had only earned one point in the end, it was still a major step in the right direction. I had about an hour of free time starting now, so I wanted to complete a Task if possible. Earlier, the Tasks were concentrated more on the west side, but now, they were starting to be concentrated more on the east.

"Can you keep walking?" I asked Nanase as she was sitting down, getting rehydrated.

"A-ah, yes, I can," she replied.

While it was admirable that she was simply able to keep up with me without delay alone, there was no way that she wasn't exhausted now.

"You need to take it easy and rest," I told her.

"But..."

Nanase seemed to be worried that I was going to leave her here or something.

"I would say something directly if I was unhappy about having you accompany me. I wouldn't do something like up and vanish without a word. Besides, if you keep pushing yourself right now, so much that you can't keep up with me later, isn't that just going to make things even tougher for you later on? Even though we don't have to worry about any more random designations today, we might need to run if we want to go for the Early Bird Bonus. I'm not going to be able to wait for you if it comes to that."

Despite the look of frustration on her face, Nanase nodded at my words, accepting that her endurance had its limits. I felt bad for her, but this would allow me to move around unfettered for a bit, albeit temporarily. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to sign up for anything or not, but if the stars aligned, I might be able to make it to two or three Task locations. The next available Task, an academically oriented test named "History," was going to be

starting soon, and it was in the area I was already in. I headed off in that direction. The first-place winner would only receive five points, but the reward also included provisions. I wanted to make sure that I came out on top.

Only eight groups could participate. Since that wasn't a lot, I figured it would be best if I hurried. Shortly after I started walking that way, I caught sight of a couple three-person groups racing against one another, along a separate path. Apparently, their intended destination was the same as mine. They were headed for the History Task. Fortunately, they didn't seem to see me, so I kept on running and adjusting my route.

If I just leisurely walked towards the Task, those two groups would probably get ahead of me. I continued to cut through the woods, making my way straight to the Task location. Once I arrived there, I saw that a fair number of people had already gathered. There was an adult with a tablet in hand, but they didn't seem to be a teacher with the school. I called out to that person.

"Can I register?" I asked.

"Yes, you can. You're the seventh group."

By the time I had gone through the entry process, the two groups that I saw earlier had come this way. I saw that Hashimoto, a fellow second-year student, was slightly ahead of the other group. He seemed to notice me standing there nearby, but rather than addressing me, he first called out to the adult in charge.

"Can I register?!" he shouted, dripping with sweat, having seemingly run a considerable distance.

"Yes, you'll be the final group, but—" began the adult, stopping to look at students coming from behind.

The group that had been giving chase was there too. Apart from Kamuro, who was the second person to arrive after Hashimoto, the next three students were all first-years who all seemed to be in the same group. Hashimoto's remaining group member was lagging quite far behind and would have been the sixth person to arrive. This was a Task where you could participate as a unit with your entire group, but if you didn't have your full team present, you obviously couldn't register.

Making an excuse, like "They're almost here," wasn't going to work, either. Even if they were only thirty seconds behind, if that three-person group of first-year students managed to slip in during the time Hashimoto had to wait for his third member to arrive, then his chance of registering would get snatched out from under him. Which was exactly why Hashimoto said something else to the staff member once Kamuro had caught up.

"It'll just be us two registering," he said. "Me and her."

He chose to exclude the third member of his group and limit his entry just to two people. The first-year students collapsed onto the ground in apparent frustration. I'm sure it must have been demoralizing to have struggled so hard to get here only to have gotten nothing to show for it. On the other hand, Hashimoto had a look of satisfaction on his face, despite missing out on the chance to have his entire group register. In Tasks where you were allied to participate as a group, the more people you had, the bigger your advantage. That being said, there was a significant difference between not being able to participate as a group and not being able to participate at all.

"S-sorry...! I-I couldn't make it in time...!" sputtered Ninomiya, gasping for breath.

Her two teammates didn't seem to hold it against her at all though. Ninomiya had an A- in academic ability, which was certainly nothing to scoff at. Her physical ability, however, was rated D-.

"Gotta say though, you did good gettin' here, Masumi-chan," said Hashimoto.

"Ugh, just shut up," shouted Kamuro, desperately trying to catch her breath. "Don't talk to me... I'm all hot and sweaty, this sucks...!"

She waved Hashimoto away as he tried to approach.

"Oh, hey, come to think of it," said Hashimoto, turning to me, "this is the first time we've bumped into each other during this exam so far eh, Ayanokouji? So, you're on this part of the island too, huh? Man, though... Going it alone, you sure got guts, I'll give you that. You managing to rack up a decent number of points?"

"To be completely honest," I answered, "it wouldn't be surprising if I were in the bottom ten."

"Dude, come on, quit yankin' my chain. There's no way a guy who doesn't think he's gonna win would actually choose to tackle this thing solo," said Hashimoto.

Truthfully, I really wasn't in that great of a situation right now, but I didn't want to show him my tablet to prove it.

"Okay, so what if you do end up actually being in the top ten?" he asked, looking at me as though he were assessing me or something. "What then?"

There was no way that something like that could possibly happen, though.

"Anyway, though," he added, "I'm sure glad this isn't a math test, phew. We wouldn't have stood a chance against a whiz like you."

"All right, everyone, the Task is about to begin," said the person in charge.

"Oh, sounds like that's the end of our conversation," said Hashimoto.

Since the last group had registered for the Task and they now had a full lineup, the Task was going to begin right away. If you proactively went out and registered for Tasks, you would often find yourself competing against students from your same grade level, like I was now. However, I had no intention of taking it easy.

Besides, all the test questions were basically multiple choice, with four answers. So, even if I did get a relatively high score, I could just make the excuse that my guesswork had been on point, and I got lucky. While I was looking down at my tablet, I did occasionally catch sight of Hashimoto glancing over in my direction, with a probing look in his eyes. He had his suspicions about me from a rather early stage, so that wasn't surprising.

I started running through all twenty of the history questions. To be completely honest, if you were to ask me if I were good at history or bad at it, I'd have to say it was the latter. That was because in the White Room, teaching us about history wasn't really

a priority. Nevertheless, I did remember a fair bit about the subject. Whatever was within the realm of common sense, anyway.

Since the test was given in a multiple-choice format with four options, I was able to answer all the questions correctly without any difficulty. A short while later, the results were tallied, and all eight groups' scores were announced at the same time. I had taken first place with a hundred points. A group of third-year students got second place with eighty points. Hashimoto and Kamuro came in third place with seventy. Once I had received my points and provisions, I immediately set off to my next destination. However, Hashimoto took off after me, quickly catching up to me.

"Man, respectable job on that test," he said, "you sure kicked our butts. Guess you're a history buff too, eh?"

"I was surprised too," I replied. "I got really lucky with several questions, since there were only four choices."

"So, you're saying it was simply 'cause you got lucky?" said Hashimoto. "Yeah, I find that hard to believe."

"Well, if you don't believe me, there's nothing I can really say about it. Sorry, but I've got to hurry to my next thing," I told him.

"What Task are you going for next?" he asked.

"I was planning to go for the chemistry Task. What about you?"

Most likely, Hashimoto's group had been thinking of doing the same thing. I watched as Hashimoto briefly turned back and shot a look at Kamuro behind him.

"Aw man, that's a shame," he said. "We're doin' something different."

Hashimoto was a calculating guy. Instead of going for a Task where he'd be up against an opponent who he was sure would take the win, he had shifted his priorities to somewhere he had a better chance of winning, even if it were somewhat further away. Honestly though, deep down, he probably wanted to go up against me in the same Task, to find out more about what I was capable of.

Kamuro, having overheard our conversation, had a blatant look of disgust on her face. Heading towards yet another Task would take up quite a lot of stamina, after all.

"Smell ya later, Ayanokouji," said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto, with Kamuro in tow, quickly headed off at a brisk pace toward yet another Task. If Sakayanagi was operating things in the background and he was following her orders, his group was probably going to be joining with Ichinose's eventually to make a six-person team.

5.5

AFTERWARD, I registered for the chemistry test Task, and I ended up taking first place, gaining an additional five points. With that, there was only one designated area left for today, and I had accumulated a total of forty-eight points so far.

By comparison, a three-person group that had earned every Arrival Bonus but hadn't gotten any Early Bird Bonuses or cleared any Tasks would have a total of thirty points by now. Since I had no way of accurately guessing what the group rankings were exactly at this point in time, I wondered where a total of forty-eight points would place me.

At three o'clock that afternoon, the final designated area of the day was announced. It was area I4.

"How are you feeling?" I asked Nanase when I met up with her again.

"I've completely recovered, thanks to you allowing me to stay back and rest," she said. "I can manage anything that may come my way."

In that case, since there was nothing else for us to do after reaching this final designated area today, I figured we should really get moving. After settling on a route, we quickly made our way there with our sights set on getting the Early Bird Bonus. We walked in silence for a while. Our surroundings really were quite a bit different from yesterday.

"I have to say... There really aren't any actual proper paths around here at all, are there?" said Nanase.

"Yeah. When I looked at the map, I thought this part of the island would be easier to trek through than areas D and E, but I guess I was being overly optimistic," I answered.

Although the woods weren't dense enough to completely block out all sunlight or anything, the ground was still rough and uneven. Even if you were trying to push straight ahead in a specific direction, you wouldn't really be able to make any progress

without taking the occasional zigzag detour. Students who ventured into this part of the island would most likely be faced with considerable challenges. If you tried to run through this area in a hurry, you might get your foot caught on something and fall. In the worst-case scenario, it was entirely possible that you could come away with an injury too.

"Excuse me, senpai," Nanase asked, "but how do you plan on securing more water?"

Even though I had taken first place in both the History and Chemistry Tasks, water wasn't a reward for either of them. My remaining water supply was down to a single 500 milliliter bottle.

"If you feel that getting more water should take priority over reaching the designated area, then how about looking at the Task that appeared in H3?" she added.

A Task had appeared in H3, and we had fifty minutes left to register for it. Not only would you get points from it, you could get water as well. Furthermore, you'd get a whole two-liter bottle of it.

"I'm sure the competition for it will be steep," I replied.

Even though I was engaging with her in discussing it, I continued moving forward, without stopping. I was sure that other groups were going to start running low on drinking water soon, just like we were.

"Even if we can get water from Tasks, our opportunities are quite limited," said Nanase.

On the first day of the exam, there were a total of sixty-eight Tasks available throughout the entire island. On the second day, there were a hundred. As of this current point in time on the third day of the exam, there had been ninety-four. So even though the number of Tasks seemed to be increasing day by day, they still didn't come close to matching the number of groups. Some of these Tasks only offered rewards for whoever came in first place. Even if you were to include the Tasks that gave rewards to groups that came in first through third, that just wasn't enough for everyone. Any group would be satisfied if they managed to get at least one victory per day, but, naturally, the best groups were

snatching those opportunities away, taking first place wins three or four times a day.

Considering all of that, it wouldn't be all that surprising if there were groups out there that were already running out of drinking water. If that happened to anyone, they'd be forced to return to the starting point and try to compete in an established safe zone. In that case, you wouldn't be able to earn points normally by visiting the designated areas, and so Tasks that appeared in the nearby area would become extremely competitive. Forget about increasing your point value; you'd find yourself in increasingly dire straits, forcing a losing battle as your points continued to be whittled down. And if your designated areas were around the northeast part of the uninhabited island, it simply wouldn't be possible to replenish your water immediately.

Nanase looked over at me from where she was walking beside me. "You have some kind of idea in mind, don't you, senpai?" she asked.

"What makes you think so?" I asked.

"Because you don't seem to be that worried about our water supply," she said. "It doesn't seem like you've been paying it that much mind."

"Maybe I'm just thinking we'll be able to manage somehow, through sheer random luck," I answered.

"W-well, that would be a little troubling..." She looked a little flustered, visibly bewildered over what I had said.

"I was originally planning on returning to the starting point in the event of an emergency," I told her.

"But that would be exceptionally difficult in our current situation, wouldn't it?" said Nanase. "Hypothetically speaking, if we were to return to the port where we started from, how many hours would that even take? And if we were traveling at night, we would be considerably slower."

Obviously, that strategy wasn't possible from every location on the island. The farther away you were from the starting point, the greater risk you'd take of wasting both time and energy.

"Still," I said, "that was a strategy that I had been considering going with."

"Water is essential, yes, but if you went ahead with that plan, you could end up getting injured. I can't say that I feel it's a wise decision, by any stretch," said Nanase. I supposed her concerns were natural, from a normal point of view. "And yet, despite that, you're saying that this dangerous strategy was the only one that you've been considering, Ayanokouji-senpai?"

"If you look at the rules for this special exam, you can see that the only surefire methods of getting additional water are to either to buy it at twice the price back at the starting point or to get water through completing Tasks," I said.

"Well, yes, I suppose you're right about that," said Nanase.

"And between those two surefire methods, the only really reliable way of getting safe drinking water is to buy it using points."

"Safe drinking water...?" she repeated.

"Outside of that, you'd have to rely on natural water sources of some sort. Like seawater, rainwater, or river water, for example. Even though they call this an 'uninhabited' island exam, we technically don't know much about what happened here. If people did once live here, it's possible that the water could actually be contaminated," I reasoned.

Of course, it was difficult to imagine that the school would have chosen this island if that were true, but there was no way to be certain of that.

"Since I'm working as a one-person group, if I were to fall ill, I'd be out of the game immediately," I went on. "I have no intention of doing anything that will put me at risk, no matter how low the chances are."

"But forcing yourself to move across the island at night sounds quite risky too," argued Nanase.

"If I fail, then that's that," I answered.

"So... What you're saying is that you wouldn't have any problems in this scenario, Ayanokouji-senpai?" said Nanase.

There wasn't any point in carrying on this conversation any longer. After all, as long as I was allowing Nanase to accompany me, I had absolutely no plans to implement that strategy anyway.

"In any case, getting back to the earlier point," I said, "I do have a way of using seawater or river water. I have a pot that we can use for just that. If necessary, I was thinking we could use it to sterilize water by boiling it."

On hearing that, Nanase brought her hand up to her chest and let out a relieved sigh. After we continued walking for a little while longer, Nanase caught sight of a flowing river, and hurriedly pulled out her tablet.

"Excuse me, senpai, but we've strayed from our path," she said. "I think we need to head further east."

We were supposed to be heading towards I4, but our current position was putting us towards the center of H4. If we wanted to take the shortest path to I4, then yes, we should be heading east, just as Nanase had said.

"It's fine. I'm not planning to get the Early Bird Bonus this time," I told her.

"Huh?" She blinked.

While Nanase had her doubts about what I was doing, I continued to walk away and she followed along. Eventually, when we had arrived near the center of H4, we happened upon Sakagami-sensei, who was hard at work setting something up. It seemed like this was the right place after all. My predictions had been spot on. At least, so far, anyway.

"Hello," I called out to him.

"Hm... Ayanokouji?" he replied.

Although Sakagami-sensei looked surprised to see me, there was always the possibility that a student could bump into a teacher or staff member like this, while they were setting up a Task. After all, a lot of preparation was needed before they could get a Task up and running.

"Is it all right if we go ahead and sign up for this Task first?" I asked.

"Yes, of course, just a minute," he answered.

"Isn't this great, senpai? We're quite fortunate to have been able to find a Task location before it appeared on the map," said Nanase.

"Yeah," I answered.

Sakagami-sensei didn't have enough time to stand around and talk with us, so he quickly got back to work getting the Task ready. A few minutes later, and the clock struck 3:30.

"All right," said Sakagami-sensei. "You can go ahead and register for the Task now."

As soon as I heard him say those words, I immediately approached him once more and stated my intention to register. Nanase followed suit, also announcing that she wished to register. We both quickly went through the registration process on our tablets.

"Still, I wonder what kind of Task this is exactly," said Nanase.

Just as Nanase was about to open the app on her tablet and check that information for herself, Sakagami-sensei spoke up to tell her.

"This is a Task where participants earn water in the order they arrive here. A 'competitive race,' basically. Ayanokouji, since you were here first, you've earned yourself a two-liter bottle of water and three points. Nanase, since you were second, you get a one point five-liter bottle of water and two points," said Sakagami-sensei.

"What, so that means... Well, I suppose that means we've already completed the Task then, haven't we?" said Nanase.
"That's quite a surprise."

Sakagami-sensei fetched the water that was to be given to us as our reward and presented it to us individually.

"Luck is another form of ability, you two," Sakagami-sensei told us. "Be glad."

"...Yes, we really were quite lucky," said Nanase.

Apparently embarrassed about something, Nanase bowed her head bashfully as she accepted the water.

"Well then, I suppose we won't have to worry about drinking water. At least for a little while," I told her.

After we left, Nanase stopped to ask me something. "Um... Could I possibly confirm just one thing with you, if that's all right?"

"What's up?" I asked.

"Unless I'm mistaken about something, I think that you're someone who could aim much higher, Ayanokouji-senpai. Whether it's designated areas or Tasks, I'm sure you could score more points. So, why aren't you?" asked Nanase. It seemed like she was hoping to confirm something that had been bothering her as we had been working together over these past two days.

"Because I didn't really feel like going all out and running all over the island right away at the start," I replied. "Since I'm going it alone, my efforts would all be for nothing if I were to do something reckless and end up getting injured or sick."

"But with the way things are going, you're just going to continue to fall behind the other groups in points, aren't you? Whether it's for designated areas or Tasks, effective time management is key. It's not as though you could earn a substantial number of points and turn things around in a single day," argued Nanase, basically saying that there was no other option but to untiringly continue to rack up points. The more capable, prominent groups would understandably go that route, opting to work diligently at racking up point after point.

"Let's just say that this is just one of my strategies," I replied.

"A strategy where you deliberately hold yourself back and don't earn points...?"

I nodded and then continued walking. This wasn't a conversation that I wanted to get into any further with Nanase. Even though we were working together, she was in a different grade level, and she was clearly my enemy. Plus, there were just too many mysteries surrounding her.

"At any rate," I told her, "there's still a possibility that we could shoot for the Early Bird Bonus at our designated area, so let's head there for the time being. We should hurry."

"Y-yes," said Nanase, hurriedly scrambling to catch up with me as we rushed towards I4.

5.6

OUR LUCKY BREAK didn't last much longer. We did manage to reach area I4, but as we had expected, we weren't able to get the Early Bird Bonus after all. And we weren't blessed with any additional Tasks afterward either, so it looked as though our battle for today had ended.

"Shall we walk over to the riverbank?" asked Nanase.

"Sure," I replied. "The footing around here is pretty bad, and this isn't a good spot to make camp and sleep, either. Let's keep moving."

"All right," said Nanase.

We continued to forge ahead, cutting a path south toward the riverbank. We spent about twenty minutes making our way through the woods before we managed to reach the river.

"Want to make camp around here?" I asked.

"That's fine," said Nanase.

Just as the two of us had come to an agreement, I heard voices coming from far in the distance.

"HEEEY! Ayanokouji!"

It was a guy's voice, and one I was familiar with. I heard it coming from the other side of the river. The voice belonged to Ike, holding dead branches in both arms.

"Hey, Ayanokouji, Nanase, I thought that was you!" shouted Ike as he came closer to the river, flashing his white teeth in a big smile. "So, this is where you two guys've been!"

"What an incredible coincidence!" said Nanase. "Are you camping around this area tonight?"

They both raised their voices as they engaged in conversation, trying their best to talk over the sound of the river. After shouting back and forth for a little, Ike signaled over to us to try and join up with him on the other side of the river. Upon seeing this, Nanase and I went upriver. Before long, we reached the south

side of area H4, which was connected via the shore, and we were able to meet up with Ike. Sudou and Hondou were there too, having come after hearing our voices.

"Wait a minute, don't tell me, was your last designated area for today—"

"I4," I replied, cutting him off.

Apparently, Sudou's group had the same destination that we did. He and his teammates exchanged looks, clearly surprised.

"Man, what a coincidence, huh?" said Sudou.

We had been in the same area on the east side of the island this morning, and we ended up in the same location at the end of the day. Although our Tables were different, considering the fact that I had seen Sudou several times now, I supposed there might be a tendency for our two Tables to take us to similar places on occasion. We decided to make camp together again, just like we had done the other day.

Since we had free time for the rest of the day, we each went and did our own things. Of course, we still worked together when it was necessary for us to do so. I told Nanase that I was going to go for a stroll by myself for a little while and went into the woods alone. There wasn't any particularly profound meaning behind it or anything. If I had to say anything, I'd say I did it because I was looking for other students or something. After all, apart from Nanase, I still hadn't come across any other groups that seemed to share my same Table.

I came back to our campsite about thirty minutes later, returning just as Ike was about to get the campfire going.

"You're pretty handy," I told him.

"Well, you just gotta do what you can, I suppose. It's like, you know how this time we knew in advance that this test was gonna be on an uninhabited island, right? I think lots of people must've done some research on their own, trying to figure out how to do all kinds of stuff," said Ike, gazing into the fire. "But still, actually doin' something is different from just readin' about something, yeah? I guess it's kinda like, if you actually have the

capability to do somethin' you set your mind to, then you won't have trouble doing it."

It was certainly true that you couldn't always replicate something perfectly just from reading about it in an article or watching a video. You would only be able to find out what you could or couldn't do by trying your hand at it yourself, directly.

"There you are, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Nanase.

"What's up?" I asked.

"You were taking a while," said Nanase, directing her gaze towards the woods. "I went looking for you for a little bit."

Apparently, we had just missed each other when I came back to the riverbank.

"All right, my dudes," said Ike, "I think it's about time to chow down."

"Yeah," I agreed.

Ike had a big grin on his face as he was holding onto a bucket that he retrieved from his tent nearby. Then, he proudly showed us what was inside.

"Wow, amazing!" shouted Nanase.

Inside the bucket were several fish that Ike had presumably caught.

"I had some time when my group went out by the water, so I took the opportunity to do some fishin'. Let's eat!" said Ike.

Ike started preparing the food in a bit of a hurry. At first glance, he looked like he was fine, but it was obvious that he was only pretending to be in good spirits. Still, he was tackling this uninhabited island exam better than I thought he had been, so I supposed there wasn't anything to worry about for the time being.

"Oh, wow, something smells really good!" said a new visitor.

It was a group of three people who happened to be passing by, perhaps drawn over by the smell of the fish that Ike was grilling for dinner. We were camping out by the riverbank in plain view, so it wasn't surprising that they managed to see us. What was surprising, however, was the identity of one of our visitors.

That part specifically was something I couldn't have predicted at all.

"Ah!" A girl, the second one from their group to arrive, let out a gasp after making eye contact with me.

"What's the matter, Karuizawa-san?" asked one of her teammates.

"Oh, um, nothing. It's just, like, I was surprised to see someone grilling fish is all," said Kei, trying to cover up her surprise at meeting up with me by sheer coincidence.

It was the third day of the exam, and yet this was the first time I had bumped into Kei here. From the looks of things, she seemed to be doing fine so far. Her teammates were two students from Class 2-A, named Shimazaki Ikkei and Fukuyama Shinobu. They were both very academically gifted students. Even though they were lacking when it came to physical ability, when you looked at them in terms of overall aptitude, they certainly had the skills to claim the top spots with ease in any Tasks that were based on written exams.

"Hey, why don't we camp around here too?" said Kei. "I bet Ike-kun would treat us to some food."

"Huh?!" Ike shouted. "Wh-why should I have to give you anything?!"

"Come on, it's fine, isn't it? I mean, it's not like you're going to run out or anything," said Kei.

"No way, there'll be less to go around if you have some! No way!" he shouted.

Well, Ike didn't exactly like Kei in the first place, so he stubbornly refused her request. However, Sudou grabbed Ike by the shoulder and pulled him aside to whisper something into his ear.

"Dude, come on, what's the big deal? Besides, she might know somethin' 'bout Shinohara, man," said Sudou.

After Ike heard what Sudou had to say, he went silent. He still hadn't been able to meet Shinohara on the island yet. Since

Kei was our classmate, it was reasonable to expect that she'd remember something if she did see Shinohara somewhere.

"W-well, all right, guess there's no harm in it!" Ike shouted. "Since you're here, I'll just go ahead and get fish ready for three more!"

"For real? This is our lucky night! I'm glad I said something!" said Kei.

Kei had been half-joking when she made that suggestion earlier, but somehow, it led to her camping together with us, albeit unexpectedly. Still, Ike wasn't going to be able to get the food ready immediately. It was probably going to be a while before he finished grilling the extra fish. I told everyone that I was going into the woods for a bit, and Kei also left the group shortly afterward.

Of course, we didn't go so far in that we'd end up getting lost or anything. We went just far enough that Ike and the others wouldn't be able to see or hear us. We met up by a fairly large tree and sat down together, with our backs against the tree trunk.



"Seems like things are going well," I told Kei.

Her group had managed to score a total of thirty-seven points over these past three days. For the time being at least, they weren't going to be finding themselves at the bottom of the rankings.

"I've basically been getting helped by my teammates constantly," she said. "They're the ones carrying the group. How about you?"

"Things are going good, all things considered," I replied.

"Well, I figured you'd be fine, since you're you, after all," said Kei.

Kei then proceeded to stretch with a groan. She then sighed. "Still, though, I just wish this exam would be over and done with already... I can't believe we have eleven more days of this."

When you considered just how many days were left, I supposed there was no denying that we were still just in the first phase of the exam.

"By the way, has anything changed over the past few days?" I asked.

"Oh, you mean about that thing you told me about, Kiyotaka? No, nothing in particular, I don't think."

Before the special exam started, I asked Kei to check on a little something for me. I did that in consideration of the possibility that the White Room agent might try contacting her. However, it didn't seem like anything had happened over these past three days.

"I did jot down notes about everyone that I've come into contact with on my tablet though, just in case," said Kei.

She opened the notepad app on her tablet and showed me lists of groups and students that she had seen over the past few days. Her lists were mostly filled with second-year students. She seemed to have virtually no contact with third-years or first-years. Well, I supposed they weren't going to let themselves get caught so easily, after all.

"Oh, and one *other* thing..." said Kei.

"Hm?" I replied.

Kei suddenly brought her face much closer to me, peering into my eyes.

"I heard something about how...that first-year girl has been traveling together with you, Kiyotaka. What's up with that?" she asked.

"Word gets around fast, I see," I replied.

"When I asked Ike-kun about what was going on, he told me all about it, without even missing a beat. Wait, hold on," she said. "Forget about that part, that's not the point!"

Well, even someone like me, who was ignorant when it came to love, understood that as my girlfriend, Kei would be concerned over the fact that I had been working together with a first-year girl. It made sense that she would press me on it. Even if I were to casually throw out a list of reasons why I had agreed to let Nanase accompany me, there was no way that she'd simply accept me going around with a member of the other sex as okay.

I supposed I could bring up that Nanase might be involved in the plot to get me expelled, or that she may have some connection with the White Room. But those things didn't have any direct connection to Kei. In the end, the thing that Kei was extremely upset and anxious about was the fact that I was working with another girl. I took Kei's hand in mine, squeezing it a little forcefully, and brought my face close to hers.

"Are you worried? About me spending time alone together with another girl?"

"Hey! Wait a— Hold on, what? It's not like I'm that *worried* or anything, I'm... Okay, yes, obviously I'm worried about it," she said.

She had tried putting on a brave face at first, but she immediately dropped it and told me how she honestly felt.

"I'm only working with Nanase because I had no choice to, in order to do well on this special exam," I told her.

"...Really?" she asked.

"Yes, really. Needless to say, I have absolutely no feelings about her. There's nothing else going on," I added.

"I believe you, I do," she said. "But when I heard about you being all alone with another girl, I guess I just... I hated it."

Even though there wasn't anything for Kei to worry about, I supposed it was only natural that my girlfriend would still be concerned. No matter how cleverly I tried to smooth talk my way out of this one, I was sure that it wouldn't do anything to put Kei's heart at ease.

"Kei," I replied, saying only her name.

When I did so, she turned to look at me, her lips pursed just slightly into a dissatisfied pout. I took advantage of this moment and came in closer, pressing my lips against hers. Our lips must have only been touching for less than a second, I guessed. It was the first time I had kissed a member of the other sex. The feeling of our lips touching was far softer than I had ever imagined it would be.

"Hu...h?" stammered Kei, sounding dazed, unable to wrap her mind around what just happened.

To be honest, I would have liked to have enjoyed this moment for a while longer, but we were smack in the middle of a special exam on an uninhabited island right now. It wouldn't have been surprising at all if another student happened to pass by where we were, even by sheer coincidence.

"Hold on, wait, what was... That was... A k-kiss...? Huh? Buh?" she sputtered.

"Have faith in me and wait, okay?" I told her.

When Kei heard that, she nodded repeatedly in an almost mechanical fashion, as if she were a doll. I figured that if she were that full of anxiety over the fact that I was working together with Nanase, then the quickest way of dealing with that would be to give her a more intense memory to keep her mind occupied.

"The others might start to suspect something is up if we're going for too long. You should head back," I told her.

So, I decided to send Kei, still completely dumbfounded, back to meet up with everyone at the campsite first.

Chapter 6: Unseen Enemy

IT WAS JUST BEFORE five in the morning, the time when the sun was just starting to rise. While most students would still be asleep around this time, I woke up thanks to a strange sound coming from somewhere outside my tent. The sound was so faint that I thought I was just hearing things, and that it might have just been a quiet ringing in my ears. When I poked my head out of my tent to investigate further, I realized that I actually *could* hear a sound, though it was quiet. The same sound must have woken Nanase as well, because she poked her head out from her tent moments later.

"Can you hear something?" I asked.

"Yes... It's faint, but I can hear it," Nanase said. "It's like some kind of electronic beeping noise."

Perhaps it was because of how far away we were from whatever was making that sound, but it was so quiet that you could mistake it for a simple ringing in the ears. It was possible someone could have set an alarm on their tablet, but even so, this sound had been ringing for a long time.

"Wait, you don't think that could be the Emergency Alert, do you?" said Nanase.

"It's a definite possibility," I answered.

I now fully emerged from my tent, trying to analyze the sound that I was hearing. It was almost exactly like the sound that Mashima-sensei had played for us during the informational orientation meeting. Without a doubt. I could hear the sound echoing, perhaps because it was coming from somewhere deep in the woods.

"It doesn't seem like it's going to stop, does it?" said Nanase.

One minute had already passed since I had noticed the sound. Warning Alerts were designed to go off twice, but in both

cases, they could be disabled after five seconds. The only alert that was designed to sound continuously was the Emergency Alert.

"And if I remember correctly, after five minutes—"

"School officials will find your current location via the GPS in your watch and send help to your position," I replied, finishing Nanase's sentence.

If a student was in a situation where they couldn't manage to turn the alert off, then it was conceivable that they could be in quite a bit of danger.

"Couldn't we go find whoever it is before school officials arrive?" said Nanase.

"What reason would we have to do that?" I replied. "Even though it's sunrise, visibility is still poor, and if we're not careful, we might end up getting hurt and needing help ourselves."

"Do you really need a reason to go help someone?" Nanase asked.

She looked at me with a piercing gaze, the look in her eyes almost overly innocent rather than angry. I could tell from that look that even if I told her that I wasn't going to help, she was fully prepared to go by herself.

"If we're going to do something, it'd be better to have more people with us," I told her. "Let's wake up Sudou and the others."

"Okay," replied Nanase.

We decided to wake up Sudou, Ike, and Hondou, who were asleep in their tents. After we got the three of them to come out, still half-asleep, we explained the situation while we moved towards the source of the sound. Our field of vision wasn't that great out in the woods, and it was still quite dark, even now. Plus, we had concerns about not being able to find good footing on this terrain. Because of that, we had to tread carefully, while shining a light on the path at our feet as we pushed onward.

We had a total of three flashlights between all of us. Nanase and I had one each, and Sudou's group had one more. While I couldn't say that was enough to provide sufficient lighting for all of us, we just had to make do with what we had on hand. We had

decided to bring one tablet with us as well to make sure that we didn't get lost.

"Well, guess I'll take the lead," said Ike, volunteering to lead the group, perhaps doing so because of the situation being what it was.

However, he didn't seem entirely confident about it.

"I'm terribly sorry, but would you consider refraining from doing so?" asked Nanase.

"Huh? Wh-why?" sputtered Ike.

"Considering the fact that visibility is still poor, I'm afraid I cannot agree to having someone who is technically unreliable take the lead," Nanase said. "This role should be handled by someone who is adept at dealing with a crisis and can choose the optimal route for us to take."

"Well, yeah, I guess, but out of all of us here, I'm probably the best one to—"

"Ayanokouji-senpai, could I please ask you to do the honors?" Nanase interrupted. "I will follow your judgment without hesitation if you're the one giving directions."

She was asking me to take the lead without even bothering to listen to Ike's counterargument. Well, I supposed that in a situation like this, every second mattered. If I were to try and come up with some lame excuse about why I shouldn't lead and draw this argument out further, it would only be a waste of time.

"Nanase, Ike, and I will each take a flashlight," I decided. "I'll take the lead, with Nanase behind me. Sudou and Hondou, you're behind her. Ike, please take the rear."

Adding nothing else to my explanation, I started walking forward, leading the way for our group without a moment's hesitation.

"Huh? Wait, what?" said Ike. "Ah, okay, sure, uh... Are you seriously okay with this though, Ayanokouji?"

Just like that, Ike had gotten left behind, still unable to process the fact that I had been made the leader of our group.

"Don't worry 'bout it, just hurry up, man," said Sudou, forcefully grabbing Ike by the arm and pulling him along. "Ayanokouji will probably be fine."

With that, the five of us set out.

"There certainly is a real possibility of injury in a situation like this, isn't there?" said Nanase.

"Man, I can't believe this, walkin' around this early in the morning," whined Hondou, grumbling and rubbing his sleepy eyes.

"Well, it ain't that weird or anythin' actually, to be out and about this early. If our next designated area were super far away, we'd probably have to get goin' around this time if we were gonna cover that distance," Sudou reasoned.

School officials seemed to have picked designated areas with some level of consideration for the amount of time it would take us to reach them. With the addition of randomly assigned areas, though, there were more than a few possible scenarios where a group would need to take firm action either early in the morning or late at night. Little by little, we gradually approached the source of the Emergency Alert. Even now, it was still echoing loudly throughout the woods.

Wait, hold on, that's...

"If somebody's out there, give us a holler!" Sudou shouted in the direction that the alert was coming from.

Little by little, the alert was growing louder and louder.

There wasn't any response. We didn't sense any movement, either.

"Why ain't they sayin' anything...? D-do ya think this might be the work of a ghost or somethin'?" Hondou was trembling; perhaps he felt like there was something eerie about the sound of the alert.

"Don't you think this means that they're in a situation where they cannot call for help?" said Nanase.

"If that's true, then this might be seriously bad news," said Sudou.

At any rate, the only way we'd find out for sure was to continue pressing onward, towards the source of the sound. We held back the urge to rush over there frantically, instead choosing to continue making our way through the dense woods carefully, while shining a light at our feet.

"Don't you think that the sound seems a little bit peculiar, everyone?" Nanase asked as she continued to walk behind me.

"Peculiar?" said Hondou. "Well, it definitely sounds creepy, probably 'cause it's coming from the middle of this dark forest..."

"No, that's not what I—"

I looked over my shoulder at Nanase. "You're talking about the frequency of the sound, right Nanase?" I said, interrupting the conversation.

She nodded vigorously.

"At first, I had thought the sound was simply echoing because it was coming from deep within the woods," she said. "But now that we've gotten closer, I've realized that I was wrong. We're hearing two sounds."

An Emergency Alert would sound when someone was in an exceptionally critical condition. The idea of multiple alerts sounding simultaneously wasn't something that we had really been expecting. However, now that we had come this far, it was clear that was what was happening. The definite rhythm of two Emergency Alerts, blaring at almost the exact same time, could be heard coming from somewhere. It only seemed like it was an echo because they were ringing at slightly contrasting times.

"Dude, this is terrifying... Are you sure it's okay for us to keep going on ahead...?" whined Hondou feebly, as the path ahead gradually started to incline slightly upward. Since we were approaching an area where two people had encountered significant trouble, in quick succession no less, I supposed that his fears weren't unreasonable.

Before long, we were close enough that the alerts started getting extremely loud. We briefly came to a stop and began to search the area for the source of the alerts, shining our flashlights

around as we searched. Fairly quickly, our flashlights illuminated a figure collapsed on the ground.

Sudou was the first person to recognize the identity of the person we had just discovered. "Hold on, is that...Komiya?!" he shouted.

There was no mistaking it. It was indeed Komiya from Class 2-B.

Sudou rushed over to the collapsed Komiya. "H-hey, come on, man... H-hey, come on, wake up man! Komiya!" He was panicking, perhaps because they were on the basketball team together.

"Senpai..." said Nanase.

"Yeah."

There wasn't one alert that had been sounding; there were two. The second alert was still blaring from somewhere several meters away from where Komiya had collapsed. We found that it was coming from Kinoshita Minori, also from Class 2-B. Although Nanase seemed to have been confounded for a moment by the bizarre spectacle, she rushed over toward the collapsed Kinoshita's side.

I left the matter of checking on Komiya and Kinoshita's safety to the others while I searched the area, so that I could get an understanding of what had happened here. Shinohara was supposed to have been in Kinoshita and Komiya's group too, but there wasn't any sign of her. I couldn't find either Komiya or Kinoshita's backpacks either. I found those points concerning.

"Hey, Komiya!" shouted Ike. "What happened to Shinohara?!"

"It's no use man, he's not showin' any sign of wakin' up..." said Sudou.

I heard them shouting back and forth about what was going on. They then each proceeded to manually shut the Emergency Alerts off on Komiya and Kinoshita's watches, returning the woods to a state of silence.

"Kinoshita-san doesn't appear to be regaining consciousness, either. Judging from the dirt on her jersey, and her scrapes and

bruises, most likely..." Nanase's voice trailed off as she looked up at the steep cliff nearby, which stood several meters above where the group stood.

After checking Komiya's condition, Sudou nodded his head in agreement. Both Sudou and Nanase seemed to think that one of them, either Kinoshita or Komiya, had lost their footing along the steep slope and fell. Then, the other person, in trying to save them, had fallen along with them. Hm.

When I approached the slope, I definitely saw obvious signs that someone had come tumbling down. It was safe to assume that it was Komiya and Kinoshita who had fallen here. Visibility was poor, and it was entirely conceivable that they could have just accidentally veered off their intended path. Also, due to the high degree of humidity and the fact that the ground was slightly damp, it was quite easy to slip and fall.

I pointed my flashlight down towards my feet. The ground was still a bit muddy here and there, so depending on where you stepped, there should be at least some visible footprints. By shining my flashlight on the path, I could just barely make out the footprints that we had left behind when we had come over to check on Komiya and Kinoshita. However, there were also some very faint traces of footprints that did not belong to any one of us. Those footprints did come close to where Kinoshita and Komiya had laid, but then they quickly turned back.

While it was unclear just how relevant this was, this did mean that there was a possibility that another person had been here, other than Kinoshita and Komiya. Was it Shinohara? No, it was difficult to imagine that she would've just walked away without rushing over to try and help her teammates. Besides, even if she had left to go call for help, she most definitely would've rushed to their sides first to check on them.

When I compared the shoe size of the footprints to the size of my own feet, I discovered that they were a little bit on the small side. My shoe size was twenty-six centimeters. These footprints, on the other hand, looked to be about one point five to two centimeters smaller. Although I couldn't rule out the possibility that

these footprints had been left by a boy, the odds of it being a girl seemed high.

Suddenly sensing another presence in the area, I kept my flashlight pointed down at the ground while heading northwest. The world was still shrouded in darkness, and my field of vision blocked by thick, overgrown trees. I couldn't see if anyone was there. I wondered if there was some reason this person wasn't approaching us. Perhaps there was some reason they felt guilty and wanted to remain hidden.

I decided to ignore that presence for the time being and went to check Kinoshita's trail. I figured that there was a possibility that Kinoshita might have been walking around here before she had lost consciousness. However, I couldn't find any evidence that suggested that she had walked around the area nearby where she had fallen. I supposed that meant it was safe to assume that those footprints had been left by an unidentified third party, after all.

Kinoshita's face and clothes were scratched up and dirtied, just like Komiya, but there didn't appear to be any major external injuries.

"Well, at any rate, I suppose the problem now is what's going to happen once the teachers arrive..." said Nanase.

The full extent of their injuries was still unknown, but there was no way for Kinoshita and Komiya to avoid being checked out by a medical team. If they really had lost consciousness after falling off the slope, a thorough medical examination was necessary. It'd be difficult to imagine that they wouldn't end up getting eliminated from the special exam afterward. It was unlikely that either of them would wake up in time and have the wherewithal to be able to smooth things over with a lie.

If Shinohara was in an analogous situation someplace else, then all three members of Komiya's group would end up getting eliminated all at once. Since none of them had the Insurance Card either, they would inevitably be expelled.

"SHINOHARA!"

Ike shouted Shinohara's name into the dimly lit woods. If she was in the vicinity, it wouldn't have been strange if she could hear

it and respond, or at the very least give us some kind of signal. The fact that she couldn't seem to respond, though, seemed to suggest that she might have had some kind of accident like Komiya and Kinoshita after all. Ike was about to run off to go search for her, but I hurriedly rushed over and grabbed hold of him before he could.

"If you go rushing headfirst into the woods without a tablet, you're likely going to end up getting lost," I warned him.

"Y-yeah, I know, man, but come on!" shouted Ike.

"Look, I understand that you're feeling anxious. It is strange that she isn't answering even though you're shouting her name," I told him.

"Y-yeah, which is exactly why I gotta hurry and find her!"

"But if she were seriously injured, then we should be hearing her Emergency Alert going off, like what happened with Komiya and Kinoshita, right?" I reasoned.

Aside from those two Emergency Alerts that we heard earlier, there hadn't been another sound.

"Well, that's... Okay, I guess that makes sense..." said Ike.

"Plus, since Shinohara currently isn't anywhere nearby, we can assume that it's very unlikely that she had gotten seriously injured," I added.

"Wait, so you're saying she might be lost or something...?" said Ike.

That was a definite possibility, of course.

"Ugh...!"

While the five of us were still struggling to wrap our minds around what was going on, we heard a groan come from somewhere.

"Komiya!" Sudou shouted. "Can you hear me? Komiya!"

Komiya seemed to respond to his calls this time, grabbing onto Sudou's jacket. Apparently, Komiya had regained consciousness. A feeling of relief washed over us, but we quickly found out some more troubling news.

"I-it hurts..." moaned Komiya. "My leg...!"

It looked as though he could still move his right leg, but he wasn't able to move his left at all. There was a look of agony on his face.

"Dude, your leg...!" cried Sudou.

Judging by how shaken Sudou was, I could grasp what kind of state Komiya was in without needing to see for myself. In order to get an understanding of the situation herself, though, Nanase took a closer look at Kinoshita.

"It's not just Komiya-kun," she said. "Kinoshita-san's left leg appears to be in terrible shape too. I think that it might be broken, in the worst case."

Not only had the two of them both fallen off the same steep slope, but it also sounded like they had both suffered from a serious accident and had injured their legs. I supposed that I could've ascertained the state of their injuries by touching them directly, but it was trivial now.

"If they've got any serious contusions or broken bones, then they're going to get eliminated for sure. No questions asked," I replied.

It was naturally assumed that as of this current point in time, early in the morning on the fourth day of the exam, no one had been eliminated yet. But it was looking highly likely that the elimination of Komiya's group was set in stone. Even if Shinohara was safe, it would be difficult for her to accumulate a high number of points all by herself. Moreover, Shinohara herself was still nowhere to be found.

Nevertheless, this coincidence was...

Well, more importantly, there was still that strange presence observing us from the northwest. And yet this person was deliberately choosing to do nothing. They had apparently decided to stay far away and watch us from a distance. At first, the presence was indeed extremely faint. But, as I continued to pretend not to notice it, it only seemed to grow increasingly

pronounced. It was almost as if they were telling me to come and find them.

Just then, Nanase left Kinoshita's side. Kinoshita still hadn't regained consciousness yet. Nanase leaned in and whispered into my ear.

"Don't you think that there's something a little strange about all of this?"

Sudou and the other guys probably didn't sense it, but there certainly was something off about this situation.

"Yeah," I agreed. "These two might have gotten themselves caught up in some kind of situation."

If only one of them had suffered an accidental fall, I could find that reasonable. But the fact that both were in exactly the same situation was concerning.

"Komiya. Can you remember exactly what happened?" I asked.

If I continued to try and speculate on my own, I wasn't going to make any progress. I decided that it would be better to ask Komiya now that he had woken up. I figured I probably wouldn't have much time to talk to him before representatives from the school arrived.

"I-I don't know... It just happened without warning," said Komiya. "I suddenly felt something hit me in the calf real hard... Next thing I knew, I was rolling down the hill and... Agh..."
Komiya's face twisted in agony as he tried moving his left leg.

"Something hit you?" I asked.

"M-maybe. I don't really remember... Sorry," said Komiya.

Apparently, his memory of the incident was fuzzy, but I couldn't really blame him.

"Kinoshita over there fell too. Do you know what happened to her?" I asked.

"Huh...? N-no, no idea. Why did Kinoshita...? If I remember right, when it..." He trailed off.

Judging from Komiya's reaction, it didn't sound like Kinoshita had been the first one to go down. So I supposed that, at the very least, we could assume that Komiya had fallen first.

"That's right...! Satsuki! Where's Satsuki?" shouted Komiya, fighting back against the pain. "Did she fall too?!"

Perhaps his memory was gradually starting to become clearer. When Ike looked over at Komiya, hearing him shout Satsuki's name, his face darkened. Still, this was no time for him to get upset over something so trivial.

"Shinohara's missing. Were you not traveling together?" I asked.

"Satsuki was... Ugh...!!!"

It seemed like it wasn't easy for him to keep talking, most likely because of the extreme pain in his left leg.

"You don't have to push yourself," I told him.

"N-no, I'm worried about Satsuki, and... Sorry Sudou, can you help me up...?" asked Komiya.

"S-sure, man, but don't overdo it," said Sudou.

Komiya slowly sat up, using Sudou to support himself.

"Komiya, where's Shinohara?!" shouted Ike.

Naturally, Ike was more concerned about finding Shinohara than anyone else in our group. In fact, even Komiya could pick up that Ike was unable to contain himself.

"...I don't know... We, I mean, we were trying to rush on ahead, and..." A pained expression flashed on Komiya's face time and time again as he tried to explain. "So, we were waiting...for Satsuki to come back, and..."

"Hold on, you were waiting? I don't get what you're tryin' to say!" shouted Ike.

Komiya was struggling to get his story straight, unable to do an adequate job of explaining things in context. He shook his head side-to-side a couple of times to compose himself. Then, carefully recounting everything that happened, he worked to set up a timeline of events.

"Let me start over from the beginning," he said. "We were in a hurry to reach our designated area because we missed two in a row yesterday. So, after talking it out late last night, we came up with a plan to close the distance early in the morning, and... It was still pretty dark out and everything, so we tried to watch out for one another when we got moving that morning. But then, Satsuki said she had to use the bathroom. So, Kinoshita and I waited for her nearby. Of course, we were each using our lights to keep track of where we were and all, but then..."

Komiya was much calmer now than he had been earlier. Even though he was fighting against the pain, his worry for Shinohara was quite palpable.

"While we waited for Satsuki to come back, Kinoshita and I were looking down over the hill there, talking about how maybe we could use it as a shortcut or something. Just as I was thinking that it'd be difficult for us to go that way—"

"That's when you felt something suddenly hit your calf, right?" said Nanase, having anticipated what Komiya was about to say.

Komiya slowly nodded in response.

"I remember that it hurt like crazy...but I forgot about that pain a second later since I remember rolling down the slope right after... Then, when I came to, Sudou and the rest of you were all here," said Komiya.

Human limbs certainly weren't impervious. We could easily find ourselves hurt at a moment's notice. If Komiya had been the only one who had gotten hurt, you could've easily concluded that the pain he felt shoot through his leg was what caused him to fall. That would've provided a satisfactory explanation. However, because the same thing happened to Kinoshita too, something about all this didn't quite add up.

Did she try to help Komiya after seeing that he slipped and fell, only to fall herself? In any case, both the eyes that were watching us right now and those unidentified footprints were concerning.

Rustle.

As I was thinking about what happened, I heard something moving up at the top of the slope. We all pointed our flashlights up in that direction at the same time, but we didn't see anyone there. The noise could have come from a small animal or something, given how quiet it had been, but...

"Shinohara?!" shouted Ike. He had only just started to regain his composure, but after hearing that sound, he took off running towards the slope.

"Hey, Kanji! Wait, dude! It's dangerous!" shouted Sudou.

The cries of Ike's good friend fell on deaf ears, the words echoing throughout the dark woods.

"Senpai, it's dangerous to let him go off on his own!" shouted Nanase.

"I know," I replied. "I'm going to leave the tablet with you, so wait here for us."

Given the situation, I was tempted to rush after him. But Ike was hurriedly trying to climb a steep slope, so a slight delay in me getting to him wouldn't make that much of a difference.

"But won't it be a problem for you if you don't have the tablet with you, senpai?" asked Nanase.

"It'll just get in the way while I'm trying to climb."

Besides, having it get in the way while I was trying to climb wasn't the only thing I had to worry about. The bigger risk was that I could end up dropping it and lose it, in the unlikely event that something happened. Anyway, if I left it with Nanase, it wouldn't be impossible for her to come and find us if we had some kind of accident.

I quickly set off after Ike. He was frantically scrambling up the slope, climbing with both arms to reach the source of the sound we had heard. He didn't seem to notice that what he was doing was dangerous. By the time I had caught up to Ike and had overtaken him, I decided to take the lead so that I could show him a path forward. It was clear as day that he would resist if I carelessly tried to bring him back to the others with me.

"A-Ayanokouji?!" he stammered.

When Ike noticed that I had overtaken him, he was shocked. He probably thought that I had come over to stop him from what he was doing, so he panicked, rushing to keep up with me. That panic in turn caused him to get impatient. He stopped paying close attention to his footing, and he slipped, and was just about to fall.

"A-ah...?!"

I quickly reached back and grabbed Ike's arm tightly as he was about to slip and fall, pulling him back up.

"Can you calm down and follow me?" I said. "If you can't, then I'm going to bring you back immediately, by force."

"...O-okay, okay. I'll follow you, Ayanokouji... Please, just don't make me go back..." said Ike.

I nodded, and then proceeded to lead him up the steep slope. Although visibility was still poor, the sun's rays were starting to shine down on the path more and more, little by little. We took our time, carefully climbing up the steep incline. Once we reached the top, we came upon the narrow path that Kinoshita and Komiya must have fallen from.

Ike was down on his hands and knees, struggling to catch his breath, but his eyes were scanning the area. From what I could tell with just a quick glance around, there was no one in sight.

"SHINOHARA!!!" shouted Ike, screaming her name as loudly as he possibly could, desperately hoping that his voice would reach her this time.

There weren't many viable pathways in the area, so we couldn't deny the possibility that Shinohara might have actually fallen after all. Then, I discovered three backpacks nearby, which presumably belonged to Komiya, Kinoshita, and Shinohara. As far as I could tell from looking at the outside of the backpacks, there weren't any signs that someone had rifled through them. Most likely, all three of them had deliberately placed their bags here while Kinoshita and Komiya were waiting for Shinohara to come back from using the bathroom. I could picture in my head the sight of Kinoshita and Komiya discussing whether to try climbing down this slope.

"Damn it! Is she not here?!" shouted Ike, slamming his fist against the ground in frustration, as he still received no response.

That's when it happened.

"...Ike? Is that you?"

Shinohara had been crouching down amidst some bushes over some distance away from us. When she noticed us, she slowly emerged from her hiding place.

"Shinohara? Shinohara!"

When Shinohara got a good look at us and realized that it was Ike and I, she came rushing over as fast as her legs would carry her. She then threw herself into Ike's chest, trembling, tears streaming down her face.

"Y-you've been here this whole time?" asked Ike.

"Ye... Yeah," said Shinohara.

"Then you should've said something way sooner!"
Ike shouted. "Do you have any clue how worried I've been?!"

"B-but, I..." sputtered Shinohara.

She seemed to be remembering something that happened. She was shaking like a leaf. Just from seeing her trembling so much, Ike must have understood that she hadn't been hiding simply to be mean-spirited.

"Wh-what about Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san?!" she wailed.

"They're at the bottom of the slope," Ike said. "They're both hurt really bad. What in the hell happened?"

If her teammates had simply slipped and fallen, then Shinohara would have been frantically trying to help them. But considering she didn't do that, and instead chose to stay hidden in the bushes, then something wasn't right.

"I-I couldn't move... I was so scared, so scared...a-and I...I saw..."

"Saw what?!" asked Ike.

"...I saw someone... I saw someone push Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san," said Shinohara.

Then what happened to her two teammates had not been a simple accident.

"Someone? Who? Who was it?!" shouted Ike.

"I-I don't know who! I don't know! ...Why would someone do something like that?!" she wailed.

Ike clenched his teeth in frustration as he watched her collapse onto the ground, sobbing deeply. What we could assume, based on what Shinohara was saying, was that she had hidden in the bushes because she had been afraid that this someone might have found her too. In that case, it was perfectly understandable why she didn't immediately rush over to try to help her teammates or respond to Ike's calls.

Though there wasn't exactly any conclusive evidence that backed up what she was saying, Shinohara wasn't the kind of student who could come up with a story with a made-up villain like that. Still, it would've been nearly an impossible task for this someone to have managed to sneak up behind two people without either of them noticing. Not only that, but if they had been using a flashlight, that would've basically announced their presence to their targets. That meant this person had been operating in the dark with low visibility.

I decided to change the direction of the conversation a bit, posing a question to Shinohara.

"Do you remember seeing anyone else around between last night and now? If someone did do this on purpose, then suspicion would fall on any groups camping nearby," I asked.

"I think it was after 8:30 last night, after it had gotten dark... Let's see, there were some... Yeah, I remember we came across a group of first-year students camping out... We passed by them on our way," said Shinohara, pointing north.

"Do you know any of their names?" I asked. "Even if you know just one of them, that would be helpful."

"I'm sorry, I still don't know any of the first-year students' names," Shinohara said. "All I remember is that there were three girls and one boy."

If that was really all she knew, then I couldn't exactly say that what she provided was especially useful information. But if some first-year students had attacked Komiya and Kinoshita as part of some kind of practical joke, then I supposed we'd find the culprits soon enough.

"For the time being, let's just head back down and meet up with Sudou and the other guys. It won't be long before the teachers get here," I reasoned.

"R-right," said Ike.

Since going back down the way we came would've been risky for both Shinohara and Ike, we took a slight detour.

6.1

ABOUT FIVE MINUTES had passed since Ayanokouji-senpai had taken off up the slope after Ike-senpai. I gently laid Kinoshita-senpai, who I had been holding in my arms, down onto the ground. Then I stood up, and quietly gazed out into the woods behind me.

"Hey, what's the matter?" asked Sudou-senpai, apparently suspicious of me.

I felt sorry for him, but I didn't have the time to answer his questions. Someone was clearly trying to provoke us. Someone had been watching us this entire time. Even though this person had made their presence known to us, they didn't show themselves. Well, to be perfectly honest, while it was obvious to me that there was someone here, this person's presence would've been barely noticeable to someone ordinary.

How long had this person been making their presence known, exactly? It had been about since Ayanokouji-senpai had gone running up the slope earlier. They were continuously giving off this palpable sense of presence, so much so that you could practically feel it in the very air. I didn't know their reasons for doing this nor what was going on exactly, but no matter.

Whoever they were, it seemed like it would be well worth just getting some information from them, considering the circumstances. I gently placed the tablet down on the ground, and steadied my breathing. Whoever this person was, they had noticed that I had picked up on their presence, but they still hadn't moved. They might have been confident in their speed, but I was quite confident in my own abilities.

"Sudou-senpai. Please watch those two!"

"Huh? Ah, hey!"

The only thing I could be certain of at the moment was that there was someone watching us right now. I kicked off the ground and broke into a full sprint in the direction of the presence I had

sensed. Even if they tried to escape in a hurry, I should be able to catch up to them when they turned and tried to run. If they happened to catch their foot on something, even if it only caused them a slight delay or stumble, then I should be able to catch them and force them to talk.

The distance between us must have been between ten and twenty meters at the most. As the morning sun started to rise higher, my field of vision began to open up more and more. Even though footing wasn't great in this area, it wouldn't take long before I managed to catch up to them. However...!

"So fast!"

I managed to grab hold of the mystery person's jersey cuff for just a brief second, but they were just too quick. The mystery person, by making clever use of the trees in the area, deftly managed to evade me while at the same time revealing nothing about their identity. I chased after them at full speed, but I wasn't managing to close the distance between us. Rather, they just got further and further away from me.

"Grr!"

If we were simply comparing running speed, then I couldn't imagine that there was that significant of a difference between us. Somehow, my opponent understood the terrain completely, and was choosing the perfect, most direct paths as they continued to run away from me. How could they possibly know how to do that? While I knew that I didn't know the lay of the land as well as my opponent did, I still tried my absolute hardest to catch up to them.



"Please wait! I just want to talk to you!" I shouted at my opponent as they quickly darted away deeper into the woods, but they showed no signs of stopping. It wasn't like they couldn't hear me. It was more likely that they were simply ignoring me. In that case, I could conclude that the person running from me was indeed suspicious. So, then, I decided to change my strategy.

"Those two are greatly injured because of something that you did, aren't they?!" I shouted, deliberately saying something accusatory in an attempt to agitate them.

If I could manage to make my opponent make some kind of mistake before I made one, then I could catch up to them in an instant. Even if I was wrong about what was going on here, if I could just get them to trip and fall, that would be all I needed. However, rather than showing any signs of faltering at all, they seemed to actually pick up speed instead.

I had trained so much that I felt confident I wouldn't lose to anyone else. At least, not to anyone at this school. But despite that, the distance between me and my opponent continued to widen more and more. At some times during our chase, I did seem to manage to gain on my opponent somewhat, but it was never for very long. That was a clear indication of my opponent's superiority over me.

They were deliberately provoking me via their actions, as if they were telling me, "Come on, try and catch me, if you can." Even so, I was continuing to chase after them, refusing to give up until the bitter end. If I couldn't make them slip up somehow as they continued to evade me, then... I'd win in a battle of stamina. Just as I came to that determination, I managed to catch sight of my opponent's hair swaying as they ran in front of me, though only for an instant.

"Wait, is that—?!"

That person's distinctive hair color and hairstyle were almost burned into my eyes, committed into my memory. I could clearly recognize those features.

"Grr...!"

As I continued to give chase through the woods, my foot got caught on the roots of a tree, bringing my efforts to an abrupt end.

"Huff, huff...!"

I had gotten tripped up because I had gotten distracted. I was caught off guard upon realizing an unexpected truth. The fatigue that had been building up in me suddenly washed over me, and I realized that I was completely out of breath.

"Huff, huff... Huff, huff...!"

I closed my eyes, trying to slow down my heart, which was racing right now. Although I hadn't been able to get a good look at whoever that was, I didn't have any doubts about their identity.

"Don't tell me, *you*...pushed Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai...? But, why...?"

I continued staring off into the woods for a while longer, as though I were still searching for any sign of the person who had vanished amongst the trees.

6.2

THE DETOUR I TOOK with Shinohara and Ike took us about fifteen minutes. When we managed to find a path back down, we just so happened to reunite with Nanase, who seemed to have been walking alone.

"What are you doing here, Nanase?" I asked.

Sudou and the others should have still been a fair distance from where we were now.

"That's... Um, well, I wasn't able to see you and Ike-senpai anymore, so I went looking for you, and..." She trailed off.

Nanase was clearly out of breath and sweat was trickling down her forehead. It looked like she must have been in quite a hurry to look for us, but her eyes had been looking elsewhere.

"Are you searching for something?" I asked.

"No, please don't worry about it," she replied, not going into the matter any further. I noticed that she continued to keep her gaze fixed on the same point, with a stiff expression on her face.

Then, almost as though a switch had been flipped inside her brain, Nanase looked over at Shinohara.

"I'm glad that you managed to find Shinohara-senpai safely," she said, letting out a genuine sigh of relief upon seeing Shinohara next to Ike.

I had been walking out in front of Ike and Shinohara, so I waited for a bit for them to catch up with me as I was talking with Nanase.

"Sudou-senpai and the others are over this way," said Nanase.

Since Nanase had a clear understanding of which route to take back, she showed us the way. In the meantime, I decided to tell Nanase about what Shinohara had told me just before.

Specifically, I told Nanase that Shinohara said she saw someone push Komiya and Kinoshita, but that she didn't know

whether it was a boy or a girl who did it. I also mentioned how Shinohara had been hiding, quietly holding her breath, out of fear of being discovered by this person. Then, I shared one more piece of valuable information.

"It seems like Shinohara and her teammates passed by a group of first-year students last night."

"First-year students?" repeated Nanase.

"Presumably, they were camping somewhere nearby," I replied. "But Shinohara only said that they had passed each other by, so we can't conclude that they're the culprits for sure."

"That's true. Still, I have to wonder who those first-year students are? If we knew that, then we might be able to investigate and find some kind of clue," said Nanase.

Even if those students were somewhere in the area, finding them in these dense, overgrown woods was going to be difficult. It might be a slightly different story if that group of students had continued to stay in a particular location for an extended period of time, but everyone was constantly on the move, in search of their next destination in the exam. In fact, it was probably better to assume that they were somewhere far away by now, even as we spoke.

Still, the fact that it was first-years was nagging at me. If one of those students was the White Room agent, then they'd obviously be able to do something as daring as pushing another student off a cliff without batting an eye. Nanase remained silent for a while, but finally opened her mouth to speak once more.

"Senpai," she said. "Supposing, if... If there really was someone out there willing to cause such significant harm, don't you find it strange that Komiya-senpai didn't notice anyone?"

"Yeah," I agreed. "You would think that if someone had showed up, there would have been some back-and-forth, and that Komiya would have remembered seeing someone."

Even if Komiya had run into an upperclassman or first-year student whose name he didn't know, he would've said something to us about it. However, his memory of the incident was fuzzy, and

based on what he was saying, there was no conclusive evidence that he had necessarily been attacked. Had it really been just a simple accident?

Or had someone managed to greatly injure both Komiya and Kinoshita without being noticed? Assuming that it was darker out when it happened than it was now, then surely whoever came upon them must have had a light of some kind.

"If it were you, Ayanokouji-senpai, would you have been able to hurt Kinoshita-senpai and Komiya-senpai so badly without them noticing you?" asked Nanase.

"Me? Don't talk nonsense," I replied.

I was dodging the question, but, actually, if I set my mind to it, it wouldn't have been impossible for me. According to Komiya's testimony, he had fallen after feeling something strike his calf with great force. So, I could've silently approached him from behind, and kicked his calf to send him tumbling. After doing so, he would've been rolling down the slope, face twisted in agony. He probably wouldn't have the time to turn and look at me before he fell.

"As for me... Well, supposing I had been the one who attacked Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai, then... I don't think it would be impossible for me, depending on the timing. Though, it would be extremely difficult, of course," concluded Nanase.

Rather than believing that Shinohara had simply made the whole thing up, Nanase seemed to think that there had been someone who attacked them. But even if there was a culprit out there, it was completely unclear what their purpose was for attacking Komiya and Kinoshita, or and what benefit they'd get from it. Was it to send me a warning, albeit indirectly? No, the risks were far too great, if that were the case.

Were they perhaps trying to illustrate that they weren't afraid of taking such large risks? Or I supposed that it could also be possible that they had been forced to act due to some unforeseen accident. Still, none of these theories sounded very convincing at present. It was entirely conceivable that the perpetrator wasn't the White Room agent. There might not even be a perpetrator at all.

"I suppose we still don't understand the reason why they were attacked in the first place, though," Nanase said.

She had arrived at the same train of thought I had, at almost the exact same time. The reason they were attacked. In trying to come up with an answer for what happened in this situation, that was the most puzzling part.

Not long afterward, we returned to where Sudou and the others were waiting. Nothing had changed since we left.

"Now, the question is when the teachers will arrive," I muttered.

We were somewhere in the northeast part of the island. It would take them a fair amount of time to get here, even if they were coming by boat or helicopter. Thirty minutes had already passed since the Emergency Alert first went off, but there was still no sign of anyone coming yet.

Just then, though, as if to give us a signal that the situation was about to change, several students appeared on the scene.

"Um, excuse us... Did something happen?" they asked.

Nanase and I briefly exchanged looks with one another. The group who had called out to us was made up of first-year students. There was Mitsui Ayumi from Class 1-A, Dougami Mitsuko from Class 1-B, Tsubaki Sakurako from Class 1-C, and Makita Takashige from Class 1-D. Their group had a total of three girls and one boy—which matched up perfectly with the testimony that Shinohara had given a short while ago. Ike, as someone who had heard Shinohara's testimony firsthand, eyed the four students with a look of suspicion.

"There's been some trouble," I replied. "These two students tripped and fell down this slope. They've gotten hurt badly."

Upon hearing my response, the first-year students exchanged looks.

"We were camping nearby," said one of them. "We heard an alert, and we heard something that sounded kind of like someone shouting... We waited for it to get a bit brighter outside, and then we headed on over to check out the situation, just in case."

Well, yes, the alert had been blaring quite loudly. It must have been ear-piercing if you were in the surrounding area.

"Anyway, are the injured people all right?" asked Dougami, taking the lead and speaking up as the representative for her group.

She looked quite flustered by the sight, as did Makita. Tsubaki, by contrast, was quite calm. Despite being surrounded by upperclassmen, two of whom were seriously injured, she didn't seem fazed at all.

"They don't look like they're all right, but we're no experts," I said. "We can't tell for sure. Right now, we're just waiting for the teachers to arrive."

Another thirty minutes had passed after the first-year students had shown up. Then, roughly a full hour after the initial Emergency Alert went off, representatives from the school finally arrived. The first to appear was the homeroom instructor for Class 2-B, Sakagami-sensei, and then our own homeroom instructor, Chabashira. There were three other adults with them, who I assumed were medical personnel. In total, it was a team of five people.

"I'm sorry to start right away by asking questions, but could you please tell us what happened here?" said Sakagami-sensei. He approached Komiya, who was sitting up, and Kinoshita, who was still lying unconscious.

Students started gathering around the area as though they were looking in on an investigation at a crime scene. Seeing this, I distanced myself from the rest of the group and approached Chabashira, who had been looking over in my direction.

"Even from just a brief glance, it looks like it'll be difficult for Komiya and Kinoshita to continue the exam," I observed.

"Yes," said Chabashira. "I think that elimination is unavoidable, in this case." She had a dispirited look on her face, most likely because one of the students from Komiya's group was from her class.

"Was it a simple accident?" I asked.

"I think we'll be finding out soon enough," she replied.

After seeing that the two injured students were now being given medical care, Sakagami-sensei approached the remaining member of the group, Shinohara, to ask her for an explanation for what happened. However, as soon as Shinohara took another look at the state her two teammates were in, she burst into tears again.

"Crying is not going to help us understand the situation here," Sakagami-sensei admonished Shinohara sternly.

Upon hearing that, Ike stepped forward, to cover for Shinohara. "Um, 'scuse me, would it be okay if I explained what happened? Shinohara told me everything," he said.

Apparently, Ike wanted to explain the situation to Sakagami-sensei on Shinohara's behalf.

"Well...I suppose that's fine," Sakagami-sensei replied. "Please tell us what happened."

"Shinohara said that they were pushed," said Ike.

Sakagami-sensei looked over at the slope that they had fallen from as he listened to what Ike was saying. It looked as though he found the idea hard to believe.

"Pushed...?" he repeated. "That's quite troubling."

"That means they won't be eliminated then, in that case, right?" said Ike. "Right?"

"If it's true that's what happened, then yes, you're absolutely right," said Sakagami-sensei.

"What do you mean, 'if it's true'? Shinohara said so herself!" shouted Ike.

"Well, do you have any kind of evidence?" asked Sakagami-sensei.

After being asked that question, both Ike and Shinohara were at a loss for words.

"B-but, come on, we're not at school or anything," wailed Ike, "so it's not like there's any surveillance cameras around!"

"However, if they were pushed, someone must have seen the perpetrator's face, at least," countered Sakagami-sensei.

"That's—" said Ike, before being cut off by Sakagami-sensei as he turned back to Shinohara.

"What do you say, Shinohara-san?" he said. "Don't just sit there crying. Why not give me an answer?"

The only evidence that we had right now was the testimony of Shinohara, the third member of the group of the students who had been injured. I could try to bring up the footprints I had spotted earlier, but by now, the entire area had already been trampled by a large number of people. Even if I were to say that I spotted someone's footprints, it wouldn't prove anything.

"I-it was dark, and... *Hic*," squeaked Shinohara.

"It was dark? So, you're saying that because it was dark out, you couldn't get a look at the person's face, or people's faces, then?" said Sakagami-sensei.

Shinohara quickly nodded her head yes, and Sakagami-sensei let out a deep sigh.

"So, it was dark enough outside that you couldn't see their face, and yet you clearly saw your teammates get pushed... That's what you're saying?" said Sakagami-sensei. "Well, I hate to say it, but that's an awfully convenient story, wouldn't you agree?"

He then got closer to Shinohara as she continued crying, telling her to come out and speak the truth. Shinohara was crying so hard that she couldn't even manage to speak, so she just kept nodding her head, trying her best to appeal to him that it was true.



"Shinohara would never lie!" shouted Ike.

"You're her classmate. It's obvious you would say something like that," countered Sakagami-sensei.

"Are you sayin' you don't believe her?" shouted Ike.

"If what she is saying is true, then this is quite a serious matter," said Sakagami-sensei. "However, her testimony alone is not sufficient proof."

"No way! Then, what's gonna happen to Komiya and Kinoshita?!" Ike cried.

"Well, regardless, I'd have to say that their only real option is elimination," Sakagami-sensei replied. "As their homeroom teacher, I certainly can't say that I'm thrilled about having two of my students withdraw from the exam, either. But when you look at the state of their legs, it would be impossible for them to continue."

It wasn't as though Sakagami-sensei was intentionally trying to be unkind. It was simply that their injuries weren't so slight that they'd be up and walking again in a day or two.

"Considering the current situation, we have no choice but to conclude that Shinohara is lying to us, in an attempt to fool us into thinking that they didn't simply sustain injuries as a result of an accident," he added.

"You've gotta be friggin' kidding me! How in the hell would anybody buy that load of crap?!" shouted Ike, fighting back passionately as he held onto Shinohara's shoulders.

However, the response he got back from Sakagami-sensei was quite cold. "I will forget that outburst I just heard. But only this once. Do you understand?"

"Ngh...!"

Ike, realizing that he just took things too far with a teacher, bit down on his lip. He and Shinohara had been desperately pleading their case this whole time, but if you watched how Sakagami-sensei was reacting to the situation, you'd understand why he was acting so dismissive.

"It would seem you've already figured several things out, Chabashira-sensei," I said, turning to Chabashira.

She nodded quietly, still standing beside me.

"We relied on Komiya and Kinoshita's GPS signals in getting here. Komiya's Emergency Alert went off at precisely 4:56:24 this morning. Kinoshita's alert went off seven seconds later. The only other GPS signal that we picked up in that area during that timeframe was Shinohara's," said Chabashira, looking down at her tablet.

I knew it. I was sure Sakagami-sensei had this same information, as well. If there had been even a single suspicious GPS signal in the area, then there would have been some room to suspect that a student might have done something nefarious. However, based on the GPS data that the teachers picked up, they couldn't confirm that there was any kind of 'suspect' in the first place. In that case, the teachers could only assume that Shinohara had made up a story about some unknown third party as a kind of ruse to save her teammates because she didn't want them to get eliminated.

"The first people to arrive on the scene after Komiya and Kinoshita's alarms went off were you five, Ayanokouji," Chabashira said. "Then those four first-year students got here. Finally, we arrived too."

There was no record of anyone else coming upon Komiya's group before us. It was safe to assume that this information must be at least somewhat believable. In that case, did that mean it was possible...that the culprit wasn't a student? The teachers didn't have to wear the watches, so they wouldn't have a GPS signal to track. Well, wait... That didn't sound right.

I did have one hypothesis that I had been forming, but there were many issues still nagging at me, such as the fact that Sakagami-sensei and his colleagues didn't seem to have a full grasp of the situation themselves.

"Chabashira-sensei. You're going to be heading back to the starting area with Komiya and Kinoshita, yes?" I asked.

"Yeah. We'll need to have them undergo a more thorough examination for their injuries onboard the ship,"

"There's something I'd like you to investigate, while you're at it. Discreetly," I added.

I then leaned in and whispered something into her ear. Although she was somewhat surprised by my request, she nodded, agreeing to do what I'd asked. With that out of the way, I had other things I needed to deal with. With Komiya and Kinoshita's elimination essentially set in stone, Shinohara would be left all alone. I was sure that, for Shinohara, just the idea of managing to make it through today and tomorrow on her own would seem hopeless and impossible.

"I just can't... I just can't, anymore... There's no way I can do this alone..." she wailed, sobbing.

Ike, seeing Shinohara breaking down and falling to her knees, was unable to find the right words. He simply stood there, completely stunned, looking like he had no idea what to do. I wasn't the only one who noticed Ike looking like that, either. Komiya, right before he was carried away by several students, had also noticed.

"Ike...C'mere," said Komiya.

"Wh-what?" said Ike.

Komiya had called out to Ike, beckoning for him to come within arm's reach. Then, pushing through the pain that was shooting through his body, Komiya reached out, grabbed Ike by the shoulder, and forcefully pulled him in close so that he was close to Komiya's mouth.

"Show her yer a man."

After those few short words, Komiya laid back down, practically collapsing onto the stretcher. Komiya had been planning to tell Shinohara that he had feelings for her during this exam on the uninhabited island. But from the sounds of things, he hadn't managed to do so yet. Perhaps, contrary to what he had expected, Shinohara had come up to Komiya beforehand and asked him for advice about Ike. If she had done that, then Komiya should have

understood that Shinohara cared for Ike. And so, Komiya had entrusted Shinohara, the girl he was determined to protect, over to Ike, his romantic rival.

"Man," said Sudou, "this is just crazy..."

I was sure that Sudou understood everything as he saw Komiya getting carried away. It wasn't just his own classmates who were maturing. Komiya and the others were also maturing day by day, just like Sudou had been.

Just then, Nanase spoke up, offering a suggestion to Shinohara to help her get through this difficult situation.

"You could choose to take the bare minimum amount of supplies you'll need with you and wait near the starting point," she said. "You will not be able to collect any points from visiting designated areas, but you'll be able to avoid getting eliminated, at the very least, by going with that option."

It was certainly true that this was the best possible strategy that Shinohara could go with, as someone working alone. She would have to hope that the other groups would start getting eliminated during the remaining ten days that we had left on the uninhabited island. But, of course, if no other groups did get eliminated, then Shinohara's expulsion would become an inevitability.

"Shinohara," said Chabashira. "It's not like I'm trying to say that I'm expecting you'll get expelled, but... What are you going to do? It'll be quite difficult for you to carry on in this exam by yourself."

"Y-yes, I understand..." said Shinohara.

"In any case, you could simply return to the port, as Nanase suggested, and hold out until the exam is over. That is one option. Besides," Chabashira added, "it wouldn't be impossible for you to pick up any Tasks that appear in the surrounding area."

While cruel, what Chabashira and Nanase had proposed was still the best option that Shinohara could take on her own. If she tried to push ahead and continue taking the test all by herself as normal, then she'd most likely soon run out of steam. After

exhausting her stamina and her provisions, she would end up being eliminated.

However, if Shinohara changed the way she approached handling this exam, such as by asking for some support from groups that passed by as she patiently waited things out near the port, then she might be able to at least make it through to the end of the exam. It was certainly a far better option than the other possibility that lay before her right now, which was expulsion. Shinohara, wiping away her tears, slowly nodded her head.

"I hope that you'll manage to get back to the starting area on your own, somehow," said Chabashira.

"Yes... I understand," replied Shinohara.

Because representatives from the school couldn't get involved directly, that meant that Shinohara would have to head back to the port by herself. Then, Shinohara, bag in hand, started to walk away. As she was just about to leave though, Ike rushed over and grabbed her by the arm.

"...What?" said Shinohara.

"Whaddya mean, 'what'? Are you really okay with just headin' back to the starting area and waiting?" asked Ike.

"What other choice do I have?" said Shinohara. "Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san aren't here anymore... There is absolutely no way I can make it through this special exam on my own and come out on top. It's impossible."

"But, but—!"

"Whatever, I'm going to get expelled anyway, so just leave me alone!" Shinohara yelled, jerking herself free from Ike's grasp and hurriedly trying to get away.

"Ngh..."

Ike clenched his teeth, frozen in place. The old Ike probably wouldn't have been able to do anything more at this point. However, Komiya's unseen hand was at Ike's back, pushing him forward.

"I... I'll do something about it!" Ike shouted, as Shinohara continued to walk away.

"Just stop. It's obviously impossible, anyway," replied Shinohara, continuing ahead without listening to what Ike had said.

"It's *not* impossible!" shouted Ike.

Ike, having realized that he couldn't just stand there and watch her go, rushed over as quickly as he could, once again grabbing Shinohara by the arm.

"Let me go...!" huffed Shinohara.

"I ain't gonna let you go. You really think I'm just going to let you get expelled 'cause of all this?!"

"Well, why not?" said Shinohara. "Besides, this has nothing to do with you, does it, Ike? Actually, if I end up getting expelled, then that just means the chances you have of getting expelled will go down, right, Ike? Does that make you happy?"

"Happy...? The hell are you talking about, there's no way I'd be happy about that!" shouted Ike.

"Huh...?"

"I mean, uh, we'd probably lose a ton of Class Points if you get expelled... And, uh, I gotta stop that from happenin'! Yeah. So that's why I'm gonna lend you a hand, to make sure that doesn't happen!"

"Well, I guess that's true, but... But wait if your group falls into the bottom of the rankings because you're helping me? What then? And on top of that, it'd just be a bother to Sudou-kun and Hondou-kun, anyway."

"Well, I—"

"You just never think, do you, Ike? If you keep being that way, eventually, you're going to get expelled yourself," said Shinohara.

Then, wearing a somewhat exasperated smile on her face, Shinohara gently shook off Ike's hand.

"Anyway, I'm not going to give up, I'm going to hold on for as long as I can. So, you do your best too, Ike," said Shinohara.

Shinohara had rejected Ike's offer, saying that she didn't have any need for his help.

"W-wait...!"

The confident bluster that Ike had up until this point was nowhere to be seen, completely vanishing without a trace. As Shinohara continued to walk into the distance, there was nothing more he could do to stop her.

"Kanji," Sudou called out to his friend. He had a bold grin on his face, thumping his chest to wordlessly tell Ike not to worry so much.

Ike, after getting some moral support from his best friend, tried to take another step forward. "Wait... Wait, Shinohara... I... I just... I'm... Well..." he sputtered, desperately trying to get the words out, but he just couldn't seem to find the right ones.

The words were right there on the tip of his tongue, but they just weren't coming out. Just one final push. The final stretch. However, neither Sudou, nor Nanase, nor I could make Ike say those words. The only person who could do it was Ike himself. In the end, though he still feared the consequences of what might come, he had no choice but to suppress those feelings of fear and take that step forward.

"Wait, I said!" he shouted.

"J-jeez, you scared me. Okay, okay, I heard you... Was there still something you wanted to say?" she asked.

"Yes, there is! I have somethin' big to say! I don't want you to get expelled, so I'm gonna save you!" shouted Ike.

That...certainly wasn't what you might call a beautiful, romantic declaration of love. Even so, there was no doubt at all that Ike's words were filled with his utmost emotion.

"Yeah!" shouted Sudou. "If that's what Kanji's decided, then let's get down to discussin' strategies, Ryoutarou!"

"Y-yeah," replied Hondou.

Sudou and Hondou both circled around behind Ike, to support him. Then, they waved over to Shinohara, beckoning her to come over.

"Huh...? What? Are you guys stupid or something? I mean, you shouldn't be wasting your time with someone like me, and..." Shinohara trailed off.

Shinohara still wasn't walking back over to him, but Ike was unable to wait for her any more. He ran up to her and grabbed her by the arm once again, fiercely determined to not let her go. Upon seeing this spectacle, even the normally indifferent, detached Chabashira cracked a little smile. Perhaps she had decided that everything was going to be all right now, because she proceeded to disappear back into the woods, following Sakagami-sensei and the others.

All that being said, Ike couldn't exactly afford to be overly optimistic. Saving Shinohara wasn't going to be that easy.

Now that the four of them had gathered together, I decided to offer a suggestion. "In order to save Shinohara for sure, it is absolutely essential that she join up with a group that has at least three open spaces for extra group members," I said.

It was difficult to say whether Sudou and his teammates would be able to win those three extra spaces for teammates on their own. It wasn't a sure thing.

"Asking for help from people in our same class would be the most realistic option, right?" said Ike.

"I think that would normally be true," said Nanase, "but given the rules for this special exam, it is impossible to find out, at least in an indirect manner, which groups have earned the right to increase their group limit size. Also, what group would accept Shinohara-senpai into their own so easily, when she's already had two members from her group get eliminated? Their score would most certainly be lowered as a result of merging with Shinohara-senpai's group. A group would only be taking on additional risks by merging with her. In that case, it might be more realistic for Shinohara-senpai to focus on accumulating points by herself rather than hurriedly running about, trying to join with another group."

Don't you think she ought to steadily build up her points while simultaneously taking on any Tasks that appear when she has time available?"

Nanase was recommending that Shinohara give up on the idea of trying to merge with a group and instead focus on getting points by herself.

"But it would be best to assume that there will hardly be any Tasks that Shinohara can get a high ranking in all by herself," I said. "She'll have to hope for some kind of unexpected coincidence or good luck, like a situation where there's a lack of participants."

"Is there really no way she could join up with another group smoothly, Ayanokouji?" asked Sudou, hoping I might have any ideas to help Shinohara navigate this tricky situation.

"Well, it's not like it's impossible," I replied. "I do have a plan that could work, with a high rate of probability."

"R-really?" exclaimed Sudou. "What kinda plan?!"

For a moment, I considered telling them, but I ultimately decided against it. If I told them about this strategy right here and now, I was sure that a ray of hope would be born amidst their despair. But, at the same time, it would weaken their resolve to save Shinohara. So, it was difficult to say whether it was a good idea to share it. It was important that Ike and his teammates stayed on their toes until the very end of this special exam.

Besides, there were several things that had to be done to make that strategy a reality anyway. I started walking to where the luggage was located, and I instructed Nanase to get ready, as well.

"H-hey, Ayanokouji? What plan?" repeated Sudou.

"The only thing you can do right now is have Ike take the lead in protecting Shinohara," I replied. "Then, earn as many points as you possibly can. Beyond that, if you have the chance, you'll obviously need to take on any Tasks that will let you increase your maximum group size."

"What are you gonna do?" she asked.

"I'm going to start putting together a contingency plan in case of an unlikely emergency," I said. This was precisely why I

didn't have the time to stick around here with Ike and the others. "But, like I said earlier, there's no guarantee. Furthermore, if any of our other classmates happen to fall into the bottom five of the rankings, then... Well, when that time comes, we might need to make a decision about who to save."

I wanted to let them know well in advance that there was a possibility we'd have to abandon Shinohara. As long as it was a certainty that the bottom five groups in this special exam would be subject to penalty, then it was inevitable that it wouldn't be possible to save some students.

"Don't forget that, Ike," I added.

"...I got it," said Ike.

About two and a half hours after that whole ordeal started, we finally arrived back at our campsite with Shinohara in tow. It looked as though Kei and her teammates who had been camping nearby had already left in search of their next designated area. The backpacks that Komiya and Kinoshita had left behind were brought over by Sudou and Ike, respectively.

"Sudou, take care of Ike and the others. Out of everyone, you're the one most capable of making the most levelheaded decisions," I told him.

"R-right, leave it to me," Sudou.

Since our designated area had already been announced, I got my tablet back from Nanase as I was taking care of some other arrangements.

"I would imagine you've used up quite a bit of energy since this morning..." I said, turning to Nanase.

"Please do not worry. I still have enough stamina to keep up," she assured me.

Starting today, the fourth day of the exam, the top ten and bottom ten groups would be revealed. This was also the day when we'd start being able to take Tasks that would allow for large groups to be formed. If those rewards did appear among the available Tasks, I'm sure that the competition would be fierce and

those Tasks would immediately reach full capacity. First, though, we needed to check our designated areas.

Our designated area was G3, which meant that we needed to travel north from our current location on the island. We were already thirty minutes behind schedule. It was probably impossible for us to get the Early Bird Bonus this time around. It would likely take us over an hour to reach our destination with the route we were taking, but I was feeling curious, so I decided to check out the rankings. Though I was interested in knowing what groups were in the lead, it was much more important to check who was in the bottom five—that is to say, to know which groups were running the risk of getting penalized and expelled.

Without a word, Nanase looked over and peeked at my tablet as well. The bottom ten groups were arranged neatly in a list. Not only did it list the members of each group and their scores, but a host of other details were also provided.

“This is—”

Out of all the groups in the bottom ten, seven of them were groups composed of students solely from classes 3-B and 3-D. The group in last place was a three-person team composed of students from Class 3-D, with a total score of twenty-one points. Five of their points came from Tasks, while the other sixteen points were simply rewards for arriving at the designated areas. However, that particular three-person group did have someone get eliminated on the very first day of the exam, so there was some room for sympathy.

The remaining three groups in the bottom ten included one group of second-year students, and two groups of first-year students. That particular group of second-year students was a three-person team made up of my classmates Akito, Haruka, and Airi.

“It would appear that some people from your class are in a dangerous position, senpai,” said Nanase.

Currently, they were ranked ninth from the bottom, with a total of twenty-eight points. They were doing much worse than I had expected. I supposed that was probably because it took a

considerable degree of stamina to keep traveling to the designated areas. Airi in particular was lacking when it came to stamina, so with her in the group, it would probably be difficult for them to earn that many Arrival Bonuses.

Those two groups of first-year students, on the other hand, were both two-person teams. When you considered the fact that the first-years were allowed to form four-person teams right at the start, it made sense that competition among them was stiffer, as many of them must be scoring a fair number of points.

"At any rate, this is quite a surprise," Nanase mused. "To think that so many third-year students would be at the bottom of the rankings..."

Although it certainly was a bit of a shock, I couldn't imagine that they were in the bottom of the rankings simply due to incompetence. I decided to hold off on checking the top rankings until later and told Nanase what we should be doing right now.

"I'm planning to shoot for the Arrival Bonus for G3, for the time being," I said. "However, I'll most likely skip the designated areas after that for a little while."

"Then there is somewhere you wish to go, even if that means ignoring designated areas?" asked Nanase.

"Yeah. If you want to continue shooting for those designated areas, then we'll just have to go our separate ways, Nanase," I replied.

"No, I'll accompany you," she said. "Besides, as long as Amasawa-san or Housen-kun arrive at those areas, it won't be counted as a miss for our group... Moreover, this has something to do with that plan you've come up with to save Shinohara-senpai, doesn't it?"

I responded with a small nod and then walked onward. Once we reached G3, we'd make our way back to the starting area. I wanted to make it back there by sometime tomorrow, if possible.

Chapter 7: The Aloof Child Prodigy of Class 2-D

AT SEVEN O'CLOCK in the morning on the following day, the fifth day of the exam, we were walking along the riverside from area D4 to area D5. After we had reached G3 yesterday on the fourth day of the exam, we decided to ignore the next designated area, H4, and instead traveled west, back towards the starting area. As a result of that, we had missed out not only on reaching H4, but on the areas that came after it, which were H6 and I7. Which meant that we failed to reach designated areas three times consecutively.

Unless by sheer coincidence a randomly assigned designated area was to appear somewhere along our route, we were inevitably going to miss four designated areas in a row. Ultimately, that lucky scenario didn't end up happening. Once seven o'clock came around this morning, we saw that our first designated area of the day was in I8. Well, since I8 was so far away from us, I supposed that it made it easier for us to accept it emotionally without feeling too bitter about it.

Perhaps it was because it was so early in the morning, but the gentle murmuring of the river was quite pleasant. It would've been a great morning if I hadn't gotten several bits of bad news.

"At any rate... Things certainly look dire for Shinohara-senpai, don't they?" said Nanase.

Shinohara had been left all alone after her teammates Komiya and Kinoshita had been eliminated the other day. Though Ike and Sudou were doing what they could to support her, there was a limit to how many points she could really get all on her own. As of yesterday, her group didn't appear in the bottom ten, but when I checked this morning, she had already fallen to the bottom eight. On top of that, when you considered the fact that the groups behind her in the rankings would be picking up more and more points than she would, Shinohara would probably be in last place tomorrow or the day after.

And thanks to that, in an ironic twist of fate, Akito's group was no longer in the bottom ten—for the time being at least.

Then, on the other hand, we had the rankings for the top groups, which I hadn't checked yesterday. In first place was Nagumo's group, which was composed of students from Class 3-A. In second place was Kiriyama's group, made up of students from Class 3-B. The representatives from the third-years were accounted for in the top two.

"Oh, senpai," said Nanase. "There's someone fishing."

A lone student came into view in the distance. They were sitting on the rocky shore, leisurely passing the time by fishing. I immediately recognized who it was, thanks to this person's distinctive physical characteristics. He was a member of a group that I'd now been wanting to meet up with more than anyone else. I just never imagined that I'd get my chance to do this so easily. After all, searching for a specific person you wanted to meet was quite difficult to begin with. I had already been considering using the GPS function to find him after it had been made available for us yesterday. I wanted to take advantage of this opportunity to talk to him while I had this chance.

"Do you mind if we make a stop here, Nanase?" I asked.

Though several rather tempting Tasks had appeared in the area, I'd most likely have to give up on them.

"I am simply your traveling companion, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Nanase. "Please do not pay me any mind."

I was grateful to hear that, so I took her up on it and decided to approach the person in question. It didn't seem as though he had noticed me yet, but I decided not to call out to him, so that I wouldn't disturb him while he was fishing. Instead, I approached quietly, walking along the gravelly path. Eventually, I had gotten close enough for him to take notice of my presence, and he slowly turned to look in my direction.

"I had heard that you started this exam on your own, but it appears that you haven't fallen into the bottom ten," said Katsuragi, of Class 2-B. He didn't seem to be turning me away, but rather, welcoming me.

"Somehow, more or less," I agreed. "But if I took it easy for even just a day, I'm sure that I'd fall fast."

Ryuuен, having overheard the conversation, emerged from his tent and shot me a somewhat exasperated glance.

"So, you're casually walkin' around this island with a chick in tow, eh?" he said. "What, you get tired of Karuizawa and kick her to the curb or somethin'?"

"Karuizawa?" Katsuragi turned to look back at Ryuuен, confused. "Why are you bringing up her?"

"*Ku ku.* Ain't nothin', don't worry 'bout it."

"Seems like you two are doing pretty well," I observed.

You could check who was at the top of the rankings by looking at your tablet. As of this morning, I had a total of fifty-two points, putting me in seventy-fourth place overall. If you took the fact that I was going it alone into consideration, that rank was fairly good. That being said, Katsuragi and Ryuuен's group was in a better position, being in tenth place with a total score of ninety-two points. Twenty-nine of those points had come from Arrival Bonuses from reaching their designated areas, forty-one of the points came from Early Bird Bonus, and twenty-two from Tasks.

"Shut the hell up," said Ryuuен. "Hey, isn't that freakshow with a whole bunch of screws loose one of your guys?"

"Yeah, that's right. He is," I replied.

The 'freakshow,' as Ryuuен put it, was none other than Kouenji.

Even though he was going it alone like me, he was currently sitting in fourth place in the rankings. Out of all the groups in the top ten, he had earned the most points from Early Bird Bonuses. He had really racked up a lot of points via Tasks as well, bringing his total score to 126 points. He was getting excellent results and had apparently been making no mistakes.

However, there were still ten days left before the exam was over, if you included today. If he were to have some kind of accident, for example if he became overcome with fatigue, or if he got injured, then he'd likely drop in the rankings in a flash. During

this two-week-long uninhabited island exam, we didn't even have a single day where we could just kick back and rest our bodies. No matter who you were, if you overworked yourself day after day, you'd damage your body more and more.

It would start with obvious symptoms, such as muscle pains, and then, gradually, your legs would feel like they were getting heavier, and your walking pace would slow. That, coupled with the fact that we could only get the bare minimum amount of nutrition and hydration that our bodies needed, meant that we'd suffer from feelings of fatigue and exhaustion, both physically and mentally.

"What's your next designated area?" I asked.

"Huh?" said Ryuuен.

"It's already past seven," I said. "You seem to be pretty laid-back, though."

"I was the one who wanted to stop," said Katsuragi as he cast his line into the river, flicking his fishing rod with a *fwip*. "We've been moving at a faster and faster pace over these past four days, as we continued to challenge ourselves to reach designated areas and complete Tasks. When they announced our first designated area of the day a little earlier, it was randomly assigned. It's E10. We would need to push ourselves quite hard if we were to arrive there in time. I concluded that it wasn't worth using up that much energy just to get a point."

Ryuuен wore a thin smile as he shrugged his shoulders in response. Ryuuен was the person who always tried to push things to the absolute limit whenever and wherever, but Katsuragi had gotten him to stop, eh? There was no way that Ishizaki or Kanedra could have managed to make Ryuuен take a break if they were here. It seemed like Katsuragi was quickly becoming an important part of Class 2-B.

"Have you caught anything?" asked Nanase, looking at the bobber in the river.

"Unfortunately, I haven't gotten many bites. If I wanted to catch a lot of fish, I'd have to go out to the sea," said Katsuragi.

So he was casting his fishing rod here simply to kill time,
from the sounds of it.



"Seems like you don't have much to worry about in terms of food," I said.

While I had no idea how much they'd tell me about that, I decided to ask anyway.

"We can easily take care of our food needs by gathering from the sea, the river, or the forest," Katsuragi said. "It's the same with water. All we need to do is boil river water, and it's fine."

"But aren't there risks in drinking river water?" I asked.

"Yes, there are," Katsuragi agreed. "No matter how much you boil it to sanitize the water, you can't state with absolute certainty that it's perfectly safe to drink. That's why it's my role to drink river water. Ryuuuen is drinking the water we purchased at the start of the exam and any water we obtain from Tasks."

So, they were managing the risks perfectly. By this point, I was sure that some groups out there were struggling, completely dead in the water. But these two seemed like they could carry on safely for quite a while longer yet.

"Actually, it just so happens that I was looking for you, Ryuuuen," I said, turning to him.

"For me, eh?" he asked.

"I'm sure you must be aware of what groups are in the bottom ten right now, right?" I asked.

"Well, yeah, sure. Dunno what those morons from my class are thinkin', though, sitting down there in the bottom eight,"

With two members of that particular group gone, the rate at which they collected points had declined sharply, creating a growing disparity between them and other groups in the bottom of the rankings.

"Komiya and Kinoshita got eliminated," I informed him.

Ryuuuen stopped smiling. He now had a stern look on his face. Katsuragi turned his attention over to me as well, pulling himself away from his fishing.

"Eliminated? What happened?" asked Katsuragi.

Since Katsuragi had now become a member of Class 2-B, Komiya and Kinoshita were allies that he needed to protect.

"They were both seriously injured," said Nanase. "It's unlikely that either of them will be able to walk for a while."

"Was it an accident?" asked Katsuragi.

"Well, that's—" said Nanase.

"According to the remaining member of their group, Shinohara, they were attacked by someone," I replied, interrupting Nanase.

"So, I guess in that case, that certain 'someone' or whatever got eliminated too then, right?" asked Ryuuuen.

"Unfortunately, Shinohara's testimony was the only evidence they had," I replied. "Neither Komiya nor Kinoshita could seem to remember if they had really been attacked or not. I think the school is going to be looking into it, but I wouldn't count on anything coming of it."

"The school seems to be operating under the assumption that it was a lie on Shinohara-senpai's part because she didn't want her teammates to get eliminated," added Nanase.

"What should we do then, Ryuuuen? Even if we manage to break into the top three, it'll be meaningless if Komiya and Kinoshita are expelled."

If Shinohara's group came in last place, then both my class and Ryuuuen's class would suffer severe damage.

"You said you were lookin' for me, right?" Ryuuuen said. "Shinohara's your classmate. So, am I good in assumin' that you've already got a plan to stop 'em all from gettin' expelled?"

I expected as much of Ryuuuen. Even though he couldn't know exactly what my plan was, he had intuited that I had something up my sleeve.

"Sorry, Nanase, but I can't let you hear the rest of this conversation," I told her. "The survival of the second-years is at stake in this battle."

"I understand," Nanase replied.

After I had confirmed that Nanase was far enough away from us, I drew closer to Ryuuuen and laid out the details of my strategy. He could share that information with Katsuragi himself later.

"*Ku ku*, all right, all right. Well, with somethin' like that, then Shinohara definitely has a way to survive. Still...is it all gonna go smoothly?" asked Ryuuuen.

"Our chances will be even better if you work together with us. The rest will steadily fall into place," I replied.

"You got some balls, man, changin' things up," Ryuuuen said. "If the others realize somethin' is up, they're gonna make a move."

I nodded. That was the reason I didn't want Nanase to overhear our conversation. If the first-years were to find out, it would likely lead to a direct showdown between the second-years and the other grade levels.

"There are some pretty perceptive first-years out there too," I told him. "There's a possibility they might catch on faster than we expect." It was also impossible for us to predict what the third-years would do if they caught wind of the situation.

"If they're small fries, then I don't really give a crap about lettin' them get tossed out," said Ryuuuen. "But Komiya and Kinoshita still have their uses."

"So, can I take that to mean that...you'll work with me?" I asked.

"Our interests align on this one, so ain't no way I'm not gonna make use of this plan."

Shinohara's group was composed of students from both of our classes, after all. If we couldn't work together here and now, then there wouldn't be any way we could save Shinohara, Komiya, or Kinoshita.

"If you run into Ichinose, can you tell her the plan too?" I asked.

"Ichinose's a goody-two-shoes, so she's not gonna be a problem. But I can't imagine Sakayanagi's gonna lend a hand so easily," said Ryuuuen.

"She isn't the type who'd just let herself get done in by first-years," I argued.

"*Ku ku*, yeah, guess yer right."

With that, our unexpected meeting had ended. After saying our goodbyes, I immediately decided to set back out on my way.

7.1

SHORTLY AFTER THAT ENCOUNTER, Nanase and I had been planning on heading south towards the starting point, but along the way, a Task appeared near the summit of the mountain in area C5 and we changed course. This particular Task was a one-on-one tug-of-war game. However, at a glance, the conditions for the Task did appear to be quite strict. It had a short time frame, at just forty minutes, and the number of participants was limited to two women and two men. However, you could earn five points just for participating, and if you won, you would earn an additional ten points on top of that for a total of fifteen.

Since it would only take us a short time to reach the summit, any rivals outside of the area were unlikely to get there before we did. After considering that I'd be missing my fourth designated area in a row soon and losing ten points as a result, I decided that I wanted to go for it. Plus, there was a good chance that no one else would show and I wouldn't have anyone to compete against, so I could end up getting a free fifteen points.

Despite the mountain's high elevation, we continued walking on at a quick pace and had arrived at the Task location with about five minutes to spare. I had thought we would've been the first to arrive, but apparently someone else had gotten there before we did. They seemed to notice our presence, but there wasn't any sign that they were even going to try to make eye contact with us.

"He got here rather quickly, didn't he? He must have been rather close by, don't you suppose?" said Nanase.

"I have to wonder about that," I replied.

Even if he had been on the south side of C5, it should have still taken him quite a bit of time to have gotten here.

"I'm not sure if this will help clear things up for you, but that's Kouenji Rokusuke," I told Nanase.

"Kouenji?" she repeated. "...As in, the person from your class who is currently in fourth place, Ayanokouji-senpai? Well, he

certainly...radiates an aura of greatness, I suppose."

Getting here faster than we did was one thing, but what was really strange was the fact that he didn't seem to have any bags or supplies. There was nothing on him at all aside from the single bottle of mineral water that he was holding. I supposed that if he were traveling light, that would certainly explain why he was able to climb up the mountain faster than we did, but... That would also mean that he was moving about without a tablet.

Well, I supposed that was par for the course, for someone like Kouenji. I'm guessing he must have been satisfied with himself, having just finished climbing to the summit. After taking a single sip of his water, he proceeded to dump the rest of it over his head, like he was bathing in it.



"Ah... I am simply dripping with radiance," he declared.
"What a marvelous, splendidly handsome man I am. It would seem I have powered up even more since a year ago."

"Is he...talking to us...?" said Nanase, confused.

"No, he's just talking to himself," I replied. "He's probably just intoxicated with his own self."

"I-I see..." replied Nanase.

She cocked her head to the side, puzzled, unable to fully understand Kouenji's behavior. I didn't think anyone else would come, but there was only a little time left to register for the event, so I figured I'd just head over and take care of the sign-up process. Nanase and I signed up to register, securing our spots for the Task. However, because this Task was a one-on-one event, with the sexes divided into different competitions, there was no avoiding the fact that I would be going up against Kouenji. As for Nanase, well, since no one else had showed up, there was no contest, and she won by default.

"It would seem that you are my opponent, Ayanokouji boy," said Kouenji.

"Seems so," I agreed.

All the Tasks I'd taken part in so far had been conducted in group settings where I could just blend into the crowd, only competing against my fellow students indirectly. This was the first time I would have to compete with someone in a one-on-one confrontation. And not only that, my opponent for this first ever one-on-one battle was Kouenji. I prayed that this wasn't the beginning of some strange destiny between us.

The staff member in charge of this Task presented us each with rope and instructed us to tie it around our bodies. Given my situation, I was going to miss reaching more and more designated areas, so I wanted to collect as many points as possible. However, rather than try and take the win myself when I wasn't currently in the top ten anyway, I decided that I ought to hand the points over to Kouenji. Since he was currently in fourth place, he ultimately had a higher chance of winning in the end. By getting the fifteen

points from winning here in this Task, he would overtake Kiriyama's group's score of 135 points, which would put him into second place, albeit only temporarily.

If I was going to hand over the win to Kouenji, I figured that it would be better for me to just allow myself to lose immediately so that I wouldn't pointlessly waste my energy. I wouldn't waste any time; I'd collect my five points, head back down the mountain, and make my way back toward the harbor at the starting area.

"The Task is about to begin," said the staff member. "Please ready yourselves."

"Is something the matter, senpai?" asked Nanase.

"Well, I—"

"*Fu fu*. So, you are the sort of man who thinks matters through with efficiency in mind, hm?" said Kouenji, interrupting me. He had seen right through me in an instant, guessing my thoughts as though they were written on my face.

"You were thinking that it would be better for our class if you were to concede those points to me, as I am in fourth place, I'm sure. And that way you wouldn't waste any time. Even though you purposefully came all the way here to engage in a confrontation with me, you've determined that it would be better for you to simply bow out, no?"

"Is that true, senpai?" said Nanase, stunned.

"I don't have any complaints as long as Kouenji is getting results," I replied.

"However, I doubt that Horikita girl would be wholly satisfied with that, hm?" Kouenji said. "After all, it isn't too difficult to imagine that it would be preferable for her that I took second or third place, rather than first."

What Kouenji just said was so accurate that I couldn't help but wonder if he had overhead when Horikita and I had been talking about this.

"That's just limited to situations where students from Class D are competing with each other for the top spot," I said. "Right now, the only group in the top ten that is made up solely of

students from Class 2-D is yours, Kouenji. If we were to pointlessly squabble over points, we would just drag each other down.”

“I understand, of course, but that is nonsense. You have such misguided notions in your head as you harbor the belief that you have some chance of winning against me in this Task in the first place. I will win, regardless of who comes to participate against me.”

Kouenji had taken part in several Tasks so far, and he had won rewards in all of them. He was the only person out of all the various groups across each grade level who was taking victories in the Tasks so definitively. Although there were some Tasks where he had come in second place, when it came to those that involved stamina or physical fitness, he had taken first in all of them.

“Keep those nonsensical ideas about your excellence inside your head where they belong, Ayanokouji boy. You’re overselling yourself. After all, it’s not every day that you get the opportunity to fight me when I’m motivated,” said Kouenji.

I supposed that Kouenji’s greatest appeal was that he believed in his own ability, without end. I slowly picked up the rope down at my feet and wrapped it around my waist.

“Now then, I’ll count down from ten,” said the staff member. “When I say ‘zero,’ you both start pulling.”

As long as I only made it seem like I was actually putting in some effort for the sake of formality before I let myself lose against Kouenji, then I wouldn’t waste any of my energy.

“I don’t get the sense that you are very motivated,” said Kouenji.

I supposed that my intentions were probably entirely transparent to him.

“Well, then, go ahead, give it a shot. No matter how hard you struggle, victory will not smile upon you,” he said to me.

Once both Kouenji and I had firmly taken hold of the rope, the countdown began.

“Three, two, one... Zero!”

At the exact same moment that I heard the staff member shout, "Zero," I gently started tugging on the rope. If Kouenji were putting in a serious effort, then he probably would pull me over the line in only a second. However, the rope didn't appear to be budging, not even by a single millimeter. Kouenji stood across from me, wearing a bold grin, waiting for me to start competing against him seriously. While I didn't have any intention of doing so, I also didn't want to waste any time, either.

In that case, I figured that the match might come to a conclusion quicker if I resisted a bit, to make Kouenji feel threatened. If I were to start pulling with more force than he expected, then he would panic and do something about it.

More went into winning a game of tug-of-war than simply pulling back with all your might. There was also the force of friction of the rope in your hands and the force of friction, as well as normal force between your feet on the ground.

And if you were to get even more precise, the force of gravity was also involved in the equation. I maximized my grip strength on the rope and planted my feet wide apart. I started to tilt my body backwards, without bending at the waist. Then, I bent my knees, pulled the rope in close to my waist, and...

The center part of the rope ever so slightly started to come over to my side. Everything up until this point had been gone as I had calculated. However, the amount of displacement was less than I had expected. Then, I felt a vicious amount of force pulling back on the rope, instantly blocking my counterattack.

"What is needed in order to win at tug-of-war is not technique, but pure power," said Kouenji.

It wasn't like I was going easy on him, by any means. However, the force with which Kouenji was pulling was enough to return the middle part of the flag back to its original position so that it was now perfectly between us once again. From what I could infer from this situation, Kouenji and I were just about even when it came to arm strength. Not only that, but he also weighed more than I did.

Considering that weight was the most crucial factor in tug-of-war and that I was outclassed in that respect, it would be difficult for me to beat him unless I were to get an advantage in some other way. If I used every ounce of my physical strength, I could turn this match into a fierce battle of attrition, and just wait for Kouenji to make some kind of mistake, like losing his footing. But that would be a waste of both time and energy. I did have a strategy that I could use to win this, but it was too early for me to use it.

The rope painfully dug into my fingers. The two of us really were evenly matched in strength. The man known as Kouenji truly possessed unimaginable physical ability. Even Sudou and Albert, who were heads and shoulders above other high school students, were still nowhere near the level of the man who stood before me now. Actually, even the title of something like "Ultra High School Student" probably wouldn't be enough to cover it.

When I applied force for a second time and made another show of pulling on the rope, Kouenji responded in kind with a similar level of force. Not wanting to let this instant pass me by, I immediately slackened my grip on the rope. Naturally, the role was pulled over towards Kouenji's side and the contest was brought to an abrupt conclusion.

"It would appear that your dedication to efficiency knows no bounds, hm?" said Kouenji. He seemed to be a little exasperated over what had just happened, but he must have lost interest in me because he didn't try and talk to me any further.

"That was unfortunate, senpai," said Nanase.

"Nah," I said. "Even if I had tried to compete with him seriously, I still wouldn't have stood a chance. This was a foregone conclusion."

Ultimately, this Task had ended with groups belonging to Class 2-D earning a total of twenty points. That by itself was enough to make coming all the way here meaningful.

"Do you still have energy to spare?" I asked.

"To be honest, my legs are starting to get a little sore in some places," said Nanase, rubbing her thighs a little. "But just as

I had said when I first started to accompany you, please take action as you see fit, Ayanokouji-senpai."

She wasn't showing any sign of backing down and was determined to keep up with me to the end.

"In that case, full speed ahead," I replied.

"Yes," said Nanase.

Kouenji must have started to climb down the mountain on a separate route at some point while Nanase and I had been talking because he was already out of sight.

7.2

AFTER ABOUT TWO MORE HOURS, we finally arrived back at the exam's starting point, the harbor in area D9. Nanase seemed like she was struggling to keep up so she arrived about a minute or so after I did, completely out of breath.

"Phew... Managed to catch up, somehow," she panted, wiping off her sweat with a towel as she tried to catch her breath.

"I can hardly believe that you're a first-year girl," I observed. "I didn't think you'd have this much stamina."

Throughout the time she'd been accompanying me, there were several times that my interest had been piqued. But this was by far the time I had become most intrigued.

"Oh no, not at all," Nanase said. "Besides, you don't seem to be out of breath at all, Ayanokouji-senpai... You really are quite amazing, as I thought."

"Honestly, I'm just putting up a tough front, is all. More importantly, though, check that out," I said.

"Wow... That's incredible."

Nanase, having caught her breath by this point, seemed shocked by the number of people busily coming and going down at the harbor. Not only could you purchase additional supplies here, but also you could get free medical care, take a shower, and could make use of one of the clean, well-maintained restrooms. It was, in a word, an oasis for the students, and the only place where they could feel safe, secure, and able to unwind.

Students must come here for all sorts of reasons. It could be because it was close to a designated area or on the way to one and they just took the opportunity to stop by, or they decided to miss out on one or two designated areas so they could come here to take a breather. The representatives from the school and related personnel, who were in charge of managing these services, were scrambling to conduct their duties as well.

"So... Why did you decide to head back to the starting point anyway?" asked Nanase.

"Before that, let's check out a Task," I replied.

"Oh, yes, come to think of it, there was one, yes."

Around the time we set foot in area C8, after heading over that way from area C5 where I had competed in a tug-of-war match against Kouenji, a Task had appeared in D9, the area where the starting point was located.

Task: Open Water Swimming. It was a competition where participants would need to swim a distance of approximately two kilometers, from the starting point to the finish line. Among the Tasks that we had seen so far, there had been many that assessed our physical abilities, but this one seemed to have an exceptionally high bar for us to reach. Perhaps it was for that reason that this Task also boasted the highest reward yet at twenty points. Since the starting area was rather easy to reach, I could imagine that the Task could hit maximum capacity quite quickly. However, the number of students who ended up registering would inevitably be quite limited in the end, because of what the Task involved.

Besides, the waves looked quite rough today too. Swimming out in the open sea was different from swimming in a pool. It was probably safe to assume it was precisely because of the danger involved that school officials were limiting this Task to be held only near the starting area. I imagined that lifeguards would be on standby, readying to rush over in the event that something went wrong.

Registration for the Task seemed to be at the other end of the harbor, so I made my way over there. From what I could tell at a distance, there looked to be a fair number of people gathered, but I had to wonder if they were really there for the Task. Nanase and I arrived at the registration site on the harbor to sign up.

"My apologies," the staff member told us. "I'm afraid that the last spot for the boys was filled just a few minutes ago."

There seemed to be just one spot remaining for the girls' side, though, a situation reminiscent of the Beach Flags incident the other day. While this Task didn't have a particularly large

capacity for registrations or anything, I had expected that many students would have just passed this one by. Still, what surprised me more than that was...

"Senpai... Huh? Is that Kouenji-senpai?" asked Nanase.

The person standing with his back to us was, without a doubt, Kouenji. I never imagined that he would've come all the way over here after this Task had been announced... Talk about a shock.

"Um..."

"If you want to sign up for this competition, you should go ahead and do it. But are you feeling okay, physically?" I asked.

Our journey here had certainly not been an easy one by any means. It was no exaggeration to say that Nanase was already starting to run out of energy. She would need to recover some of her strength in just the brief amount of time she had to change her clothes and wait for the Task to start.

"Although I'm hesitant to say that I'm in top form or anything... This is a rare opportunity, so I think that I would like to give it my best," said Nanase.

It seemed like she had more than enough enthusiasm, at least.

"I'll just be waiting over there, then," I said. "Head over once it's finished."

"Yes, I will," said Nanase.

After seeing her off, I decided to head away from the Task area for a moment. In the meantime, I thought I'd try to make contact with a certain someone. Meeting with this person had been the main purpose behind my coming back to the starting area. Before long, I found the very person I had been looking for, sitting down elegantly on a beach chair next to a parasol propped up on the sandy beach.

"Hello there, Ayanokouji-kun. It appears it's going to be another extremely hot day today, doesn't it?" said Sakayanagi.



"How are you doing?" I asked.

"I would say reasonably well, I suppose," she replied.
"Ichinose-san and Shibata-kun are giving their best efforts for me, so I cannot ask for much else."

Ichinose and Shibata were part of Sakayanagi's group. Because Sakayanagi had a bad leg, she was participating in the exam in a semi-eliminated state. Of course, that meant that since only two members of their group could go around to the designated areas, they could only get two points for each Arrival Bonus they received at each designated area.

"I actually wanted to ask you something. Can your group even receive Early Bird Bonuses?" I asked.

Normally, if a student got eliminated, their group wouldn't be able to earn Early Bird Bonuses anymore. But Sakayanagi was a special case.

"Thankfully, the school has made an exception for us. After all, it's not as though I had intentionally put myself in this situation, hm?" she said.

Though her group wasn't in the top ten right now, I supposed it was fair to assume that they were getting decent results.

"At any rate, what business do you have here at the starting area today?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Well, several things, but the first ended up being a waste," I replied. I directed my gaze over towards the Open Water Swimming Task, which was likely about to begin any minute.
"Unfortunately, Kouenji nabbed the last spot."

"He was in fourth place just this morning, but he's in second place as of this current moment, no?" said Sakayanagi. "This classmate of yours is something of a child prodigy, isn't he?"

"Yeah, I'm of the same opinion."

Most of the groups in the top spots of the rankings were competing against each other in a rather close race. If Kouenji

were to take first place in this swimming Task, then he would jump up to first place overall, for the time being.

"I think you should have about thirty minutes until the Task is over and Nanase-san comes back, so you are welcome to join me if you like. There's shade, and it's quite cool and refreshing." Sakayanagi motioned for me to sit down, giving me permission to take a seat next to her in the open space underneath her parasol.

"How do you know Nanase?" I asked.

"Because I receive regular reports on what is happening on the uninhabited island," said Sakayanagi.

I had crossed paths with groups that contained students from Class 2-A more than a few times so far, so I supposed it wouldn't have been strange if someone among those students had reported back to Sakayanagi here at the starting point. After all, traveling together alone with an underclassman girl did cause me to stand out, in a bad way.

"Are you sure that it's okay for me to join you? I'm an enemy," I reminded her.

It was so hot outside right now that you couldn't exactly say, "Oh, it's fine, it's only thirty minutes. I can manage being outside for that long." It wasn't a good idea to be that optimistic. If you stood around outside in direct sunlight without any shade, you would inevitably find yourself quite exhausted.

"*Fu fu.* Of course it's all right. Please, by all means," said Sakayanagi. I wondered if she meant that since I wasn't in the top ten, she didn't even see me as a threat.

The students who had signed up for the Task walked over from the beachfront and got into the water to get ready for the competition. Shortly afterward, the boys began swimming.

"Quite overwhelmingly one-sided," Sakayanagi observed.

Kouenji had gotten a definitive head start on the competition right at the start, and he kept his commanding lead throughout the race, continuing to push on ahead and completely outpacing the rest of the challengers. So, despite the energy he had spent

moving from area to area, he somehow still had this much stamina to spare.

"Kouenji-kun seems to be quite motivated during this exam. The other groups must see him as someone that's rather threatening," said Sakayanagi.

It was certainly true that, at least as far as this island exam was concerned, you could say that he was the most dependable ally our class had right now.

"To tell you the truth, I have a favor I want to ask you, Sakayanagi," I told her.

"Oh, Ayanokouji-kun is asking me for something, directly? Now this is *quite* interesting. Please, do go on, I'd love to hear it."

Normally, no one would want to listen to something like a request for a favor from an enemy, but Sakayanagi's eyes were sparkling.

"Five days have passed since the special exam started, and only two people have been eliminated so far," I began.

"Yes, Komiya-kun and Kinoshita-san. You are well informed," said Sakayanagi.

"Well, I just so happened to be there with them, when they both got eliminated, just by coincidence."

Upon hearing my explanation, Sakayanagi nodded once, deeply interested. "Well, judging from the fact that Shinohara-san, the remaining member of that group, is still pressing on in this exam... That would suggest that she is working with someone so that she can endure, am I correct?" she reasoned.

"Exactly so," I replied.

"However, given her abilities, attempting to keep fighting during the latter half of this exam will surely prove considerably difficult," said Sakanayagi. "I would think that it would be preferable that she be absorbed into some other group as soon as possible... Yes, I see what you're asking."

Even though I hadn't explained that part yet, Sakayanagi had managed to deduce what my request was on her own.

She went on. "So then, you wish to have my cooperation, yes? Have you met with Ryuuuen-kun?"

"He seems to think pretty highly of Komiya and Kinoshita, so he's on board with my plan," I replied.

"Is that so?" said Sakayanagi. As she turned her discerning gaze towards me, she was wearing a broad, delighted smile. "Well, it's only natural that Ryuuuen-kun would lend you a hand, I suppose. But there is no benefit for me in doing so myself. If I had to say anything on the matter, then yes, I think it would be wise to prevent Class Points from the second-years from falling into the hands of the other grade levels. However, to be completely honest, if there's no harm to Class 2-A, then I don't imagine that this is something we need to be concerned about," said Sakayanagi.

While she had been hearing me out, what she said was a long way off from an explicit agreement.

"However," she continued, "if you are willing to accept collaborating with me under the same conditions, then... Well, that would be a different story altogether."

It was exceedingly natural that she had responded with a proposal of her own. Thanks to how perceptive Sakayanagi was, this discussion was going to reach a conclusion in short order.

"While I'd like to say that yes, I fully accept your conditions, I am in desperate need of manpower right now, unfortunately," I answered.

"I will gladly wait until you are ready, of course. This strategy will require both time and effort, so if you are going to act, it would be best to do it quickly, I would imagine," said Sakayanagi.

"Yeah, you're right."

Besides, I thought it best to assume that Nagumo had been working towards executing a similar strategy from an early stage in the exam. It was likely that battles would be fought using this strategy in the latter half of the special exam.

"I'll contact you again later," I told her.

"I will leave the matter of deciding the messenger to you, then," Sakayanagi said. "Whether it's Horikita-san, or Ryuuuen-kun,

or anyone else, that is fine with me."

I nodded in response before promptly walking away. I decided it wouldn't be a good idea to linger for too long. If I kept hanging around here, I would draw too much attention, and in a very bad way. After parting ways with Sakayanagi, I once again returned to the center of the harbor.

I just so happened to catch sight of a group of students there. They were first-years, evidently trying to purchase supplies from Mashima-sensei. It looked like he was in charge of selling goods to students. Even though I had practically no points to purchase anything with, I decided to stop by.

"Hello," I said.

"Oh, Ayanokouji, is that you? Perfect timing... Here, make it look as though you're just looking at the supplies and listen up," said Mashima-sensei.

I did as he suggested, casually lowering my eyes so that I was looking at the goods, while moving in closer to him.

"Acting Director Tsukishiro hasn't done anything particularly noteworthy so far, not since the special exam has started," Mashima-sensei said. "I haven't caught sight of him making any moves that would suggest he's planning something for you."

"So, you're saying I don't have to worry about him doing anything?" I asked.

"Well...that's what I'd like to tell you, but there are still some things that feel a little bit strange," he replied.

"Meaning what?"

I took my time looking at the products on display, occasionally picking some up.

"No one can really know for sure when someone might run into danger in this special exam," Mashima-sensei replied. "We have small boats and helicopters at the ready for rescue operations, in the event that a student was to suffer a particularly urgent injury."

"That sounds perfectly reasonable," I said.

It wasn't any wonder that the school would have both a boat and a helicopter on standby for different uses. For example, the boat could be used if a student was waiting for help on the other side of the island or in cases of inclement weather, when it was dangerous to fly. And in other emergency situations where every second counted, a helicopter would be the better option.

"We were originally planning to have one helicopter and one small boat brought here, but for some reason, we have two boats here. When I investigated the matter, I discovered that Acting Director Tsukishiro had specifically arranged for it, just in case," said Mashima-sensei.

From the sounds of things, even during the exam, Mashima-sensei had been diligently collecting information while monitoring the situation.

"So we could assume that he did so because he's anticipating that a situation might arise where there needs to be multiple rescue operations at once?" I mused.

"It certainly seems that way," said Mashima-sensei.
"Ultimately, though, this is just one thing that had been nagging at me, so I thought I would mention it."

So while there was originally only supposed to be one small boat, there were now two, from the sounds of it. No matter how small these boats may be, though, someone would inevitably notice something if one of them started moving. It would probably be difficult to send one of these boats out without an SOS from a student. More importantly, even if Tsukishiro did manage to mobilize one of the boats, the question still remained: what did that have to do with me?

"Where is the Acting Director normally?" I asked.

"Generally, he stays in the tent where the monitoring station has been set up, checking for any abnormalities with the students' watches," Mashima-sensei answered. "Other staff members are also doing that work with him, of course. Aside from that, he seems to go out and make the rounds around the island several times a day for a few hours at a time."

"He purposefully goes around to patrol the island, by himself?" I asked.

"That's what it seems like."

Although I didn't know what he was doing exactly, one thing I did understand was that there were a few hours each day when no one could observe him.

"In any case," Mashima-sensei said, "I have a bad feeling about this. Be careful, Ayanokouji."

"Thank you for going through the trouble of warning me about this."

Of course, I had intended to be as vigilant as I could possibly be, but I couldn't just ignore the exam. In the end, I would continue to be restricted by the compulsory Basic Movement system, whether I liked it or not.

7.3

THE OPEN WATER SWIMMING TASK had reached its conclusion back at the starting point. In the end, while Nanase had missed out on nabbing first place, she just barely made it into third and managed to get some points. Considering the fact that she had quickly swum an absurdly long distance in just a short amount of time, she had done well. I was going to compliment her on her efforts when she got back, but she didn't look too joyful.

"The person who took first place was a girl from my class, Onodera. When it comes to swimming, she's formidable," I told her. "Don't let the loss get to you that much."

Onodera was a member of the swimming team, so considering she was Nanase's opponent, Nanase had kept up pretty well.

"Yes, thank you. Onodera-senpai certainly was amazing. However, what I was really concerned about was..." Nanase's voice trailed off as she turned to look over her shoulder at one person in particular.

That person was none other than Kouenji, who had taken first place in the boys' race, with a display of overwhelming skill.

"On top of the fact that he had gotten back to the starting area faster than we did, he also won first place in a remarkably fast time," said Nanase.

Kouenji leisurely gazed out at the sea. It didn't appear that he was out of breath at all.

"He's a freak and superhuman," I replied. "Which is exactly why it's a waste of time to be bothered about him."

Despite saying that, as his classmate, I'd revised my evaluation of Kouenji two or three times during this special exam. The tug-of-war match we just had was one such example. He had truly unfathomable potential. If this was what came naturally to him, then without any doubt, you could truly call him a child prodigy.

Adding the twenty-point reward to this point total, Kouenji had temporarily moved up to first place. However, this didn't necessarily put Nagumo at a disadvantage.

Rather, if anything, Nagumo's overwhelmingly advantageous position hadn't changed. Moving forward, Nagumo was definitely going to increase his group size until it hit the limit. Once he had six members in his group, Nagumo would start earning points at a faster rate, and then he would probably start building a commanding lead. No matter how incredible Kouenji might be, considering he got himself this far while fighting alone, you couldn't beat sheer numbers in this special exam.

So, how will Kouenji rise to the challenge when the time comes? I wondered.

At any rate, Nanase and I decided to rest until our next designated area was announced. We rehydrated by drinking the free water here, and then we laid down for a brief respite. Then, at one o'clock in the afternoon, the third designated area of the day was announced. It was another random designation, so even though our last area was H9, this one was over at B6.

I had failed to reach five designated areas in a row so far, so I had lost points several times. I wanted to reach this one at any cost.

Having seen that our area was B6, Nanase looked over at me with shining eyes. "Senpai... In terms of distance, it's manageable, but..."

"We'll be in for a rough time if we try and cut through the woods," I said, finishing her thought. "But we can go along the beach in D8 and C8 and make our way through to the beach in B8. Then, if we head north from there, we can reach area B6 without losing our way."

Nanase had apparently thought of taking the same route because she nodded and stood up.

"Thankfully, I've regained my energy, and I was able to rehydrate too. I should be able to continue without any problems," she said.

Though we were reluctant to leave, we once again departed from the starting area and walked into the woods of the uninhabited island. We were able to see many other students around for quite some time after setting out, but the moment we set foot inside the woods proper, we once again found ourselves thrust into a battle against solitude. Unlike down on the sandy beach, where we were pelted with powerful rays of direct sunlight, in the woods it felt as if our bodies were being melted away by the damp, humid heat.

"I'm already quite parched," said Nanase.

"I'm sure glad that we were able to rehydrate back at the starting area, but I'm starting to miss having all that water on hand," I agreed.

I guessed that it was inevitable we were going to feel some recoil from the situation since we went from being able to drink as much water as we wanted to once again being forced to conserve it. That was exactly why, even though we all needed to keep earning points in this exam, some groups were still going to desperately try and stick around the starting point.

"There are more groups clustered around the starting point than I had imagined there would be," said Nanase. "Do you suppose it's because things have started to become difficult and stressful after living here on an uninhabited island for four or five days now?" asked Nanase.

"I think that's part of it, yeah, but that's not the only reason," I replied. "The biggest factor is the fact that we can now see the bottom ten groups."

"...Is that so? Well, I suppose only the bottom five groups are at risk of expulsion," Nanase mused. "So, starting on the fourth day of the exam, you can afford to be complacent because you'd know what your status in the rankings was every step of the way via your tablet..."

In all probability, by the end of the third day of the exam, almost every student had been giving this exam everything they had. We were required to accumulate as many points as possible while running around on an uninhabited island that we knew

nothing about, hurriedly bouncing back and forth between designated areas and Tasks. All of this for the sake of escaping the underlying threat of expulsion.

However, on the fourth day of the exam, things changed significantly. By using their (albeit somewhat shallow) experiences from the first three days of the exam as a baseline, students would compare their point totals to those of the groups in the bottom ranks, and make rough, imprecise estimates about how many points they would need to earn in a day. This way, they could determine whether they were at an advantage or disadvantage.

"But even so, supposing even if you had a ten- or twenty-point lead over those bottom groups, there are no definite guarantees, are there? If it were me, I would wish to establish as much a lead as I could—at least by thirty or forty points," said Nanase.

"I'm sure that deep down, everyone understands that's what they should be doing, of course," I agreed. "Everyone went into this exam with the intention of fighting with everything they had from start to finish. But reality isn't as simple as that. Once people start feeling some kind of desire or craving, like how right now you and I really want to have a drink of water, that firm resolve will start to fall apart."

"I see... I think I may understand then, if you put it that way," Nanase said. "I suppose it's sort of like how, even if you're determined to pull an all-nighter the day before a written exam, once you start thinking things like 'I really want to take a quick nap, just five or ten minutes,' and you get under the covers, you suddenly find that you slept until morning, and..."

Perhaps she was speaking from experience, because she looked somewhat embarrassed, as though she were recalling a memory.

"Many groups had probably exhausted their on-hand supply of food and water by the fourth day of the exam, and I'm sure that they're starting to get overcome by fatigue," I went on. "You must have already gotten the idea yourself since we stopped at the starting point earlier, but if you saw another group resting back

there, it's only natural that you'd think you should take a little break too."

If no one was resting back at the starting area, then most groups that went back there probably wouldn't get distracted. They would feel like they had no choice but to keep doing their best in the exam and turn right around and resume their journey.

"I would guess that groups would talk things over while they stopped to take a break at the starting area," I reasoned. "They'd say things like 'We have a good lead in points for the time being, so why don't we hang out here where it's safe and we can get water? Meanwhile, we'll take it easy and check for Tasks. Then, once we've gotten a good supply of provisions and water, we'll set out again.' Something like that."

Nanase nodded along as she listened. Once I finished speaking, though, she seemed to have some doubts because she immediately asked me a question.

"So, then, the correct answer would be to give up on taking the easy way out and force yourself to keep moving? Is that what you're saying?"

"Nanase, earlier, you said that you'd want to get a bunch of points so that you can establish a lead. Aren't you starting to feel fatigued?" I said. "Besides, you've taken part in more of the physically demanding Tasks than I have too."

"Y-yes. I realize that earlier, I said that I would work hard, but truthfully, I do think that my pace has slowed compared to the first day. I have a feeling that I'll slow down even more by tomorrow or the next day."

Though she wasn't saying it openly, I was sure that the physical wear and tear on her body was greater than I had imagined it was. Tasks aside, just how many kilometers had she walked these past five days?

"Rest is important," I said. "Yes, there are times when you need to put the hammer down and push yourself to pick up points, but the key is knowing when you need to do it. Meaning that you absolutely must avoid doing the same thing that a majority of other students are doing."

Move when the majority have chosen to rest, and rest when the majority are on the move.

"I was thinking that you had been slacking off during these first few days of the exam, Ayanokouji-senpai. However, you're just managing things in such a way that you wouldn't peak in the first half. Isn't that right?" said Nanase.

"That's basically been my approach, yeah," I replied. "If I see a situation where I have a chance, then sure, I'll push myself, but even if I did desperately struggle my way into a hotly contested Task, there's a limited number of points I can get from it."

There were several Tasks that I thought I could've won if I had signed up for them, but most of the time, I hadn't gotten the opportunity because someone else had signed up before I could.

"Um... Why are you telling me all of this?" asked Nanase. "Up until this point, I had thought that you would just try to dodge the question or deceive me in such matters, senpai."

Why, huh? I suppose it made sense that she'd ask that. I normally didn't tell other people these things. So then, why did I choose to tell her even just *some* of my strategy at all, rather than just hiding everything? Well, after having spent several days traveling alongside her around the uninhabited island, I had gotten to understand her quite well.

What kind of personality did the student known as Nanase Tsubasa have? What kind of mentality did she have? She was a serious honor student who was above average in both academics and sports. She was someone who followed instructions without any complaints, but also someone who wouldn't hesitate to speak her mind if she had her doubts about something, no matter who it was she was dealing with. More importantly, she was made of stern stuff, so she wouldn't break easily.

That had its merits, but at the same time, it had its disadvantages too. You could say that it was an awkward way to live your life. It was because Nanase was that kind of person that I couldn't help but feel like there was something out of place about the fact she was working together with Housen. Was that because she was trying to get me expelled, as the White Room agent? Or

did she have some other reason for doing what she was doing, perhaps?

When she had suggested accompanying me on the island, I had thought that she did it because she was looking for an opportunity to strike. That was why I tried to make myself appear as though I was distracted on many occasions. If she had tried to make a move when we were in the dark woods, then no matter what came of it, there wouldn't have been any prying eyes around to bear witness.

However, in the end, Nanase hadn't even once showed any signs of trying anything. She had been helping me and others to the best of her ability, like with Ike, or when Shinohara and her group were in trouble.

"To put it in the simplest terms," I answered, "you are clearly my enemy, Nanase. Not only because this is an exam where each grade level is competing against each other, but also, because there's the matter of twenty million points for the taking, all for you, if you get me expelled."

"...Yes, you're right. I did plot against you, senpai," said Nanase.

"But that being said, there are also some things that make it impossible for me to think of you as an enemy," I said.

"Even though I have acted with such blatant hostility...?"

"Strange, huh?" I agreed. "Well, at any rate, the other reason I told you all that was because I figured that you would've figured it out to a certain extent anyway, even if I didn't say anything."

Though she had repeatedly looked surprised throughout this conversation, I was sure that she had picked up what my true intentions were. She was aware of my plans, but she was pretending not to have noticed anything. There was probably something else that she was trying to draw out of me.

"That being said, all that was just a hunch on my part, though," I added.

Afterward, Nanase fell silent. I wasn't going to press the matter any further either, so we simply continued walking quietly through the woods. Right now, I thought, my top priority was reaching the next designated area.

7.4

PHEW... We managed to make it our final designated area in time, somehow." Nanase slumped down onto the ground right on the spot and let out a heavy sigh, as if she were expelling all the exhaustion out of her body.

Our fourth designated area for the day had been B5, the area directly above B6. I was sure that even though we only traveled a short distance, that trip had been quite a burden for Nanase.

"Seems like you're pushing yourself pretty hard," I remarked.

She was fine for a while when we set out from the starting area, but Nanase's pace had gradually slowed as time went on. I'd been considering the option of leaving Nanase behind depending on how things played out and going for this designated area alone. In the end, though,

she had managed to stick with me all the way through sheer willpower.

"To be completely honest, that swimming Task really took quite a lot out of me," she said.

I didn't have any doubt that it had taken all the remaining energy that she had left.

"Well, I think we'll call it right here for today," I told her. "We can take our time and look around for a place to pitch our tents."

We rested for a little while, waiting for Nanase to feel ready to walk, and then set out to find a suitable place to camp. After looking around in the immediate area, we came across a clearing. It looked like another group had already set up camp there. They must have been getting ready to eat dinner since they had various cooking utensils laid out in front of their tents.

There seemed to be plenty of space, enough for another group to set up. But it was a difficult ask to just go ahead and make camp when you would be right next to people who you

didn't know particularly well. Just as I was about to pass the campers by, one of them called out to us.

"Hey there!"

It was Hamaguchi Tetsuya, from Class 2-C. I gently waved in response, and then gestured for Nanase to come along.

"You guys in a hurry to get somewhere?" asked Hamaguchi.

"Nah," I said. "I was thinking of heading down closer to the ocean, but we've already reached our designated areas for today."

"In that case, why not hang around here for a bit?" he offered.

I had last spoken with Hamaguchi during the uninhabited island exam last year, and then during the exam on the cruise ship that was held while we were on our way back afterward. We only interacted for a brief period during those times, and we didn't typically interact with each other at school. Our relationship wasn't deep enough for us to call each other friends, and yet... What in the world was he thinking by trying to strike up a conversation with me?

There was a prolonged period of silence. He looked at me, and then spoke up once more, sounding somewhat apologetic and sheepish. "If it's a bother, though, you don't have to force yourself to stay or anything."

Nanase had been following along without voicing a single complaint, but I was sure that her fatigue must have been reaching its peak.

"I suppose we can take a short break," I agreed.

"Yeah, man, come on over," he replied.

Hamaguchi ushered us over to his campsite as if he were inviting some close friends into his room. Just as you'd expect from one of Ichinose's classmates, he really managed to create a kind, welcoming atmosphere here.

However, what interested me wasn't Hamaguchi, but rather, his two companions. The sound of Hamaguchi and I talking had brought Andou Sayo and Minamikata Kozue out of their tents at

almost the exact same time. They were whispering things to each other, and occasionally glanced over in my direction.

"If you're not comfortable inviting me to stay, I can leave," I stated.

Since I was a student from a different class, if me hanging around here made them feel uncomfortable, it would probably be best that I just go. At least, that's what I had thought was going on here, but Andou and Minamikata hurriedly stopped me from leaving.

"Oh no, no, it's not like that. We were talking 'bout something else. Actually, we kind of wanted to talk to you, Ayanokouji-kun. You don't have to go at all—it's fine with us if you camp here tonight. Right, Kozue?" Andou looked to her friend Minamikata, who quickly nodded several times in agreement.

"Well then, since you've decided to stick around and kick back a bit after all, how about we have ourselves a welcoming party?" said Hamaguchi, bringing a backpack out from one of the tents.

When he unfastened the zipper of the bag, revealing the contents hidden within, we saw a bunch of canned foods peeking out.

"That's a heck of a lot of stuff," I remarked.

Even with just the amount of food that I could see right now, I reckoned that they had enough to make it through a week quite easily.

"To tell you the truth, all three of us actually had those cards that gave us one point five times the number of points to buy stuff with, at the start," said Hamaguchi. "That's why we have way more food than other groups."

Although I had already looked into this matter and figured that out for myself, I figured that I'd just pretend like I was genuinely impressed with what he just told me. Under normal circumstances, a three-person group would have a total of 15,000 points to start. However, Hamaguchi and his teammates had 22,500 points. Even if they'd gone ahead and bought a whole lot

of meat and a barbecue grill, they would still have plenty of change to spare.

Of course, items like those wouldn't be a good fit for travel. Plus, the weight would pile up. One of Class 2-C's strengths was that their students rarely acted for their own selfish interest. Despite that, though, after taking a glance at this situation, you might think that Hamaguchi's group had been spending their points wastefully. But that probably wasn't the case here.

Most likely, this was Ichinose's idea. It would be extremely tough to move about with an abundance of food supplies, especially if you were lugging around cooking utensils such as grills since those things would generally get in the way. However, it's a different story when someone is specifically tasked with holding onto the items. Ichinose had probably thought of a plan where students would share convenient items that would let them prepare meat and fish.

According to the special exam's rules, we were allowed to share food with one another. So, I supposed it was appropriate to think of these three as kind of like the kitchen staff for Class 2-C.

Hamaguchi pulled a bunch of skewers out from the backpack.

"Quite an interesting strategy, isn't it?" mumbled Nanase.

She had most likely gone through the same process that I had.

"Maybe so," I replied.

"We first-year students are greatly lacking in terms of solidarity," said Nanase. "I would have to say that there are few students in our grade level who would have any desire to be there for another."

Still, a different problem emerged when you considered a strategy like this. It was important that someone take on the role of guarding the food supplies, sure. But when a group stepped up to do that, they would run into issues trying to score points during the exam. In the worst-case scenario, I supposed that the penalty that came from failing to reach designated areas could be

mitigated by one person. However, that group would still be gradually outpaced by their rivals around them, in which case that group would inevitably face the threat of expulsion.

"You two okay with yakiniku?" asked Hamaguchi.

"Huh? What do you mean by that?" asked Nanase.

"Well, we figured we should at least treat you to some dinner tonight. Right, guys?" said Hamaguchi, turning to his teammates for their approval.

Both girls immediately nodded in agreement, without a single shred of reluctance.

"No, wait, hold on." I said. "I really appreciate the gesture, but I can't accept."

"Yes, that's right. Food is so valuable, after all," added Nanase.

Although Nanase was incredibly grateful for their goodwill, we both declined their offer. Apparently Hamaguchi wasn't having it though, because he started preparing food for us anyway. He was far too good-natured. He should be using his resources to support his own classmates in need, rather than wasting them on helping people from other classes and grade levels. But without so much as a second's thought, Hamaguchi took out a bunch of meat from the cooler that was stored inside the backpack.

"Really, don't worry about it, it's cool," he said. "We just so happened to get some beef today as a reward from a Task is all. And it's not going to last awfully long anyway, so we would've had to eat it up ourselves."

From the looks of things, Hamaguchi was going to put together a real, honest-to-goodness meal, with cuts of meat on skewers. His group had even brought out mosquito repellent to make the atmosphere even more comfortable.

"Is it really okay for...you to treat people like us to a meal?" asked Nanase.

"Course it is! Don't be shy," said Hamaguchi.

No matter how much people from their class tended to enjoy caring for others, I still had to ask myself, *Why me?* I'm sure they wouldn't go around inviting every single student that passed them by.

"Are you wondering why I called you over?" asked Hamaguchi.

"Well, considering that you're going as far as treating me to a meal, yeah, I'm definitely curious," I answered.

After stopping to think for a short while, Hamaguchi started to speak once more to explain why he invited us over.

"Well, I guess it's because we've been hearing about you a lot lately, Ayanokouji-kun. We just wanted to talk to you ourselves. Right guys?" said Hamaguchi, turning to his teammates.

"Yeah, definitely," said Andou.

Both she and Minamikata seemed to be on board with the explanation that Hamaguchi gave.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, it's like... You know?" said Andou. She shot me an inquisitive glance, as if to say, *You get it, right?* I didn't answer. Once Andou and Minamikata realized that I wasn't responding, their expressions gradually changed to surprise.

"Huh? Wait, hold on, then there really hasn't been *any* kind of progress yet?" said Andou.

"No way!" said Minamikata. "I thought for sure they would've gotten to that 'more than friends but not quite lovers' yet stage."

"I know, right? I mean, Honami-chan has been saying Ayanokouji-kun's name like all the time lately," said Andou.

"Really?" said Minamikata.

"I mean, I know it's probably not our place to say anything, but... Is there any reason why they wouldn't be going out?" said Andou.

While I had heard that girls liked talking about these kinds of things, I had no idea they could talk about it right in front of the person in question. Nanase must have just wrapped her mind

around the situation here, because she turned to look at me with rapt attention.

"...Okay, I don't really get what you're talking about exactly," I interrupted, "but I don't think we'll go out with each other."

"Wait, wait, wait, hold on," said Andou, "You don't think so? I'm just gonna say this once more to be sure, but you know we're talking about Honami-chan, right?"

"I can't really speak for the guys or anything since they don't really say anything, but you know like, probably 80 or 90 percent of the second-years like her, right?" said Minamikata.

"I'm pretty positive that's true, yeah," I replied.

While there was certainly no denying the fact that Ichinose was quite popular, 90 percent was an exaggeration. I mean, the truth was that Sudou liked Horikita, Ike liked Shinohara, and so on. I'm sure there were many other cases of romantic attraction aside from them too.

"I mean, sure, you're in different classes, but I don't think you've got to worry about that stuff when it comes to love," Andou said. "There are lots of people out there who are dating others regardless of class and grade level."

"Okay, but isn't the biggest issue here that Ichinose isn't even interested in someone like me to begin with?" I asked.

"Oh ho, is that modesty I hear? Ayanokouji-kun, you do know that you were kind of a hot topic among the girls when you first started school here, right?" said Andou.

Thinking back on it now, I remembered that Kushida had said something like that too. I had simply chosen to not take what Kushida had said at face value though. More accurately, I just didn't think too deeply about it.

"It seems you're quite popular, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Nanase.

"No, I'm really not, at all," I insisted. "I've never had a girl say anything remotely like that to me before."

"Really?" said Minamikita. "Oh, yeah, I definitely remember his name going around a lot before, but I think people kinda moved on pretty quickly."

"Well, I guess there's no helping that," said Andou. "You can't really know if you could love somebody unless you talked to them face-to-face, I think. And I remember that a year ago, Ayanokouji-kun wasn't the type to really go around talking to people."

"Well, I kind of get the feeling he hasn't changed all *that* much then," said Minamikata.

The two girls smiled and shared a laugh as they got strangely excited talking about me.

"Do you mean that Ayanokouji-senpai has changed somewhat since back then?" asked Nanase, asking the two girls a question of her own after having listened to the conversation so far.

"Well, I guess I kinda get the impression he's sort of softer now?" Hamaguchi cut into the conversation to offer his thoughts, having just gotten back from using the restroom.

While I hadn't spoken with Andou or Minamikata before, I had spent some time together with Hamaguchi during the exam on the cruise ship, so it was reasonable to say he was someone who could make a fair comparison to what I was like a year ago versus now.

At any rate...I didn't get the sense that these three were afraid of the possibility that they might get expelled. It wasn't clear to me what their scores were exactly, of course, but I was sure that they couldn't be near the top of the rankings. If that was the case, then...

After dinner and conversation, Nanase and I had decided to accept their warm hospitality and ended up spending the night there with them.

Chapter 8: The First-Years on the Move

IT WAS THE SIXTH DAY of the special exam. We started out by heading straight south for our first designated area in B6. I had managed to get the Early Bird Bonus there. Our second designated area was A5. It was fairly close by, but unfortunately, I only got an Arrival Bonus for getting there. The third designated area, which was announced at one o'clock that afternoon, turned out to be the random designation for the day, and we were tasked with heading over to C3.

There were several routes that we could take to reach C3 from where we currently were in area A5. The first option was to cut through the steep, rugged mountains that towered over areas A4 and B4. This would be the shortest path for us to take, but while it wasn't immediately clear from the map, we would most likely need to do some mountain climbing on this route. Another option would be to go through C4, which would reduce our level of risk somewhat. Our last option would be to travel over to D5 and take a significant detour along the riverside.

"I'm thinking that the other groups are probably going to choose to take a detour and go through area C4, or something along those lines," said Nanase.

"Yeah, probably."

If we could manage to make our way through areas A4 and B4 in good time, then arriving at our designated area first and getting the Early Bird Bonus might be a realistic goal.

"While I imagine that you're probably still quite exhausted, we're going to take the somewhat riskier way there," I told her.

"So, you mean that you want to take the shortest path then?" said Nanase.

Though Nanase had somehow managed to stick with me up until this point, there was no telling if she'd be able to keep this up. Still, she had made up her mind about going, and she kept

following me without even the slightest hesitation. However, shortly afterward, a huge ordeal loomed in front of her. We had only dealt with steep slopes up until now, but this time, we were faced with a massive sheer cliff. Whether you looked to your left or right, the cliff seemed to stretch out as far as the eye could see. There wasn't any way we could easily bypass it. Now that we had gotten here, we had two options: either pull back or climb.

"I-I can do this," said Nanase, voluntarily stepping forward.

I didn't say anything in response to that. I decided to let her go ahead, to see what would happen. Nanase took a ribbon out from her backpack and tied up her long hair, to make it easier for her to climb.

"Agh...!"

The moment that Nanase started climbing, though, she messed up her footing, and came tumbling back down to the ground.

"Oww...!"

Nanase rubbed her bottom as she stood back up. Fortunately, she hadn't been that high up when she fell. If she'd fallen from another two meters higher up, then things probably would be playing out very differently right now. Even though this cliff wasn't that difficult to scale, it would be challenging for Nanase to climb this nearly ten-meter-high cliff by herself.

"Guess that's that, then," I said.

This obstacle in front of us was a bigger deal for her than I'd thought it would be. She had done a decent job keeping up with me these past six days, but I should press on by myself from here.

"I-I can climb it!" shouted Nanase.

"Even if you can, there's no point if you use up all your energy just getting up to the top," I replied. "The reason we're scaling this cliff and taking on this risk is to save time. We have to assume that some people will also take the direct route, so every second counts."

Nanase must have also understood that pointlessly standing around talking about this was arguably an even bigger waste of

time.

"I'm going on ahead. If you insist on climbing, then fine, that's up to you. But you have to accept responsibility for what happens yourself."

Nanase made no attempt to hide how frustrated she was by this, but I simply left her there, put my hands on the cliff face, and started climbing. Knowing her, she should be able to make a rational decision, so I had no intention of looking back to see what she was doing. However, I sensed her coming up behind me, so I looked over my shoulder at her.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Please don't...mind me. I have decided to follow you, Ayanokouji-senpai, of my own will...!" she replied, reaching out once more, without fear of falling. However, because she still hadn't recovered yet, she wasn't able to exert sufficient strength in her grip, so her arms trembled as she clung onto the cliff face.

"If you're not careful, elimination isn't the only thing you'll have to worry about," I told her.

Despite being warned once again, Nanase refused to give up and continued to pursue me. Why was she going to such lengths to accompany me? If she was trying to slow me down by being a hindrance, then I supposed she was succeeding, in some sense. I climbed down about halfway from where I'd reached on the cliffside, making sure to keep my footing steady as I scaled back down. Then, I turned to Nanase and reached out my hand.

"Take it," I said.

"I-I cannot do that. I had joined you on the condition that I would not ask for any help from you, so... Please, go on ahead, without paying me any mind," said Nanase.

"It'd leave a bad taste in my mouth if I went on ahead and you ended up getting injured," I replied. "If you were begging for my help then we'd be having a different conversation, but I'm the one who just so happened to decide to do something nice. Don't worry about it."

"But...!" she wailed.

"It's a waste of time to sit here and discuss it. Am I wrong?"



After I explained to her once again that it was pointless to just stand here and do nothing, Nanase couldn't argue the point any further.

"...I understand," she replied.

Though she seemed slightly frustrated, she took hold of my hand. It was a given that her energy was rapidly declining, of course, but even if she were in her peak condition, the question of whether she'd even be able to climb was another matter entirely.

"Senpai... Do you have any rock-climbing experience?" she asked.

"Nope. This is my first time doing something like this," I replied.

This was an exam that required me to fumble around quite a bit, doing things I had no experience with. Considering what this exam was supposed to be, reaching out and helping her like this probably wasn't the correct thing to do, given the risks.

"I see..." said Nanase.

As I pulled her up, I guided her to where she should grab onto. Though it was a highly inefficient way of climbing, we repeated this process over and over, and we eventually we managed to make it up to the top of the cliff somehow. However, we hadn't reached the finish line yet. We had spent over ten minutes just getting up the cliff, meaning that we lost time. I started walking once more, without taking time to rest.

Now that we had gotten to this point, in the worst-case-scenario, Nanase could manage to climb down by herself if she took her time. Nanase lagged behind somewhat, but she did start walking as well. Her resolve remained unchanged, and she desperately tried her hardest to keep up with me.

She was kind of like a dog, I thought. But I decided to hurry onward, and eventually, we managed to arrive at C3. It had taken some time for us to get here, but none of my rivals had managed to beat me, meaning I arrived first.

"Th-thank goodness...!" said Nanase.

Even though she had arrived second, and thus didn't earn the Early Bird Bonus, Nanase let out a sigh of relief, patting her chest. We had some time before our next designated area, so I figured I'd take a short break and keep her company. Just like when we were at the top of the mountain, a light breeze blew past from time to time. It was quite pleasant.

"There was hardly any breeze at all until yesterday," I remarked, "but it's pretty windy out today, huh?"

The skies had been sunny and clear before, but now thick clouds were starting to set in overhead, and the sky was becoming noticeably overcast.

"I'm sure it must have been pretty surprising to suddenly have to go live on an uninhabited island right after becoming a high school student, huh?" I asked.

"Of course it was. I thought to myself, 'What an incredible school,'" said Nanase, with a wry, bashful smile. "Senpai, do you find this school enjoyable?"

"Yeah, I guess so," I replied. "There have been a lot of headaches to deal with, but I've never thought of this school as unenjoyable."

I supposed that the school looked the same day after day, but there was always something different going on. So, I continued to enjoy attending. I never felt like I got bored of it, since there was something different about it each day.

"It feels like graduation is a long way away, but I'm sure it'll be here before we know it. That's why I think it's best to spend time without any regrets," I added.

"...Graduation..." repeated Nanase.

"Something wrong?" I asked.

"O-oh, no, not at all. It's nothing."

I was getting a different vibe from Nanase now, compared to what I was used to sensing from the Nanase that I had managed to become somewhat closer to over these past few days. It was the same impression I had gotten when I saw her shortly after she had started school. That being said, it was a faint difference. So

faint, that if someone were to tell me that it was just my imagination, I'd probably chalk it up as such. If she did have something on her mind, I supposed I'd just have to wait for her to tell me about it later.

8.1

NINE P.M., ON THE SIXTH DAY of the special exam. Several representatives from among the first-years had decided to gather in area F9. From Class A, there was Takahashi Osamu. From Class B, Yagami Takuya. From Class C, Utomiya Riku, as well as Tsubaki Sakurako. Finally, from Class 1-D, there was Housen Kazuomi. Normally, it would have been challenging for students who had been scattered about to meet up like this, but it wasn't difficult if you had decided upon a meeting place in advance before the special exam started.

Furthermore, since their meeting place was on the beach, just one bonfire would serve as a reliable signal. And the one who spearheaded things was...Tsubaki, who had no notable accomplishments under her belt yet.

It was already past the appointed time for their meeting, but there was no sign of Housen.

"Tsubaki-san, it looks like Housen-kun hasn't arrived yet," said Yagami.

"Well, he doesn't exactly look like the type to show up on time, I guess," said Tsubaki. "Or maybe he's just not coming at all."

After talking things out, they ended up deciding to wait a while longer, to see if he would come. Then, Takahashi raised one hand, clutching his stomach with the other.

"Sorry, everybody... I got a bit of a tummy ache, so I gotta use the bathroom," he said. "It might take a while." He hurriedly ran off into the woods.

While everyone else was watching Takahashi leave, Yagami was looking at Tsubaki.

"Well, it would certainly be favorable for all of us if everyone was present, but..." Yagami trailed off. He seemed to be thinking something over for a brief moment, but he quickly started speaking once again, picking up where he left off. "Well, while Housen-kun hasn't arrived yet, may I have a few words?"

Tsubaki, who had been watching the fire, silently turned to Yagami.

"What...?" she replied, finally speaking.

"I was just thinking it would be nice if you could tell us what your plan is exactly about now," said Yagami.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"You've been scheming something big, haven't you?" said Yagami. "If not, you wouldn't have proposed that all the class representatives assemble like this, right when the latter half of the special exam is just around the corner. Surely we're not here just to share progress reports, are we?"

Tsubaki simply stared back at Yagami, saying nothing.

"At a glance, your OAA ratings appear to be below average. In fact, there isn't anything remarkable about you in the slightest. However, in the battles we first-years have faced so far, you have repeatedly made highly insightful comments. Furthermore..."

"Furthermore?" she asked.

"It doesn't look like Class C is working to get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled, but I suspect that you're actually taking action from behind the scenes," Yagami said. "Utomiya-kun being in control of Class C is just for show. In truth, you're the one pulling the strings from the shadows, aren't you?"

"Hmm. You say some pretty interesting things, Yagami-kun," said Tsubaki. "So, you're saying that you supported my proposal to set up this meeting 'cause you knew I had some kind of idea in mind?"

When Tsubaki had appealed to everyone to arrange for this meeting before all by herself, the leaders of each class wouldn't budge an inch. After all, no one was going to listen to someone who hadn't done anything to stand out whatsoever like Tsubaki. It was only because Yagami had so strongly advocated for this meeting that it was possible for everyone to get together today without any difficulty.

"I have been a firm believer, from the very beginning, that all first-year students should cooperate with one another. So,

supposing even if you didn't have any profound reason behind this meeting, Tsubaki-san, I thought it would be meaningful just to be able to make sure we could all confirm the current situation," said Yagami.

"Hey, Yagami-kun. How 'bout I tell you something interesting?" said Tsubaki.

"Something interesting, you say? Well, that certainly piques my interest."

"But, well, after I tell you this something interesting... I can't give you any guarantees," she added.

"...It must be something *quite* interesting, then," said Yagami. He felt slightly alarmed, but he didn't back down and simply waited for Tsubaki to continue speaking.

"So, anyway, Yagami-kun," she said. "You were saying just now that Utomiya-kun and I have been scheming from the shadows to try and get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled, right?"

"Yes," said Yagami. "At a glance, one might think that only Housen-kun and Amasawa-san are the ones who are taking part in this endeavor during the last exam, but I think that you were targeting him too."

"Well, there's a reward of twenty million points for getting him expelled. Anybody would find that attractive, wouldn't they?"

"That might be true, but not for me," said Yagami.

Upon hearing that flat denial, Tsubaki narrowed her eyes.

"Not for you? Sorry, but I very much doubt that. You make yourself look harmless, but you're trying to get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled too, aren't you? Actually, you're even more obsessed with it than Housen-kun and Amasawa-san."

"Why do you think that?" said Yagami. "I haven't done anything thus far."

"It's just something I can tell by looking at you. I've got a pretty good eye for people, you know," said Tsubaki.

Though Yagami didn't stop smiling, his face became noticeably strained.

"Your angle was to start out by successfully pretending to be his ally and get closer to him, only to stab him in the back. That sort of plan is difficult to imagine, considering how you act normally, Yagami-kun, but, well... That's what you've been scheming. Am I wrong?"

Yagami looked into Tsubaki's eyes, but her gaze seemed to pierce into the depths of his being, causing him to unconsciously avert his eyes. Though he had a feeling that Tsubaki wasn't an ordinary student, the way that she seemed to look right through him made it seem like she was more than he had imagined.

"You..." said Yagami, sputtering.

"Well, anyway, putting that aside for now. Our current situation's looking kinda crappy, huh?" said Tsubaki.

"Kinda crappy?" Yagami repeated.

"It looks like Nanase-san has been sticking with Ayanokouji-senpai for a while now," Tsubaki said. "What's more, he's even given her permission to tag along with him. Just to be sure, I checked out their location using the GPS search function, and sure enough, the two of them are in area C3."

"I see," said Yagami. "So, you're saying that Housen-kun is eagerly preparing to make his next move, then?"

"I'm saying we've got to do something sooner rather than later. If Housen-kun does get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled, then he's obviously going to win. I'd like to hear what kind of ideas you've thought of to get him expelled as a reference, if possible," said Tsubaki.

"But I've already told you that I don't..."

Tsubaki came in closer to Yagami, with a look of absolute conviction.

"You might end up losing out in lots of ways if you don't show a willingness to cooperate, you know," she said.

"What do you..." started Yagami.

"Like, someone important to you might be in danger. Something like that."

"Y-you're not planning to do something to Kushida-senpai, are—?!"

Upon hearing Kushida's name, a faint smile appeared on Tsubaki's normally expressionless face. She had already known that Yagami and Kushida had a connection. Furthermore, she was even aware that there was something going on between them.

"What about Kushida-senpai?" she asked.

"N-no, nothing, I... Please excuse me. There's nothing more that I can say on—?!"

Suddenly, Utomiya grabbed hold of Yagami from behind. Yagami resisted and tried to break free, but he didn't have the strength to break Utomiya's hold.

"What are you, doing...? Utomiya-kun?"

"Sorry, Yagami," said Utomiya. "I don't hate you or anything, but...I've got no choice."

It was obvious now that Yagami's hunch was correct. Tsubaki was indeed the one calling the shots from the shadows.

"I-I think that all first-year students are my allies. Come on, why don't we just stop this senseless fighting?" said Yagami.

"Either you come clean and tell us everything, or you get eliminated. Pick one," said Tsubaki.

Since they were the only ones present, Yagami couldn't call for help.

"You've determined that Kushida-senpai is the key to getting Ayanokouji-senpai expelled, Yagami-kun. But why is that? How exactly are you going to make use of her?" asked Tsubaki.

"I can't say..."

When Yagami refused to answer, Utomiya tightened his hold on Yagami's arms, binding them behind his back. "Don't you feel like spilling?" said Tsubaki.

"I... Kushida-senpai is just..."

Utomiya released his hold on Yagami's arms and immediately wrapped an arm around his neck instead.

"Gah!"

"This is the end of the road, Yagami-kun," Tsubaki said. "If you don't tell us right here and now, we'll just ask Kushida-senpai directly."

This wasn't an empty threat. Tsubaki actually had the strength of will to go through with it. The fact that she was really using Utomiya as a means to carry out acts of violence and coercion was proof of that.

"I'll ask you one last time," she said. "Will you talk? Or not?"

Yagami, having only one choice he could make in this situation, could only resign himself and give up.

"...I understand. I'll tell you everything."

Yagami, hanging his head low, started to tell them everything he knew. He talked about Kushida Kikyou's past, and the fact that Ayanokouji Kiyotaka knew the truth of her past too. By the time he finished telling them everything, Takahashi had finally returned.

In the end, Housen never did show up.

Chapter 9: Identity Revealed

THE MORNING OF THE SEVENTH DAY had come. So far, I had accumulated a total of sixty-seven points. Hypothetically speaking, even if a four-person group had taken in zero points from Tasks, they would still have ninety-two points just from reaching all their designated areas. Just by looking at that, you might think that I was in a difficult spot with my sixty-seven points, but this test wasn't all that simple. As of this current point in time, I had steadily risen to fifty-first place in the overall rankings.

That fact illustrated just how difficult it was to keep moving about the island without ever failing to reach your designated areas. I assumed that about half of all groups had been going all out during the first three or four days of the exam, until they had run out of their initial supply of food and water that they had purchased when we started. Around the fifth day of the exam, those groups probably also started to stagnate, and they started aiming to get themselves back in fighting shape by centering their efforts near the port. However, it wasn't going to be so easy for a group to get back to full strength.

The stress and exhaustion that had continuously been building up wasn't going to completely go away, and there was no avoiding the mental burden that came when traveling long distances. Since they would need to avoid failing to reach their designated areas though, I was sure that groups would hold discussions and come up with ideas like sending someone from their group to go reach the area on their own. Though this would mean that they wouldn't miss reaching their designated areas, they wouldn't be able to gain any Early Bird Bonuses, and they'd only get one point for the Arrival Bonus.

As for me, I had managed to conserve my energy, just as I had planned. I was still in the same physical condition as I had been on the first day of the exam. I was going to kick it into high gear now that we were heading into the exam's second half.

Meanwhile, Kouenji was also continuing to make steady progress. He didn't show any sign of slowing down any time soon. He was currently holding his position as number two in the rankings, close behind Nagumo's group, which was leading by only eight points.

One of the other second-year groups in the top ten was Ryuuuen and Katsuragi's group, sitting at ninth place. Well, at any rate...

After I finished washing my face in the river, I turned around to look at the tent behind me. During the last several days that Nanase and I had been traveling together, I noticed that Nanase always got up early in the morning. But today she was still nowhere to be seen, even though it was almost 6:50 in the morning. Was she still sleeping? Or had there been some change in her physical condition?

After all, I was sure that she had been under quite a bit of strain due to the rigorous amount of travel and the intense Tasks day after day. After wiping my face with a towel, I went near the tent and got out my tablet. Nanase heard the noise I was making, and finally emerged from her tent.

"...Good morning, Ayanokouji-senpai."

"Hey, morning. You feeling okay?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, yes. No problems whatsoever," said Nanase.

While I had expected her to show signs of fatigue, I didn't sense a lack of sharpness in either her words or her movements. However, she must not have slept very well, because I could see slight bags under her eyes.

"I was just checking the rankings," I told her. "There's a group of first-years that has been putting up a good fight so far, and they've officially moved up even more."

Of the groups in the top ten, six of them were third-year students, three of them were second-year students, and one was made of first-year students. At present, the rankings were a representation of the strength of the best of the best.

"This group that you're talking about, which has been putting up a good fight? I imagine it's Utomiya-kun and Yagami-

kun's group," said Nanase.

They had been in seventh place as of yesterday, and as of this morning, they had risen to sixth place.

"Oh, right. Among the first-year students, they're... I mean, yes, they are a particularly elite group, after all," she added.

Though she had said that they were elite, Nanase had been rather inarticulate with that statement. Their group consisted of three boys: Takahashi Osamu from Class 1-A, Yagami Takuya from Class 1-B, and Utomiya Riku from Class 1-C.

"Well, as someone from Class D, there's a part of me that can't support their efforts in earnest," said Nanase.

"I see. That makes sense," I replied.

Given their situation, I imagined that Class 1-D would rather see students from the other school years succeed, instead of watching Takahashi's group get into the top three.

"At any rate, the third-years really are incredible, aren't they?" said Nanase. "They have students from every class, from Class 3-A to Class 3-D, in the top ten."

That was something I was also rather impressed by. As of right now, the number of third-year groups in the top ten had increased to six. And it was likely Nagumo's group sitting in first place that was leading the way. Not only had they taken part in the most Tasks of any group, they also had gotten an overwhelming number of first-place finishes in those Tasks. It was almost as though they were showing us their mettle, telling us, *Check out how much willpower the third-years have!*

"But I must say, you are incredible too, Ayanokouji-senpai. Despite being on your own, you have managed to earn a sizable number of points."

"It's not going to be easy for me to break into the top of the rankings from where I am, though," I replied. "Ultimately, if you don't manage to break into the top three, you won't be able to get the major rewards."

Simply avoiding expulsion and getting the reward for being in the top 50 percent alone wasn't that much of a boon. That probably wouldn't even be enough to pay back the points that I had borrowed from Horikita.

"Although you say it won't be easy, you don't seem to be fretting about it, senpai," said Nanase.

"I'm hoping for a miracle," I said. "It would make sense for us to see more groups start to get eliminated about now."

"...Yes, I suppose you're right," said Nanase.

As we both stopped talking, we both looked up toward the sky at almost the exact same time. We had been blessed with clear weather during these past six days, but starting today, things were going to be very different. Thick, smoke-colored clouds hung in the sky above, and it looked as though it might start pouring rain any minute. According to the weather report that I'd checked, it should start raining sometime this morning. We still had about two or three hours until it was supposed to begin.

I hadn't spent a single point on purchasing anything even remotely resembling gear for rainy weather. If my clothes and shoes got soaked, then I'd have to spend more energy dealing with the added weight and the cold. Also, if the ground was muddy, that would reduce my travel speed.

We couldn't check the details of any group that was outside of the top or bottom ten in the rankings on our tablets. I wondered if Horikita, who had been going solo, was okay. We hadn't seen each other even once since our conversation when the special exam started. If she got injured, or if she fell ill, then she'd immediately be out of the picture.

In any case, I wanted to reach our first designated area for the day before the weather got bad, just to be safe. After we finished getting ready, we started moving to the designated area that had been revealed at seven that morning. Thankfully, our first designated area of the day was somewhere close to area C3. It wouldn't take us too much time to get there from where we were right now.

But just as I was about to shut off my tablet, I noticed that I had gotten a message. If I remembered correctly, the school administrators had said that the school might send out global messages to all students.

"The Basic Movement System and Tasks may be suspended from activity depending on weather conditions. Please check your tablets regularly for updates."

Apparently, the weather was forcing the school into making a decision. Losing the opportunity to gain points could spell certain doom for the lower-ranked students. It was safe to assume that the school wasn't going to make a final decision about this until the very last minute, but I figured I'd keep that thought tucked in the back of my mind for now.

"All right. Guess it's time to head out," I said aloud.

After taking a few steps, I noticed that Nanase wasn't following me. When I turned back to look, I saw that she was just standing there in a daze, staring off into space, seemingly unaware that I had started walking.

"Nanase?"

When I called her name, she realized that she was falling behind.

"I'm sorry, I'm coming now," she said as she hurriedly ran to catch up to me.

If she wasn't having any problems with her physical health, then this was probably a mental problem, I figured. But all I could tell for sure was that something had clearly changed between yesterday and today. There hadn't been anything particularly unusual in our interactions. I couldn't imagine that she had contact with a third party, but...

9.1

I MANAGED TO ARRIVE FIRST at the designated area and received the Early Bird Bonus as well. I decided to wait for Tasks to appear nearby, but perhaps due in part to the poor weather conditions, there were fewer Tasks appearing than yesterday. There ended up not being any I could participate in. In the end, we spent the extra hour and half or so that we had on our hands just leisurely milling about, killing time.

Then, once the clock struck nine that morning, the second designated area of the day was announced. It was a randomly assigned designation and was area E2. For being selected randomly, the area that was selected was fairly close by. I was very eager to reach this designated area, but...

"We're going to have to think a bit about how we'll reach this area, won't we?" said Nanase.

"Guess so," I replied.

If we wanted to get to our destination in the shortest possible time, then it would be quickest if we crossed the mountains in areas D2 and D3. If things were the same now as they had been up until yesterday, then I would have chosen that route without a moment's delay. But it looked like the weather was just about to turn bad any second now. Once it started raining, even paths that would normally be passable would turn into difficult ones.

"What should we do?" asked Nanase.

"Let's see... I guess it would be safer to take the long way to E2," I replied.

If it did start pouring rain and we decided that things were looking dangerous, we could easily give up partway through.

"That's understandable. Depending on what the weather is like from this point onward, we may not even be able to walk on."

Though Nanase said she understood, her face suggested that she wasn't too thrilled.

"Personally, I would like to cross the mountains," she added.

"Once it starts raining, we'd lose our footing right away. It'll be dangerous," I replied.

Even I couldn't definitively say that I wasn't afraid of slipping and falling.

"I think that many of our rivals will be taking a detour in anticipation of the weather," said Nanase. "However, that is precisely why you should be taking this opportunity to arrive at the designated area first once again and get another bonus, don't you agree? Let's make a mad dash before it starts to rain."

During the time we had been together on the island, she had never once made any complaints about my decisions. That was the bare minimum level of courtesy that she could offer as someone who had requested to accompany me. Of course, Nanase must have known this as well when she had decided to speak up. I couldn't imagine that she had said something simply because she wanted to change my mind.

"What if I choose not to cross the mountains?" I asked, deciding to find out for myself.

For a moment, she looked as though she were hesitant about whether or not she should answer my question, but then she looked over, staring straight at me.

"...In that case, I will try to cross the mountains by myself," she said.

"That might not be the most efficient decision," I replied. "Housen and Amasawa might not necessarily make it to E2 anyway."

Even if Nanase were to arrive at the designated area the fastest, there was no guarantee that she would get the Early Bird Bonus. Even if, for the sake of argument, she successfully managed to cross over the mountains before the weather turned bad, there wouldn't be any value in it if her two teammates didn't make it to the designated area in a similar timeframe anyway. So

why was she insisting so strongly, to the point of meaninglessness, on crossing the mountains this time?

I would have been fine with letting her go on her own, but it would be dangerous for a girl to try and cross the mountains by herself. Although I wasn't responsible for her or anything, I would at the very least like to see her off once she was in a safe place. Besides, I still hadn't ascertained the reason she had wanted to accompany me in the first place. If I chose to part ways with her right here, I would likely never figure out the answer.

"All right," I said. "If that's what you're prepared to do, then I'll go with you that way."

"Thank you very much," said Nanase.

When I heard Nanase's voice as she said those words, I came to understand something. Namely, that she had already been totally confident that I was going to come with her over the mountains.

"Since we've decided upon a route, we should get going immediately," I told her.

I'd really hate to have gone through all this hassle only to turn around and say, *I only got one point after making such a big do-or-die speech about crossing the mountains.* We walked east for a while, but the wind started to pick up and blow more forcefully around the same time that the path that we were on started to incline, becoming more difficult to tread. The sky turned even an even darker gray, and it looked like it could start raining any second now.

When I checked our location on my tablet, the GPS indicated that we were just about to reach area D3. I was really hoping we could hold on until we arrived at our designated area, but...I could hear Nanase's quickening breaths slightly behind me. We hadn't crossed any particularly difficult paths yet today. It was too soon for her to be out of breath. Was this the result of all the fatigue that had been building up over these past several days?

If she wasn't feeling well, then the wise choice would be to set up a tent here and just wait for the rainy weather to pass us

by. If she caught a cold, then the school would find out that she was sick via the data reported from her watch. I decided to only slow my pace slightly, but not in any explicit way, so that she wouldn't notice. I was planning to stop if Nanase made even the slightest suggestion that we call it quits, but I was sure that she wasn't the type of person who'd admit defeat that easily.

If we had to slow down any further, I'd have no choice but to forcefully bring this journey to a stop. Nanase and I continued walking up the slope of the mountains, step by step, in total silence. The temperature had dropped sharply, and the humidity seemed to have increased. Both Nanase and I were wearing ordinary running shoes. Even if you were being charitable, these kinds of shoes weren't exactly appropriate for walking on a path like this, not by any stretch.

In fact, the more steps we took, the more Nanase's pace steadily slowed. The time to make a decision was fast approaching. I stopped in my tracks.

"Um... I can still—!"

"Give me your backpack," I told her.

"Huh?"

"You can't keep our current pace while lugging that bag around."

"But I couldn't possibly... I couldn't ask you to carry my bag for me, senpai," said Nanase.

"You can say that once you can keep pace with me," I said. "At the rate things are going, I'm going to have to give up on getting those points from the Early Bird Bonus. In that case, it'd be better if you just handed over your bag, so we can get going already."

She could either put on a show to keep up appearances or face reality. Now that I had brought the matter up with her though, Nanase shouldn't have the right to refuse.

"My backpack is quite heavy, though," she said. "I would think that it would be difficult to carry, even for you, senpai."

"I'll think about that after you hand it over," I answered.

"...I understand."

Reluctantly complying with my order, Nanase took off her backpack. Then, she sheepishly handed it over to me, using both hands. Although its contents were different, her bag weighed just about the same as mine did. In that case, I should be able to keep walking at my initial pace without any hindrances. Normally, it would be easiest to use your lower back for support to lighten the burden, but in this case, I didn't really have an option. I held Nanase's bag in front of me with both arms and continued walking once more.

"A-are you really sure you're all right?" she asked.

"Walk first, then talk," I answered.

Nanase heeded my warning and shut her mouth. Then, she started walking again, staying almost exactly two meters behind me.

9.2

OUR SURROUNDINGS GREW dimmer and dimmer, and visibility started to get much, much worse. The wind had gotten even stronger, and occasionally, fierce gusts raged. In the midst of all these unfavorable conditions that seemed to keep piling up, though, the good news was that we had nearly reached the top. All that was left now was to head along the somewhat smooth path downhill. Of course, even on the way down, we still needed to be careful not to lose our footing. We couldn't rest easy quite yet.

"I think I'll be fine now that we've made it this far," said Nanase. "I will...carry my bag now."

"Are you sure you'll be okay? I'd like to avoid losing any more time by going through the process of having you hand it back over to me again," I said, wanting to make sure.

"Yes, I am sure. Thank you very much for helping me," said Nanase.

Since she had said that she could keep going after I had asked her, I handed her bag back to her. She took it with both hands. After she took it back from me, though, she didn't throw it over her shoulder to carry it on her back. She simply stared at it.

"Hey, you ready? To start walking?" I asked, but she wasn't responding.

It wasn't the kind of behavior you'd expect to see from someone who was trying to reach their destination as quickly as possible.

"Ayanokouji-senpai. There is something I would like to ask you," said Nanase.

"It seems like you've had something on your mind since this morning," I replied. "It's been written all over your face this whole time."

To be precise, ever since she had asked to accompany me, it had seemed like there was something that she wanted to know.

"I knew it... You saw right through me after all, huh?" She didn't sound particularly shocked. She simply nodded along as she spoke. "There is a reason why I've been sticking so close to you all this time over these past few days, Ayanokouji-senpai."

Nanase stood there, not moving an inch, and she began to explain herself. It was obvious that it wasn't simply because we were in the same Table. It sounded as if she was finally going to tell me the answer.

"However, before that, please allow me to apologize for one thing," she said. She turned her back to me and then proceeded to place her backpack down next to a large tree. "You won't be reaching your next designated area, E2, today, senpai."

"That's a funny thing to say. Weren't we in a hurry to get there right now?"

"I wanted to cross the mountains so that I could lead you to this spot, senpai."

So Nanase's destination wasn't our designated area of E2, but the northern part of D3, where we were right now.

"And if I'm not lucky, we're probably the only two people in this area," I remarked.

"That's right. I think so too," said Nanase.

With her backpack out of the way, she came back over to me.

"Over these past six days, including today, I've had the opportunity to see all kinds of things as I've been by your side, Ayanokouji-senpai," she said. "You have made many friends at this school, you have gained quite a lot of trust, and slowly but surely, you have demonstrated what you are truly capable of."

As Nanase thought back on our first week spent here on the uninhabited island, she began to sum up what she had seen.

"Also, I would like to express my respect for the insights and the heights of physical prowess that you had shown me from time

to time," she said.

"I don't remember doing anything special," I replied.

"If that's the case, then I would say that's even more amazing, wouldn't you agree?" Though Nanase was giving me high praise, there wasn't even the faintest hint of a smile on her face. "However, you are not someone who should be here at this school, Ayanokouji-senpai."

Something started to change. The person standing in front of me was clearly different from the amicable Nanase from the last few days.

"I shouldn't?" I repeated. "Can you give me a reason?"

Nanase nodded, slowly standing back up, before turning to look at me.

"Because you're from the White Room," she said.

The phrase "White Room" just came out from the mouth of a third party. There were extremely few people who knew that name. Under normal circumstances, at this point, I would have been able to definitively conclude that she was the assassin sent in by Tsukishiro.

"I can imagine that you've already surmised as such," Nanase said, "but I enrolled in this school under Acting Director Tsukishiro's orders. And as for the exact nature of those orders—I was told to get you expelled, Ayanokouji-senpai."

She was laying everything out so openly right now that it was hard to believe that she had been working from the shadows up until this point.

"You could've sprung this on me at any point during these past several days," I observed. "Why did you specifically choose to do this right here? I'm sure you have a reason other than wanting to avoid being seen, right?"

"I'm going to knock you down here and injure you, setting off your Emergency Alert," Nanase told me. "Then, once the teachers arrive, they will call for your elimination effective

immediately, and you'll be expelled. That's just what's going to happen."

"So, in short, the same thing that was done to Komiya and Kinoshita, then? Don't tell me you were the one who caused them to be eliminated. Were you, Nanase?"

"Well... What do you think?" she asked.

"I have a hard time believing that you could have made it there and back in such a brief period of time, but if you really are from the White Room, I don't know if I could say with complete certainty that you couldn't pull it off."

Besides, that was trivial by this point anyway.

"What if I tell the teachers and staff who come rushing over that you attacked me?" I asked her. "What then?"

"I don't think that you'll be able to talk your way out of getting eliminated. That's because Acting Director Tsukishiro himself will certainly be the one who answers the call."

So I wouldn't be able to make any excuses. No matter what kind of case I pleaded, Tsukishiro would choose to side with Nanase.

"I see. In other words, getting defeated here means I'll be getting expelled then, huh?"

I slowly started to take off my backpack. Then, after sitting it down next to a sturdy tree, I turned to face Nanase once again.

"If Acting Director Tsukishiro sent you thinking that you would be able to take me down, then I guess there's no avoiding this turning into a difficult fight," I said. "Though, raising my hand against a girl could turn into a major issue by itself."

This probably wasn't going to end as a cute, childish little squabble. However, if this situation got to the point where Nanase and I were trading punches, then that by itself would warrant a significant penalty. There wasn't any guarantee whatsoever that Tsukishiro wouldn't decide to simply have the both of us eliminated or expelled, effective immediately. If this fight ended in a draw, that meant I'd lose.

"If you're looking for some way out of this, senpai, then your only option is to leave your bag and run away," said Nanase.

"Maybe," I replied.

"But I think that would be pointless as well, anyway," Nanase added.

Trying to continue the special exam on this uninhabited island without my tablet or tent would be suicide. Nanase must be confident that she could handle the situation no matter what choice I made.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"Well, now that it's come to this... I guess there's only one choice I can make," I replied.

I faced Nanase, steeling my resolve to fight.

"So, you have chosen to fight me," she said. "But do you think that there's any hope for you this way? You might see this as cowardly, but if I lose, that means you lose too, Ayanokouji-senpai."

"You might be right," I said.

During our conversation, I deliberately created an opening, making it easier for her to come at me with an attack. However, Nanase was clearly wary of the opening that I had given her and didn't immediately launch at me. She wasn't the type of person to fight recklessly. She took an orthodox approach, choosing to methodically hunt down her opponent. Not going along with your opponent's pace was the correct choice.

"I'll be making my move now," Nanase said.

The fact that she had gone out of her way to announce that she was going to start proved that she wasn't fond of using underhanded methods to outwit her opponent. Of course, it was possible that this was an attempt to fake me out as well. Though the ground was soft, that was exactly why it would serve well as a foundation for our fight.

"Hah!!"

Nanase, kicking off the ground, closed the distance between us in one go. Was she going to focus on striking with her arms? Or was she going to focus on using her legs? Or would she perhaps make use of both? Normally, I wanted to start out by analyzing her fighting style. If I thoughtlessly started throwing punches, there was a possibility that Nanase could get seriously injured. And, as she had said earlier, that would only serve to put me at a disadvantage.

In that case, my next thought was to use brute force to catch hold of her and restrain her. Most likely, Nanase had taken this into consideration as well. However...that wouldn't be a wise choice either. Though Nanase's testimony alone wasn't very credible, I had been sensing someone following us all day today. It was obvious that there was someone watching us, keeping at a considerable distance the whole time.

If this person following us wasn't coming in to back her up in this fight, then it was better to assume that they had been tasked with recording conclusive evidence of what was happening here using a tablet or some other device. So, then, there was only one choice I could possibly make here.

Nanase, after making a feint to the left, reached straight for me, with an outstretched arm. She didn't thrust with a closed fist, but rather, a gentle open palm. She was starting things off with a grappling technique. Upon seeing this, though my initial movement was delayed, I outpaced the speed of Nanase's outstretched arm. Then, I extended my own, avoiding hers and aiming right for her eyes. My tightly clenched fist stopped just one centimeter before Nanase's eyes.

"Ngh!"

Because Nanase's dynamic visual acuity was far superior to that of a normal person, her body seemed to unconsciously react and stiffen up in response to the threat of approaching impact.

"That's one," I told her.

If I had really struck her, I was sure that single blow would have finished this fight. Nanase would've been knocked unconscious in an instant and collapsed right on the spot.

"Are you worn out? Or was that hesitation? You should have much greater potential than this, Nanase."

Considering what she had shown me over these past several days, she ought to have been sharper than this. In the end, her determination to hunt me down was weak.

"Are you saying that you can defeat me without even trying to fight back...?" said Nanase.

I pulled my fist back, without answering her question. While I did so, Nanase retreated, putting about two meters of distance between us. Then, she immediately kicked off the ground once again, lunging for me slightly faster than the last time. She lowered her upper body, bringing it closer to the ground, planning to come at me with an uppercut. She had tightly balled her left hand into a fist. I sidestepped just before her attack connected, and then threw a vicious punch aimed straight at Nanase's cheek. But just like the last time, I stopped my fist just one centimeter before it connected with her face.

"And that makes two. If I had actually hit you just now, I would've knocked you out, just like the last time," I told her.

"But you didn't actually hit me," said Nanase.

Her eyes were fixed on my fist hanging in the air right in front of her face, but she didn't seem scared at all.

"That's true," I replied.

"You're free to make a show of dominance if you wish, but you don't stand a chance of winning if you don't fight back," said Nanase.

"I wouldn't stand a chance of winning even if I did fight back though, would I?" I replied.

"That's right. So, what will you do?"

From the sounds of it, Nanase wasn't taking things seriously yet either. She was trying to preempt my moves, attacking me while at the same time giving herself room to evade whatever I came back at her with.

"I'm thinking," I replied.

"I hope that you'll be able to provide me with an answer while you're still able to stand," Nanase said.

Then, she made her move, grabbing hold of my right arm, which I had been holding in the air right in front of her face all this time. What I saw just now was the first indication that Nanase was starting to take this fight seriously. It seemed like she was intending to pull me down to the ground and pin me, but I steeled myself and resisted her.

"You're not budging—?!"

Nanase had been thrown off by what just happened and was now feeling flustered and shaken. I took that opportunity to attack. Classic *taijutsu* martial arts offers a range of excellent techniques that allow you to gain control over tough opponents with gentle, flowing movements, regardless of differences in sex and physique. However, that was only possible in situations where your opponent's skill was no match for your own.

Since Nanase had nowhere she could go, she started to lose her strength in her grip. I took advantage of this opening to swing my left fist at her with an uppercut. My fist ripped through the air and stopped just one centimeter before hitting Nanase's lower jaw. The force of my swing made Nanase's hair flutter in the air.

"Agh!!!"

She stared at my fist, her eyes open wide, before turning her gaze back toward me.

"I'm telling you this just so you're aware, but that makes three times now," I replied.

As she was looking at me right then, her eyes started to waver for the first time.

"It would seem that you truly are as capable as the rumors say, Ayanokouji-senpai..."

I couldn't afford to actually fight back. Breaking Nanase's spirit was the only option I had available to me right now. I was going to make her understand that I was an opponent she couldn't possibly beat.

"I know what you're trying to do, senpai..." Apparently, Nanase was aware of my plan too. "Certainly, at this rate, if I continue fighting you normally, I have little chance of defeating you. I admit that," said Nanase.

Had her spirit been broken already...? No, that wasn't possible. I could most definitely see passion and hatred in her eyes as she looked at me.

"I suppose that...*I* probably cannot defeat you," said Nanase.

Nanase had been at my mercy through the course of our fight so far, but those slight traces of panic that she had shown earlier had disappeared. Well, actually, it started to feel like she had never even had such feelings of uncertainty ever in the first place. That was the kind of vibe I was getting from her now. Was she trying to reach some kind of emotional harmony?

After a brief period of silence, Nanase kicked off the ground once again, lunging at me at a high speed without making a sound. I didn't have the time to calmly analyze the situation this time; I was forced to take emergency evasive action. Her movements now were twice as fast as they had been just moments earlier, when I could easily move out of the way enough to avoid any of her attacks without trying.

She was staring daggers at me, the sharp gleam in her eyes so intense that it seemed like it could kill a person. It was such a huge transformation that it was difficult to believe she was the same person as before. If I'd been hit by her last attack, it would have definitely done a fair amount of damage. She could very well gain the upper hand on me in this situation. That was how starkly different things were right now, her moves were that much sharper than before.

"So," said Nanase, "*I'm* gonna stop you."

She was now speaking like she was a different person. There was no way that this simple change in speech pattern could change her movements. But even so, her last attack had been on a very different level from the ones that she had opened with.

"Who are you?" I asked. Given the situation, I couldn't help but respond with that question.

"I've come back from that place," Nanase replied. "To stop you."

That place? For a moment, I had thought she might mean the White Room, but that didn't seem to be it.

"I've come back...from that dark place," said Nanase.

I didn't understand what she was talking about, but I couldn't let my guard down either. This new Nanase, who was speaking differently from the way she was before, had also changed her fighting style. Instead of primarily using attacks from jiu-jitsu, she was now utilizing karate techniques. She came at me with repeated quick thrusts, powerful enough to make even a man faint in agony if they were to land. As I calmly controlled her thrusts, I began to ponder the mystery of her change in speech.

"Do you really think you can keep dodging forever?!" she shouted.

Nanase must've been convinced that if she kept on attacking over and over, say ten or twenty times, she'd eventually hit her target. It was precisely because of that conviction that she cast aside her hesitation and launched into a series of consecutive strikes. If someone were witnessing our fight right now, I could bet they'd probably think the same thing. They would think that it'd be impossible to keep avoiding Nanase's attacks forever. And they'd think that you would have no choice but to fight back to protect yourself in a situation like this.

"H-hyah—!!!"

Nanase was becoming increasingly out of breath as she continued her relentless onslaught. Of course, there was no way she could keep up such a rapid barrage of attacks without end. As long as I never hit her back, though, she could recover her energy at any time.

"Huff..."

Just as I had thought, Nanase had put some distance between us now that she had run out of breath and was trying to

center herself.

"I will definitely... I will definitely defeat you... Definitely defeat you..." she huffed, repeating those words over and over like some kind of Buddhist mantra, glaring at me the whole time as though I were a murderer. "I-I have come back to defeat you..."

"Come back? What are you talking about?" I asked.

I hadn't been able to make sense of what Nanase was saying for a while now.

"I suppose it makes sense that you don't understand," Nanase said. "After all, we've never met in person before."

If we'd really never met, this overwhelming hatred of hers made even less sense to me. I suppose I could imagine that someone from the White Room might have a grudge against me, even if we had never met before. But was Nanase really from the White Room? She was speaking in a slightly different tone of voice than she usually did. It was almost as if, while she still looked like a girl on the outside, she had transformed into someone more masculine on the inside.

"If you're not gonna fight back, that's just fine," said Nanase. "You can do whatever you want. I just have to keep coming at you until I put you down—"

She had taken less than twenty seconds to catch her breath and rest, but that was apparently enough time for her to have regained her earlier sharpness.

"Hyaah!!!"

Her feelings of hatred must have been spurring her on because she came at me with another thrusting attack, the fastest one I had seen yet today. Her thin, pale arm came straight for me, and her fist just grazed my bangs. She still looked like Nanase, but had her personality been replaced with someone else's? As I thought about that, something came to mind.

Multiple personalities, or, to use the scientific term, dissociative identity disorder, refers to a condition in which two or more distinct personalities inhabit a single individual. If Nanase

really did have dissociative identity disorder, then everything became much simpler to explain. There was more to this disorder than a simple change in personality. It was said that in some rare cases, even if one of the alters had a chronic disease, it might temporarily disappear when another alter emerges.

In other words, this meant that it was sufficiently possible that this alter that resided within Nanase, who spoke differently, could possess superior physical ability to her original personality. And if this alter was a man, then she may be able to demonstrate a level of strength equal to a man.

"You don't seem like Nanase," I remarked.

When she heard that Nanase stopped dead in her tracks, visibly irritated.

"You still don't understand, do you?" She thrust her fist out, glaring at me, both her fist and her voice shaking. "I'm not Nanase. The person standing before you is...Matsuo Eiichirou."

"Matsuo Eiichirou?" I repeated.

I had certainly heard the surname Matsuo before, at the very least; it certainly wasn't a distant memory or anything. I had heard that name come from the mouth of *that man*, back when he showed up at the Advanced Nurturing High School. Given all of that, I could finally deduce what was going on here. Since I wasn't outwardly showing that I understood what Nanase was telling me, though, she spoke up once more.

"The son of the man who was killed by your father," said Nanase, sounded quite irritated. "I borrowed this body. I am appearing before you right now to defeat you."

"Borrowed?" I parroted back. "That's a funny joke."

It was simply impossible for the personality of another person who exists in reality to transfer over to another body.

"If you think this is a joke, then please, by all means, try me," said Nanase.

She kicked off the ground once more, her arms trembling violently. The orthodox method of attacks that she had been using

up until this point gradually began to change into something crude, sloppy, and unrestrained.

"I am here to defeat you... I am here!" she shouted.

Before, Nanase had moved gracefully. But now, her movements had changed, becoming wild. She was trying to overwhelm me with her quick movements, but because of this change, some of them had become useless. Regardless of whether she was using an orthodox fighting style or not, if she hit me, it was still the same in the end. That's what fighting was, after all.

"I'll make you pay!" she shouted.

Even though she had gotten sharper, I wasn't going to just let myself get hit that easily. Nanase must have understood that quite well herself, after seeing everything that had happened so far. Though she was trying her best to appear calm and collected, it was Nanase, not me, who had her back up against the wall here. No matter how many short breaks she took to recover her energy, her shoulders were heaving; it was clear that she was close to her limit.

Still, it would be pointless for me to just wait until she tired herself out. Nanase was never going to back down on her own. She would keep challenging me to fight her indefinitely. I had no choice but to break her spirit.

"This is the first time I've fought someone who could dodge my attacks for so long... But there's no way you can keep it up forever. Since I'm here, since I'm the one fighting you, I can defeat you, without a doubt... I can defeat you!" she shouted.

Even though Nanase was slowly but surely suffering emotional damage throughout the course of our fight, she still bared her fangs at me.

"I understand quite well what you're trying to say," I told her.

While I didn't know the specifics of the situation exactly, there were some things that I had established. After briefly

thinking it over, I had finished sorting out my thoughts on the matter.

"Nanase, you do not have multiple personalities, nor have you been possessed by someone."

"I already told you, didn't I? If you think I'm joking, then go ahead and try me. But it really is me, I'm standing right here." Nanase stomped her foot down on the ground hard, raising her tone in denial.

But that was precisely what proved that the other personality didn't exist.

"Well, unfortunately, I can't believe you," I replied. "If, for the sake of argument, this alternate personality of yours wasn't a person who existed in real life, then sure, I might have been able to accept it. However, you're telling me that 'Matsuo Eiichirou,' a person who exists, has transferred into your body. Sorry, but that is just far too unrealistic."

"If... If that's true, then how do you explain me being here?!" she shouted.

How? There wasn't any need to think that hard about an answer to that question. It wasn't that complicated.

"You simply made it all up. You basically just conjured up this other personality inside of you on your own, nothing more. The fact that you deliberately changed the way you speak was just to convince yourself of it."

Nanase was, fundamentally, a nonviolent person. That was precisely why she didn't want to use violence to make her opponents submit. But since she had to fight, she had no choice but to conjure up a personality that could fight. Well to put it more succinctly, she had no choice but to play the part.

"This power is proof enough that I'm real!" She threw another punch at me, and it was most definitely faster and more forceful than before.

"You're not showing me anything beyond what you've always been capable of from the start, Nanase," I answered.

The color drained from Nanase's face, and she looked visibly shaken. I had clearly struck a nerve.

"Y-you're wrong! I'm... I'm Matsuo!" she shouted.

"If you really are this Matsuo person, then there's no need for you to be so upset by what I have to say," I replied.

If she really were him, then as Matsuo, she could have confidently called me out, snickering at my misguided reasoning.

"I felt like there was something off about how you just conveniently changed the way you spoke. It was simply a form of self-deception." She was simply doing that as a way to change herself into an aggressive person.

"You're wrong!!!" she shouted.

"You want to believe that Matsuo's personality resides within you... Actually, I bet you don't even believe it yourself."

She was desperately trying to keep lying to herself, but she just couldn't convince herself of it.

"Uwaaaaahh!!!"

Nanase must have not been able to stand listening to what I had to say for a minute longer, because she lunged right for me. The sharpness that had existed mere moments ago was now gone. I probably could have dodged her even with my eyes closed right now.

"Give up, Nanase," I told her. "You can't beat me."

"I will! I have to!" she shouted.

She reached out and grabbed my collar. Then, deciding that this was the golden opportunity that she had been waiting for, she swung her arm back wide. I was perfectly within her reach. It was safe to say that under normal circumstances, there was no way that anyone could avoid being hit from the position I was in. Nanase swung at me with her right arm, intending to smash her fist into my face. But even though she was still holding tightly onto my collar, I managed to avoid the blow.

"Ngh!"

Another punch came flying at me immediately after that one. Yet I dodged it just like the last one.

"Why?! Why can't I land a hit?! Why can't I hit you?" she screamed.

A third, a fourth, and then a fifth punch came flying at me, but I dodged every attack. Then, fed up with the fact that her attacks weren't landing, she tried to reach out and grab me by my hair. She had probably determined that if she could keep my head still, she'd be able to land a punch. I grabbed her right wrist when she tried to, though.

"L-let me go!" she wailed.

"Even if I do, nothing is going to change," I replied.

"Lemme go!!" she screamed.

She forcefully tore her arm free of my grasp, only to repeat this meaningless cycle all over again. She threw another punch. She had thrown so many punches today that I had honestly forgotten how many it had been. She missed again, her fist going through empty air.

"Huff, huff, huff...!"

She had reached her limit, both physically and emotionally.

"Why? Why...? I'm so close, and yet... I was so close, and yet—!"

Nanase no longer had the will to keep lunging at me. She just barely managed to come forward, knees trembling, but her body just refused to fight.

"I'm sure you were thinking that if you just kept coming at me, you'd eventually land a hit. But that was a mistake on your part. At your current level of ability, even if you kept on attacking me until you died, you'd never be able to land a single hit on me," I told her.

I was just bluffing, of course. There was no possible way I could keep dodging her attacks forever. However, since Nanase had just been faced with the reality that she hadn't managed to hit me even once, what I said most likely struck a chord with her.

"If you really want to get me expelled," I said, "then your best option would be to play the victim and pretend that I was the one who attacked you just now. If your clothes were all messed up, that alone would probably be enough to force me into a difficult position."

Even though telling her that was essentially helping an enemy, I couldn't imagine that she'd really go through with it. Because I didn't think, deep down, that she really wanted to get me expelled.

"I... I—!!!"

Nanase, letting out a scream, fell to her knees right on the spot. No matter how much you tried to push yourself, if your spirit was broken, you would lose the will to fight.

9.3

AS I LISTENED TO THE WIND echo through the woods, I was pouring my energy into tracking two people. Just how hard would I have to struggle to reach area D3 this morning...? It should only be a little bit farther... Or at least, that's what I told myself as I pressed forward, step by step. My legs shook. If they were to find out that I was tailing them, all my efforts thus far would be meaningless.

Normally, when you're tailing someone, at the bare minimum you had to keep them within your range of vision, so that you didn't lose track of them. Of course, that meant that they would be able to see you too. That was just the risk that came with trying to do this. But no matter who I was tracking, they would never, ever find out that I was tailing them. I wasn't even able to see my main target, Ayanokouji, with my naked eye right now. The key to this operation was the walkie-talkie I had in the pocket of my jersey. Thanks to a certain someone on the other end, this walkie-talkie kept me constantly up to date on Ayanokouji's location.

Ever since the sixth day of the exam, all students were allowed to search for others via GPS by spending points. That allowed me to get an approximate idea of my target's location. No matter what it took, there was something I absolutely had to get my hands on: definitive proof. If something unexpected happened, I was even willing to spend my own points to hunt down my target using my tablet.

One way or another, I had to get my hands on information that could get Ayanokouji expelled. I didn't have any other options anymore. Taking down Horikita should never have been my priority. I felt deeply ashamed that I had denied it somehow, even though I had some inkling of what was going on. In retrospect, I should've suspected something back when Ryuuuen had stopped searching for the person known as X, the elusive mastermind from Class D.

Ayanokouji was involved in what happened back in that chain of events. Even now, though, after coming to understand everything, there was still a part of me that found it all hard to believe. After all, at a glance, he didn't look like anything more than that sort of harmless, insignificant, boring guy you'd see anywhere.

I got a beep on the walkie-talkie. I was wearing an earpiece with a microphone so I could listen without having to stop and take it out of my pocket.

"Please stop for a moment, Kushida-senpai. It seems that the two of them have stopped moving."

"Huff, huff... F-finally? They're finally taking a break, huh..."

Complying with the instructions I had received, I came to a stop, relieved. Now I could get a little rest.

"I know that you must be exhausted, but we just have one last push. The decisive moment will arrive soon. And when it does, there will be nothing left to bind you."

Since I hadn't been pressing the transmit button, my partner shouldn't have been able to hear my voice, but they were talking as if they knew exactly what was going on with me.

"Yeah, I know, I know..." I muttered.

At this point, I just felt irritated. It felt like I was a horse and someone was dangling a carrot in front of my face. I was taking on a huge risk; I had been acting entirely on my own for the entire day to do this dangerous job. And I needed to lay down groundwork for a bunch of other things too, so I had lots to do after this...

After only a brief five-minute break to rest, I got new orders over my walkie-talkie.

"There hasn't been any movement. It seems that they've come to a complete stop. Please proceed slowly to the northwest while concealing your presence. Also, please do not forget to get a recording with your tablet."

The way my partner was explaining every little detail in such a polite tone was irritating, but right now, I just wanted this all to be over as soon as possible. Suppressing the urge to break out into a run, I took my tablet out of my backpack and, with it in hand, began to walk in the direction I'd been told to. Not too long afterward, I caught sight of two people.

Nanase, standing in place, looked over her shoulder and said something to Ayanokouji. Neither of them seemed to be wearing their backpacks, so I wondered if they were still taking a break after all. I opened the camera app on my tablet and switched it over to recording mode. Then, I snuck towards them, carefully remaining hidden behind the trees, so I could get as close as possible without being discovered. But no matter how much I really concentrated and tried to listen, the wind was so irritatingly loud that I couldn't make out what they were saying.

Chagrin coursed through my body. A desire to see them start pounding on each other welled up within me, making me even more annoyed. *Hurry up! Hurry up and hit each other!* If I could hear what they were saying, then I might have been able to get a better understanding of what was going on, but getting closer was risky. Now that Nanase's head was turned, if I moved from my current location, there was a chance that I might enter her field of view.

I couldn't let myself get impatient. I had to get my emotions under control. It was a little dangerous, but I just had to calm down and go around. I held my breath as I quietly began to move. Then, after putting some distance between me and them, I'd circle around them, and—

"Wh—?!"

Even though there shouldn't have been anyone else around, a hand suddenly came out of nowhere and grabbed me from behind by my right shoulder. I let out a little yelp, but the unknown assailant quickly covered my mouth with their other hand. Faced with this unexpected turn of events, I started to panic. Just then, a pair of glossy lips came close to my ear.

"Shh. I'm sure you must be surprised, but you gotta be quiet, Kushida-senpai. You'd be in a lot of trouble if Ayanokouji-senpai and Nanase-chan found you, right?"

It was almost like she could see right through me. The person speaking in my ear was none other than Amasawa Ichika, from Class 1-A, someone I'd never even had an actual conversation with before. This was practically the first time that we had even met. But Amasawa clearly knew my name. She almost forcefully dragged me some distance away from Ayanokouji and Nanase before she let go of me.

"Um... Why are you here, Amasawa-san?"

I somehow managed to regain my composure and started a conversation so I could get her to leave. If the fight were to start while I was talking with her, then I'd be back at square one. It would have all been for nothing. I could feel myself getting impatient, but I was determined not to lose my cool.

"Well, I just so happened to be passing by when I saw you being all sneaky-sneaky, Kushida-senpai," said Amasawa.

"I wasn't being sneaky," I replied. "I was just... Yeah, I was taking a little walk by myself is all."

I knew that was a lame excuse. I was acting on my own, away from my group. Anyone with eyes could clearly see that there was something weird going on. Amasawa had specifically said that it would be bad if Ayanokouji and Nanase saw me too, so it sounded like she knew what I was up to. I had heard that some of the first-years already knew about me, after all.

"Hmm?" Amasawa drew closer, eyeing me up suspiciously.

Anyway, how did this Amasawa girl get here without a tablet, or even a backpack—

Smack!

A dull sound echoed throughout the woods, although it was drowned out by the sound of the intense winds. Lost in thought, I felt a sharp pain on the right side of my face. I immediately brought my hand up to my cheek.

"Wh-what?!" I sputtered.

"So, what were you plannin' anyway?" Amasawa asked.
"Coming all the way here deep in the mountains like this, all by
yourself, snooping around?"

"Wh-what do you mean? What are you talking about,
Amasawa-san?!" I shouted.

"I'm really, really looking forward to seeing how long you
can keep that mask on," said Amasawa.

I pretended that I was horrified at being suddenly struck by
her, but she closed in once again.

"S-stop!" I wailed.

"I'm not gonna stop!" she said in a sing-song tone, raising
her left hand in the air.

I immediately put myself in a defensive stance, but
Amasawa forced her way past.

Smack!

This time, she hit my other cheek, hard. Even though I had
tried to protect myself, I couldn't keep up with how fast she was.

"D-do you understand what you're doing? You can't do this!"
I protested.

"I'm just giving you gentle little slaps, though," said
Amasawa. "I mean, they don't hurt at all, not one bit."

"Why are you doing this?! I don't understand!"

"You don't? Hmm, okay... Well, I wonder if maybe you'll get
what I mean if I hit you at least once with a good punch then?"

"Huh?" I blinked.

Punch? As my mind was processing what I just heard her
say, I felt my vision get all distorted and fuzzy. The sound of my
cheek getting punched came later. Before I knew it, I was looking
up at the cloudy, overcast sky.

Did I just get punched in the face...?

Then, I started to feel a warm sensation on the side of my face, as though the blood was gradually hemorrhaging underneath my skin. My cheek started to feel hot, and I felt a throbbing pain.

"Ngh, ah...!!!"

"Oh ho, I guess that one stung a little bit, huh? I mean, it's not every day someone smacks you around like this, right?" said Amasawa.

I couldn't understand this. She just suddenly showed up out of nowhere. Why was she messing with me? And she was getting violent too, which made me understand this even less.

"Well, then, how about I go for the other cheek next?" said Amasawa, closing the distance between us once again.

Right now, all I knew was that this wasn't some simple joke. I wanted to avoid getting senselessly beaten up any more than I had been already, no matter what. I struggled as hard as I could to brush off Amasawa's outstretched arm, pushing her away with all my effort.

"H-hey, I-I'm sorry, okay? But you just attacked me so suddenly, and..."

"You're still trying to play innocent?" Amasawa said.
"Kushida-senpai, I know *allll* about you, y'know. You're a girl with a real nasty personality, who knows exactly how cute she is. You absolutely love other people's secrets, and when you find yourself in a tight spot, you'll gladly bring everyone else around you down with you when you self-destruct. You're a total wolf in sheep's clothing, aren't you?"

"I don't understand what you're saying, Amasawa-san... But violence is absolutely not okay... Yeah?" I replied.

"Okay, then why don't you go crying to the school about how rough I was with you? If you do that, I might get expelled. But I might just leave you a little parting gift then, y'know? I'll expose *allll* that darkness from your junior high school days, everything you've been trying oh-so-hard to hide, and I'll take your status away from you."

"How—"

Amasawa just suddenly showing up here, completely empty-handed, without any supplies, was... No, that wasn't just simple coincidence. There was something wrong.

"How do I know your secret, you ask?" she said. "From the look on your face, I bet you're thinking I heard it from Ayanokouji-senpai, right?"

She looked at me with eyes that seemed to see through everything.

"But nope, that's not it! Nothing gets past me. I see through everything, because I'm special," said Amasawa.

"Nothing...?" I repeated.

"Hm, okay, how 'bout I give you an example?" she said. "Like, there was the time that you tried to cozy up to Student Council President Nagumo and join yourself, but he just turned you away at the door. Well, even if things had gone well for you back then, I guess you couldn't really expect him to have your back anymore and keep protecting you, now that Horikita-senpai has joined the student council."

"How... How do you know that mu—"

"Yes, yes, how indeed?" she replied.

Amasawa grinned broadly, as though she were playing with a toy. My patience had reached its limit.

"Who... Who told you?!" I yelled.

"Looks like your true self came out! But I told you to shush, remember? Look, sure, it seems like there isn't anybody around right now, but even though this uninhabited island is so big, you never know when someone might come along," Amasawa gently reprimanded me, lightly poking the tip of my nose.

That smug, condescending attitude of hers was the biggest insult of all. I couldn't keep my emotions in check any longer. I felt words bubble up from the bottom of my heart.

"Knock it off, you bitch!" I screamed.

If you only knew what Kushida Kikyou was like on the outside, then you would have been shocked by her words. Amasawa wasn't surprised, though; instead, she smiled happily.

"*A ha hahaha!*" she laughed. "Yeah, yeah, that definitely suits you much better, Kushida-senpai."

I knew it. This girl knew about me after all. In fact, somehow, she seemed to know far, far more than the likes of Ayanokouji...

"What the hell?! What in the hell are you?!" I demanded.

"Hmm, that's a good question," said Amasawa. "I guess that I'm... Yeah, I got it. I just came here to save Ayanokouji-senpai is all."

"Save? Huh?" I balked.

"Don't try to hide it, Kushida-senpai. I know everything you're plotting. You were going to get some dirt on Ayanokouji-senpai using that tablet you dropped over there to get him expelled, weren't you?"

"I have no clue what you're talking about. Get some dirt on him?" I repeated. "What?"

It was no use. This girl had seen right through me... Part of me knew that it was pointless to try to resist, but I had no choice but to put up a fight and keep denying the truth.

"You've been in a class together with him for over a year now, and you still don't understand anything, do you, Kushida-senpai? Not even one little bit. There is just no way that you could corner Ayanokouji-senpai with that shallow level of thinking."

Amasawa shot a look over in the direction of where Ayanokouji and Nanase should be.

"*Siiiigh.* I really wanted to watch from a front-row seat too," she grumbled. "I'm positive that Ayanokouji-senpai is going to defeat Nanase-chan without even hurting her. I really wanted to see that."

She turned her gaze back to me.

"I don't know who put you up to this," she went on, "but you've been taken advantage of, Kushida-senpai. No matter how bad of a situation he's in, I'm sure that Ayanokouji-senpai has noticed that you've been tailing him. I mean, there's no way he *wouldn't* have noticed, Kushida-senpai, given what a total noob you are."

"B-but I've made sure I've left plenty of distance...!" I squeaked.

"Oh?" said Amasawa. "'Plenty,' you say? Hmm? Did you just admit that you've been tailing him?"

"W-well, that's... I-I mean," I stammered, "I just thought that there was something suspicious about those two, so..."

"So, you followed them out of curiosity? And you went along this rough mountain trail all by your lonesome?"

I knew I should just stop with the excuses already, but it was a habit of mine to always keep looking for a way to escape, no matter the situation. I had no choice but to recognize the person in front of me as a formidable enemy and treat her as such.

"It's none of your business," I replied.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess I should have assumed you would have some fight in you," Amasawa said. "But, you see, the thing is, it absolutely *is* my business, big time. You see, Ayanokouji-senpai is someone special to me."

"What? What's that supposed to mean...? That you like him or something?" I asked.

"I'd really prefer if you didn't talk it about like it's something so vulgar. It's not that I simply like him. I suppose it's more that I *love* him...? Well, no, that's not it, it's much, much more than that... Yeah. It's a feeling that goes far beyond love."

"Huh?" I blinked.

"Well, there you have it. Anywho, now that I've learned you a thing or two, you just go back down the mountain and head back to your group, now. The weather's going to get real bad

soon. If you want to make it back in time, I'd say it's now or never," said Amasawa.

"...This isn't a joke!" I shouted.

I grabbed a clump of wet dirt and threw it at Amasawa, to show her I rejected her. "I'm going to get some dirt on Ayanokouji, no matter the cost, and get him expelled...!"

"You know that even if you do manage to get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled, it's not going to solve anything, right?" said Amasawa. "You do realize that?"

I'd come this far, desperately clinging to my plans. I couldn't just back down now and hang my head in defeat because of this first-year girl.

"I'm going to tell you this one more time," she said. "Ayanokouji-senpai is someone special to me. There is no way I'm going to let him get expelled because of an outsider like you."

She drew closer to me, and then mercilessly grabbed me by my bangs, yanking my head up.

"Ugh! Let go of me!"

"Nope, not gonna do that, I'm afraid."

Amasawa's eyes seemed colorful at first glance, but at the same time, they looked blank and hollow. They were the eyes of someone who was completely insane. My body started to tremble. My instincts were screaming. *Run away! Run away!*

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

"Wow, this sure is weird, don't you think? I can't believe that you're trembling in fear of a girl who's younger than you. But you know, I really think it'd be better for you to cherish this feeling, Kushida-senpai."

In a strange, bizarre way, Amasawa was complimenting me, but she didn't even pretend to care what I thought about it. She just carried on with her monologue.

"You think you're cuter than other people," she said. "Better than other people. More than other people... Basically, you're just completely in love with yourself, aren't you, Kushida-senpai? You

are just *desperate* to get one up on everybody else, to have them come to you with their secrets. And because you absolutely hate when other people stand above you, you can't stand it when other people know your secrets. You know, I don't exactly hate how messed up you are."

I suppressed the urge to talk back and analyzed the situation. She clearly knew a lot about me. For the time being, I had to set aside the questions of how and why. As I talked myself through it, getting my pounding chest to settle down, I stood back up.

"Earlier, what was... What were you trying to say?" I asked.

After sorting out my thoughts and feelings, I had regained my composure. The more I panicked and shouted, the more I'd get caught up in Amasawa's pace.

"I gotta say," Amasawa said, "I *am* amazed that you made it all the way here by yourself. Even though you've got a tablet and somebody backing you up, it doesn't change the fact that you walked all the way here with your own two feet. You must've had a lot of headaches to deal with, lying to your teammates too. I mean, breaking away from your group and setting out on your own means taking on quite a bit of risk, doesn't it? The more your score drops, the more you'll put yourself at risk of getting expelled, and—"

Amasawa suddenly shoved me once more, knocking me down again. She looked down at me as she stood over me.

"But I'm sure you didn't overlook anything, Kushida-senpai. Even if you did happen to cost your group points and the group sank all the way to the bottom of the rankings, you've gotta have enough Private Points for you to survive at least, right?" said Amasawa.

Needless to say, she was absolutely right. I was acting so recklessly because I had secured the two million points that I needed at minimum. I had put up one point three million of those points myself, and they had supplied the remainder that I was missing.

"I will never lose..." I huffed. "No matter what, I'm never going to give up..."

"Okay then, how are you going to resist me?" Amasawa said. "I mean, I'm playing with you like putty in my hands right now, Kushida-senpai."

It was true.

"...So what? You say that I'm putty in your hands, but when exactly did I lose?" I shot back.

The fiery determination in my eyes wouldn't be extinguished just from this. Far from feeling shaken and overwhelmed by my emotions, I was starting to regain my composure. There was no need to panic. I just needed to make Amasawa disappear too. I just had to get rid of all the obstacles that got in my way. Well, that wasn't all, actually.

"Oh ho... You're an even bigger pain in the ass than I imagined, Kushida-senpai," Amasawa said. "However, there's still just one thing about you that impresses me. You've got this impressive strength, like, in a mental sense. Rather than being afraid of me, you're just like, bursting with hate. Well, it's not just directed at me, I guess, but it's directed at everyone who knows your secret."

I stood up once more, without bothering to brush myself off. If necessary, I could beat the crap out of Amasawa right here and now, and—

"Don't bother. You wouldn't stand a chance against me even if you tried, Kushida-senpai. See ya," said Amasawa, turning her back to me.

When she did so, I leaped toward her. I didn't even really think it through. I just wanted to push her down to the ground. But she must have been expecting it, because she dodged my shove without even a moment's delay. Then, she quickly knocked me off my feet, and I fell to the ground for what seemed like the umpteenth time.

"G-grr...!"

"I get the feeling that we're not really compatible, huh, Kushida-senpai? Look, you might use other people's secrets as weapons, but I don't have any secrets that you can use, y'know? Even if you try to threaten me with violence or something, I am stronger than boys are, okay? I don't have any friends that are special to me or anything either, so you can't take a hostage to use against me. Well, I guess if I had to say anything, I would say that Ayanokouji-senpai could be my weak point, but... Well, beating him would be just about as difficult for you as beating me. Right?"

Amasawa just kept droning on and on in that same condescending manner, the kind of thing you'd hear from some dumbass teacher.

"Okay then, so how 'bout you just cut it out now and go back?" she said. "I've gotta meet up with Ayanokouji-senpai."

"...What are you gonna do?" I asked. "Tell him that I've been tailing him?"

"Nope," said Amasawa. "I already told you there'd be no point in me doing that. But hey, maybe things will turn out just the way you want, Kushida-senpai. You never know, Ayanokouji-senpai might end up getting expelled. Aren't you happy?"

"...Once Ayanokouji is out of here, I'm going to crush you. I will most definitely crush you," I spat.

"This fight was over before it even started, Kushida-senpaaai. Hey, I get that getting people who know your secret expelled is your only way of protecting yourself, but that only works on gentlemen like Ayanokouji who don't go around blabbing to everyone. Now if it were someone like me, well, I'd feel free to spread it around before getting kicked out of school, y'know?" said Amasawa.

"Hah... Don't make me laugh," I replied. "Sure, it's true an awful brat like you would probably run her mouth about my secret. But it's not like anyone would believe a thing you say. People would just pass it off as a mean-spirited prank from a student who's about to get expelled."

"Hm, well, yeah, sure, I guess?" said Amasawa. "I mean, there would only be a few people who would believe everything I say. But just a few would still be enough to put a crack in the image of this perfect person that Kushida Kikyou appears to be on the surface, wouldn't you say?"

I guessed that she must not have felt like playing with me anymore, because after that, Amasawa disappeared into the woods, heading off in Ayanokouji's direction. I still could have kept going after her, but if I did... I was sure she wouldn't show me any mercy. She'd probably spread the secrets I held close without even batting an eye. I'd be completely defeated.

Now that Amasawa was gone, I just sat there right on the ground in the woods, looking up at the sky. Raindrops started gently falling between the dense cover of leaves above. They landed on my cheeks and trickled down the back of my neck.

"What...am I even doing...?" I huffed, feeling like a coward.

I felt so empty that I didn't even feel anger welling up inside me anymore. First Ayanokouji, and now Amasawa. One after another, more and more people who disturbed my peaceful life kept appearing. Well, no... It wasn't just those two. They weren't the only reason I was down in the dirt right now. I began to remember where this had all started, how I had gotten into this mess.

9.4

ON OUR FIFTH DAY HERE on the uninhabited island, I met up with a lone first-year student. Bumping into someone wasn't all that unusual in itself. After all, if you were moving all about this vast island in every direction, you'd often run into people and chat with them, whether they were from your same grade or upperclassmen or whatever. But those kinds of encounters were still all just products of coincidence.

This specific encounter was a little bit different. I'd been contacted via a walkie-talkie that I was secretly entrusted with, and intentionally made arrangements to meet with this first-year student.

That was because, well, given the circumstances, I had no other choice but to meet in person. When the first-year student saw me, I was greeted with a smile. As I drew closer, I responded with a smile of my own. Then, after I had made sure that there was no one else around, I got down to business.

"I got your report over the walkie-talkie this morning. You're going to explain to me what happened, right?" I demanded.

I then addressed him by his name to emphasize the seriousness of my request.

"Yagami-kun."

As in the leader of Class 1-B, Yagami Takuya.

"Thank you for taking the time to come and meet with me," he replied.

"Forget the pleasantries. I'm just asking for you to explain yourself."

In response to my urgency, Yagami averted his eyes, like he was troubled by something. Then, he turned back to look at me once again.

"Well, unexpected things do tend to happen, Kushida-senpai."

The way he just casually spoke about this like it was no big deal was infuriating. It looked like I wasn't going to get anywhere in this conversation if I kept on playing nice.

"What do you mean, unexpected?" I snapped. "It's *your* fault that those first-years found out about my past, isn't it?"

When Yagami contacted me earlier, he reported that when he was pressed into making a confession, he told Takahashi Osamu from Class A, Tsubaki Sakurako and Utomiya Riku from Class C, and Housen Kazuomi from Class D about me. Apparently, those four had their suspicions about our relationship from an early stage, and Yagami couldn't talk his way out of it. This wasn't the kind of problem where I could just say this kind of thing was inevitable and forget about it.

"For that, please accept my apologies," said Yagami.

"Seriously? Even if you say you're sorry, it's not going to change anything."

Now, four more people had learned the truth. Now it had gotten to this point, there wasn't anything I could do about this on my own anymore.

"Tsubaki-san and the others had more information than I had expected," said Yagami. "It came as a surprise to me too."

"That was a surprise? Don't be stupid," I spat.

"Please calm down, Kushida-senpai. Tsubaki-san and the others are not what's important right now," said Yagami.

"What?"

"Their objective is simply getting Ayanokouji-senpai expelled," he replied. "They essentially have no interest in what kind of past you have, Kushida-senpai."

I didn't give a crap if they were interested or not. I simply could not stand living in the same space as people who had my sensitive information. Why couldn't anyone understand that?

"Besides, those four are first-year students. They would basically never come into contact with you, Kushida-senpai," said Yagami.

"Hah! Don't make me laugh... You do realize we're in the middle of fighting other grade levels here on this island, right? When I inevitably have to fight with the first-years, that means they'll have something over me."

That meant I would inevitably be put at a disadvantage. If they said they were going to disclose everything, I'd have no choice but to follow their demands, even if they were younger than me.

"Yes, I suppose that you're right. If I were to look at this from your perspective, then I suppose that would be important," admitted Yagami, having understood the truth. "However, that being said, getting those four expelled right now would be a Herculean task. Am I wrong?"

"Are you giving me lip?" I huffed. "Don't you dare look down on me."

"...I am sorry. However, personally, I think that I made the best choice," said Yagami.

How exactly was it the best choice for him to go around blabbing my secrets without my permission? I had to fight the urge to smack him as I listened to him keep talking.

"Do you remember what I told you on the cruise ship?" he asked. "How I was devising a strategy to get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled?"

Of course I remembered that. He said he'd come up with a secret plan to get Ayanokouji expelled, and he was going to carry it out on this uninhabited island. But all he did was hand me a walkie-talkie. He hadn't given me any of the finer details of his plan yet.

"I will add a few steps to my strategy for your sake, Kushida-senpai," he said.

"Add a few steps?" I repeated.

"After Ayanokouji-senpai has been expelled, I will make sure to have those four troublemakers expelled as well, without fail," said Yagami, without a hint of guilt in his voice. He said it as if

what he was implying was, *That will surely take care of the problem, yes?*

"Now, then," said Yagami, "let's think about how we can outsmart those four. As things currently stand, even if Ayanokouji-senpai's expulsion goes off without incident, the credit will go to Tsubaki-san and the other students of Class 1-C. We would not get our hands on very many of those twenty million points."

"I don't want points," I replied.

"I understand that. However, having a sizable sum of points means that we'll have a great deal of security," said Yagami.

Up until this point, I'd been going along with Yagami's ideas because I had to. Even if I didn't want to listen to him, I had no other choice. But I'd reached my limit. I couldn't afford to stay on board this sinking ship.

"I'm done. I obviously bet on the wrong team," I replied.

I came all this way today to distance myself from Yagami, not to let him keep ordering me around.

"You can still recover from this," said Yagami.

"It's already too late," I replied.

"No, it is not too late," he insisted. "Actually, I would say now is your chance."

"What...?"

"As of this current moment, Nanase-san has been sticking quite close to Ayanokouji-senpai," said Yagami.

"Nanase? She's that kid from Class 1-D, right? *That* Nanase? Don't tell me she also—"

"Please rest easy," Yagami said. "Of course, Nanase-san knows absolutely nothing about your past, Kushida-senpai."

"You know I can't trust anything you say anymore, right?" I snapped.

"I sincerely apologize for betraying your trust. However, please, listen to what I have to say." He just wouldn't stop talking, even though I'd been making it clear how annoyed with him I was

for a while now. "I have told you before that she has been working together with Housen-kun to get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled. I have some idea of what their strategy is this time," he said.

"...And? What are they planning, then?" I asked.

"Considering that Housen-kun is the one who came up with the plan, I'm certain that it will involve violence," he replied.

"Violence? Well, normally that'd be problematic behavior, but I guess the Acting Director did say the school would tolerate minor disputes between students. I can't imagine that would be enough to get someone expelled, though."

"If it were nothing more than a casual scrap, then yes, that might be true," Yagami agreed. "However, what if it escalated into a horrifically violent bloodbath? What then?"

"Sure, Housen seems like a pretty tough guy, but if Ayanokouji got completely worked over, and he was the only one who was hurt, then Housen would be the only one who'd get expelled, right?"

That would get Ayanokouji disqualified from the exam due to being seriously injured, but I couldn't imagine that he would actually get expelled.

"Housen-kun will most likely not be the one to confront Ayanokouji-senpai this time," said Yagami. "As you yourself have said, he is quite infamous. If there were to be a fight, he would certainly be the very first person that the school would suspect."

"So, that would mean..."

"Yes. That means that Nanase-san will be the one to fight Ayanokouji-kun. Even if she starts punching him, he naturally won't start fighting back right away. However, if she really does go all out against him, then he'll have to do something to subdue her in order to get the situation under control. Perhaps he will hit her back, or perhaps he'll get on top of her and pin her down. In either case, I'm sure the spectacle will be quite unsightly," Yagami explained.

It was certainly true that if Nanase and Ayanokouji were to start throwing punches, then... Well, needless to say, it would be a big deal.

"So, you're saying that the plan is...to have Nanase report to the school that Ayanokouji beat her up?" I asked.

"Exactly," said Yagami, "which is why, to carry out this strategy, we will need to time our move so that we can strike at precisely the right moment."

"Let's say that you're telling the truth about this, that this is how the strategy will go," I said. "We can't really do anything when we don't know when this fight is supposed to happen, right? It's not like we can hover around them twenty-four hours a day."

"I already know when it's going to happen. A certain someone told me what day that the plan will be put into action," said Yagami.

"A certain someone...?" I repeated.

"While I cannot say who, it is someone trustworthy. Nanase-san will be carrying out the plan on the seventh day of the exam. While the exact time of day remains unknown, it will most likely be when they've gotten somewhere where they are completely alone."

And then a violent incident would occur...

"So, what exactly is your strategy for outsmarting the others, then?" I asked. "Specifically, what are you going to do?"

"Our tablets come equipped with the ability to record video, correct? In that case, it is possible for us to get our hands on some irrefutable evidence."

If we handed over video evidence to the school, then expulsion would absolutely be possible.

"But video of Ayanokouji pinning Nanase down might not be enough to get him expelled on its own," I said.

"But it would be enough for making threats," Yagami pointed out. "It's possible that he might choose to drop out of school of

his own volition."

I understood the gist of what Yagami was trying to say. If things really did turn out the way he said, then getting some video would give us an advantage.

"I would like to ask that you handle that job, Kushida-senpai," said Yagami.

"Huh? Why should *I* have to take on that much risk? Can't you do it yourself?"

"It wouldn't be that unnatural if you were the one to approach him, Kushida-senpai."

"That's not true. Ayanokouji is wary of me," I answered.

"I'm a guy," said Yagami. "If another guy witnessed such a spectacle, it's possible people would think that I ought to have rushed in to try to stop it. However, Kushida-senpai, well, you'd be a weak little girl. Even though you were too scared to jump into the fight, the fact that you had at the very least gotten evidence of it by recording it with your tablet would be... Well, you would demonstrate to everyone that you're a righteous sort, who would never allow such injustice, even if it were coming from a classmate."

"Okay, people might think that it's righteous or whatever," I said, "but what if my classmates just think I sold out one of our own, and scorn me instead?"

"In that case, you can just hand the video over to me. I'll just say that I received it from an anonymous source, and that'll be that," said Yagami.

He was going all out trying to persuade me. Personally, I had no problem whatsoever letting Nanase and the others go ahead and get Ayanokouji expelled for me. But it was true that it would be better to do as much as possible to increase my chances of success, even if just by 1 percent.

"I really don't want to be on this sinking ship any longer," I reiterated.

"Of course," said Yagami.

"So, what are you going to do? You're just going to have me handle this and do nothing?" I asked.

"Absolutely not. On the day everything takes place, I'll be backing you up over our walkie-talkies. Once the GPS search function is made available to use tomorrow, I can give you Ayanokouji-senpai's location at any given time. That way, you will be able to maintain a safe distance while you follow them. Besides..."

"Besides?"

"There is a chance that Tsubaki-san could be plotting something too," said Yagami. "She might try to pull something at the same time. So I will do some digging to see what they're up to."

"What are you going to do about that Utomiya guy who's in your group with you?" I asked.

"He's nothing more than Tsubaki-san's pawn. There's no need to worry about him coming up with any plan."

I needed to figure out just how much I could let myself believe what Yagami said. That was an important thing for me to make clear. But either way, it was also true that I didn't have any choice in the matter right now.

"You will do this for me, won't you, Kushida-senpai?" said Yagami.

"...I don't really have any choice, do I?" I snapped back.

There was no way out for me anymore. To protect myself and my current position here at school, I couldn't allow myself to make any more blunders.

Chapter 10: Seeds of Unrest

"OOF, THIS IS BAD," said Ichinose.

It was just after seven o'clock in the morning on the seventh day of the exam, right around the time that groups should be heading toward their first designated area of the day. At that moment, though, Ichinose Honami let out a deep sigh as she looked down at the watch on her right wrist. Cloudy skies stretched out overhead; it looked as though it could start raining any minute.

"Is it really broken, Ichinose?" asked Shibata Sou, one of the other members of her group, as he peered over at her watch.

"Yeah," Ichinose said. "Seems like it's out of commission. I think it happened this morning when I fell by the river and hit that rock."

Ichinose had already tried several ideas to reset her watch after she found out it was malfunctioning. However, the GPS function and the heart rate monitor function still weren't working at all. Nothing showed up on her tablet when she tried to confirm her current location, either. She wasn't going to be able to score any points with a malfunctioning watch, whether it was from designated areas or Tasks. Leaving her watch as it was and continuing with the exam would get her absolutely nowhere.

"I guess we should be thankful that you weren't on the other side of the island," said Shibata.

"Yeah, you're right about that," she agreed.

Ichinose and her teammates were somewhere in the southwest part of area E6. It was possible to get back to the starting area if they walked for about two hours, but it would be dangerous for her to head back on her own while her GPS function wasn't usable.

"Guess you have no choice but to head back, for the time being," said Shibata.

Shibata sounded a little annoyed, but he wasn't criticizing Ichinose at all for what was happening.

"But—"

Their first designated area of the day was area D5, which meant that they would have to move in the exact opposite direction of the port at the starting point to get there. Not only would they miss out on the valuable Arrival Bonus at their designated area if they went back to the starting area, but they wouldn't be able to get the Early Bird Bonus either. Even though Ichinose understood that they ought to head back, she looked back at the three people behind her, who were waiting to depart.

"Well, since her watch isn't working, I guess she doesn't have any choice but to head back. Right, Masumi-chan?" said Ichinose's classmate Ninomiya with a nod.

"If she heads back now, she might manage to make it to our third designated area in time," said Kamuro.

No one showed even the slightest sign of disapproval or reluctance for the idea of heading back. While Ichinose was glad that they understood, at the same time, she also felt terribly sorry for her teammates. Two days ago, on the fifth day of the exam, Ichinose's group had taken first place in a Task that had allowed them to increase the size of their group, allowing them to take on an additional three people. On the following day, they had used the GPS search function to find and meet up with Hashimoto's group—only to find themselves in trouble today.

"I'm sorry, guys," said Ichinose. "I will definitely be back in time for the third area."

Now that they had decided what they were going to do, Ichinose had to move quickly so she could get back to her teammates as soon as possible.

"Well, guess I'll stick with Ichinose and make sure she gets there," said Shibata.

Once Ichinose had gotten herself ready to go, she and Shibata both went directly south.

"I'm really sorry, Shibata-kun, for making you come with me," said Ichinose.

"Hey, accidents happen, it's no big deal," Shibata said. "Let's just not make a thing out of it."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right," replied Ichinose.

After spending about an hour walking, Ichinose and Shibata managed to reach area E9, going along the river. Around the time that the sandy beach came into view, they could also see that the starting point was getting close.

"We've been going at a much faster pace than I thought. Things are looking good," said Shibata.

All they needed to do now was push westward and they would make their way to the port. Even if they took their time and moved slowly, it would take them less than thirty minutes to reach their destination. Still, that meant that a round trip back to their current location would take around an hour.

"Shibata-kun, why don't you start heading for the next designated area from here?" suggested Ichinose.

"Hey, it's not safe for you to head there on your own even this close, y'know? It's like a maze in these woods, it's easy to get lost. Besides, even though it's daytime, it's looking pretty cloudy, and rain might..." He trailed off as he looked up at the sky.

It was eight o'clock in the morning now. It hadn't started raining yet, but there was no telling when the weather was going to turn bad.

"Yeah, I understand that it's dangerous," said Ichinose. "But I should be able to make it back to the port from here without getting lost. If we're going to catch up to the top groups, then we can't afford to miss out on even a single point. Besides, if it does start raining, then neither of us might be able to meet up with the others."

Ichinose strongly emphasized that it was important for them to be greedy for points in this exam; they needed every point they could get.

"Besides," she added, "all I need to do is just head straight there."

At the very least, Ichinose wanted Shibata to get back into the game quickly so that he could earn points for the group. It was precisely because she was the one dragging down the group that she wanted to minimize the burden she was placing on them.

"...All right," Shibata conceded. "But don't do anything reckless, okay? If it does start raining, don't rush. Just wait until it passes, got it?"

"Got it," said Ichinose. "I won't do anything reckless. If I got injured and eliminated from the exam, it wouldn't be a laughing matter."

Ichinose waved goodbye to Shibata, urging him to go back and meet up with Hashimoto and the others. Then, remembering the directions that Shibata had given her, Ichinose walked into the woods. Even though she knew she wouldn't make it back in time for the next designated area, she would definitely try and make it to the third area of the day. That strong determination was what kept Ichinose moving forward. Her feet moved faster than her thoughts so that she could avoid losing any time.

She didn't see anyone as she pressed on, so she assumed there must not be anyone in this area. She'd been thinking she could ask someone for help in the event of an emergency, but perhaps that was being overly optimistic. After she had been walking through the woods for about ten minutes, visibility was rapidly getting worse and worse. The cause was clear. The gray clouds above were getting even bigger.

Though Ichinose was planning on walking in a straight line to her destination, the dense trees mercilessly blocked her path. When one path was blocked, she got off it and took another. But one after another, obstacles kept blocking her way, each path as treacherous as the previous one. As she was forced to choose new paths over and over, she started to lose confidence that she was actually pressing on ahead in one direction.

"What does it feel like everything is going really badly, for some reason...?" she huffed.

Though she laughed at herself in a self-deprecating manner, she had no choice but to press on. After all, the port should have been within a few hundred meters, without a doubt. After Ichinose continued walking for another twenty minutes or so, though, she came to a stop, completely unsure of what to do. Unless she had taken a wrong turn at some point, she should have arrived at the port by now.

"Oh, jeez, what the heck am I even doing...?" she sighed.

She brought out her tablet and tried to check her location, but sure enough, she was still unable to see her current location on the map. Even if she turned around and went back the way she came, she could easily just end up getting even more lost.

Ichinose wasn't normally the type of person who would make rash decisions. However, ever since her class was demoted down to C, she was starting to feel impatience welling up inside her. While struggling with those feelings, she had managed to form a formidable group, upon the suggestion of Class A's leader, Sakayanagi. So, to show that this was an equal partnership, she had to demonstrate what she was capable of. She was losing confidence in her sense of direction, but she had to keep putting one foot in front of the other. She raised her right leg, taking another step, as if to tell the anxious thoughts inside her where to go.

Just then, she thought she heard a faint noise from up ahead. For a moment, Ichinose nearly gave in to letting out a shout of joy, but she couldn't rule out the possibility that it was a wild animal. Then, thinking that she wouldn't really be losing much time even if she went to go check it out, Ichinose quietly headed in the direction of the sound. Eventually, something came into view.

It was Tsukishiro, the Acting Director, and Shiba, the homeroom teacher for Class 1-D. Upon seeing them, Ichinose let out a deep sigh of relief. She figured she could ask them which way the port was. However... She quickly realized that this was a naïve line of thinking. However accidental all these things that happened to her were, she was still in the middle of a special

exam. It was best not to assume that they'd give her an answer if she told them that she was lost and was hoping to get directions.

It would have been one thing if her watch had malfunctioned due to some internal error, all on its own, but it had broken because of her falling. That made this an even bigger issue. If they were to just tell her that this was a failing on her part and she needed to be responsible for herself, then this precious thread of salvation would slip right through her fingers. She wanted to find a way to hold onto that thread.

Wouldn't it be wiser to follow them, instead? she thought. It would be ideal if they were heading back to the starting area, but even if they were heading towards a Task, she'd still manage to meet up with other students eventually. Either way, she could manage to avoid a worst-case scenario. She decided to follow them, but far enough away that she wouldn't be seen.

She figured they wouldn't notice her that easily, since they were having some sort of conversation as they walked. Even in the unlikely event that they did spot her, it shouldn't be a problem as long as she just feigned ignorance. Even normal speaking voices carried well in the quiet woods.

"I asked you to confirm whether we could adapt to the moment in this situation. How are things looking?"

"Difficult. I've been picking up signs that the other teachers have been monitoring us. Mashima seems to be particularly wary of us, from the looks of things..."

Ichinose wasn't interested in eavesdropping. Since she was concentrating on tailing them, she was only half paying attention to what they were saying.

"Oh, and apart from him, there's one other suspicious character. Chabashira, the homeroom instructor for Class 2-D. She was looking through all the records."

"I suppose that's because bringing the teachers into this was one of the few viable options he had left. Whether it's Chabashira-sensei or Mashima-sensei, I have no doubt that there's some connection back to Ayanokouji-kun. It wouldn't be surprising if Ayanokouji-kun knew the truth, since he was present back then."

The situation changed for Ichinose the moment that unexpected name came up in the conversation: Ayanokouji. It was a name that made her heart start pounding when she heard it. She held her breath, trying to listen more closely. The two men had come to a stop, perhaps because that name had come up, but, after a brief pause, they continued their conversation.

"I've already altered the records. They won't be able to trace anything."

"Thank you for that. However, there is still the possibility that they might get their hands on something. If that happens, then it'll be a make-or-break situation for us. We'll need to make absolutely certain that we drive him into a corner."

"Will it really be that easy to get him expelled, though? I mean, he is the White Room's —"

"People get so wrapped up by titles. He's just —'s ——."

White Room? thought Ichinose. Even though she had perked up her ears to listen, she couldn't clearly make out everything they were saying. The wind suddenly picked up, drowning out their voices. However, Ayanokouji's name and the word "expulsion" had stuck firmly in her head, and she couldn't get them out.

Why would the Acting Director and a teacher be talking about something like that? she wondered. Ichinose had unconsciously lost sight of the distance that she should have been keeping between herself and the two of them and instead gradually inched closer to try to hear a little more of what they were talking about.

"If he is — until the last day — bury in I2 — as planned —."

Ichinose was almost close enough to hear what they were saying. But then, something happened. Even though Ichinose had done her best not to make a single sound, the Acting Director shot a sharp glance behind him.

Oh, no.

Ichinose's gut instincts kicked in, and she immediately turned and ran. However, the weight of her backpack prevented her from

picking up speed. Making a snap decision, she undid the fasteners on her backpack, took it off, and hurled it into the brush as hard as she could. If they picked up her bag, they'd be able to figure out it was her by checking her tablet, but Ichinose was panicking too much to think through that decision.

At any rate, she figured that they shouldn't have been able to see her face. But she had no doubt they had noticed that someone had been eavesdropping on their conversation. She was absolutely certain about that. She had a feeling that their conversation just now was something she wasn't supposed to have heard. She felt that very strongly, as she continued to run.

I'm sure that I can get away—

If they were all the way over there, then I'm sure they couldn't chase after me after running this far.

Yeah, I'm sure I'll be fine. Definitely.

I'm sure of it. Definitely. I must be.



Ichinose could hear quick footsteps and twigs and leaves being trampled behind her. She wasn't that confident in her physical abilities, but she took pride in her speed. Right or left, it didn't matter. Ichinose continued running, without even thinking about it, getting completely and hopelessly lost in the woods.

People can become strangely perceptive when they see something that they're not meant to see. It was that feeling that kept her moving.

"Ngh!" she winced.

Ichinose looked ahead as she ran, not paying attention to her feet. Since she was so focused just on the path in front of her that her leg got caught on something, and she fell hard, tumbling to the ground. When she turned around to look, she saw what had most likely caused her to stumble. There were roots from a large tree sticking out of the ground. Although she felt an intense pain shooting through her knee, she hurriedly tried to get back on her feet.

Just as Ichinose was getting back up, a large hand had clasped onto her left shoulder from behind. Ichinose was so shocked that she felt like her heart nearly stopped. Unable to move, she fearfully turned around.

"...If I'm not mistaken, you are Ichinose Honami, from Class 2-C, aren't you?" said Shiba.

Intimidated by his intense glare, Ichinose crumpled back down to the ground.

"O-oh, y-yes, that's right..." she stammered.

Ichinose, having fallen on her bottom, frantically tried to scramble backwards, but there was no escaping from his sharp glare. Shiba stood over Ichinose, looking down at her, his eyes filled with an emotion that she couldn't get a read on.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"W-well, it seems like my watch is malfunctioning, so...I thought I'd get it looked at..." she replied.

"I see. So that is why there weren't any GPS signals in the area," said Shiba. "Well, it doesn't really matter how much of our conversation you heard. Even if you had only heard 1 percent of what was said, then... Well, that simply means you were unlucky."

"Are... Are you saying that I'm going to be penalized in some way?" asked Ichinose.

"This has nothing to do with the school rules. We're just going to have you removed. Immediately," said Shiba, slowly drawing closer to Ichinose and reaching out to her with his large hand.

"It is a bit premature to resort to such violent methods, Shiba-sensei," said Tsukishiro, asking Shiba to stand down.

Tsukishiro had caught up with them, Ichinose's backpack in hand.

"Ah. My apologies," said Shiba.

The Acting Director turned to Ichinose, with an unsettling grin.

"Now, then, I'm going to ask you formally. What did you hear?" he asked.

"I-I didn't hear anything..." said Ichinose.

That was a lie, of course. While she had only heard bits and pieces, Ichinose had certainly overheard part of their disturbing conversation. But she was sure that even if she told them that she hadn't heard anything, they weren't going to believe her one bit.

"I am not so naïve as to believe that," said Tsukishiro, standing before Ichinose with a probing look in his eyes. "As adults, we must always expect the worst and act accordingly. That means that I must operate under the assumption that you did indeed hear everything."

Then, he crouched down, so that he could look her right in the eyes.

"Though it may have just been coincidence, you did hear everything. Information that you were never meant to hear, and yet you did," he added.

Shiba, watching the situation unfold, looked at Tsukishiro somewhat fearfully.

"If our conversation earlier were to be made public, that would be quite troubling for both Shiba-sensei and I," said Tsukishiro.

"I-I really didn't hear anythi—"

"That is not true," he replied firmly, cutting her off. "I've already told you that I am operating under the assumption that you did hear, remember?"

Hearing this, all Ichinose could do was gasp.

"Perhaps we should hurt you until you no longer remember, Ichinose-san?" said Tsukishiro. "And then have you eliminated, of course."

Seeing her shiver in fear, Tsukishiro smiled as he stood back up.

"I jest. Of course I could never say something like that, as someone tasked with protecting this school. I would prefer to avoid such violent measures, if at all possible. Therefore, I will make you a proposal. If you tell anyone about this, I will see to it that a group composed solely of students from Class 2-C is eliminated from the exam."

"Wh—...!"

"It would be a group that does not have enough Private Points to save themselves, of course," he added.

Basically, he was saying that he was going to make sure that a group of students would be immediately expelled.

"Are you thinking that I couldn't do something like that? As the person in charge of administering the rules for this exam, fabricating a justification to have them removed would be all too easy. Especially on such a vast, uninhabited island like this, where supervision is impossible. There's no telling what might happen," said Tsukishiro, narrowing his eyes at a terrified Ichinose.

His eyes seemed to be asking her: *Do you understand?*

"Acting Director Tsukishiro, shouldn't you invoke that authority here, rather than show her such leniency?" said Shiba. "Even if Ichinose were to disappear, I doubt that Chabashira or Mashima would take notice. Those two only take care in matters where Ayanokouji is involved."

"You certainly make a good point. Well then, what do you think would be the appropriate course of action in this situation, Shiba-sensei?" asked Tsukishiro.

Without even a second's thought, Shiba pulled a pair of rubber gloves from his pants pocket.

"If you will leave this matter to me, I will dispose of her," said Shiba.

As Shiba and Tsukishiro discussed how they were going to dispose of her, Ichinose could no longer run away. All she could do was wait for whatever punishment awaited her. Ichinose couldn't even imagine what Shiba was planning to do to her after putting on those rubber gloves. Tsukishiro, still watching Ichinose, smiled kindly.

"Well, I would rather not waste any more time on this matter," said Tsukishiro, setting down Ichinose's backpack at her feet. Then he started to back off. "The port at the starting area is about 150 meters straight ahead. Please get going."

"Y-yes, sir...!"

Ichinose, in a panic over this bizarre turn of events, hurriedly put on her backpack, desperate to get out of here as quickly as possible.

"You should be protecting your own classmates. Not powerful enemies from the other classes standing in your way. Please keep that in mind so that you don't forget," said Tsukishiro.

Ichinose gave a slight bow in response, before quickly heading off in the direction that Tsukishiro had told her to go. Shiba watched attentively until she disappeared from view and then turned once more to Tsukishiro.

"It's fine. Just leave her," said Tsukishiro.

"Are you sure that's all right?" said Shiba. He couldn't help but think that letting her go was cause for concern. "If she talks to Ayanokouji, it will interfere with our plans."

"Unexpected setbacks happen all the time," Tsukishiro said. "In that case, we'll just have to adapt to the situation ourselves."

Shiba still seemed apprehensive about what might come, unable to see what Tsukishiro's true intentions were.

"Are you really that worried? I had thought I gave her a rather effective warning," said Tsukishiro.

If Ichinose were to break her promise, then someone would be expelled. Although it was just a simple threat, Ichinose couldn't interpret what Tsukishiro said as a joke. She was the kind of person who prioritized her classmates over all else.

"Whatever her relationship with Ayanokouji-kun may be, the elimination of a formidable foe like him is the kind of thing people in Class C would wish for," Tsukishiro said. "I am sure that Ichinose-san herself will come to terms with that fact in time. So, let's not lose our heads, and just watch what happens, hm?"

Just then, a single raindrop fell upon Tsukishiro's cheek.

"I am 99 percent certain that Nanase-san will fail, but it looks as though she has finally made her move. If everything goes well, then Ayanokouji-kun's Emergency Alert should be going off any moment now."

He was completely calm, not even sounding the least bit hurried. It was because of his uncompromising conviction that he was able to be so composed.

10.1

THE RAIN HAD STARTED to come pouring down harder. Nanase, after taking time to cool her head and having finally sorted out her own feelings, opened her mouth to speak, in a low, sad tone.

"I've lost...Ayanokouji-senpai."

"Can I assume that means I've convinced you?" I asked.

"Yes," said Nanase. "It seems that no matter how hard I try, I cannot beat you, Ayanokouji-senpai."

Now that I had seen completely through her, she seemed to accept her situation, as though she had been drained of all her spite and venom. Handling the situation without laying a hand on her had proven successful.

"If possible, could you tell me everything, in detail?" I asked.
"Why were you after me? Your reasons aren't clear to me, and it raises a lot of questions."

"Yes, I suppose you have a right to know, senpai... Well, now, I think that I want you to know," replied Nanase.

It seemed she no longer had the strength to get back up because Nanase stayed seated as she spoke. While her movements hadn't seemed like that of an ordinary person's, in the end, I couldn't imagine that she was a White Room student either. Nanase certainly had considerable strength. I was sure that she would even be able to keep up with opponents like Horikita or Ibuki.

But compared to a student from the White Room, she was shabby, lousy. Besides, it would have been odd for someone from the White Room to mention Matsuo's name. I decided to wait for Nanase to answer me so that I could find out the truth.

"I... I wanted to avenge my childhood friend. That's why I enrolled in this school," said Nanase.

"Childhood friend? You don't mean—"

"Yes. Matsuo Eiichirou."

She must have been referring to the son of the butler who had taken care of me in the past.

"I finally realized it after coming to this school," she went on. "Since the school is completely cut off from the outside world, there really was no way that you could have actually known what happened."

What Nanase had said was fundamentally correct. However, in this case, I did actually have a little information about the situation with Matsuo's family. I had come to know about it because *that man* had mentioned it to me when he showed up at the school to try and take me back to the White Room.

Nanase proceeded to tell me everything, now speaking in a calm tone of voice. She told me about how Eiichirou had been kicked out of the high school that he had worked to get into due to my father's relentless scheming. She told me that no matter what other school he had tried to escape to, he would always suffer the same fate there too. Eventually he realized he had no way out and gave up on pursuing his education altogether.

And she told me about how, upon hearing the news, Eiichirou's father had committed suicide by setting himself on fire. Afterward, she said, Eiichirou had made ends meet by working a part-time job. Even though I had already heard all of this from that man, I stayed silent and listened.

"I had always been together with Eiichirou-kun, from kindergarten up until he graduated from junior high. He was a year older than me. Eiichirou-kun was better than me in just about everything... In studies, in the games we played, in terms of accomplishments and skills... He was the person I aspired to be like."

Nanase had been speaking calmly up until that point, but her tone had gradually gotten lower, sadder.

"Even after he was kicked out of his home, Eiichirou-kun said that he would never give up. That's when he started working. Even though we had less time to see each other, I thought that our relationship wouldn't change," said Nanase.

Nanase continued speaking, without pause, as she remembered more of the past.

"Even though he had given up on pursuing higher education, even though he had lost his father... He just kept smiling at me. He said that he'd never give up, and that he'd keep giving it his best, no matter how far he had to go. And yet..."

Nanase's voice started to tremble, her fists clenched tightly as she spoke.

"This year, on the evening of February 14, I went to visit Eiichirou-kun at the apartment he was living in. He had been trying so hard, I wanted to make him feel just a little bit better. But—"

I didn't have to hear the end of this story to know exactly where this was going. Matsuo Eiichirou, after trying so hard for so long, had chosen to end his life.

"If you can't see the person you care about again, you'll never be able to tell them how you feel about them," I said, thinking back to what Nanase had said when she encouraged Ike. "You were thinking about Eiichirou when you said that."

In her case though, no matter how deeply she regretted it, it was too late. Even if she screamed and shouted at his corpse, her words would never reach him.

"I didn't know much about you or your father, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Nanase. "I had even submitted an application to a different high school... It was after I did that when he appeared."

"You mean Tsukishiro?" I asked.

"Yes. Acting Director Tsukishiro arranged for me to be enrolled in the Advanced Nurturing High School. He told me that someone named Ayanokouji Kiyotaka had enrolled in this school, and that everything started when you had escaped from an institution referred to as the White Room. He said that this Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was the reason that Eiichirou's life was ruined."

In the end, Nanase had specifically come to this school to seek vengeance for her childhood friend.

"He promised to allow me to meet with your father if I got you expelled, Ayanokouji-senpai. To tell you the truth, I was going to ask him to bow his head and apologize to Eiichirou-kun, but..."

Even in the unlikely event that I had gotten expelled, there was no way that man would have bowed to anyone. Nanase's words would never have reached him. At any rate, after hearing Nanase's story, I was starting to connect the dots, but there were still some things I didn't know.

"Tsukishiro told me that he sent a White Room student in after me. Was that just a bluff?" I asked her.

"Um, what do you mean, exactly?" said Nanase. "I don't really know much about this White Room place to begin with."

It didn't sound like she was lying. If that was the case, then there were two possibilities I could think of. The first was that the agent he sent in was someone other than Nanase; someone who could have been from the White Room, or one he simply had chosen to carry out that role. The other possibility was that this agent that Tsukishiro had mentioned really *was* Nanase, and he wanted me to think that she was from the White Room. If it was the latter, then that would mean there wouldn't be anyone else coming after me.

However, that was difficult to imagine. From an average person's perspective, Nanase had exceptional capabilities, but she wasn't up to the task as an agent sent to get me expelled. I found it hard to believe that Tsukishiro couldn't anticipate that things might turn out like this.

"What happened wasn't your fault, Ayanokouji-senpai," Nanase said. "But I... I just wanted to... I wanted to take all this pent-up anger and regret out on someone, somehow..."

As I heard that, everything clicked into place and Nanase's actions since enrolling at this school finally made sense. Although she was working to get me expelled, there had been times when she stepped in to help. Nanase did contradictory things precisely because she herself never believed that she was doing the right thing. Then, today, she had convinced herself that she was carrying on Matsuo Eiichirou's will, and she had let it all out.

Perhaps it was because we were on the mountain top, but the rain had caused the ground to cool and a thick fog began to roll in.

"I-I cannot bring myself to face you, senpai... I am truly sorry..." Nanase hid her face with her hands, ashamed of herself, unable to look at me. I didn't say a word. Instead, I just quietly waited until she had calmed down before speaking again.

"You don't have to apologize," I told her. "It's understandable why you'd feel angry."

It was also true that *that man* had committed a grave sin simply to try and bring me back. He was a cold-hearted person who didn't think of other people as human beings. But at the same time, the ironic thing was that it was a projection of myself as well.

"I have failed to carry out the Acting Director's orders. There isn't any point in me staying here any longer," said Nanase.

"So, does that mean you're going to drop out of school?" I asked.

"It's the least that I can do, to make amends for what I've done," she said.

That man and I were essentially the same. As long as we could protect ourselves, we didn't care what happened to others. However, even though we were the same in essence, there were some differences between us. We thought differently about whether it was in our best interest to show our true natures to third parties so casually.

In short, it was whether we would brush off those fools that could only stand in our way. It was a matter of whether we could extend our hands out to someone else. Offering his hand to a fool was something *that man* would never, ever do. That was the definitive difference between us.

I slowly offered my hand to Nanase.

"Senpai...?"

"If you really do feel sorry about what you did to me, then I want you to take back what you just said," I replied.

"What do you mean...?" she stammered.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of," I told her. "You did everything that you could in order to try to get revenge. But there's a reason I can't let myself lose, either. It's because I believe that staying at this school is the only way that I can attack that man—my father."

Nanase didn't lift her head all the way up to look me in the eye, but she slowly raised her head high enough so that she could look at my outstretched palm.

"If I may say something selfish," I said, "I don't want you to leave this school—I want you to work with me. Even now, Tsukishiro is probably scheming to use this special exam as a means to try and get me expelled, so he can offer me up as a gift to my father. If that were to happen, then it would run counter to Matsuo Eiichirou's wishes. After all, his father was the one who made it possible for me to enroll in this school in defiance of my father's orders."

"So, are you saying that... I should have been doing the opposite of what I have been doing?" asked Nanase.

"Could you lend me your hand?" I asked.

I felt her thin, smooth hand grasp onto mine.

"...It's a promise," she replied.

Though her palm was cold because of the rain, there was a pleasant warmth still there. Nanase had hung her head low for a while, but now she finally raised it up to look me in the eyes. In actuality, whether she was useful or not now was irrelevant. What mattered was that I needed to make good use of her, so that she would end up becoming useful to me, even if she was ultimately used up and discarded.

"You'll get sick if you let yourself get soaked in the rain. Let's go," I told her.

"...Okay," said Nanase.



Postscript

HEY, HEY! Hello there everyone, Kinugasa here, and my favorite food in the whole wide world is *umechazuke*, with green tea poured over it.

This volume marks the first time that a special exam has spanned two (or more!) books. I just wanted you all to please take note of that point first and foremost. While I wanted to write about what was going on with the other students scattered about in the other parts of the island, the page count ballooned before I had even realized it and I hit the page limit. I'm starting to become painfully aware that there are limits to what I can put into just one book.

When I started writing, I sometimes thought to myself, rather optimistically, *Hey, it'd be fine if I went a little over the page limit, right? What's the big deal?* But in many of my books, I found myself really fighting those remaining pages, trying to figure out what to put on them. Why can't they just make an exception for *Classroom* and let me write over 500 pages per—

No, no, let's stop right there. I'd just end up hurting myself for no good reason by fighting for that. Actually, I think I'd be just fine with a fifty-page increase instead!

All right, all right. I know that introductory part got pretty long, so I only have a little bit left for the actual postscript this time. In all honesty, I think this book would be fine even without a postscript this time. Right? I mean, is there even anybody out there who is actually sticking around to read these? I wonder about that each time I put out a book...but I also kinda don't like it that the page that comes *right* after the end of the story is the postscript. But there aren't enough pages without it, so I don't have much choice.

The end of 2020 is in sight, but I'll keep working hard through the end of the year! See you next time!



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

[Sign up for our newsletter!](#)

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter