

NOVEL

4

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CLASSROOM
OF THE ELITE
YEAR 2



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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

NOVEL 4



"Oof!"

I caught Ichinose just as she was about to fall.

"What in the world is the matter, Ichinose?"

"Th-there's something I have to tell you, Ayanokouji-kun, no matter what!"



"If you're saying that you're going to see Ayanokouji-senpai, then I think I'll play with you a little bit. To stop you."

"Wha—?!"



*"Ayanokouji, did
I do something
unnecessary?"*

*"That depends on
what happens next.
Can I assume that
this means you're
going to lend me
a hand?"*

*"Of course I will. As your
senpai, it's only natural
that I protect someone
younger than me, no?"*

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UNINHABITED ISLAND MAP

REGARDING THE TWO METHODS OF SCORING POINTS: “BASIC MOVEMENT” AND “TASKS”

BASIC MOVEMENT RULES OVERVIEW

- Designated areas will be announced four times per day. On the first and final days of the exam, only three areas will be selected, none of which 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 designations 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.

TASK RULES 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.



4

WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

NOVEL 4

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku



Seven Seas Entertainment

YOUKOSO JITSURYOKUSHIJOUSHUGI NO KYOUSHITSU E 2NENSEIHEN
VOL.4

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2 ④

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Chapter 1: Amasawa Ichika's Soliloquy

TEST-TUBE BABY.

Have you ever heard that term before? Well, I guess people don't really call them that anymore. They say "child of in vitro fertilization" or something. Anyway, I'm someone born from in vitro fertilization. But aside from that, I really don't know anything else about myself. I've never even seen my parents' faces. Not even once.

Where are they now? What are they doing? Why did they put me in the White Room? I don't know the answers to any of those questions, and, well, to be blunt, I'm not interested. There was one thing I was told, though, when I was old enough to understand it: I was told that my parents were extremely brilliant people. That meant I was an extremely blessed child, born with the genetic means to become a genius.

But my existence conflicts with the philosophy of the White Room. The ultimate goal of the facility is to nurture all people equally, raising them to identical excellence. Their aim is to prove that human limits aren't determined by genetics, but, rather, that they are determined by environment. They didn't want someone like me, a child with superior genes, to be the only one with outstanding talents. I'm sure that my existence was probably just one of many "experiments" they were doing in the White Room.

I'm not rejecting the idea behind those experiments or whatever, but did they seriously think it could be done? Personally, I concluded that it was impossible to make everyone identical in all things like intelligence, personality, and mentality. I mean, the fact that I exist right now, as myself, is the best proof of that, right?

Ever since I was really little, I prided myself on the fact that, deep down, I was so completely different from everyone around me. Even though I hid the fire in my eyes and pretended to be

completely disinterested in everything, just doing what was asked of me, I always had my doubts about the institution's whole raison d'être. Did I want to grow and mature for the sake of the White Room's ideal, foundational principles? To stake my life so that I could make a contribution to their data?

Do I really want to be the absolute best success story for the organization and devote my entire life to achieving that standard, day in and day out? I mean, don't you think that all sounds kind of sad? You'd want to live more freely too, right? Well, I do, at least. I don't want to spend the rest of my life trapped in that world.

Oh well, that's probably all moot now anyway. Let's get back to the topic at hand, 'kay? Even among those in the White Room, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was someone who stood far above the rest. He had an incredible record. Of course, when I first heard about him, I was skeptical. How could I believe that he had surpassed me in every way, beating every score that I had worked myself to the bone to get?

But... Yeah. When I looked at the data and saw him in real life, and when I finally talked to him, I understood. I knew that he was special after all.

It's just... I'm sorry, senpai. I really wanted to be your ally, but I guess that's not going to happen. It's like, I spent way, way more time there than I have together with you, senpai. You know, I... I guess I'm more compassionate than I thought I was, huh?

Senpai, speaking as someone who worships you, I'll be watching you from a distance until *that* time comes. Okay?

Chapter 2: Secret Maneuvers

THE RAIN STARTED to come down harder and the fog was beginning to thicken. Though visibility was getting worse, and it was getting harder to hear, I had a bad feeling that someone was coming up behind me. It sounded like someone hopping up and down in the mud, like they were intentionally and exaggeratedly stomping about. Nanase seemed to immediately notice the sound and the presence too. When I turned around to look, I saw that the student approaching me had suddenly come to a halt, her red hair fluttering behind her.

"Seems like it's gonna be an intense storm, huh, senpaiii?"

The student who appeared out of the rain was none other than Amasawa Ichika from Class 1-A. Though it was a well-established fact that Nanase and I shared the same Table, I couldn't possibly imagine that her being here was a simple coincidence. There were no other students around, and Amasawa didn't appear to have a backpack or tablet with her.

How did she come all this way? One possibility was that she had hidden her things somewhere in the nearby area before approaching us. Another possibility was that she hadn't been carrying anything on her person at all this whole time, and she'd been following me from fairly early on. I supposed it was also conceivable that someone else had used the GPS search feature and given her directions via a transceiver, and Amasawa came here by following those coordinates. All in all, I could rule out the possibility of this being a coincidence.

In any case, no matter how she managed it, her arrival wasn't a welcome one for me. On top of that, it didn't look like she came here completely empty-handed. She was brandishing a thick wooden stick in her left hand. It certainly looked like a dangerous enough weapon, and she could beat someone down with it. Had she been trying to catch us off guard, and we had

simply sensed her presence? The weather was bad at the moment, though. If she had intended to attack us, she could have crept up much more quietly.

"Please get behind me, senpai," said Nanase.

While I was trying to work out the reason behind Amasawa's arrival in my head, Nanase stepped out in front of me, despite being physically drained herself. I could tell from looking at her face that she made no attempt to hide her alarm. She stared fixedly at Amasawa.

"Oh? What, you're not gonna greet me with open arms, Nanase-chan?" said Amasawa. "Dang, you're sure giving me the cold shoulder, even though we're part of the same group and all. Sheesh. Or maybe you're feeling a little shaken up by this thing I've got in my hand, hm?"

Amasawa casually tossed the stick down to the ground by her feet, as if to show that she was completely harmless. However, Nanase didn't let her guard down at all.

"You're... You cannot be trusted," said Nanase.

"Wow, harsh. How can you say something like that? Even though I'm *this* dang cute?" Amasawa teased.

I didn't think that being cute meant the same as being trustworthy, but I supposed that didn't really matter right now.

"What's going on, Nanase?" I asked.

It was true that there was an aspect to Amasawa that made it hard to know what she was thinking. It wouldn't be overestimating her to say that she was someone with exceptional acting skills and capabilities. It was reasonable to be wary of her. That was something I had come to understand well enough by this point. But, even so, I couldn't explain Nanase's unusual degree of caution.

It was clear that there was some reason Amasawa had come here, of course. I supposed it was conceivable that Nanase was just overreacting because she was on my side now, but...

"Hey, I'm not a bad guy. Isn't that right, Ayanokouji-senpai?" Amasawa said. "How about we have a little chat?"

"Please do not listen to her. She's dangerous," said Nanase.

Even though Amasawa wasn't showing us any blatant hostility, Nanase relentlessly and sternly rejected whatever she wanted to say. Though this could have been taken as unwarranted criticism, Amasawa didn't seem bothered by it at all, even though she had made some comments about being hurt by this rejection.

"Senpai... There's something that I've been hiding from you all this time," Nanase started. "Do you remember how Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai from Shinohara-senpai's group were eliminated? You and Ike-senpai climbed up the slope back then, right?"

I remembered that Ike had heard a sound coming from up above and scrambled up the slope to investigate, thinking that it was Shinohara. Since I had decided that it would be dangerous to let him go off on his own, I followed him.

"After you left, I noticed that someone had been watching us nearby, so I gave chase," said Nanase.

"So, you weren't with Sudou and the others when we found Shinohara on our way back?"

Nanase gave a small nod.

"And?" I asked.

"Although I couldn't catch up to whoever was running away...I did happen to see the person's rather distinctive hair." As Nanase spoke those words, she slowly extended her right arm and pointed her index finger at the other girl, identifying her as the culprit. "You were the one watching us back there, weren't you, Amasawa-san?"

"Aha! So, you saw me after all, huh?" said Amasawa.

She didn't deny it. Actually, she laughed and immediately admitted to it. Amasawa didn't appear upset in the slightest, nor did she even seem surprised that she had been seen. It sounded

as though the presence that I sensed watching us back then was Amasawa after all.

"You were the one who hurt Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai, weren't you?" said Nanase.

"Uh, don't you think you're jumping to conclusions?" said Amasawa. "Maybe I just so happened to be there at the time, that's all."

"In that case, you wouldn't have needed to run away, though, would you?" Nanase pointed out.

"Well, of course you'd run from someone if they're chasing after you with a scary look on their face," said Amasawa.
"Besides, I don't like being suspected."

"I find that very hard to believe," said Nanase.

"So, basically you're saying that you've made up your mind that I'm the one who knocked those two off the cliff, is that it?" said Amasawa.

"I'm sure of it. There can be almost no doubt," said Nanase.

"Oh, you're sure of it, but you have 'almost' no doubt, huh?" said Amasawa. "Doesn't that mean that maybe you don't actually know what really happened?"

Even though they belonged to the same group, the two girls kept arguing in circles.

"In that case, can you swear that you weren't the one who hurt Kinoshita-senpai and Komiya-senpai?" demanded Nanase.

"Sure, I can swear anything, I guess. But there's nothing you can do to make sure what I swear is the truth, Nanase-chan," countered Amasawa, suggesting that there wasn't any point in saying anything one way or another.

"Anyway," Amasawa added, "turning the question around, what would you do if it *was* me who did it? What then?"

Rather than retreating from Nanase's accusations, Amasawa dove into them headfirst instead. Nanase seemed a little overwhelmed, but she pressed on to try and find out what Amasawa was playing at.

"Why would you do something like that?" said Nanase.
"Please, tell me the reason. Actually, wait, before that—why didn't your name come up on the map when the school administrators searched for GPS signals in the first place?"

That should have been clear enough, even without needing Amasawa to explain.

I answered for her. "Making sure you don't leave any traces on the GPS isn't that hard. All you have to do is break your watch."

Amasawa gleefully showed us the watch strapped to her right wrist.

"Correctamundo!" she said. "Whether it's intentional or not, if the watch malfunctions, it's all the same in the end. Besides, you can replace it for free."

"But if you broke your watch beforehand and caused your GPS signal to drop, wouldn't the school officials have noticed?" asked Nanase.

"Sure, yeah," Amasawa admitted. "But it'd be difficult for them to notice right away, especially if they were rushing over to an emergency to see what happened."

There were over 400 GPS signals on the island. Even if there were one or two missing when the school officials checked their tablets, they wouldn't notice them immediately. They also wouldn't have the time to thoroughly check for every signal. The teachers' only priority was the general safety and well-being of the students.

"Even so, wouldn't the school officials conduct a thorough investigation later?" Nanase said. "It would only be a matter of time before you were found out."

That—coupled with the fact that Shinohara had given testimony that her group had been attacked by someone—would naturally cause school officials to investigate the matter more deeply. During the time of the incident, Amasawa's GPS signal had disappeared, and only hers. That was entirely possible. However, therein laid the problem.

"If it were only Amasawa's GPS signal that went dark at the time of Kinoshita and Komiya's attack, then yes, it'd be inevitable that the school would become suspicious of her," I said. "But that's not enough. Since no further evidence will ever be found, they can't definitively declare that she is the culprit."

"But that's—"

I had guessed that Nanase was standing off against Amasawa because she wanted to conclude that Amasawa was the culprit. However, verifying that Amasawa was the one responsible would be much more difficult than she seemed to think. School officials would be absolutely determined to avoid being hit with any legal action that could arise if they were to eliminate Amasawa because of false accusations.

Also, the entire idea of the watch, which was originally intended as a means of keeping maintaining order and rules during this uninhabited island exam, could be rendered null in a number of ways. These watches had to be strictly regulated to prevent wrongdoing. We were allowed to replace watches that stopped working due to any sort of malfunction, but only once. It would cost you the ability to earn points whenever your watch broke down, and a broken watch could eventually lead to elimination.

However, the stricter the regulations were, the greater the possibility that you could find some kind of loophole and commit fraudulent activities in a different way. For example, you could tinker with a rival's watch to make it stop working. Moreover, if someone's watch malfunctioned due to an accident, or if equipment failure really did lead to someone's elimination, that would probably find that a tough pill to swallow.

"Rules are meant to be broken," said Amasawa. "Happens all the time. Besides, it doesn't matter what you do as long as they don't find any evidence."

Though I had some issues with the way she said it, Amasawa was correct.

But Nanase went on. "If there's no other evidence, then I can testify that you were there when it happened, Amasawa-san."

"It wouldn't make a difference," I replied. "The only facts we have are that her GPS malfunctioned and that she was at the scene of the crime. The school would say it's suspicious, but that's all."

If Amasawa were a student with a history of violence and significant behavioral problems like Sudou or Ryuuken, then the school might have paid more attention to anything suspicious. However, the person standing in front of us right now was simply a girl in her first year of high school. There was a low chance that anyone had a negative impression of Amasawa. More importantly, though, Komiya and Kinoshita couldn't give testimony saying that they had been attacked, and Shinohara could only make a vague statement about what happened. She didn't even know who had attacked them. The same held true for Nanase. All she could say was that she saw Amasawa *near* the scene of the crime. Without conclusive evidence, it was impossible to get the school to punish Amasawa for the incident.

"There you have it, Nanase-chan," Amasawa said.

At any rate, we still didn't know the reason Amasawa was here right now. Nanase kept pressing and Amasawa just kept playing word games with her. The conversation kept going back and forth, and there was no sign of any actual progress being made. It was getting harder and harder for me to believe that she was about to try anything funny. For the time being, I figured we should set aside the question of whether Amasawa was really the one who had hurt Komiya and Kinoshita.

I decided to try asking her something else so I could get this conversation out of a deadlock.

"What did you come here for?" I asked. "Actually, how did you even find us?"

Since we still had more of this special exam ahead of us, I thought that we should avoid standing here in the rain all day, letting ourselves get drenched. I wanted to get my tent set up as soon as possible and get out of this downpour.

"Aww, come on," said Amasawa. "Don't be in such a rush, Ayanokouji-senpai. Let's just be happy that we get to see each

other like this here on the island!"

"Sorry, but standing out in the rain tires you out a lot faster than you might imagine," I replied. "I'd like to make this quick."

"Okey dokey, then how about we work together and set up your tent, and you and I spend the night here together, just the two of us?" she asked.

Amasawa should have been fully aware of the fact that men and women were not allowed to spend the night together in the same tent. It seemed like she was trying to buy herself time by continuing this meaningless conversation.

"Oh, are you worried about that? Don't worry, it's no biggie! I mean, it's not like the school can monitor every single thing," Amasawa continued.

She started walking toward us to approach me, but Nanase immediately jumped in front of her and grabbed hold of Amasawa's arm.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" asked Amasawa.

"Weren't you planning on trying to hit Ayanokouji-senpai just now?"

"When the heck did you turn into such a knight in shining armor, huh, Nanase-chan? Weren't you scheming with Housen-kun to get him expelled?"

"Well, that's... That has nothing to do with you," Nanase said. "What is your purpose in coming here?"

"I got lost, so I came here looking for help," said Amasawa. It was such a blatant lie that it was like she didn't even care if she sounded remotely believable or not.

Perhaps she had come here just to confirm whether the situation between Nanase and I had been resolved, and to observe what developments there might have been now that things had been settled. Judging by how Nanase was acting right now, Amasawa should have been able to grasp that she had already switched over to my side. Well, no, if that were true, then

there would be little point in her sticking around and engaging in such meaningless chit-chat.

"I want to talk to Ayanokouji-senpai," said Amasawa. "Would you get out of my way?"

"You can just tell him what you want to say from where you're standing now, can't you?" countered Nanase.

"No, can't do that. Since it has to do with the White Room, y'know."

With that, she revealed her identity all on her own. Perhaps she thought it would be useless to try and hide it any longer.

Nanase turned to look in my direction, shocked. During the first semester of the school year, there had been whispers suggesting the presence of a student from the White Room, but I had never been able to ascertain who it was exactly. I never imagined that I'd come to learn about it in this way, in the form of a confession directly from Amasawa herself.

"Get the picture now, outsider?" Amasawa said.

If Amasawa really was a student from the White Room, then I could certainly understand why she would call Nanase an outsider like that.

"Let go of her arm, Nanase," I told her.

Nanase, though disgruntled, obeyed my command and released her.

"There, there. Aren't you a good girl, Nanase-chan? You know, personally, I don't really hate how much of a loyal puppy you are."

Amasawa started to close the distance between us, bit by bit. Would we finally be able to get this conversation moving?

"Sorry, but Nanase said something similar before too," I told her. "Don't expect that I'm going to believe whatever you say just because you said the words 'White Room.'"

"That's totally okay. I can even give you proof. But...it *might* be a little problematic if Nanase-chan were to overhear it," said Amasawa.

She flashed us that same devilish grin she always wore as she looked over at us. Her smile seemed to say, "*You understand, right?*" She shooed Nanase away with a casual wave of her hand. Nanase was reluctant to just carelessly allow Amasawa to approach me, but she soon did as she was asked. The rain was starting to come down harder now, so if Nanase stood a few meters away from us, and if Amasawa and I spoke quietly, she wouldn't be able to hear our conversation.

Amasawa, trudging along through the mud, finally came within arm's reach of me.

"Okay then. Where should I start, I wonder," said Amasawa to herself.

She looked like she was deep in thought, like she was wondering how she could explain things to me so that I would understand what was going on. It went without saying that her being here right now in the first place was incomprehensible to me. The student from the White Room had been lying in wait to get me expelled until today. And yet Amasawa had simply revealed her identity to me without even trying to spring any kind of trap. Even stranger was that after all of that and revealing herself, she seemed hesitant about what to say next. She was obviously stalling for time and was doing all of this just to drag things out. Just as I was about to decide whether to press her on that, Amasawa opened her mouth to speak.

"When you were ten years old, you underwent project five in the course curriculum, which was based on social constructionism theory. When you were eleven years old, you underwent project seven, which was based on the theory of relativity. I took both of those courses too, so I remember them quite well," she said.

These were concrete details about my past; this was Amasawa's way of offering proof that we were both from the White Room.

"It was a world of all white," she added. "Everything and anything. The classrooms, the hallways, even our own individual rooms that we were given."

It certainly seemed like she knew far more than Nanase did about the White Room, at the very least. It wasn't likely that she had just gotten the gist of it from Tsukishiro either; he wasn't the kind of person who would discuss the inner workings of the White Room with outsiders. From what I had just heard, I could conclude that Amasawa was indeed the agent that I'd heard about. From the things that she said to the way that she acted, she certainly fit the part of a White Room student.

"What's the benefit for you in deliberately coming here and revealing yourself to me?" I asked.

"Yeah, I suppose you've got a point there," said Amasawa. "I figured that's what you'd get hung up on. That makes sense. But, y'see, I just wanted to tell you that I'm not your enemy, senpai."

"That sure sounds contradictory," I replied. "The White Room student is an agent sent here to get me expelled. If you're claiming not to be my enemy, then things don't add up."

Amasawa continued. "You're a fourth-generation student, Ayanokouji-senpai." She was already soaking wet, but she didn't seem to mind. "The students from the generation that came after you all harbor intense feelings of jealousy toward you. They figured if they were to use another White Room student to take care of you, that jealousy would motivate whoever they picked to get you expelled. But the people at the top messed up when they chose me for the task. They couldn't see that I'm just a sweet maiden whose only feelings toward you are a secret admiration and yearning, Ayanokouji-senpai. I'm not jealous."

"And that's why you've revealed yourself to me like this?" I asked.

Amasawa nodded in response.

"In that case, couldn't you have done this right after you came to the school and told me then? You had no trouble making it all the way to my room before. We had plenty of chances to talk."

"That's because no matter how much you admire someone, it's all in your head," said Amasawa. "It's nothing more than your imagination at first. It takes time to meet them in person, to talk to them, to come to think, 'Yeah, I'm so glad that that I came to admire and long for this person,' y'know?"

In other words, she was suggesting that if I hadn't turned out to be worthy of recognition in her eyes, I could still have been eliminated. This whole conversation had been to that end, then. That made sense.

"Do you understand?" she asked.

"Yeah," I replied. "Only someone who was on my same side would bother to talk to me this much about the White Room."

"Exactly," said Amasawa. "It kinda feels amazing, doesn't it? Being able to just spend your time at school, as a normal high schooler, I mean."

Up until this point, I had thought I was the only one who felt this peculiar sensation. I found it interesting that another White Room student was having this same experience, in the same way that I was.

"If you're experiencing the same feelings that I am, then does that mean you also find this school to be interesting?" I asked her.

"I know exactly what you're trying to say, senpai. I've definitely thought to myself more than once that it'd be great if I could keep enjoying being a student here until graduation, just living a fun, interesting life as a student. I'm not particularly good at making friends though, so I don't have that many people to talk to," she replied.

It kind of felt like she and I were similar. I could talk to Horikita and Ike and the others, but it always felt like there was a distance between us. I remembered that there was a lengthy period of time where I couldn't honestly call them "friends."

"I'm not really lacking in communication skills like you seem to be though. You know what I mean, senpai?" said Amasawa, correcting me. It was almost like she had just read my mind. "I've

basically learned the same things that you did, senpai. But you know, there are also some things that only the ones who came after you, the fifth-generation students, have learned."

I didn't answer. Amasawa continued speaking.

"We learned to communicate with others, at least at a bare minimum level," she said. "I heard that up until the fourth generation—your generation, senpai—there was too much individualism. There were lots and lots of students who just broke down, right? Of course, the poorly made kids were left out of the equation. Only the best of the best of us were allowed to be in contact with one another."

If what she said was really the truth, then it made sense that she was able to make such rich and emotive facial expressions so easily. Personally, I could put on an act and pretend to be someone else for a brief period of time, but it was difficult to break free of my naturally emotionless state. It was a habit I'd had for much of my life.

"You still don't believe me?" she asked.

"I believe that you're telling the truth about your background," I conceded. "But I'm still not convinced that's the reason you've decided to reveal yourself to me."

"You know, for someone who just openly acknowledged the fact that I am indeed a student from the White Room, you're really quite calm, aren't you? Do you think I don't pose a threat to you, senpai?"

I didn't answer her question. Amasawa simply smiled and continued talking.

"Anywho... I've said what I wanted to say to you, senpai. I think I'll be taking my leave now."

She then turned her back to me, as if just having me recognize that she was a student from the White Room was enough.

"What are you planning, Amasawa?" I asked.

"Hey, come on. I already told you, didn't I?" She turned around. "I just admire you very, very much, Ayanokouji-senpai," she said, stroking my cheek with her wet fingertips. "So... Please don't let yourself get crushed without my permission."

Amasawa pulled her fingers away from my cheek and started to walk away from me. *Don't get crushed without her permission?* Who exactly was she implying that I would get crushed by? Tsukishiro? The students who were after the twenty million Private Points? Or perhaps...

"Are you all right, Ayanokouji-senpai?" Nanase ran over to me, looking worried. "She didn't do anything to you, did she?"

I told her there was nothing to worry about, and then looked at my backpack.

"It's still raining. We'd better hurry," I told her.

Although there was so much information I wanted to sort out, there were other things we needed to prioritize right now.

"Yes. We should set up our tents," agreed Nanase.

"Oh yeah, that reminds me," I said.

There was one thing that I couldn't forget to check. Now that she was gone, I needed to examine Amasawa's footprints.

"Senpai...?" said Nanase, puzzled.

"The footprints are going to get washed away pretty quickly in this rain," I said.

Even though Amasawa had only just left, and her tracks were still fresh, her footprints were already starting to lose form.

"Oh, her footprints? But, what about them, exactly?" asked Nanase.

"There were footprints near the scene of the crime when Komiya and Kinoshita were injured. Looks like the ones Amasawa just left are about the same size as those were," I replied.

Which meant that Amasawa was most definitely in the area at the time, just as Nanase had witnessed.

"I knew it," said Nanase. "Amasawa didn't just so happen to be nearby by coincidence. She was the one who did it."

"We don't know that for sure," I replied. "We can conclude beyond a doubt that Amasawa was monitoring you and Sudou at that time. However, it still doesn't prove that Amasawa was the one who pushed Komiya and Kinoshita."

For a moment, it seemed like Nanase couldn't understand what I was saying.

"Yes, it's true that there might not be any hard evidence, but surely we can still conclude that she was the one who did it, don't you think?" she argued.

"If we were to make deductions based only on the information that we have now, then yes, Amasawa would most definitely be the culprit," I replied.

"That's what I think. Once again, I did see Amasawa-san there," said Nanase.

That certainly wasn't a mistake in judgment on her part, obviously. She really did see her.

"But it's not like you actually saw her push them, did you?"

"That's... Well... There's also that confession she just gave us just now," countered Nanase.

"I think we'd be hard-pressed to call that a confession," I said. "All she said was, 'What would you do if it *had* been me? What then?' She never actually said that she did it."

"Perhaps she was afraid of being recorded, or something along those lines?" Nanase suggested.

"With all the noise from this downpour, and on top of that, considering the state that we're currently in, do you really think that there was any need for her to be that wary?" I asked.

Anyone could see that this environment was not exactly conducive to recording audio.

"Even so, it's not as though we can be certain," said Nanase. "She does understand that you in particular are someone that she

should be wary of, Ayanokouji-senpai. And it is reasonable to assume that she would have taken the utmost precautions."

If Amasawa were trying to minimize the risks as much as possible, sure, that would certainly have been the wise choice.

"If you intentionally harmed two students, causing potentially life-threatening injuries if left untreated, then you should run away as fast as you possibly could immediately. Why would Amasawa have gotten so close to us on purpose and let you see her escape?" I asked.

Nanase pondered my question as she collected her backpack.

"That's... Well, we should consider that it could be because she was concerned about Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai's conditions," she reasoned. "It's the same mindset as an arsonist who returns to see the aftermath of their fire."

True, people often said arsonists returned to the scene of the crime. There were many theories about the psychology behind that, but it was dangerous to apply the same idea to this case so casually. If we assumed that Amasawa was indeed the perpetrator of this incident, then we would only end up seeing the superficial components of the case.

"It simply doesn't make sense that someone who was prepared to do whatever it took, no matter the consequences, would risk going back to the scene of the crime because they were concerned about the people they attacked," I said. "It doesn't add up. The fact of the matter is that you spotted Amasawa from behind as she was running away. It's hard to imagine that anyone sent in by Tsukishiro would have made a mistake like that."

I continued to track the deteriorating footprints so I wouldn't lose sight of them.

"And why would she have gone out of her way to catch up with us and reveal her identity?" I added.

"I thought that since she had seen me, she decided that she couldn't hide her involvement," Nanase replied. "So, she allowed

herself to be seen instead. If the incident had been reported to the school, then it would have become a problem for her, even if the school officials could not corroborate the details of the crime. It would have jeopardized the role that Acting Director Tsukishiro had entrusted her with."

"In the end, though, Amasawa coming back to the scene of the crime is contradictory," I replied.

"Couldn't we just dismiss that as a careless blunder on her part?" asked Nanase.

"Not a chance."

I supposed it was possible that Amasawa had intentionally let Nanase see her for one reason or another. At any rate, though, I had successfully managed to get a new clue from the footprints that I was tracking.

"Just as I thought," I said. "There's something that we cannot overlook in all of Amasawa's actions."

"What do you mean?" repeated Nanase.

I traced Amasawa's footsteps, which were just about to be cleared away by the rain.

"It seemed like Amasawa had approached from directly behind me. But if you trace her footprints back..." I directed Nanase's attention to the footprints.

"Huh?" she replied, now noticing the bizarre inconsistency herself. "These are someone else's footprints, aren't they?"

"Yeah."

The other set of footprints seemed to be slightly larger in size than Amasawa's, but since they were half-gone from the rain, I couldn't determine their exact size.

"You can see that whoever this person was, they briefly came close to us," I said. "Here, you can see the tracks are all messed up. This is the point where these tracks meet with Amasawa's footprints, and this is where this mysterious visitor turned back."

"So, you're saying that...someone else was here before Amasawa-san came over to talk to us?" said Nanase.

There didn't seem to be any way to determine whether this person was a student or a school official at this point in time.

"Can you bring me the stick that Amasawa was holding before?" I asked.

"Y-yes," replied Nanase.

Nanase went over, picked up the stick that Amasawa had thrown to the ground earlier, and came back over to me. After looking at it, I narrowed down my hypotheses and felt like I could make one educated guess.

"Do you notice anything about this?" I asked Nanase.

"Do I...notice anything? Well, it does look dangerous. It would cause a lot of harm if you were to hit someone with it. Oh, wait a minute. Is that...?" She trailed off.

As she was feeling the wooden stick she held in her hands, Nanase also noticed something.

"I can't imagine that this was just randomly picked up off the ground from somewhere around here," she said.

"Yeah. The useless parts have been scraped off, so that it could be used as a deadly weapon. Its condition is far too unnatural for me to think that it's just some branch that naturally fell off of a tree," I replied.

"Then was Amasawa-san planning to attack you using this stick, Ayanokouji-senpai?" asked Nanase.

"If Amasawa had been planning to attack me, then she should have just hit me with a surprise attack without a single word. But even though she was holding onto a weapon, she didn't show any signs that she was planning to attack me with it. Rather, I think that she specifically intended to use it to make herself noticeable."

From that, there was something else that we could infer as well.

"That means that from the beginning, she never planned to attack you," said Nanase. "Amasawa-san wasn't the person who originally brought this stick here. It belonged to the other person who vanished. Correct?"

The other visitor's footprints were close together when they were approaching us, having taken short strides. However, after they turned back, the footprints were spread farther apart. They must've ran away, either to avoid being seen or because they were trying to escape.

"But, why?" said Nanase, confused.

"Amasawa said that I'm someone she deeply admires," I mused. "When I consider the possibility that she tried to protect me when I was about to be attacked, I can start to see some connections to what's been going on."

"I can't help but feel that it's a little dangerous to determine that she's your ally just from that though..."

"Of course. Anyway, though, I really have no clue who left these footprints, but they must've been after me."

"Could... Could it have possibly been someone affiliated with the school?"

"That's a possibility," I agreed. "But remember, I do have a bounty on my head."

It was quite possible that these footprints belonged to a student who was after the prize money. And it was also conceivable that, whoever it was, they were willing to take the risk and try and get me expelled by force.

"Oh, I've got it!" shouted Nanase, sounding as though she had just thought of something. "Senpai, let's do a GPS search right away! Not that much time has passed since Amasawa-san arrived here and talked to us. Even if the other mystery person was running away at full speed, they most likely wouldn't have gotten that far in this poor weather. Don't you think so?"

It was true that if we conducted a GPS search right now and picked up a signal in the surrounding area, we could narrow down

our list of suspects. All we had to see who was in the area, starting with those closest to us.

"Oh, but I suppose that if this person broke their watch like Amasawa-san did, then we wouldn't be able to identify them..." added Nanase, dejected.

"Not necessarily. If you break your watch, that means your GPS signal goes dark. What if I did a search right now and we found that only one GPS signal was missing from the map other than Amasawa's?"

"...Then we could confirm that whoever it is, they're the perpetrator."

"Yeah," I said, "which is why the person who came here to attack me is not going to break their watch."

"In that case, it's well worth it for us to spend the extra point to search, right?" said Nanase.

I figured it had only been about fifteen minutes since Amasawa had approached me to talk. Even if this other visitor had run away as fast as they could to put some distance between us, they would've had to try desperately hard to get out of the area that we were currently in. If we were lucky, the person who left the footprints and then vanished would be the only other person in this area aside from us. That was exactly why I *should* have done a GPS search right then and there as Nanase suggested, but...

"No, we're not going to do a GPS search," I replied.

"Huh?! Wh-why not?!" shouted Nanase.

"No matter what kind of person we're dealing with here, it wouldn't be surprising if they had some kind of countermeasure if we decided to try and search for them. It's also possible that people who are completely unrelated to this incident might come up in our search."

We couldn't say for certain that this person wasn't hoping to get us to conduct an investigation in order to throw suspicion onto totally unrelated people. I figured that it was best to be wary of situations where your opponent pushed information onto you, just

like how Amasawa had let Nanase see her, making her into a witness, and then appeared again before us just moments ago.

"But it seems like a waste not to," said Nanase.

"At the very least, if it were me, I certainly wouldn't be stupid enough to let someone catch me with something like a GPS search. If this person has forgotten that we can do something like that, then there's absolutely no reason for us to be afraid of them," I replied.

Nanase was still somewhat unconvinced, but she seemed to go along with my decision on the matter. At any rate, even if I wanted to take a moment to sort out my thoughts on the matter, I figured that I shouldn't do that under the current circumstances. I decided to stop our conversation there for the time being and quickly started setting up our tents. To say that the rain was starting to come down hard would be an understatement.

Nanase and I put our tents next to each other, face-to-face. After we managed to get everything laid out, we ducked into our respective tents to take shelter from the rain. Closing my tent, I took off my wet gym clothes, jersey, and underwear, wiped myself down, and dried my hair off with towels. After changing into some spare clothes that I had handy, I opened the cover to my tent and peeked outside. Even though it was still around midday, it was so dark outside that it looked like night had fallen.

We were probably going to be stuck here for at least the rest of the day. The rain poured down relentlessly, threatening to seep into my tent, so I closed the cover once again and laid down inside. I had learned about Nanase's past, and I had confirmed that Amasawa was a student from the White Room. But even so, that didn't mean all the fog had been lifted quite yet.

2.1

AS THE HEAVY RAINFALL continued, the school sent out an e-mail to everyone. It announced that they would be suspending the test for the rest of the day. I supposed that it was reasonable enough to have predicted they would do so. The notification also said that because it would be difficult for students to make up for the loss of points from Basic Movement and Tasks, they were currently looking into ways to compensate us for the inconvenience. That way, students wouldn't have to suffer for the cancellation.

This meant that the school couldn't confirm yet how exactly they would make it up to us, at least not while the weather still showed no signs of clearing up. Anyway, no matter how they decided to do it, the fact remained that the test was suspended for the day. Although compensation in the form of points would certainly be effective in the sense of helping our overall scores, the strategies that each individual group had been using thus far would now have to be completely reworked. As for me, I could hardly call this suspension a blessing in disguise, even if I was being generous.

I had been planning to bring my A-game in the second half of the exam so I could outscore the groups that had used up their energy in the first half. They would be starting to lose steam now. However, now that the seventh day of the exam had pretty much been rendered a free day, everyone would have an opportunity to rest up and regain their energy. Of course, they weren't going to be recuperating in a comfortable environment, so it wasn't like they were going to be completely recovered. Even so, the difference between not resting at all and having at least some rest would be like night and day.

“—pai.”

“Hm?”

Huge drops of rain beat against my tent and the sound was practically deafening, but I could faintly hear someone's voice.

"Sen—ai."

There it was again. Someone was calling for me. I was certain that the voice belonged to Nanase, from the tent across from mine. I once again opened the zipper to my tent and looked out, peering through the mesh fabric. Visibility was poor, but it wasn't difficult to see as far as her tent.

"I would like to speak with you for a moment!!! May I come over there?!" she shouted.

She wanted to come over. Nanase should have known that it was risky for a man and a woman to be alone and squeezed together inside a small tent. I supposed she must have forgotten all about that. The rules only stated that men and women were forbidden from sleeping together. Simply spending a short time together wasn't a problem. As long as students didn't lose their sense of reason, then there wouldn't be any moral problems either. Still, having said that, the rain was coming down hard. Even though the entrances to our tents were less than two meters apart, Nanase would inevitably end up soaked while making the trip over.

"That's fine with me, but how about I go over to your tent?" I replied.

Nanase shook her head no in response to my offer. She then unfolded a towel and held it up above her to keep her head dry before opening the entrance to her tent. In response, I hurriedly opened my own tent to welcome her inside. In perfect sync with me, Nanase jumped out of her tent and flew into mine as quickly as she could. Even though the entire process took less than a second, she still got drenched, of course, but the inconvenience was as minimal as it could have been.

"Phew... Please excuse me for bothering you while you're resting, senpai."

"Nah, it's all right," I replied.

Nanase was more tired than I was, anyway. On top of the fact that she really had to push herself to reach this area, we had just fought a fierce battle right before this, albeit one born from a misunderstanding. I wondered what she wanted to talk to me about, but she didn't jump straight into conversation. It seemed like she was unable to bring herself to start speaking right away. There was a period of silence, as if we were both trying to guess how the other was doing.

"I suppose I'm a little brazen, aren't I?" said Nanase apologetically, lowering her head. "I treated you with such hostility just moments ago, senpai. I even went as far as to say some cruel things to you, and yet, despite that, I've... I suppose I'm only being a bother trying to talk to you like this, like we're close friends, aren't I?"

I felt like this was coming rather late, but it seemed like Nanase was coming face-to-face with those conflicting feelings now.

"I don't really care, and you can stop with the apologies. It should be clear that there's no need for us to antagonize each other, at the very least. Right?" I replied.

Though there were some things that couldn't be brushed aside so easily, we were in the middle of a special exam right now. Any doubts in your mind would cast a shadow onto your efforts, making it more difficult to think and act the way we needed to.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Nanase said, indicating that she understood. She apologetically bowed her head once more.

"So? What did you want to talk to me about so badly that you braved the rain?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," said Nanase, finally remembering the matter at hand. "I can't seem to stop thinking about Amasawa-san, since she showed up so suddenly earlier. When I thought about your struggles, Ayanokouji-senpai, I just felt like I had to come out and say something to her, against my better judgment."

Apparently, she had simply been worried about me back then, rather than having any specific motive behind speaking up for me. I found it a little problematic that she was more upset about the situation than I was, but I appreciated the sentiment.

"I just went ahead and decided that Amasawa-san must've been the one who pushed Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai. I thought that Amasawa-san was hiding her true nature because she wanted to hide the truth from us. But when you said that it didn't necessarily mean that she did it, Ayanokouji-senpai, well, I just couldn't quite understand your reasoning for that, and..."

"Because we're still completely in the dark at the moment. We don't know the truth."

Amasawa was about as close to being suspicious as she could possibly get. But she wasn't *completely* suspicious. She was, more or less, in a gray area.

"I'm curious about the perpetrator's motive," Nanase mused. "Whoever it might be, why would they engage in such risky behavior?"

I decided to reiterate my thoughts on what had happened with Komiya and Kinoshita. After all, sometimes you can come to see things more clearly by exchanging opinions with someone else. Someone had knocked Kinoshita and Komiya down. The fact that the perpetrator's watch hadn't given off a GPS signal clearly indicated that this was not a spur-of-the-moment thing, it was planned. And then—

"Hm... Wait, isn't that strange?" said Nanase.

As soon as we started talking about the issue, Nanase furrowed her brow in apparent confusion. It seemed she found some of what I said unconvincing.

"If Amasawa-san really is completely uninvolved with this incident, doesn't that strike you as strange?" she said. "That would mean that Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai just so happened to be attacked when she was around. And that Amasawa's watch just so happened to be broken at that same time. And finally, that I discovered her just by chance. Right?"

"It's true that when several coincidences intersect, it becomes difficult to call it a coincidence anymore," I agreed. "Certainly, if we were to make our deductions predicated on the idea that Amasawa was unrelated to what happened to Komiya and Kinoshita, then our case quickly falls apart."

Now, a new theory was emerging: the idea that someone close to Amasawa had knocked Kinoshita and Komiya down.

"So, even if Amasawa-san isn't the actual perpetrator here, that would mean that she knows who is," concluded Nanase. "If so, does that open the possibility that Amasawa-san is an accomplice?"

"That's exactly what I'm getting at," I replied. "Those other footprints that we saw earlier might've belonged to the actual perpetrator."

If we considered that Amasawa had been helping the real culprit, then that would explain her actions.

Nanase nodded. "Well, I suppose if someone did want to resort to violence, it would make sense to go about it that way," she said, connecting the dots.

"But..." I replied, trailing off before finishing my thought.

Just then, I had started to feel curious about...something completely unrelated to the topic at hand, for some reason.

"But what?" asked Nanase.

Now that she was looking up at me with a vacant, puzzled look on her face, I hesitated to ask her the question on the tip of my tongue. I paused because I simply couldn't understand how any of *this* worked. It was our seventh day living here on the uninhabited island. Nanase had basically collaborated with me all this time. And we hadn't had much time to wash up properly.

Nanase did have the chance to wash off the sand when she changed into her swimsuit for Beach Flags, of course. And when she went swimming, she would have taken a shower when she changed back. But even so, just the amount of sweat that you managed to produce in a single day could cause issues. Since the tent was rather small, Nanase's scent, though slight, had filled the

space. I wouldn't say that it was an offensive odor, though. Even if you could mask the scent of sweat by wiping yourself off, I wondered what it meant if it smelled good? I wanted to ask her about it, but that would obviously make me a bad senpai.

"No, it's nothing, I just misunderstood something. Don't worry about it," I told her.

"Oh?" she replied, puzzled.

Nanase nodded, not prying any further, and apparently not sensing what I had been thinking about either. Even though I did have a girlfriend, I was a beginner who had just started learning about these things. There was a lot that I didn't understand when it came to this sort of thing.

Deodorant and antiperspirant sprays were relatively inexpensive and readily available for us to get, as per the rules. I figured that she had purchased some. That was just about the only answer that I could come up with at the moment. This was a random topic that I had gotten myself stuck on, but I was getting strangely caught up in it. Nanase didn't seem to think anything of my pause though, so I figured that I would just get back to the topic at hand.

"Although we have no way of ascertaining whether Amasawa actually did anything to Komiya and Kinoshita, we do have a pretty good idea of who is in which Table," I told her.

Nanase cocked her head to the side in confusion, perhaps because she didn't understand what I meant. I took out my tablet and showed it to her.

"Wait, are you sure that's okay?" she said. "That contains your personal information, Ayanokouji-senpai... Are you sure you don't mind showing it to me?"

By "personal information," I assumed that she was referring to my scores. It was valuable information, I supposed, since scores and ranks for students outside of those in the top ten or bottom ten were not disclosed.

"I thought you and I weren't so distant from one another anymore and that we had a relationship where we could trust

each other. Am I misreading things?" I replied, straight out.

When she heard me say that she snapped to attention, looking up at me.

"Oh no! No! I-I'm grateful for your trust in me. Thank you!" she stammered. She sounded somewhat flustered, happy, and apologetic, all at the same time.

The face she made was typical of her. Nanase was the sort of person who couldn't just forget a perceived act of rudeness on her part.

"Besides, we've been working together," I added. "You'd probably be able to roughly guess how many points I've gotten anyway if you just thought about it. Right?"

Even though I had taken on some Tasks alone, I was sure that Nanase would have at least given some thought as to how I had earned my points if I were in first place. I proceeded to explain things to her, without paying any mind to the fact that I was disclosing my scores in the process.

"So anyway, as I was saying earlier, we can actually know who is in what Table, but—"

As I started explaining things, the sharp-minded Nanase quickly noticed something that seemed odd.

"Huh? Senpai, your score... Doesn't it seem lower than you would think it should be?"

"What do you mean?" I asked in return, evaluating her.

Nanase started to do some calculations in her head, using her fingers on both hands to work things out.

"Arrival Bonuses, Early Bird rewards, and Tasks... Subtract any penalties, and... I thought you won first place in the Task that you took on while I was taking a break too," she said, working through the problem.

She seemed to have quite a good memory. That would certainly be a useful asset to me, and something I could use in the future.

"So, you've noticed. Yes, I should've had eighty-eight points by now. Excellent job picking up on that."

"But you have seventy-eight now, a whole ten points less. And I don't believe you've suffered any penalties..."

So, how—and when—did those points disappear? I went on to explain the answer.

"In this special exam, we have four designated areas per day as part of the Basic Movement system," I explained. "They are announced to us, and then we move to those areas. We spend a total of ten hours on test content each day, from seven in the morning to five in the evening. I decided to do a total of ten GPS searches on the sixth day of the exam, when the feature was unlocked for us. I did one search each hour, except when we were on break at noon."

Nanase didn't yet understand what I would've been able to see by doing that, so I continued. "The GPS search is an exceptionally useful feature that allows you to know the location of every student on the entire island. But if you only use it once, just to determine people's location at a given moment, then its usefulness decreases. However, if you divide the day into ten segments and repeat the search over and over, you can see many things that you couldn't before."

By connecting the dots, you could see the trajectories that people made throughout the course of the day. Similarly, if someone else had performed ten searches, they could have noticed that Nanase and I had been together constantly during this exam.

"Hmm, okay, I think I understand now what you used those points for," Nanase said. "It is true that if you knew where everyone was going at each hour of the day, you might be able to work out which people belong to the same Table. But senpai, I don't remember seeing you fiddling with your tablet for extended periods of time on the sixth day of the exam, and it's not as though anyone could memorize all that information, right? Wait... Are you saying that you memorized everything in just an instant?"

"That would be impossible. It would take a ridiculously long time to check every single student's name and location," I answered.

I opened up my photos folder in my tablet and showed her the images that I had saved.

"I took screenshots after each GPS search. That way, I could take my time and go over them in detail when I had a spare moment to see what kinds of movements other students were making that day."

It was true that we couldn't send messages or photos to each other during the exam. However, taking a screenshot and saving it to your own tablet was a standard feature. Also, by repeatedly zooming in and out on the images that I had saved, it was possible to keep a detailed record of every student's location.

"By comparing the locations of each student at each hour of the day, it's possible to see a record of everyone's daily activity," I said. "And I can check it at any time."

I could review everyone's movements before going to bed, before getting started on exam activities in the early morning, or when I was taking a break. I had plenty of opportunities to look, so I could do it whenever. The map also gave details about the Tasks that appeared during those time periods, so a ton of information was laid bare in those screenshots. Though what I saw was only limited to the sixth day, I could see everything, including what kinds of strategies each group and each student adopted.

"...I had no idea you had done all of that," Nanase said. "I didn't notice at all."

"I wouldn't do something so stupid as to let myself get found out by someone who might have been an enemy," I replied. "I had no idea what kind of person you were as of the sixth day of the exam, Nanase."

It would've been sheer stupidity for me to let Nanase know that I was using the GPS search function at that time when she was still my possible enemy. At any rate, it was precisely because

students often had their hands on their tablets—doing anything from checking their current location to reading up on details about Tasks—that it hadn't looked out of the ordinary for me to be messing around with mine fairly often. I just did a GPS search and took a screenshot every hour or so while making sure not to lose track of the designated areas and Tasks.

Nanase, looking quite impressed, swiped through the saved screenshots. Each time she slid to the next one, she saw that the GPS coordinates of each student changed in interesting ways.

"I mean no disrespect whatsoever when I ask you this, but can you really say that doing this was worth ten points?" she asked. "I suppose that there might be added value in doing this if you could share the screenshots with someone, but if you're taking this exam alone, it would take quite a bit of time for you to analyze the behavioral patterns of the other students, wouldn't it?"

She definitely had a point there. If you could freely send screenshots to your teammates as attachments in messages, then you could get more value out of these images. With multiple people, you could do searches in even shorter intervals of time, and it would be possible to check the information outside of the regular exam hours. If the rules allowed for you to do something like that, then it wouldn't be surprising at all if other classes put it into practice.

"Even though this is within the scope of individual use, it depends on how you use it," I replied. "I *can* say that whether this strategy is ultimately worth the ten points or more, or whether it's not worth that many points at all, is about to be determined."

"And that means...?" said Nanase, inquisitively.

"It means that there's another piece of information that we can gather through these repeated GPS searches."

If you were to look at the information and break it down by grade level, like, for instance, if you looked at just the first-years or the third-years, then you could see other things. For example, the third-year student groups showed some strikingly unique patterns of movement.

"You can see that some third-year student groups have been exhibiting strange movements throughout the day," I explained. "It also appears that Nagumo's group and Kiriyma's group have been actively involved with the other groups who were moving strangely. When I looked into it further, I found something interesting."

I focused solely on Nagumo's group, observing their movements over each hour, starting from seven in the morning on the sixth day of the exam.

"First, Nagumo's group was in area B8 at seven that morning," I pointed out.

"Does that mean that B8 was their last designated area on the fifth day of the exam?" asked Nanase.

"I'd say there's a strong chance you're right about that," I agreed. "But they were situated in the southernmost part of B8. It's possible that the area to the south, B9, could have been their previous designated area. At any rate, at the time that they set out for the day, you can only see GPS signals for people from their group in that area; there was no one else near them."

However, an hour later, around eight o'clock that morning, several other groups started to gather around Nagumo. This trend became even more pronounced at nine o'clock that morning, with even more groups gathering around Nagumo's position. And then, from that point onward, this collective of groups went on the move together. Things really started to look interesting when you noted their movements at ten and eleven o'clock that morning.

"So many groups coming together and all moving as one... They're like a school of fish," Nanase observed.

"If you pull back and look at the whole image, you might not see it, but I bet if you zoom in, you'll notice something out of the ordinary," I told her.

Once I had explained that to her, Nanase nodded twice. Then, she proceeded to swipe through the images, stopping on the one from three that afternoon.

"Are they moving like that so they can monopolize Tasks?" she asked.

"With a system like this, I'd say Nagumo can likely take first place in any given Task without difficulty, depending on how well he coordinates with his peers."

It wasn't complicated at all. This was an extremely simple, yet powerful strategy.

"But none of the groups other than Student Council President Nagumo's will earn points this way, will they?" Nanase pointed out. "I can't imagine that they're all in the same Table either. They're working together to make one specific group win... I think that's an idea that anyone might have thought of at least once or twice, but it would be impossible for anyone to actually put such a plan into action."

For this plan to work, the other groups would need to head for designated areas other than their own. On top of that, if the Tasks were being handed over to Nagumo's group, then the other groups wouldn't be able to get high scores on Tasks either.

"That's right. Putting this strategy into action means ignoring the basic premise of the uninhabited island exam. Why couldn't we work together to make it so that one specific group wins?" I asked Nanase, testing her.

"That's because Class Points and expulsion are on the line, of course," she answered.

I then went ahead and showed Nanase the students from the groups that had gathered around Nagumo.

"They... The groups that they're using as fodder are all made up of upperclassmen from the lower-level classes..." Nanase realized.

"That's right. There isn't a single Class A student among those groups," I confirmed.

"It seems like the gap in Class Points between Class A and all the lower classes is so extreme for the third-years that catching up must seem hopeless to them," remarked Nanase.

"Put another way," I said, "it also means that whether Class 3-B or Class 3-D loses, it won't have any impact on their battle."

Neither the first-year nor the second-year grade levels were ready to give up on their inter-class battles just yet. Since those grade levels were still fighting tooth and nail with one another to become Class A, they were determined to not let themselves fall into the lower ranks. The third-year students, and only the third-year students, could ignore that impetus, and all four of their classes could cooperate with each other.

"The strength of this strategy lies in the fact that the groups that are sinking to the bottom of the rankings can basically do whatever they like during the exam," I added. "Whether they have only a single point or if they have fifty points, their disadvantage as a group from a lower rank remains the same. They'll just lose Class Points and get expelled. That's it."

"If they're doing everything in their power to back up one particular group, though, then shouldn't their point totals be as close to zero as you can get?" asked Nanase. "Those third-year student groups are most definitely in the bottom of the rankings, but they still have like twenty or thirty points or so, don't they?"

If you were ignoring the Basic Movement system and didn't bother with any of the Tasks yourself, then of course you wouldn't score any points. Nanase was saying that it wouldn't be unexpected, then, if these groups had around zero points thanks to successive penalties. Instead of answering her, I gave her some time to think. Then, she slowly started to pick up on the answer. To give her another push, I provided one small hint.

"Once this strategy is discovered, it becomes less effective. What could they do to avoid being detected?"

"Well, if there were two or three groups that had zero points, then it would be clear as day to the other grade levels that there was something going on," Nanase mused. "So, they would need to have at least some points to make it more difficult to notice that they're up to something..."

She looked over to me after she finished speaking. She seemed to have been able to work out the reasoning on her

own, and she was exactly right. You could see how extraordinarily good Nagumo was from this strategy. If several groups had zero points, it would have been far too obvious. They might as well have outright declared that they were up to something devious.

"While it does indeed seem like there are multiple groups supporting Nagumo," I said, "each group is making sure to have at least one of their people hit their respective designated areas."

"That's so they can avoid accruing penalties and getting more and more points deducted, right?"

By doing things that way, those groups would get at least a bare minimum level of points.

"The groups that are cooperating with Nagumo's group should make sure that they're seen as being competitive," I agreed. "As long as they're giving up first place to Nagumo, it doesn't matter who takes second or third as it's all the same in the end. That's why even among the lower ranks, the positions might change sometimes, or groups might have differences in scores."

You wouldn't be able to detect this strategy unless you performed those ten GPS searches. Even if you felt like there was something suspicious, you wouldn't be able to make anything of it.

"So are the students from those groups fully prepared to get expelled to make sure that Student Council President Nagumo wins?" asked Nanase. "Even if they cannot move up to Class A, wouldn't they want to avoid expulsion?"

"There might be some eccentric students out of the bunch that are doing this on a whim, but basically, yes, Nanase, that's correct. I'm sure that Nagumo has devised some kind of peculiar back-up plan to help them out as part of this whole scheme."

"What could that be?" asked Nanase.

"As things stand, it's impossible for any of the students in Class 3-B or below to graduate from Class A, even if they tried their best in the special exams," I said. "But what if there was a

possibility that they could move up to A by working together with Nagumo?"

"If that were the sole option available, then...I suppose people might cooperate, yes," answered Nanase.

If those students were forced to choose between graduating from B or below or taking a sink-or-swim chance to graduate from A, then it wasn't surprising that some of them would volunteer to help Nagumo.

"Somehow, I can't really tell if the school is administering this exam or if the Student Council President is," Nanase sighed.

"That's exactly the question. Nagumo has his entire grade level in the palm of his hand. That means that he's not on the side of those who must follow the rules; he's on the side of those making and controlling them."

That was precisely how this situation had come to pass. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Nagumo was probably the first and only one of his kind, even if you were to go back through the entire history of the Advanced Nurturing High School. Of course, we second-year students weren't going to just twiddle our thumbs and let Nagumo do whatever he wanted though.

On the fifth day of the special exam, I had approached Ryuuuen and Sakayanagi with a proposal.

The idea was that at least some of our grade level would come together and cooperate by working together to complete a specific Task. If I were to describe it simply, it was something of a similar nature to Nagumo's strategy. However, it was not about concentrating points to ensure that one specific group won, like Nagumo was doing. Since we second-year students were still competing against each other, there was no way we could reach an agreement when scoring was involved. Therefore, the proposal was made on the condition that we would be cooperating on things other than scoring points.

There were several groups made up of students from Sakayanagi and Ryuuuen's respective classes who they felt somewhat uneasy about anyway. So, we all negotiated with each

other as equals, offering to support one another. For example, in exchange for helping raise the maximum number of group members for Sudou's group, which was formed of Class 2-D students, we, in turn, would help raise the maximum number of members for a Class 2-A group.

Although our class leaders were enemies, they would work together without hesitation if their interests aligned. It was one of their superior qualities. Of course, had this been our first year in school, I don't think that we would have been able to pull this off quite so well. It was precisely because we had all accumulated a year and half of experiences together that we were able to make this happen.

"I understand. So, that means that paying ten points in exchange for this information wasn't that big of a risk for you, senpai. Right?" said Nanase.

"It's not like I've entirely abandoned the idea of trying to get into the top spots," I replied. "But Kouenji is fighting tooth and nail to take the top spot too, fortunately enough. Besides, I think I'd rather have the means necessary to be able to support my allies at any time."

"Kouenji-senpai really is quite amazing," said Nanase. "He's single-handedly keeping up with Student Council President Nagumo's group."

Kouenji was certainly impressive. However, the situation was a little misleading. Kouenji and Nagumo were in a neck and neck race right now, each potentially about to overtake the other. Or at least, that's what everyone must have been thinking when they checked which groups were in the top spots. They would think to themselves, "*Kouenji is holding his own against Nagumo's group all on his own.*" In reality, Nagumo's group was only pretending to be in such close competition with Kouenji. It was nothing more than an act.

Nagumo would likely maintain the status quo until the end of the twelfth day, when the top ranks could be confirmed. Then, during those last two days when the scores couldn't be checked, he would make a mad dash for the finish line. That way, the

results would only show that Nagumo had defeated Kouenji by overtaking him in the endgame once Kouenji had run out of steam. The fact that Nagumo was using a large network of allies to raid Tasks wouldn't be exposed. I supposed if Nagumo was willing to go up against Kouenji, then there was a chance that we could win this thing.

"Now then," I said, "let's use the information we have to see what kind of movements Amasawa was making on the sixth day of the exam."

Hearing those words, Nanase understood that there was even more value to those ten points that I had spent.

"It looks like Amasawa wasn't inside the designated area as of that morning," I pointed out.

It wouldn't have been surprising if she'd been camping out in the same designated area that we were in, considering that we were in the same Table to begin with. However, her GPS coordinates placed her two areas below that. She must have spent the night alone as we couldn't see any other GPS signals overlapping with hers.

"This was her position at eight in the morning, one hour after the designated area was announced," I added.

"And we were headed for B6, right?" said Nanase.

"That's right. It looks like Amasawa took a different route than we did to get there."

Looking at the distance she had traveled in just one hour, she must have been going quite fast. Was it just that she was traveling faster than the general walking speed? Or was it because she had moved with precision along the best possible route? In any case, I found it hard to believe that she was just some girl walking through the woods all on her own. When I proceeded to the screenshot of the map one hour later, I saw that Amasawa had been in area C6, just one space to the right of our designated area. We could assume that she had entered the designated area during that one-hour time frame and then made her way to a nearby Task. At least on the morning of the sixth day

of the exam, Amasawa must have been taking this exam seriously, just like the rest of the students.

"Once again, I have to say, this is really impressive," Nanase remarked. "I can see each and every person's movement on the map, plain as day."

Then, we focused on Amasawa's movements from the third screenshot to the seventh screenshot, in order. There wasn't anything particularly unusual; she had appeared to participate in three Tasks and visited each of the designated areas in time. Whether she had actually won anything from those Tasks was something I could more or less find out by looking at Nanase's tablet, but the results Amasawa had gotten from those Tasks weren't important.

"At the very least," I said, "as of five o'clock in the evening on the sixth day, there weren't any signs that Amasawa was approaching us or making any kind of suspicious movements."

"...I suppose this means that we've gotten nothing from this then," said Nanase. "What a shame."

"No, we've gotten plenty," I assured her. "At the very least, Amasawa appears to be engaging with this special exam with at least some degree of seriousness. And this all means that she hasn't given us any kind of opening to find out anything about what she was doing with the GPS search."

Without a doubt, it was safe to assume that she had been engaged in other activities during the evening and early morning hours, outside of the special exam period for the day. While it was possible to do a GPS search during those times, it would be a total waste of points.

Just then, we received an additional notification from the school regarding the suspension of special exam activities today.

"Because students were only able to complete one-fourth of the day's activities for the seventh day of the exam for both the Basic Movement system and Tasks as a result of the inclement weather, we have decided to compensate students in the form of doubling all rewards earned from Arrival Bonuses, Early Bird"

Bonuses, and Tasks on the final day of the exam. Also, please note that the forecast predicts that the weather will be back to normal by tomorrow morning.”

The final day of the exam was like the first in that it was only three-quarters as long as the regular exam days. So, in that sense, I supposed that it was a good choice to allocate our compensation to that day.

“This might make it possible to turn things around, don’t you think?” said Nanase.

If points gained were doubled on the last day, the day we could expect most showdowns to be decided, then it was even likelier that an upset could happen.

“Announcing their decision to double points on the final day of the exam right away was the correct move on their part. This way, it gives students time to rethink their strategies for the second half of the exam so they can decide what kind of moves to make,” I reasoned.

Also, since today could be used as a day of rest, groups would be thinking about how best to pace themselves starting tomorrow so they could carry through to the end of the final day. I supposed that it wouldn’t be surprising if some groups took advantage of this opportunity to push forward with everything they had starting on the eighth day, while other groups were slowing down. But for me, personally, neither today’s severe weather nor the decision the school had made to deal with it were welcome developments.

After staring down at my tablet for a while, I noticed that Nanase had started speaking less and less and she seemed to be nodding off. Her eyes closed and opened over and over, as if she were on the verge of passing out.

“I know it’s still daytime, but wouldn’t it be a good idea for you to get some sleep?” I asked her.

She had basically forced herself to climb a mountain this morning. After that, we had our fight, which drained all her stamina in one go. She must have pushed herself beyond her

limits more than once or twice by now, so I was sure her fatigue was catching up with her.

"O-oh, uh... I'm sorry," said Nanase, flustered.

She quickly tried to sit up straight once more, but it wasn't like you could make drowsiness go away that easily. Especially if you had bruises all over your body.

"...I'll be going back to my own tent," she said.

People know their own bodies best, after all. If she stayed here any longer while she kept nodding off like that, she'd only end up being a bother to me.

"Yeah, that's for the best," I replied.

Thanks to the rain, we likely wouldn't be able to move around much at all for the remainder of the day, anyway. It would be best for us to take this opportunity to relax as long as we could and rest our bodies. That being said, it wasn't exactly comfortable inside the tent, so it wasn't that great a reprieve. As Nanase was just about to exit my tent, she turned to look at me.

"As soon as it stops raining, I'd like to go ahead and pursue Amasawa-san," she told me. "Now that it's clear that she's a student from the White Room, I'm curious about what she's going to do in the days to come."

It was true that sticking with me wouldn't reveal anything more about that situation. Amasawa was unlikely to get the opportunity to do anything malicious to Nanase either, as they shared the same Table.

"The fact that Amasawa was able to make it through the White Room all this time, until she reached her current age without any difficulty, means that she is a threat," I warned her. "It's important that we don't underestimate her because of her gender or age."

"I don't understand the situation fully, but I'll take it that you mean she's an extremely powerful opponent," said Nanase.

If we were talking purely in terms of combat prowess, it was safe to say that Amasawa surpassed the likes of Sudou and

Ryuuuen. They might have been superior to her in physical strength, but she was leagues ahead of them in terms of technique. No matter how hard Nanase might try and resist Amasawa, she stood no chance of winning.

"Besides, you have Housen in your group too," I added.

"Right. He isn't an opponent I could best in terms of raw strength, either," Nanase nodded.

It wasn't just his strength that made him dangerous. If anything, it was better to think of Housen as the type of opponent who didn't make moves based on brute force alone.

"While I think the chances of Housen being a White Room student are extremely low, this whole thing with Amasawa has now made me feel less certain of that. At any rate, put me second on your list of priorities and protect yourself," I told her.

If Housen's top priority wasn't getting me expelled, that is.

"I'm not afraid of being expelled. I intend to do whatever it takes to protect Ayanokouji-senpai."

It didn't seem like Nanase was going to take my warnings to heart.

"Let me rephrase that," I replied. "Careless action on your part could potentially cause me unexpected harm. I would like for you to avoid risky behavior." I wasn't worried about her. I had apprehensions about harm befalling *me*.

When I said that, though, Nanase went from looking courageous to looking like a sad little puppy.

"That's... You're right, that won't do. I cannot cause you any more trouble, Ayanokouji-senpai," she said.

"If that's what you think, then please just be prudent. Okay?"

"I understand. I promise," said Nanase.

I figured that if I told her to be careful, she wouldn't do anything too rash. I was sure that she wouldn't want to do anything potentially disgraceful that could make her feel even more ashamed than she already did.

After Nanase returned to her own tent, I lowered my gaze to my tablet once more. I checked the scores of the groups in the top and bottom ten. I also wanted to assess my current situation based on my own score.

Top Ten Groups by Points:

- 2nd Year Kouenji's Group: 168 Points / 1st Place
- 3rd Year Nagumo's Group: 166 Points / 2nd Place
- 3rd Year Kiriyma's Group: 150 Points / 3rd Place
- 3rd Year Sozoe's Group: 133 Points / 4th Place
- 3rd Year Ochiai's Group: 133 Points / 4th Place
- 2nd Year Ryuuuen's Group: 128 Points / 6th Place
- 2nd Year Sakayanagi's group: 127 Points / 7th Place
- 1st Year Takahashi's Group: 115 Points / 8th Place
- 2nd Year Kanzaki's Group: 104 Points / 9th Place
- 3rd Year Kuronaga's Group: 101 Points / 10th Place

And then there was me in forty-ninth place with seventy-eight points. There was a difference of ninety points between me and Kouenji, who was currently sitting in first place. Though it seemed like that difference was completely insurmountable, I supposed it was possible to scale it. If I arrived at a designated area first and earned the top Early Bird Bonus, after factoring in the Arrival Bonus, I could get a total of eleven points. Granted, since there were four designated areas to visit per day, it would only be possible for me to catch up if I arrived at my designated areas first, nine times in a row. And, of course, this was also assuming that my opponent didn't accumulate a single point.

If Kouenji didn't slow down his current pace and continued to keep scoring a fair number of points, then he would likely end up with somewhere around 350 points when everything was said and done. If I wanted to catch up with him, then I'd have to earn

almost forty points per day. I'm sure that if any other group was asked to do something similar, they would have said it was impossible and given up. But even the practically inhuman Kouenji should be slowing down in the second half of the exam.

"So, tenth place has 101 points, huh..." I muttered to myself.

When all the rules for this uninhabited island exam were explained to us, I expected that all of the groups would have had slightly higher scores than I was seeing now by this time. It was the halfway point of the exam, after all. But considering the score of the group in tenth place, and the fact that I was currently sitting in forty-ninth place with a total of seventy-eight points, I was getting the strong impression that the rate of scoring overall had been rather sluggish, right from the onset of this exam up to now. After people started to peak on the second or third day of the exam, their fatigue started to show. It was clear that the number of times groups had failed to reach their designated areas, the number of penalties, and the number of times groups had missed registering for Tasks were all increasing.

However, the total number of groups was gradually decreasing as well, as smaller groups were slowly but surely beginning to merge with one another. I couldn't forget about that. I was going to need to really go for it in the second half of the exam if I was going to make it into the top rankings. And the key would be the tenth-place score. That was exactly why I didn't push myself too hard in the first half of the exam and instead just quietly observed and prepared.

Things were going to pay off starting tomorrow, the eighth day of the exam. But even so, I could expect another major spike in activity on the eighth and ninth days thanks to the fact that today, the seventh day of the exam, had been cancelled on account of heavy rainfall. This would also provide an opportunity for some groups to conserve their energy in order to focus on getting double points on the final day.

This special exam appeared unwinnable for someone going it alone. The exam rules, the Basic Movement system, and Tasks were all at odds with each other. If you aimed to get to your

designated areas as quickly as possible, you might miss Tasks. If you focused on Tasks, there was an increased chance that you'd miss Early Bird Bonuses. This was a common issue shared by all, whether you were operating alone or were with a large group made up of many people.

The Early Bird Bonus reward was determined by when the last person in your group got to an area. As for Tasks, you could only gain a large number of points through them if you got the chance to actually participate when they appeared, and you had to win as well. Both of those facts showed that this exam was made up of well-designed systems.

It was unclear whether it would continue raining tomorrow or not, but I intended to fight through the second half of this exam using a new strategy. There were a few things that still concerned me, though—like Nanase's presence.

Chapter 3: Just Keep Going and Keep Quiet

THE HEAVY RAINFALL kept coming until just around dawn. It cast a shadow of intense anxiety over the students. However, around the time that six o'clock rolled around, the rain clouds vanished. The sky was so clear that you could hardly believe it had rained at all. The weather looked sunny and clear, having returned to what it was like the day before yesterday. The sunlight didn't really shine through the trees when you got deep into the woods though, so it would likely be some time before the muddied paths dried up and it became easier to walk around again.

"Guess I'll need to take care of food issues when the time comes again too..." I muttered to myself.

I hadn't been able to maintain the daily caloric intake that I needed as a high schooler. Slowly but surely, I was starting to run out of energy. As I had never intentionally trained myself to deal with chronic food shortages, this would be my first experience with prolonged hunger. At the very least, if I was able to maintain my water supply and stay hydrated, I could remain somewhat active. But even so, that wouldn't be great. It would lead to my immune system weakening, therefore making me more susceptible to illness.

Eating wild animals and insects was a possibility, but that was only something I'd do as a last resort. If you had points left over, you could go back and purchase food at the starting area, but only in small portions. That meant that basically, the only way to get food was to complete Tasks and make sure that you placed near the top, or if you received food as a participation prize. The Tasks that we could obtain food from were going to become fiercely contested from here on out.

"I'm all set," said Nanase, approaching me with her backpack slung over her shoulders. She had apparently finished

putting away all her stuff.

"Amasawa will be hitting the designated areas, right?" I asked.

"Considering that it'll increase her score, I'm certain that's what she'll be doing first today," she replied. "So, if you don't mind, I would appreciate it if you would allow me to accompany you to our first designated area."

I didn't say anything back, only answering her with an affirmative nod. If we were headed for the same destination, then I didn't have any reason to push her away. Not long after we started walking, Nanase opened her mouth to speak once more.

"Amasawa-san started following us on the evening of the sixth day of the exam and into the morning of the seventh day, correct?"

"If we think it through simply, we should assume that when she approached us early on the morning of the seventh day, she did so using the search function," I answered.

Since we couldn't access anything like a search history, there wouldn't be any evidence of any kind that suggested Amasawa had used it for certain. However, if we could see that her group's score went down on the seventh day, then we could take that as proof that either Amasawa or Housen had made a GPS search. Since they didn't appear to be in either the top or bottom ten groups though, only Nanase could confirm that fact since she was in the same group as them.

"I did check our information on my tablet, of course. However...as far as I can remember, our group's score wasn't reduced by even a single point from what we had accumulated as of the morning of the seventh day," said Nanase.

So, if Nanase's memory was to be believed, Amasawa had not used the GPS search.

"While it's unclear where exactly Amasawa-san was that morning, we were in quite a hurry at the time," Nanase went on. "It wouldn't have been an easy feat for her to have caught up

with us unless she was somewhere close by already, don't you think?" reasoned Nanase.

"That's why she had devised an ingenious way to catch up with us," I said.

Unlike Nanase and I, who were walking along with our backpacks, Amasawa had been traveling light at the time. This meant that she had been stationed somewhere close enough that she could easily close the distance between us.

"We should assume that there was some kind of trick she used to find out our specific location," I added.

"Are you saying that Amasawa-san got your location from someone else, Ayanokouji-senpai?"

"Maybe."

Whatever method she might have used, it would be difficult for us to get definitive proof at this stage.

3.1

WELL, SENPAI, I suppose this is where we say goodbye for now," said Nanase. We had just reached area E3, having traveled from D3, and both of us had earned a single point from the Arrival Bonus.

"How are you planning on joining up with Amasawa and Housen?" I asked.

The GPS search was an excellent feature for finding out your opponents' locations, but it wasn't exactly ideal for trying to meet up with people. Items that allowed for direct conversation like walkie-talkies would be better suited for the task.

"I can't imagine that I'll be able to run into them even if I move about at random, but it's not as though I can repeatedly use the search feature to try and find them. I'd selfishly use up the points that we worked so hard to

obtain," said Nanase. "For the time being, I'll just use one point to search now and follow their GPS signal. If I can't find them after that, then I'll just have to go on to the designated area."

I supposed the bare-minimum approach would be to look for Amasawa and Housen throughout the day, as time permitted. Since there wasn't any point in me asking her what Amasawa's location was right now, I decided not to bring it up.

"I also think that it would be difficult to investigate what the first-years are doing unless you were also a first-year student, like me. If I find anything disturbing, I'll rush to your side, Ayanokouji-senpai," she added enthusiastically.

What I was most afraid of was that she'd drag me on some kind of wild goose chase.

"Don't do anything excessive," I replied.

Nanase bowed and promptly left, tablet in her hand. Hopefully she'd be able to join up with her teammates soon, but

that all depended on the remaining two people in her group. If they were constantly moving within their designated area, then that'd be it. But I wouldn't be surprised if the two of them ended up doing something unpredictable.

After I saw Nanase disappear into the woods, I took out my own tablet. Now that I was finally back to being alone, it looked like I could get the second half of this exam started.

"Doesn't look like there are any Tasks nearby," I muttered to myself.

There was a Task that was a straight shot from where I was, about 400 meters away. Unfortunately, registration began twenty minutes ago, and considering that it would take fifteen minutes for me to get there, I'd get there thirty-five minutes after registration had opened. Only five groups could register for it as well, so it didn't allow for many people.

I determined that, realistically, it would be difficult for me to get in. I decided to not overdo it, and instead just took it easy. I would wait right where I was for the next designated area to be announced. Once my strength returned, I'd get back up. Thus, when nine o'clock came around, I took out my tablet and started to take action. Whether I would head straight for my designated area in the shortest amount of time possible or whether I'd head toward a Task would depend on what the announcement said.

I looked at my tablet to check. It turned out that this designated area, my second for the day, was the random one. It was fairly close for a random designation, relatively speaking: it was in E6, just three spaces below my current location. I immediately started walking, but I didn't put away my tablet. I continued to use it as I moved, checking what Tasks were appearing right now so I could set my course of action.

I needed to be efficient if I was going to rack up a lot of points in a single day, especially a day in which time was limited. And, to achieve that, it was essential that I eliminated factors influenced by "luck" as much as possible.

3.2

IT WAS JUST BEFORE four in the afternoon. I had finished the Task that I had registered for and was just about to get going.

"Ayanokouji-kun?"

Just then, I spotted Horikita for the first time since we parted ways on the first day of the special exam. She looked a little surprised, but she didn't seem particularly fatigued or anything.

"We haven't seen each other since that first day," she said.

"Sounds about right," I replied.

Here in F7, we were meeting again for the first time since the exam began.

"Did you come here for a Task, or are you just passing through? Where are you headed?" I asked her.

"G8. I'm just cutting through on my way there. What about you?"

"F8. Looks like we're heading in the same direction then," I observed.

Apparently, Horikita's destination was just one space ahead of mine.

Nothing was as big a waste of time as just standing around and talking, so instead, we started walking side by side as we talked. If we were following the same route to our destinations, at least for part of the way, this would be the best solution.

"You seem to be doing better than I thought you would be, physically. And from the looks of things... Are you still alone?" I asked.

"That's right," she replied. "There are plenty of hardships, but there are also many aspects that are easier when you're alone."

It was true that if you were alone, you didn't have to worry about anyone else or try to match your pace to other people's. Come to think of it, Horikita's name hadn't ever appeared in the bottom ten yet. That might've been proof that she had been performing well and scoring points, but even so, it was strange that she didn't seem to be tired at all.

"Do you find it that strange that I'm still feeling fit?" she asked.

"Most of the students I've encountered have seemed pretty exhausted," I answered.

"Has anything unusual happened?"

"Unusual? Oh, yeah... Come to think of it, have you heard anything about Shinohara and the others?"

"Yes. I just heard today," she said. "With that in mind, I'm glad that I could meet up with you."

From the sounds of things, Horikita had stopped back near the starting point, and was approached by a student from Class 2-A. Then, she met up with Sakayanagi and learned that Komiya and Kinoshita had been eliminated from the exam. She then heard about the strategy that I had proposed to Sakayanagi earlier and had accepted the terms of the negotiations.

"So, you didn't turn it down," I remarked.

"I didn't have any reason to," she said, "and we absolutely must avoid letting Shinohara-san get expelled. From what I've heard, you were the first to discover what happened. Did you find out any details?"

"No, not especially. I think it was both an incident and an accident."

I explained what I saw, as someone who had examined the scene of the crime up close. I didn't mention that Amasawa had been lurking in the background at the time, of course.

"Shinohara-san's group dropped hard in the rankings," said Horikita. "Her group is now sitting at seventh from the bottom. At this rate, she's likely going to drop even further in the rankings

before the day is out, into a position where she'll be in danger of expulsion. We need to hurry. If, in the worst-case scenario, she cannot find a group to merge with, then I'll make my move. I was fortunate enough that just before I met up with you today, I completed a Task that allows me to increase my group size by three."

That was good news. There were only a few Tasks that allowed you to increase your maximum group size, and those Tasks drew quite a crowd. It couldn't have been easy for Horikita to get first place.

"But if you take her in, then you and Shinohara would have to score points with just the two of you," I pointed out. "If possible, I'd like for you to coordinate with Sakayanagi to work this out smoothly, and make sure Shinohara is absorbed into a group that's in decent shape."

Horikita seemed to share my opinion, agreeing with a nod.

"Also, as I've been walking around this island for the past eight days, I've noticed there are far more groups using walkie-talkies than I imagined there'd be," she said. "I've seen them in use all over the place; Sakayanagi-san used one to relay details about Shinohara-san's case to her fellow students from Class A."

"They seem to be especially useful for the upper-level classes with good leadership and the means to afford them," I mused. "Tools that allow you to exchange information over long distances can be well worth the high price, depending on how you use them."

"I wonder..." said Horikita, "if we could've done the same thing, if we trusted each other a little more."

Perhaps she found the idea somewhat difficult to imagine as she was pursing her lips somewhat tightly.

"It could've been a waste if we had gotten them, though," I said. "You know, pearls before swine. They wouldn't necessarily lead to a net positive in this exam."

"I suppose," she replied.

I took out my tablet and checked to see whether any new Tasks had appeared yet. A Task had appeared nearby that offered food just for taking part, and it was both risk- and hassle-free. Moreover, fifteen groups could participate, which was quite a high number. On the other hand, it wasn't very appealing in terms of point value. You could only receive one point for it as a participation prize.

"I'm running dangerously low on food, so I'm thinking of stopping by this Task," I told her. "What about you, Horikita? What are you going to do?"

If she were after the Early Bird Bonus for reaching her designated area, then it would be better if she continued on without bothering with the Task.

"I don't exactly have that much food left myself, so I'm going to stop by that Task too," she replied.

Since Horikita and I both had the same priority now, we decided to change our route slightly and head over toward the Task. While I was quite grateful for this Task being there, simply getting in was going to be somewhat competitive. Both Horikita and I picked up our walking pace and hurried to its location. While we were on the way, we started to see more and more first-year and third-year students and, of course, second-year student groups as well. They were all headed in the same direction, presumably for the same purpose that we were. Most of the groups started to take off running as soon as they realized they were surrounded by rivals.

"Don't worry about me, Horikita. Go ahead and hurry there," I told her.

"You're one to talk. If you're so incredibly low on food, don't you think you should take the lead and hurry over there?"

"I don't have the energy to run anymore," I replied.

"I'm in the same boat," said Horikita.

Even though we were in a hurry, we both were trying to avoid using up too much energy unnecessarily. I also started to see that Horikita, who had continued working alone in this exam,

still had some energy to spare, just like I did. She was taking this exam at the same pace I was.

We managed to get there in time to register for the Task. Once we arrived, we decided to chat a bit with our classmates that we hadn't seen in a while. Besides, even if we rushed over toward our next designated area, we wouldn't be able to get the Early Bird Bonus anyway.

In that case, I figured it was better that we stick around and trade information until the last possible minute so we could make the most out of our time in the second half of the exam. Furthermore, many students were unaware of Shinohara's situation.

I had received four points from the Basic Movement system today and taken part in four Tasks, scoring fourteen points. In total, I had earned eighteen points today. My overall score was now ninety-six points, and I was in twenty-third place in the rankings. I had the impression that, on the whole, students had moved more actively than on the fifth and sixth days of the exam, but there were some groups that had hardly moved at all. I had the clear impression that everyone was divided into two distinct categories: those that were strictly trying to maintain their energy, and those that were not.

I had expected that the eighth day of the exam was going to be a fierce battle, but it ended up not being that bad of a day, actually. There hadn't been any major shakeups in the scores in the top ten either. Kuronaga's group was hanging on at tenth place with 111 points. Tomorrow, I wanted to reach and stay at my ideal ranking. If possible, I wanted to meet with Sakayanagi in the near future too. I decided to get a little sleep, hoping that my next designated area would be somewhere in the direction of the starting point.

Chapter 4: Fighting Against Solitude

I BRUSHED THE SPIDERWEBS off my clothes, slowly took my backpack off, and set it down. The ninth day of the uninhabited island exam was as hot and humid a day as ever. Having safely arrived at my fourth designated area, I let out a deep sigh. I had reached my destination on time, just as I planned. The sweat beading on my forehead slowly trickled down to the bridge of my nose, and I wiped it off with my arm.

My fourth designated area for the day, which was announced at three in the afternoon, had been quite the trek. It took me from area H9 all the way to D5. Making it there in time had been a rather arduous journey. One Task that I could have snatched up had appeared while I was on the move, but I decided to forego it to reduce my risk of getting hit with a penalty.

Despite it taking nearly two hours for me to get to where I needed to go, few other groups had come to this area, including students from other Tables. I successfully managed to arrive early enough to get the third place Early Bird Bonus. Though I was, by and large, not dissatisfied by the results, I wasn't able to meet up with Sakayanagi because I wasn't near the starting point. I'd used up lot of my energy to push on ahead already, and I didn't want to overdo it.

I passed by several groups of Class 2-A students and reached out to talk to them, but unfortunately, none of those groups had walkie-talkies. *Should I push my luck tomorrow morning? No... That'd be dicey.* I set the matter of contacting Sakayanagi on hold for the time being and proceeded to summarize the day's events.

"So, after adding up all of the points I got today, that brings me to a total of a 112... Huh," I muttered to myself.

Kuronaga's group had maintained their position at tenth place in the rankings, with a total of 123 points. I had moved up to thirteenth place—and there was now only an eleven-point difference between my score and Kuronaga's group's. Considering

that it would soon be five o'clock, there was a good chance that the day would end with this gap as it was. My goal had been to get to eleventh place, but I supposed that an eleven-point difference in scores was more or less acceptable.

Although I had gotten here later than I planned due to the whole incident with Nanase and the severe weather, I had reached the perfect position: the spot I had been aiming for since the beginning. That's right: I had been aiming for eleventh place since the start of the uninhabited island special exam. I was in thirteenth place today, a little below where I wanted, but the important thing wasn't necessarily getting to exactly eleventh place. What was important to me was making sure I got to just barely below tenth place and that I stayed there.

I needed to work hard to accumulate points so that I ended up on the winning side. That was unavoidable. But whether I was working alone or whether I was in a large group that had seven people in it thanks to having the One More card, if I broke into the top ten, I'd stand out even if I didn't want to. That was because the top ten groups were announced publicly. If I were to stand out, then my rivals would become wary of me, and the risk of sabotage in the near future would surely increase.

To avoid those risks while still giving me a chance to shoot for the top ten later, the ideal ranking for me to reach was eleventh place. However, this strategy did have several drawbacks. Because of the nature of this plan, I needed to be extremely careful in managing my score. Any failure in that department could result in me popping into the top ten too soon, even if just for a moment. If that happened, then my strategy would fail.

An even bigger drawback was that this plan was highly dependent on the group in tenth place. The closer that the tenth-place group got to the first-place group, the easier it would be for there to be a breakup. But on the flipside, the more points they needed to catch up to first place, the more difficult it would be to pull off a surprise victory later. This was precisely why it was so important to have those groups at the top drag each other down for me.

Well, that hadn't been happening as overtly as I'd hypothesized, and now, some groups had basically pulled far, far ahead of everyone else. I wouldn't call it compensation or anything, but the second-years as a whole had been able to fight this battle from a relatively advantageous position. That is to say, we weren't feeling much pressure pushing up against us from below or pressing down on us from above. Trying to sabotage another group more or less amounted to an act of self-sacrifice, which meant that it was difficult for anyone to actually pull some kind of stunt unless they had the luxury of extra points to spare.

What concerned me most was whatever Nagumo was up to. I anticipated that he might have tried to do something to Kouenji since he was competing with him for first place, but from what I could tell by checking their movements via the GPS, there was no sign of Nagumo interfering with him in any way. I supposed that could have been because Nagumo was focusing his efforts more on building up his own group's score rather than kicking opponents off the board, but...

"Well, even if I don't win, if Kouenji takes first and I get second, I wouldn't really have anything to say to that," I muttered. "That'd be fine."

If I maintained my place in the rankings, staying somewhere close to eleventh, then I wouldn't stand out. And even if I did lose time due to sabotage by Amasawa and the first-year students, I wouldn't drop down into the lower ranks either. What I needed to do was to keep hiding in plain sight among the higher ranks until the end of the twelfth day.

I took it easy for a bit, resting in the shade of a big tree and wiping off my sweat. Then I slung my backpack over my shoulders once again and headed toward the neighboring area, which was only a short distance away. I decided that I wanted to find a clearing that was a little further out of the way from the boundary line.

The sun was starting to set, and I needed to decide where to set up camp for the night. Just then, I noticed a lone single-person tent had appeared in my field of view. Someone else must have gotten here already. Since the tent's entrance was shut while it

was so hot outside, I wondered if the tent's owner, whoever it was, was away at the moment. They could be conducting reconnaissance of the surrounding area, or perhaps they were using the bathroom.

"It's a nice spot," I remarked out loud, to no one in particular.

There didn't seem to be that many places in the nearby vicinity that were reasonably open and flat. For my part, anyway, it would be quite easy for me to set up camp in this area. However, now that I no longer had Nanase accompanying me, I was a single guy traveling alone. If the owner of this other tent happened to be a girl, then carelessly approaching them could lead to trouble.

More importantly though, I had to wonder—what did it mean that there was a sole single-person tent here? Was this person acting separately from their group? Or had they been going it alone from the start? If it was the latter, then whoever this person was, it was almost certainly someone that I knew. Regardless of whether I ended up setting up camp here myself, I wanted to identify this other tent's owner.

I decided to stand around for a while to see what was going on. If they were out walking around, they'd be back before the sun went down completely. And if I heard any noises coming from inside the tent, then I could just call out to them without delay. I knew that it would be more efficient for me to just try calling out to them right away, but... Well, you get the idea.

I proceeded to wait for about ten minutes or so. But even after waiting that long, I didn't see or hear any sign that they were coming back. I wondered about the possibility that maybe they had gone to bed early, by some chance. Since there was no sign of any of their comrades coming this way to join up with them, I decided to steel myself and just say something.

"Is anybody there?" I called out from beside the tent.

I held my breath and quietly waited a few seconds to see if I could hear any kind of reaction, but I didn't hear a single thing.

"Sorry for the bother, but I was thinking of setting up my tent near here. If that's an inconvenience, let me know," I added.

After assuming that the other camper wasn't around, at least for the time being, I lowered my backpack to the ground. Of course, I made sure to set up at an appropriate distance from the other tent. Although I was a little curious about who this other person was, I finished setting up camp in short order. I was once again impressed by just how much easier it was for me to set up a tent this year compared to when I was on the island last year.

I also rather liked single-person tents because I didn't need to worry about anyone else. Well, I suppose thinking that way might have been the reason I didn't really have many friends. A cheerful person, I figured, would find a tent that couldn't accommodate that many people to be rather boring. I wondered if a day would come when I felt that same way.

"...I can't really imagine that happening," I muttered to myself.

That was a future that was never going to come to be.

Just as I was getting ready to get changed and stuff, though, I heard someone call out to me from behind.

"I thought I saw something strange. Turns out it's just you."

Apparently, the owner of the solitary tent nearby was none other than Ibuki.

"Was I being loud?" I asked.

"Not really."

She only said a few words, and she glared at me right after answering. I thought she was going to say something else, but then she quickly ducked back inside her tent. There was something about the way she looked that made me uncomfortable, so I decided to go over to her tent to check on her.

"Hey, do you have a minute?" I called out to her.

I didn't get a response. However, I could hear a faint sound coming from within her tent.

"I just wanted to ask you something," I said, trying a different approach.

I didn't get any response that time either. I thought that maybe she was just ignoring me, plain and simple, but it felt like she was up to something sneaky instead.

"Hey, I'm going to open your tent and come in," I said.
"Okay?"

I waited about thirty seconds, just to be on the safe side, and then I proceeded to open the entrance to her tent.

"...What?" she huffed.

When I peeked inside, I saw Ibuki sitting down with something in her mouth.

"You're really— Wait, what are you eating?" I asked.

"Jerky," she replied.



"Jerky? That wasn't in the uninhabited island manual they handed out to us."

That meant she must've gotten her hands on some fresh meat by purchasing it or some other means and prepared it herself. However, it would take a considerable amount of time and effort to make jerky all by yourself. What's more was that Ibuki had issued a challenge to Horikita right at the start of the exam, and then had immediately set out for her designated area. It was obvious that if she had been walking around with fresh meat on her, it would've spoiled in less than a few hours during the summer season.

In that case, could I assume that all of Class 2-B knew how to make their own jerky? Maybe some groups had taken it upon themselves to make it for everyone.

That way, it could be done readily and at a considerably lower price. Dried foods were quite effective options for quick, portable meals. However, pre-prepared foods like jerky that could be stored for an extended period of time didn't have a great cost-to-performance ratio, considering the high number of points needed to buy them outright. That was why even if you were preparing the same amount of food, it would be more cost-effective to make the jerky yourself from fresh beef since it was cheaper to produce in large quantities.

Although I hadn't seen any of Ryuuuen and Katsuragi's food, I felt it was safe to assume that they were operating in much the same way, carrying around emergency rations, namely jerky. Even if they could only scrimp on just a few meals by doing so, that still meant they'd be able to pass up a hotly contested Task that offered food without worry.

"What does it matter anyway? It's none of your business," snapped Ibuki.

Although I had taken the liberty of imagining what could be going on with the jerky situation, it didn't sound like I was going to be able to hear the truth from Ibuki. At any rate, even though Ibuki had been tackling this exam all on her own, her name hadn't appeared in the bottom ten up until this point, at least as far as I

knew. She must have been pushing ahead as hard as she could, collecting point after point. In her case, it was hopeless to try and get high scores in any Tasks that involved academic ability, so her main sources of points must have been Arrival Bonuses for reaching her designated areas and Early Bird Bonuses.

I supposed that with her skills, that narrowed down the Tasks she could take on to ones that primarily focused on physical ability. That meant, of course, that she would inevitably become more fatigued than the other students. And because of that, she probably sustained quite a lot of psychological suffering as well. It was plain for anyone to see that, and it wasn't an exaggeration to say that she'd already pushed herself past her limits.

"How many people have you talked to since the exam started?" I asked.

"Huh...?" she huffed. She must not have slept very much either, as she had dark circles under her eyes. "Horikita. I told her I wasn't going to lose to her," she said. "You heard it too, didn't you?"

"In other words, you haven't had an actual conversation with anyone since the exam started," I concluded.

I figured that, at most, she had probably only opened her mouth to say yes or no to staff members at Tasks sites when she was trying to register.

"You should probably talk to someone, even if it's just a little," I told her.

"I don't talk to enemies," she replied.

"Then you should talk to your classmates. If you wander around a bit, you might run into one of them," I suggested.

"I don't consider anyone in my class my friend."

So, she had been hiding within her shell, and that was how she was continuing to act, even today. I was impressed that she had lasted for nine days in this state, but there were still five days left in the exam. If she were to let it all out, even just for a second, she'd most likely immediately fall apart. Of course, if Ibuki

got eliminated, then it was inevitable that she'd get expelled, since she was on her own.

The collective understanding that we all shared for this special exam was to avoid letting groups from our same grade level get expelled as much as possible. The best thing for her to do would be to spend an entire day resting. I didn't count the seventh day as rest, even though it had been cancelled anyway. But if she could spend a full day peacefully doing nothing at all, then that alone would restore a great deal of her strength. It wouldn't be impossible for Ibuki to survive the other remaining four days with the strength she had recovered from that day of rest.

But reality wasn't that kind. It might sound simple on paper, but it was exceedingly difficult to actually spend an entire day just resting. Even if Ibuki forced herself to take a physical break, whether she could revitalize her spirits was another matter. While she was taking it easy, her rivals would be scoring more points. She'd be pressured by the threat of being overtaken and sinking down to the bottom of the rankings.

Under those circumstances, any ordinary person would find it impossible to spend time recuperating and clearing their mind. Besides, simply failing to reach your designated areas would lead to a loss in points too. If she racked up more penalties, then she would suffer even more in the days to come.

"Get out," said Ibuki.

"...I'm going."

Even though this was Ibuki I was talking to, she was still a girl. Peeking into the tent of someone of the opposite sex at a time like this when it was getting dark out was absolutely not the right thing for me to be doing. Even if Ryuuen had been here right now, I was skeptical that we could've fundamentally solved this issue anyway.

After leaving Ibuki's tent, I got back to checking out my clothing situation which I had been in the middle of doing. The wind blew calmly outside now, so it seemed like I'd be able to stay at least somewhat cool tonight.

"Hey."

Ibuki must have settled down more now that she had finished whatever she needed to do. She got out of her tent with a wobbling, dazed gait, but she walked straight ahead. She then stuffed her hands in her pockets and approached me.

"How many points do you have now?" she asked. Just when I was thinking about how surprised I was that she had finally emerged from her tent, she came out and asked me something so audacious.

"We're enemies, you know," I reminded her.

"So, you can't tell me, huh," she said in a low mutter. It sounded like she was implying I was stingy and tight-fisted.

There wasn't a single person on this entire island who would benefit from knowing I was in thirteenth place.

"Yep, that's how it is," I answered.

"Okay then, in that case, just tell me if your score is higher or lower than mine. Mine is—"

I cut Ibuki off with a wave of my hand just as she was about to go ahead and divulge her own score to me.

"Sorry, but I can't answer that question in any way, shape, or form," I said, interrupting her.

Even if I were only telling her that my score was above or below hers, I'd still be giving her a clue. That'd be true even if I lied about my score. It might have seemed like a safe bet if I told her that I was ranked lower than she was, but if she thought that I was struggling to get points, then she might come after me aggressively and try and force me into a corner. I had to avoid letting information carelessly slip and allowing it to take on a life of its own.

Ibuki, hands still in her pockets, clicked her tongue at me. "Oh well... Fine. Whatever," she snapped. "Dealing with you is a waste of time anyway."

"There you have it. Besides, your real favorite is Horikita, isn't it?"

The second I uttered Horikita's name, Ibuki's attitude immediately changed. She had been looking worn-out, but she made the effort to yank her hands out of her pockets and glare at me with her middle finger raised.

"If you see her, tell her that I am never, ever going to lose to her."

"That's all well and good, but I'm not the one you should be giving the finger to, am I?" I replied.

"You're the same as her. Since you two are such good pals," she said.

Well, no, we weren't, actually. I wasn't close with Horikita, but I guessed it was all the same to Ibuki. She must have only come out of her tent to ask me about my score because she soon turned to go back inside.

"Wait a second," I said.

Ibuki stopped and turned back toward me, and I took a few steps closer to her. She was clearly wary of me. When I reached my hand out to her, she grew even more suspicious and moved out of the way.

"Huh? You wanna go?" she said defiantly.

She must have determined that I was arbitrarily fixing for a fight with her. She balled a hand into a fist.

"That is absolutely not my intention in the slightest," I protested, quickly reaching my hand out toward her once again. I didn't give her the opportunity to escape and grabbed onto her wrist.

"The hell are you doing?!" she shouted.

Flustered, she lashed out with a kick, but I blocked it with my other hand. I thought she was going to try again, but she just let out a deep sigh and turned to look the other way. It was like all the venom drained out of her.

"I admit that I can't beat you. But someday I'm definitely going to land a good kick on you."

I didn't want her to go ahead and set such a troubling goal like that.

"So, what now? Did Horikita tell you to sabotage me?" said Ibuki.

Not only had she failed to understand my true intentions, she had also even started to raise some strange suspicions about me. Well, I was one of Horikita's classmates, so I supposed nothing I said would get through to her. If I thought about it, there was no way that Ibuki would accept the idea of taking a break that easily, so there was little hope for her.

"Your pulse is elevated," I told her.

"So what?!" she snapped.

"And the area around your mouth looks dry. Your lips, especially, are really cracked. You're obviously dehydrated," I explained.

At this rate, it wouldn't be long before her watch emitted a Warning Alert. It might have already sounded once already. The reason she had been sitting so quietly in her tent was most likely due to fatigue...but it might've also been because she was trying to get her pulse down so that she could suppress the alert.

"I'm not really all that thirsty... I mean, I'm not thirsty anymore," she said.

"Not 'anymore'? Does that mean that you were dehydrated before?"

When I let go of her wrist, Ibuki made a face like she wanted to bark back at me again, putting some distance between us.

"I don't need your help," she said. "I'm not in any real trouble."

When she turned back around, I quickly ran past her, overtaking her.

"Hey, what the— What are you doing?!" she yelled.

She wasn't the sort of person who would listen even if I tried, so I walked ahead of her, crawled into her tent, and pulled out her backpack.

"Show me what's in here," I told her.

"Huh?" she said. "There's no way I'm showing my bag to a guy. Actually, I wouldn't even show my bag to a girl."

"I figured," I replied.

Since there was no way that she was going to give me permission to do so, I went ahead and opened her backpack anyway.

"What the hell?!" she snapped.

Inside her backpack, I found clothes, toiletries, and a small amount of food, like jerky. I spotted just one single 500-milliliter water bottle, which was empty. Garbage bins were offered at various locations, such as Task sites, so I guessed that she had tossed out anything she didn't need a long time ago. There wasn't even a single drop of water in the plastic bottle, so she must have finished it quite some time ago. I also didn't see anything she could use to communicate with others, like a walkie-talkie.

"When did you last have a drink?" I asked.

"I don't have to answer y—"

"I said, when did you last have a drink?" I repeated, cutting her off, speaking in a forceful tone and looking at her with a stern stare.

"About...one day ago. And then some," said Ibuki.

"Have you been walking around in this condition?" I asked.

"I haven't," she replied. "I've been resting here this whole time today."

"That's a blatant lie," I said. "There wasn't any GPS signal in this area this morning."

"What, did you do a search?" she asked.

I hadn't, of course. It was a bluff, but the most important thing was that she seemed to have bought it. I lied simply because I couldn't imagine that Ibuki would actually *choose* to rest when she so desperately wanted to beat Horikita.

"Did your Warning Alert go off?" I asked.

"It did... About an hour ago," Ibuki admitted. "That's why I didn't have any choice but to go to sleep early."

The Warning Alert on our watches was designed to stop sounding after a while unless there was some kind of continuous anomaly detected. If time continued to pass and the warning system hadn't escalated to an Emergency Alert, the watch would sound the Warning Alert again.

"At the rate things are going, if you can't rehydrate, the alert is just going to keep going off even if you do rest," I warned her.

Ibuki's pulse was elevated. She wasn't going to be able to get it back down, and eventually the alert system would move up to an Emergency Alert. By that time, she would be fully dehydrated, and the inevitable medical check-up would result in the teachers declaring her elimination from the exam.

"I'll do something about it tomorrow," she replied. "If push comes to shove, I'll just head back to the starting area. So just leave me alone."

"The starting point is over two kilometers away from here. If you collapse on the way there, that'll be it for you," I reminded her.

"Then I'll just do a Task or something," she said.

"You obviously can't do that," I argued. "That's why you're struggling so much right now."

I shot down her irrational protests with sound arguments. I had to calm her down. I went into my tent and got my backpack. Then, I took out two 500-milliliter bottles that I had gotten earlier today from completing a Task.

"Let's trade," I told her.

"Huh?" She blinked.

"This is perfect. I'm in trouble right now because I'm running low on food," I said, matter-of-factly. "On the flipside, I just so happen to have a surplus of water, which means I have more than I need. I think that I can make a fair trade with you here, Ibuki, so I hope we can negotiate."

Ibuki audibly cleared her throat at the sight of the plastic bottle full of water, even though it wasn't cold anymore.

"So, what do you say? Let me just say, once again, that this will be a fair trade," I reminded her. "I'll be expecting a reasonable share of food in return."

"Who in the hell would trade with—" she protested. I cut her off again.

"You can turn me down if you want," I interjected, "but I'm not going to offer a second time."

As long as I kept command of the conversation with an aggressive attitude, I could get Ibuki to stop talking.

"With how dehydrated you are, you'll get eliminated at this rate," I told her. "Then your loss to Horikita will be set in stone. You know, I ran into her a little while ago. She looked good. And she didn't seem to be having trouble with food or water either."

There was an essential key word here to get Ibuki moving—or rather, a name. Instead of bringing up the threat of expulsion, I simply had to mention Horikita.

"Fine, fine, I get it..." grumbled Ibuki. "I'll accept your trade or whatever. But how much should I give you?"

With the way things were going, Ibuki's food supply would be exhausted in less than two days. But if I only took a small amount from her, then you could hardly call that a fair trade.

"Half your remaining supply. That'd be good," I said.

"And you're sure you're okay with that?" she asked.

"It's a heck of lot better than having to eat weeds because I'm struggling to find food."

And so, Ibuki and I each traded what we had: my water for her food. As soon as we finished making our exchange, Ibuki slammed down about half of the water in the plastic bottle, gulping it in one go. Normally, I would have told her to be careful, but considering that she was beginning to show signs of dehydration, she needed to have something to drink as soon as possible.

She must not have liked the fact that I was looking at her because she shot me a sharp glare. Even though the issue of her dehydration had been improved somewhat, her mental state was clearly not normal. Ibuki had to continue to challenge herself while under intense stress, and she had absolutely no room to breathe and relax. How much more was her mind and body going to be able to endure?

Would she last a few hours? A few days? Hopefully she'd be able to hold it together until the end of the final day of the exam. We were in different Tables, though, so if I parted ways with her right now, I probably wouldn't see her again during the exam.
Should I at least try to say something else to her now?

"I'm not going to say thank you," she snapped. "It was a fair trade, wasn't it?"

"I'm not really asking for you to thank me," I answered.

"Then what is it?"

She was probably extra sensitive to having someone try and talk to her right now because her nerves had been sharpened throughout the day. That ability would be useful in short intervals, but right now, she was basically torturing herself with it.

"If you're not falling into the bottom of the rankings at this point, don't you think it would be a good idea for you to spend tomorrow resting to recover your strength? Or you could switch things up and focus on getting food and water," I suggested.

"What, you're telling me to give up on scoring points? *Hah!* Quit joking," sneered Ibuki. My proposal had only stoked the flames. "I'm not trying so hard to avoid expulsion. My only goal is to beat Horikita."

I understood that, I really did. I was simply offering advice to help her to increase her chances of winning, and yet... Well, ever since Ibuki found out that I was X, she started to hate me as much as you could possibly hate someone. Everything she said or heard was filtered through those extreme feelings, so not even the truth behind my words could get through to her.

"I'm not talking to you anymore," she said.

And with that, she went back into her tent. I knew that it would be pointless to try and persuade her, but I supposed that at best, my message might have at least come off to her as a warning. At any rate, there wouldn't be any problems with Ibuki's physical condition today or tomorrow. Now she just had to get back on her own two feet and get more food and water on her own.

Since she was going it alone, I was somewhat concerned about how many points she was getting. But since she was such a strong-willed contender, I couldn't imagine that she'd fall to the bottom of the rankings.

There was still plenty of time left today, but I already used up a lot of my energy, so I figured I'd take a rest myself. It was still sweltering and humid outside, so I decided to wind down and spend the night here.

4.1

IT WAS FIRST THING in the morning. I was returning to my tent after going outside to use the bathroom, a trash bag in hand, when I saw Ibuki moving suspiciously near my tent.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Ah!"

She seemed to have been completely absorbed in rifling through my backpack, because she couldn't hide her surprise when I called out to her.

"Were you trying to look at my tablet without my permission? Or was there something else you wanted?"

Unfortunately for her, our tablets were set up with a lock screen that made it impossible for a third party to access their contents.

"I wasn't doing anything like that! I was just... I was just checking to see if it was *really* a fair trade, that's all," replied Ibuki, slinking away from my backpack. "There was only one bottle of drinking water in your backpack. How exactly is that supposed to be a 'surplus' or whatever you said?"

I had only been away from my backpack for less than a minute, but I supposed I had been a little careless. That had been enough time for her to check its contents. That being said, I had no right to criticize her. After all, I had gone and rifled through her backpack without permission yesterday. Even if I tried to fool her into thinking that I had just drank my extra water last night, she would simply have asked me where the empty plastic bottles were. It was against the rules to just toss our garbage around on the island.

"So, what? Were you thinking that you'd help me so that I'd owe you a debt?" she demanded.

"How exactly? You wouldn't have even found out unless you looked in my backpack," I said. "I don't think that would mean I

was trying to make you owe me."

"Ugh." After I shot her down, Ibuki puffed out her cheeks angrily.

"Whatever the truth is, the point is that it was still a fair trade," I told her.

"I'm not entirely convinced, but... Fine, whatever, I get it. In that case though, I'm not giving you anything back," said Ibuki.

"Would you have given the water back to me if I *had* been trying to make you owe me?" I asked.

"No," she replied flatly.

"I see..."

So, she checked out my backpack because she simply wasn't convinced that it was a fair trade. Since our conversation stopped there, I briefly went back inside my tent. It was only just after six-thirty in the morning, but I could already hear Ibuki moving about. I opened the entrance to my tent again and peered out. It seemed like she was already starting to put her tent away.

If this were the second or third day of the special exam, I probably would have thought, *Wow, she's really motivated.* I once again had the feeling that she wouldn't speak to me anymore, so I went back into my tent. Eventually, seven o'clock rolled around and the first designated area of the day was announced. Mine was in E4. I didn't hesitate to spend a point to use the GPS search to see the locations of all students.

The search was well worth the one point spent.

The gap between me and tenth place was slight, so it was possible I could unexpectedly overtake them. By using that one point on a search, the gap between me and Kuronaga's group increased to twelve points. Even if I arrived first at the designated area and won the eleven-point first place Early Bird Bonus, I still wouldn't overtake them in the rankings.

There were about three rival groups on the map right now who could be competing with me for this Early Bird Bonus. Among those three groups, one of them included a certain someone who

was quite a formidable enemy. And that group was in a perfect position too.

Depending on how the situation developed, I was considering ignoring the Basic Movement system for now and making replenishing my supplies my top priority instead. It was a good thing I had done this search before making a decision. It allowed me to check how many students were in the vicinity of the Task that I was after as well, which made it possible for me to predict the degree of competitiveness there would be from an early stage.

When I got back out of my tent after I had finished getting ready, Ibuki was already nowhere to be found. There wasn't much benefit in heading out before the day's exam period started, but I figured she might have simply wanted to get as far away from me as quickly as she possibly could.

4.2

MY DESIGNATED AREA was located close to the starting point, but it took me nearly an hour and a half to get there. I looked down to check my watch just as I got a notification and saw that I had not gotten any Early Bird Bonus points. I had only received one point for the Arrival Bonus. I wasn't dissatisfied with that, of course, because I had picked up a Task along the way. From where I was standing, a point at a high elevation, I could practically survey the entire uninhabited island, if just barely.

"You were quite late getting here, Ayanokouji," said Kiryuuin, standing just barely within sight. She was looking down the cliff face, not turning to look at me as she spoke.

"From the looks of it, apparently so," I replied.

When I had done the search earlier today, I considered her to be the most troublesome person out of the students in my same Table.

"I thought that there was a formidable opponent racing me for the Early Bird Bonus," she said. "So, it was you, huh?"

"I'm not so sure about that," I replied. "Besides, it's not uncommon for people in different Tables to be in the same area. More importantly, I didn't think that you were interested in breaking into the top ten, Kiryuuin-senpai."

Kiryuuin had been sitting somewhere around eleventh place or lower, but this morning, she had suddenly shot right up to ninth place.

"This uninhabited island exam has been surprisingly interesting," she admitted. "I guess I just got a little too excited. Rather unbecoming for someone as old as I am."

Someone as old as you are? But you're only a year older than me, I thought in response.

"I'm only planning on keeping up my current pace for a little bit longer," said Kiryuuin.

"You're not aiming for first place?"

"Everyone competing for the top spots will be gunning for one another," she said. "I'm not interested in getting involved in that mess. Although, if Nagumo or Kouenji happened to crash and burn, then I suppose that might be a different story."

"Crash?" I repeated. "It doesn't really look like things will go that way now, though."

"Do you really think that Nagumo is just going to let Kouenji run around freely?" Kiryuuin asked.

It sounded as though Kiryuuin had some idea of what was to come as well.

"With both sides so evenly matched, it's hard to say that Nagumo will win this thing," she added. "So far, he's probably just been sitting back and watching how things go. But this is about the time for him to start making his move, so it's quite likely that we'll see a showdown between him and Kouenji. Depending on how the situation plays out, they could each make it difficult for the other to rack up more points."

Alternatively, it was possible that one of them would make a misstep and fall in the rankings instead.

"Defeating your opponent head-on is another crucial element of battle," said Kiryuuin.

I couldn't make any guesses about when exactly Nagumo was going to declare war, but if things continued as they'd been going so far, Nagumo and Kouenji would surely clash. I had no doubt that at the very least, Nagumo's side would stop Kouenji.



"Are you not going for the top ranks yourself?" she asked me.

"Unfortunately, I can't really envision myself making it into the top ten," I replied.

"I see. I thought for sure you'd get a score close to mine."

She seemed to be extremely interested in me. Well, to be precise, I didn't think that I was the only one she was interested in though. Kiryuuin was, in her own way, looking at and analyzing the strategies being used by students throughout our entire school across every grade level.

"This is probably when most groups will start seeing a drop in their efficiency," she said. "Don't give up and keep giving it your best."

Kiryuuin was someone I hadn't known at all until just recently, but I gathered that she was an exceptionally capable person. She was a third-year student with excellent intuition and perception, which you wouldn't glean just from looking at OAA alone.

"That being said... From what we can see on our tablets so far, how do you feel about the fact that no groups have been completely eliminated yet?" she asked.

"All I can say is that in this situation, we can't let our guards down. Not even for a moment," I answered.

"I stopped by the starting point yesterday and picked up a little information," she said. "Apparently, some groups suffering from a lack of food and water are trying to avoid collapsing altogether by having individual members spread out in an effort to endure the situation."

"That's a wise decision on their part," I remarked.

No matter how many points a group collected, if every member of the group was eliminated, they'd be disqualified and expelled immediately. In that case, it was much safer to send one or two people back to the starting area even if it meant a drop in efficiency. Water was readily available there, and you could more easily avoid getting sick if you could maintain proper hygiene.

"I'm sure that the groups in the bottom ten are wishing to themselves, 'I don't care what group it is, I just hope some other group gets eliminated,'" I said.

"People who have no regard for appearances will use any means necessary," said Kiryuuin. "Just be careful, okay?"

"Shouldn't you be worrying about yourself in that regard, Kiryuuin-senpai? As a girl?"

"Hmm. Well, I suppose that, yes, as a fair maiden, I should be aware of the dangers," she replied.

Though I had asked her that only as a joke, she was surprisingly serious about it. "If it comes to that, then... I suppose I'll just push through by force." Kiryuuin then tightly clenched her hand into a fist.

Her answer was completely unlike what you'd expect from a "fair maiden."

"I can't tell how serious you're being about this," I told her.

"*Fu fu*," she laughed. "Sorry for taking up so much of your time. After all, you and I both need every moment we can get. We can't spare a single second of a single minute."

With that, she gently waved goodbye and started to walk away. Judging from the direction she was headed in, I guessed she must have been aiming for a Task.

Before she was out of sight, though, she paused. "You're not coming? There might still be room for you to register for the Task too, if you leave right now."

"Thanks, but I'll pass," I replied. "I don't think that I can compete with you, Kiryuuin-senpai."

At this point in time, it looked like there were only enough openings for up to two groups to register for this Task. In addition to the fact that there were three or more rival groups headed that way, Kiryuuin was *also* headed to that Task, so my chances of being able to register weren't very high at all.

As I watched her go, even though she should have been in a hurry, she stopped again and looked back at me.

"Hm, so that's how it is... Well, I guess I'll just go and see for myself in person," she said, speaking as though she had deduced my strategy. Kiryuuin finally left and headed toward the Task.

4.3

THE SUN HAD SET on the tenth day of the exam, and it was now after nine o'clock at night. It was time for me to check the GPS information for the top and bottom ten groups. Suddenly, a bright light flickered from outside my tent.

"Is someone out and about at this hour...?" I muttered.

It was risky, but I supposed it was conceivable that someone could have been trying to reach their final designated area for the day if they hadn't been able to until now. I couldn't help but follow the light with my eyes as I sat inside my tent. It wasn't as though the light was being shined in my direction though. Rather, whoever it was seemed to be sweeping the light to and fro as they walked.

The movements of their flashlight seemed unstable, as if they were desperately searching for something. I got curious, so I decided to pop out of my tent. Actually, it looked as though they were desperately searching for *someone*. Was Amasawa looking for me because she wanted to get close and try something? No, I couldn't imagine that she would have been using her flashlight so haphazardly if that was the case. After closing the distance between our positions by using GPS, she should have been able to take advantage of the darkness and gotten closer to me.

"Yume-chaaaan!"

I heard a faint voice, and it sounded like it was coming from the same direction as the the flashlight. I didn't know who the owner of the voice was, but nicknames aside, I knew that there was only one person in our school named Yume. I was certain that they were calling for Kobashi Yume from Class 2-C. In that case, it was probably correct for me to assume that whoever was speaking was either someone from that class, or who had a connection to it. If I remembered correctly, there was a girl named Shiranami Chihiro in Kobashi's same group.

At any rate, it sounded like whoever was calling was about to burst into tears at any moment. I could have ignored her and let

things be, but since this was a student from Class 2-C, she should be able to get in touch with Sakayanagi from Class 2-A since those classes were cooperating on some level. Our tablets had a flashlight function, so I took mine out and turned the flashlight on. It wasn't as dependable a light source as a regular flashlight, but it was more than enough for someone to see in the dark. Shortly thereafter, the girl noticed me and pointed her flashlight in my direction.

"Yume-chan?!" the girl said, sounding panicked, her voice getting more audible as she drew closer.

After getting flashed by the dazzling beam from her flashlight, I could slowly start to see the flashlight's owner come into view.

"Yume-chan!" she shouted once again.

"Hey, sorry, but I'm not Yume," I replied.

"Oh..."

The person that had emerged from amidst the trees was none other than Shiranami, after all.

"Oh, um, Ayanokouji-kun... G-good evening," she stammered.

Although we were hardly close, she seemed somewhat relieved. Had her situation really been so upsetting that she was happy to see even me?

"It's pretty dangerous to be out at night all alone," I said.
"Where are Kobashi and Takemoto?"

"Oh, um, well... I actually don't know where they are... I was walking along in a hurry, and I lost track of where I was going, and..."

I wasn't going to ask her such an uncouth question like, "Why are you all alone in the woods in the middle of the night?" This was an expansive forest; everywhere you looked, it was an ocean of trees. If you pressed on into the woods without being totally prepared, thinking to yourself, "Oh, they probably went this way," you'd end up losing your sense of direction in the blink of an eye. As a result of her getting lost, Shiranami had probably wandered far, far from the rest of her group.

"About how long has it been since you lost track of them?" I asked.

"I'm not sure... I think maybe fifteen...or, like, twenty minutes, maybe?"

Even if she had traveled in the opposite direction from her teammates, they shouldn't have wandered so far apart that it was worth getting depressed over. But, at the very least, she had gotten far enough away from her teammates that they were no longer able to hear each other.

"At any rate, walking around aimlessly is just going to make this situation even worse," I told her.

"O-kay," she replied.

I figured that for the time being, I'd take the lead and give her instructions to follow me while using my tablet to light the way ahead. It'd be a hassle if I ended up getting lost too, after all. Still, I couldn't just leave my tent and stuff here while I went out to look for Shiranami's group with her. I was sure that some students must have had similar troubles and got lost in the same way.

Some might have managed to find their way back through pure chance, but for others, it might have taken a long time. If students couldn't find their way back, though... Well, making it through the woods in the middle of the night wasn't exactly an easy thing to do. Even if they didn't have any major physical problems in doing so, it was still difficult emotionally. Shortly after, we reached my campsite, and I talked to the anxious Shiranami there.

"There are lots of bugs out," I told her. "For the time being, you can stay in my tent."

"Huh?!" Her shout sounded more afraid than surprised.

"I'm not going to go inside, so you can relax," I added.

I had some problems trying to explain the situation to her, but in the end, I basically forced Shiranami into the tent as she was still unable to wrap her head around what was happening. After that, I closed the entrance behind her.

"I-I'm sorry... I was just resting, and..." she wailed.

"It's all right," I assured her. "More importantly, were Kobashi and Takemoto both looking healthy? Normal?"

"Yeah," she replied.

In that case, they must have been panicking as well since Shiranami hadn't returned. I assumed that they must have been discussing whether to go out and search or to stay where they were.

"Did your group make a plan for what to do if you got split up?" I asked.

I thought I'd ask and see, but Shiranami simply shook her head.

"It's possible that Takemoto, the guy from your group, might go out to look for you by himself, Shiranami," I said. "But if he did, there'd be a risk of someone else getting lost and being in distress. They'd be taking quite a big risk if both your teammates left their tents and stuff behind to go out looking for you."

Additionally, packing up their tents and backpacks before setting out to search for Shiranami wouldn't exactly be an effective option either, since Shiranami could very well return all by herself in that time and find herself all alone at a deserted campsite. For them to do things as safely as possible, it was preferable to not walk far enough away as to lose sight of their own tents, but to stay in the nearby vicinity and rely on using lights and loud shouts to find Shiranami, hoping that she would notice them.

But if Shiranami's group hadn't made any detailed plans ahead of time, and since one of the girls had gotten separated from the group, I wasn't sure if her teammates would be able to keep level heads. It was entirely possible that they might panic and go out searching for her.

"What do I do...?" wailed Shiranami.

She was talking to herself, not asking me for my opinion on anything. I supposed you could say that this was trivial, but on the other hand, you could consider what she was doing to be a major mistake. It was understandable why she was doing it, since she was overwhelmed with anxiety. The problem was the other two

people in her group. Well, actually, it was possible that there were even more people.

"Do you still just have the same small group of three people? Or have you increased your group to four or more people?" I asked her.

"That's..." she started, but then trailed off.

So far, Shiranami had openly explained everything that had happened in detail, but now she suddenly stopped talking. Since she should've known the size of her own group well enough, she must've hesitated to tell me for a different reason.

Right now, Ichinose's class was working together with Sakayanagi's class in a cooperative partnership. I was sure that there were also friend groups that further transcended those boundaries, of course, but the majority of the groups were originally created via that arrangement. Obviously, to tell me the details about the inner workings of these groups would be considered an information leak. In that sense, it was appropriate on Shiranami's part not to casually mention whether there had been any additions to her group since the start of the exam. There was value in that.

"I understand, and you don't have to tell me the exact details of your situation. But, for the time being, just hear me out," I told her.

With that out of the way, I went on to elaborate.

"If I were a member of your group, Shiranami, then I would first look at the situation at hand. I would determine that a girl was wandering alone in the dark forest, having lost her way back."

Shiranami nodded meekly.

"I wouldn't just leave things be then, of course. First, I would raise my voice and shout her name loudly, to see if she answered back. But, like I said before, if I didn't get a response by doing that, then I'd have to try something else. Now, let's assume for example that it was Kobashi who had gotten separated from the group. What would you and Takemoto do in that case?"

"I think that we would probably...go out looking for Yume-chan, together..."

"Even if you ran the risk of running into trouble yourselves? You could end up getting hurt and eliminated from the exam," I replied.

"She's my friend. I couldn't just leave her," said Shiranami, resolutely.

That was definitely an answer I'd expect from someone from Ichinose's class. Whether that was an advantage or disadvantage was a separate issue entirely. Takemoto, being from Class A, might initially try and stop Shiranami from going, but he would probably end up going along to help her. The best approach for me to take here would probably be to let her use my tent to wait things out while her teammates came to meet up with her.

Besides, I was sure that if the situation called for it, her teammates would use the GPS search and come looking for her. Still, with this thick cover of darkness, I didn't know how well a search would help, even if you came into our vicinity once or twice.

"Do you have points to spare? Would you worry about your spot in the rankings if you used the search two or three times?" I asked.

"Well, I...I don't know, actually," she replied. "I don't think it would be a particularly good idea for us to use it."

From the sound of it, her group certainly wasn't maintaining an outstanding position in the rankings. Before the exam concluded, there would be no way of knowing if using the search would have any impact on their position, or if the points used to search spelled the difference between victory or defeat. As for Shiranami, I was sure that she'd feel guilty and upset at herself if her teammates used points to come searching for her in the same way.

In that case, I supposed the best course of action would be to just wait and see. But we couldn't necessarily rule out the possibility that her teammates would be coming to look for her, or that they simply wouldn't be able to find her. Besides, in this case, since I couldn't use the tent myself, that meant I'd be spending the

night outside. That would certainly disrupt my pace, which I had been able to keep at a steady rhythm up until now. If I was going to take action, then...I supposed now was the time to do it.

"Got any energy?" I asked.

"Huh?" she stammered.

"I mean, do you have enough energy left to walk?" I clarified.

"Y-yes. I think I should be okay to do that..."

I urged her to come out of the tent.

"Let's get moving now, so that you can join up with your group," I told her.

"But...how?" she asked.

"This isn't a problem that we'll be able to solve by just stumbling around in the dark. We're going to use this," I explained, showing her the tablet in my hand. "If we use the GPS search, then we'll know which direction they're in, and we can find out approximately how far away they are."

Still, it wasn't going to be easy for Shiranami to meet up with her teammates. Making our way through the woods under the cover of darkness like this was going to be an extremely arduous task. And for average students like Shiranami, it was going to be impossible without repeatedly using the GPS search.

"Why are you helping me...?" she asked meekly.

"Why? Well, I guess that one reason for it is that this exam is a battle between grade levels, more or less," I replied.

"But still, going so far as using your GPS search for me is..." she protested.

Using one or two points wasn't that big of a burden, at least from my perspective. I could always collect more points again and catch up, as long as it wasn't going to put me any higher than eleventh place. Since there was no point in talking about this any further, I figured I'd just try and say something that sounded reasonable.

"Well, I guess if I had to say why... It might be because it's Ichinose's class," I replied.

The instant I said those words, I turned to look back at her and saw Shiranami's face stiffen.

"Wait, could you...?" she said quietly.

Did I say something awkward?

"Hm?" I replied.

"Wait, Ayanokouji-kun, could you and Honami-chan...?" She trailed off again.

Even though Shiranami had gotten far enough to mention both my and Ichinose's names, she suddenly stopped, closing her mouth. I was able to more or less understand what she was trying to say, though it took me a minute. I thought back to what Ichinose's other classmates said to me the other day, when I ran into them.

"There's nothing," I said, trying to answer her preemptively.

But Shiranami's expression remained visibly stiffened with surprise. At any rate, for the time being, I put the subject on hold and went ahead with using the search. Kobashi and Takemoto's GPS signals were displayed on top of one another, which meant that they were most definitely still together.

We walked on ahead in search of Shiranami's group. For about ten minutes, we headed in the direction of their GPS signals.

"Chihiro-chan!!!"



As we weaved through the trees in the dark forest, Kobashi, wearing her backpack, spotted us. Her teammate Takemoto was with her too, with a backpack over his shoulders as well. They seemed to have come looking for Shiranami while carrying all their group's belongings, since he was also carrying another backpack in his hands.

Since they were heading straight for us, I guessed they had probably used the GPS search too. In the end, after meeting up, we all headed back over to the location where I had set up my tent.

"Thank you so much for helping Chihiro-chan, Ayanokouji-kun," said Kobashi.

"Nah. I'm sure that you guys would have found each other eventually," I replied. "I just hope I wasn't overstepping or anything."

"Overstepping? Come on, no way," said Takemoto. "If we had kept going, we would've risked getting injured. And more importantly, we would've had a harder time finding her."

Even though Takemoto was in a different class than his teammates, he was sincerely relieved that he and Kobashi had been able to find Shiranami so quickly. If Takemoto and Kobashi had to go chasing after Shiranami themselves, it was possible that it would've taken them more than one or two GPS searches before they found her.

I figured that I'd go ahead and broach a certain subject with Takemoto now, while I had the chance. "Hey, I wanted to ask you something. Do you have a walkie-talkie?" I asked.

"Huh? A walkie-talkie? Yeah, I do, but..." he replied, but he didn't finish his thought.

I figured that if he was somewhat grateful to me, then I might be able to borrow it from him rather easily.

"If you don't mind, I was hoping to see if I could talk to Sakayanagi for a minute," I told him. "I wanted to ask her if a Class D student that I've been worried about has gotten back to the starting point."

"Oh yeah, if that's all, then I'd be happy to. Hold on just a minute," he said.

Takemoto wasn't hesitant at all about sharing. Figuring it was a way he could show his thanks, he quickly took out the device. The walkie-talkies provided to us by the school were digital, of course, and they came equipped with a function called secret conversation mode. It was, essentially, a function that allowed you to talk only with specific people one-on-one without allowing your communication to be intercepted by others. The groups that had gotten walkie-talkies for this exam had probably prepared codes so they could prevent information leaks from happening.

Takemoto used the walkie-talkie to call Sakayanagi to see if she was available. Shortly after he reached out to her, he got a response, and then he handed me the walkie-talkie.

"I'd like to talk with Sakayanagi in private for a few minutes," I said.

Kobashi, Shiranami, and Takemoto all nodded happily, agreeing to my request. They graciously gave me some space. I still made sure that they could see the walkie-talkie, of course, to show them that I wasn't trying to pull any cheap tricks. I talked with Sakayanagi for a while, and then I handed the device back to Takemoto.

"That's all then, Sakayanagi. Sorry for bothering you this late at night," said Takemoto, saying a few words to her himself.

My communication with Sakayanagi had ended with that exchange between Takemoto and her, which served as proof that the conversation had been concluded without any problems.

"You really helped me out," I told Takemoto. "I was able to get the information I needed from Sakayanagi, thank goodness."

"That's great! Oh, also, Sakayanagi asked me to give this to you, Ayanokouji," he replied, handing me a walkie-talkie.

"Okay, thanks," I replied.

"We really need to say thank you too. Isn't that right?" said Kobashi, gesturing to Shiranami.

"Thank you so much for all of your help, Ayanokouji-kun," said Shiranami.

The three of them thanked me once again, and it was decided that the four of us would spend the night here together. I fell asleep listening to stories of Class A and Class C, which I normally didn't get a chance to hear about.

Chapter 5: Under Siege: Kouenji VS The Free Groups

KOUEANJI'S RAPID ADVANCE continued unabated even as the second half of the battle began. Until today, the tenth day of the exam, he had been continuously racking up enough points to stay neck and neck with Nagumo's group. Just after five o'clock in the evening when the day's exam tasks were done, Class 3-B's Kiriyma finished a conversation on his walkie-talkie and quietly closed his eyes for a time.

He was somewhat surprised to see Kouenji's name near the top of the rankings on the fourth day when that information was first disclosed. But at that point in time, neither Kiriyma nor Nagumo showed any signs of anything remotely resembling panic. That was because everyone thought that if a student was going it alone, they would reach their limit sooner or later.

"Kiriyma, doesn't it seem like Nagumo's bein' slow to respond? Being too reactive?" said Mikitani, a Class 3-B student. "He should have been miles in the lead by the time the second half of this battle started. But he delayed dealin' with this so we're ten days in and he still hasn't been able to settle things. And now it's looking like they're evenly matched!" Mikitani showed Kiriyma his tablet as he spoke.

Displayed on the tablet was Nagumo's group's overall score of 236 points. Also shown was Kouenji's score of 230 points. There was only a six-point difference between them. They were so close that simply getting to an area first and receiving the first place Early Bird Bonus would swap the two. Nagumo's group had now become a large group by merging with another. They also greatly outnumbered other groups due to the fact that they held the One More card, allowing them to have seven members. They would be able to gain seven points for every Arrival Bonus if they managed to reach their designated areas on time.

On the other hand, while Kouenji could only get a single point for the Arrival Bonus, he could obtain Early Bird Bonuses

quite easily since he was working alone. He boasted the highest number of first place Early Bird Bonuses of any group.

"At the rate things are going, even if Nagumo does manage to pull ahead a bit and win this thing, you'll end up in third place if you're not careful," said Mikitani. "And if you end up losing to a lone second-year, then *our* reputations will go straight down the drain too, since we supported you."

Kiriyama and his teammates currently had a cumulative total of 188 points. The gap between them and Kouenji was gradually beginning to widen.

"Come to think of it, there was a rumor that went around a little bit after Kouenji first came to our school last year," said Kiriyama. "He was getting all chummy with the second- and third-years at the time, asking about purchasing Private Points. What were your thoughts back then?"

"I thought he shouldn't get all carried away just 'cause he's rich," said Mikitani.

"Most students throughout the school thought he seemed like someone with a prominent level of academic and physical ability," Kiriyama recalled. "But even though he didn't stand out as a high achiever in terms of grades, he really does come from a wealthy family. Kouenji's simply strange. That's the impression most students had of him."

Mikitani simply nodded at that.

"The biggest reason Kouenji hasn't been recognized is that he hasn't taken anything seriously," Kiriyama went on. "He has a strong tendency to go against whatever students are supposed to be doing, and even on things like exams, he typically just gives up right at the very beginning."

That was a fact that had spread not only amongst the second-years, but among the third-years as well. If Kouenji had been a more serious and sincere person, Nagumo would have recognized him as an enemy to watch out for much earlier. Kiriyama was sure that they would have seen Nagumo take notice of Kouenji and he would've taken steps to put him in his place.

"Well, I don't know what happened, but Kouenji's sure taking this exam seriously," said Mikitani. "And 'cause of that, he's the toughest enemy here on this island. His stamina is especially terrifying. He just never seems to get tired. I think he might even keep pushing ahead like he has been all the way until the very end."

Kouenji was making the most of the advantages of being able to move independently, while also pushing on ahead with his inexhaustible energy. And even though they were third-year students, now that things had gotten this far, they had to think of something. If left unchecked, Kouenji would most definitely finish the exam in the top three. He could even end up completely eclipsing Nagumo, depending on how things played out. Losing to a junior would be a problem in and of itself, but, on top of that, losing to a student going it alone would bring shame for generations to come.

Kouenji was an opponent that needed to be defeated, and that needed to happen as soon as possible. Of course, violent means were to be avoided as much as possible. If a third-year student were to ambush Kouenji and injure him in a fight, thus eliminating him from the exam, that would naturally be a problem. If the third-year students used violence to prevent Kouenji from getting into the top ranks, it was inevitable that the school would look into the matter. Therefore, Kouenji needed to be subdued as quietly as possible.

"So, you decide on a plan of action, Kiriyama?" asked Mikitani.

"Yes. We're going to be using the Free Groups, after all," Kiriyama replied.

The "Free Groups" were groups of students hand-picked by Nagumo, five from each of the three classes below him, meaning 3-B, 3-C, and 3-D. There were fifteen groups in total with three students in each. They essentially functioned as Nagumo's foot soldiers. Two of the people in each Free Group were meant to follow direct orders, while the third member was given the responsibility of hitting the designated areas so the group could

avoid penalties. In other words, two students per group could move about freely.

"I figured as much," said Mikitani. "All right, so how many?"

"I have custody of six groups, and we're going to mobilize them all," Kiriyama said.

"Six? Are you serious? Kouenji is just one guy! And besides, even if Kouenji did have a bunch of people with him, sendin' four groups after him, my group included, would be plenty. Just in case, the other two groups should—"

"The only threat here is Kouenji," said Kiriyama, cutting Mikitani off. "We'll have plenty of time to deal with anything or anyone else after we crush him. We're able to view the leaderboards until the end of the twelfth day. We're going to keep Kouenji thoroughly contained for two days, starting tomorrow. Kouenji's working alone, so once he loses his momentum, he'll never be able to get ahead again."

Even if, hypothetically, Kouenji did merge with another group along the way, the end result would be the same.

"Come to think of it," said Mikitani, "didn't Nagumo say there was another group he was interested in? If we send in all the available groups we've got after Kouenji, we're not going to have enough manpower to handle the other one."

Mikitani hadn't heard which group it was exactly, but if it was one in the top ten, then that meant it would likely be Ryuuuen or Sakayanagi's group from the second-years, or Utomiya's group among the first-years.

"There's no need to worry about that anymore. Nagumo's fears were unfounded," said Kiriyama.

Kiryama knew which group Nagumo was wary of, of course, but that group had not appeared in the top ten even once over the past ten days. Even if that group began scoring points at a faster pace from now on, they couldn't possibly finish on top.

"Nagumo made an error in judgment on that part," Kiriyama added.

"...That sure is unusual, isn't it? Nagumo misjudging something like that, I mean," said Mikitani.

"Well, it's no wonder," said Kiriyama. "It's like there's a ghost holding him by the shoulders, after all."

The only person that Kiriyama could possibly be referring to was the only man Nagumo recognized as being worthy: Horikita Manabu. It was understandable why even Nagumo's eyes had become clouded, even though he was someone who could typically look out over the battlefield in a comprehensive, holistic way.

"Okay, so, we'll have six groups handle Kouenji, and you'll just keep collecting points like normal then, I'm guessing?" said Mikitani.

"No," replied Kiriyama. "I'll take command to contain him."

"You will? Wait, wouldn't that be kinda inefficient? Let me do it," said Mikitani.

Kiriyama's group currently sat in third place. If they went to try and stop Kouenji's rapid progress, it would affect their score.

"You want me to leave you in command?" asked Kiriyama.

"This is a do-or-die moment. However, you want to win—I need to earn Nagumo's acknowledgement. Let me handle this," Mikitani insisted, though Kiriyama didn't seem to be listening.

"Unacceptable. If you use six Free Groups and fail, that's going to be a tough pill for us to swallow," said Kiriyama.

"But you need to come in second place, don't you?" argued Mikitani, anxious to get a meritorious deed under his belt. "Don't waste your time on unnecessary things."

"No one other than me or Nagumo can stop Kouenji. End of story," snapped Kiriyama.

Mikitani furrowed his brow slightly and made a disgruntled face. However, Kiriyama wasn't looking at him, so he didn't notice it. A faction of six groups, led by Kiriyama, was frantically moving out in order to stop one single student. If Kiriyama were up against a normal opponent, that would be one thing, but Kouenji's unfathomable abilities unsettled him.

The issue was where the first designated area for the eleventh day would be once it was announced at seven in the morning. Depending on which direction Kouenji was moving in, meaning east, west, south, or north, the encirclement around him would have to change. Therefore, the ideal scenario would be to fully set up the siege around Kouenji during the evening, between the time that he settled on a campsite and 7 a.m. the next morning, when he would not be moving around.

Fortunately, Kouenji's current location in area B3 was relatively close to E3, where Kiriya and his crew were located.

Students could only view the top-ten leaderboards until the end of the twelfth day. That meant it was only possible to check scores for two more days: tomorrow and the day after. They wanted to create at least a thirty-point gap between Nagumo and Kouenji by the end of that twelfth day.

"How far are you plannin' on marching today?" asked Mikitani right at the start of their long journey, throwing the question out there simply to stave off boredom.

"As far as possible. I understand that it's risky to move at night, but I want to end up at a spot somewhere within one space of Kouenji's location at the very least," replied Kiriya. "We have to catch up with him by seven in the morning."

Once Kouenji was on the move, it would become much more difficult to catch him.

"I think knocking him down a peg in two days is going to be a piece of cake, honestly," said Mikitani. He turned back to look at the sixteen other third-year students. "We have seven groups, including yours, Kiriya. And since your group has six, we have a total of eighteen people we can use."

"Don't get careless. These woods are vast. There's a good chance that he could slip away," said Kiriya.

"Look, I get that he's this crazy tough bastard of a second-year," said Mikitani. "Doesn't change the fact that he's still a year below us."

Since neither Kiriyama nor Mikitani had actually seen Kouenji's astounding physical abilities firsthand, it was difficult for them to make an accurate assessment. Even so, data about Kouenji's physical abilities was pouring in from third-year students who competed with him in several different Tasks.

"Use caution. Think of him as the greatest adversary you've ever faced," said Kiriyama.

"Greatest, huh," replied Mikitani.

There really was no way I could've let someone like Mikitani handle this after all, thought Kiriyama, in his heart of hearts.

If you were facing an enemy that had to be defeated no matter what, then you needed to be willing to go all the way, even if it meant going as far as choking the life out of them. If you were dealing with a situation like that without being serious, then you could find yourself being eaten alive instead.

5.1

IT WAS JUST AFTER six-thirty in the morning the next day, the eleventh day of the exam. Kiriyma's group and the six Free Groups, including Mikitani, had successfully surrounded Kouenji.

"What's the situation?" asked Kiriyma.

"Still no signs of movement in his tent, from the looks of things," said Mikitani. "Guess he's still sleepin'. It'd be a lot easier for us if he got sick and stayed in bed all day, though."

Mikitani then began addressing the members of the Free Groups.

"All right," he said. "In that case, why don't we surround his tent so we can block him before he comes out? If we make it impossible for him to pack up his stuff, Kouenji's not gonna be able to move."

The Free Group members all agreed with this plan, thinking it would make things easy.

"Keep in mind that, yes, if you get in his way while he's trying to pack up his things, we can most certainly delay him in getting to his designated area. But what excuse are you going to come up with if a third party happens to see what you're doing?" said Kiriyma. "Even if you really are planning to get in Kouenji's way while he's trying to clean up his campsite, you should avoid being so careless as to make what you're doing obvious to anyone watching. You need to be discreet."

Even if they were going to go ahead and violate the rules anyway, they still needed to eliminate as many risks as possible.

"Well, why don't we jus' use a GPS search?" suggested Mikitani. "We got plenty of points to throw around."

"Our tablets can't track the locations of teaching staff. Don't forget that the search function is not an infallible tool. We will spring our trap immediately when Kouenji starts putting his tent away, just as we originally planned. If you do happen to bump into

any first- or second-year students, or any adults who are on their way to set up a Task, then immediately put a distance of at least two meters between yourselves and Kouenji," cautioned Kiriyama sternly. He then told them not to get so close that they could touch one another.

As seven o'clock in the morning approached, the situation finally started to change.

"Kouenji's on the move," said Mikitani.

Kouenji got out of his tent and proceeded to break it down, humming a little tune to himself as he did. He moved swiftly and efficiently, acting as though he couldn't even imagine that he was being watched at that moment. He finished getting ready to leave right on schedule, just before seven o'clock had officially struck. Then, tablet in hand, Kouenji stood ready to begin the exam for the day.

"Let's go," said Kiriyama, deciding that this was the best time to make their approach.

He started to walk over to Kouenji, with Mikitani and the other Free Group members following at a short distance. Whether Kouenji was even aware of their presence as they quietly approached him or not, he didn't stop fiddling with his tablet. In fact, he didn't look up once. Even after being surrounded by a total of eighteen people, he continued on with his day like normal, as if he were totally blind to everything around him. Mikitani, having decided that Kouenji must have noticed them while simply pretending not to, tried to close in. But Kiriyama stopped him in his tracks with nothing more than a quick glare.

"Could I have a minute of your time, Kouenji?" asked Kiriyama.

Even though his name had been called, Kouenji's gaze remained directed at his tablet. He didn't even bother to look up.

"What business do you have with me?" he asked in return.

Even though that was hardly the attitude that someone should have been taking with a senpai, Kiriyama simply continued the conversation without rebuke. He understood that the person

known as Kouenji Rokusuke was someone who had no common sense whatsoever.

"None of us expected you to do so well in this special exam," said Kiriyma. "If you're so exceptionally talented, then why didn't you take anything else seriously before?"

"Is this something that we should be talking about right now?" replied Kouenji. "It's going to be seven o'clock shortly. Shouldn't you be hurrying along and getting ready to head to your designated area?"

"You have to understand what I'm getting at, Kouenji. You've scored too many points," said Kiriyma.

Kouenji spoke as though he was oblivious to the situation, but Kiriyma knew that couldn't be true.

"I want you to stay where you are for the rest of the day," Kiriyma went on.

"So, does that mean...you're telling me not to score any more points?" said Kouenji.

"That's right," replied Kiriyma.

Naturally, there was absolutely no way that Kouenji would have simply nodded and agreed to such a request.

"I don't know who you are," the second-year said. "But, if you simply think this through for a minute, you'll understand that what you're asking is impossible. Even so, the fact that you have brought so many people with you here must mean...you're prepared to try and get in my way if I don't entertain your request. Isn't that right?"

"Even if you continue with this special exam, you will not get the first-place reward," Kiriyma told him. "Nagumo, who is currently in first, has seven people in his group. My group, which is currently in third, has six people. You, in second place, are alone. I will admit that you have made excellent progress thus far, but during the second half of the exam, you're going to start to tire out. And we can all expect to see a drop in the number of points you're able to get."

"In that case, you don't need to worry about me then, do you?" replied Kouenji.

"This is just to make doubly sure. Besides, as a third-year student, it is unacceptable for us to compete with you, someone working alone, for the top spot. We won't make things worse for you if you obey, of course. If you make an ally in Nagumo, the student council president, it will make your life at school much more stable."

There were two options made available to Kouenji here: either he could be kept in check by strong-arm tactics, or he could obey and get into Nagumo's good graces. It was now exactly seven o'clock in the morning. The first designated area for the eleventh day had been announced and made available on the students' tablets. After confirming that those were his choices, Kouenji slowly put his tablet away into his backpack. For a brief moment, Kiriyama and the others watched and waited to see if he would move or not.

"I'm going to be hurrying on ahead now, so please excuse me," said Kouenji, refusing Kiriyama's request.

As soon as those words left his mouth, he instantly accelerated, dashing through a gap between several Free Group members.

"H-hey!!!"

Even though Kouenji had been surrounded, there was still enough room between the third-years for a person to slip through—and he took advantage of those gaps. It would've been a lie to say that Kiriyama and the others hadn't been caught at least somewhat off guard by that. They had underestimated the possibility that Kouenji would just ignore an order from a third-year student and make a break for it.

"After him!" shouted Mikitani.

But by the time those words passed Mikitani's lips, Kouenji had already disappeared into the woods.

"Don't panic. Trying to keep pace with Kouenji is just going to be an exercise in pain," warned Kiriyama.

"This is no time to relax and take it easy!" shouted Mikitani.
"He just got away!"

"He may be able to get the Early Bird Bonus, but that's all," Kiriyma said. "If Kouenji chose to run, then that means he's not going to be able to participate in any Tasks at his leisure. On the other hand, if he does have the audacity to sign up for a Task, we'll catch up with him right then and there."

Kiriyma understood that it was dangerous for them to just decide that the direction Kouenji ran in was the same as his designated area. It would be foolish to chase after him based solely on that. But he also understood that it was impossible for Kouenji to hide from a GPS search.

Even so, perhaps because he was panicking, Mikitani started running after Kouenji, taking off at a full sprint.

5.2

WITH MIKITANI IN THE LEAD, KIRIYAMA AND THE FREE GROUPS began tracking Kouenji.

"What's his location?" asked Kiriyama.

"Well, get a load of this," said Mikitani. "He hasn't been moving at all for a while now. We searched three times and it's been the same every time."

The fact that he hadn't moved at all was entirely unnatural, considering that it wasn't a break period at the moment. Kiriyama took a peek at his tablet to see if there was some reason for Kouenji's inexplicable behavior.

"It doesn't look like there are any Tasks near him," Kiriyama observed.

"Right. We'll catch up with him in another 200 meters or so," said Mikitani.

"Let's not let our guard down this time," warned Kiriyama. "We're going to catch him for sure. Got it?"

"You don't need to tell me twice," said Mikitani.

Kouenji had pulled away from his pursuers earlier, but roughly six hours after they started chasing him, they met again, albeit in a rather unexpected way. The reason Kouenji wasn't moving was because he was sleeping, even though it was the middle of the afternoon. The third-year students exchanged exasperated looks with each other. Mikitani approached Kouenji, acting as the representative of the group. While looking down at Kouenji's face from above, he started speaking to him in a firm tone.

"Wake up, Kouenji. Seriously, taking a nap after running from us like that? You sure don't have a care in the world. Or maybe you've been running as fast as you can for these past ten days, and you got so exhausted that you couldn't help but want a little shut eye?"

Yeah, he had to sleep, even if he didn't want to, thought Mikitani. He couldn't think of any other reason why Kouenji would be taking a nap in this situation, especially after his escape. Kouenji slowly opened his eyes and smiled at Mikitani.

"Well, that's only natural, no?" he said. "After all, I am a human being, just like the rest of you."

"In that case, just be a good little boy and keep sleeping peacefully then," said Mikitani. "Take the rest of the day off. I'm sure you must be exhausted after all you've done. Go on, take your senpai's kind advice."

"Take the day off? What a strange thing to say," said Kouenji.

Kouenji, not panicking at all over having been surrounded again, stood up. Mikitani had been looking down on him before, but he had to crane his neck now that Kouenji was standing up straight. The second-year student measured over 180 centimeters tall. Kouenji's eyes seemed to be brimming with vitality; somehow, he appeared even larger than he did before.

"...Don't ignore me," said Mikitani, drawing closer to Kouenji aggressively, despite feeling intimidated by him. "If you just rest for a little while to get rid of your fatigue, then no one's going to have any trouble."

"There is no need for concern," said Kouenji. "My physical strength has already been restored. I am now back to being in *perfect* shape. Do not talk to me as if I were some ordinary person."

While what Kouenji said could have been interpreted as simple pretense, Kiriyama seemed willing to consider it as a possible truth and stepped in to address Kouenji himself.

"You certainly look well," he said. "But like Mikitani said, you've been going all out over these last ten plus days. You've been going at this harder than anyone else. You may have repeatedly gotten the first place Early Bird Bonuses, but surely you've already reached your limit by now."

"I wouldn't consider myself above the common masses if I had reached my limit," said Kouenji.

"Meaning that you haven't?" asked Kiriya.

He was becoming increasingly doubtful of Kouenji in their conversation, but Kouenji just continued on.

"I am what you call a 'super short sleeper,' you see. As in, I'm someone who doesn't need much sleep. I experience extremely short REM cycles," said Kouenji, matter-of-factly.

"Huh? Short REM cycles? What?" balked Mikitani, jumping on what Kouenji had just said.

For the first time that day, Kiriya's expression stiffened.

"A short sleeper... If that's true, then we have quite a serious problem on our hands," said Kiriya.

"What do you mean, Kiriya?" asked Mikitani.

"For the average person, somewhere around seven to eight hours of sleep a day is considered ideal," Kiriya explained. "That length of time is important for maintaining your health. You wouldn't be able to say that you had gotten a good night's sleep if you had any less than that. However, a short sleeper is someone whose constitution allows them to stay healthy while getting under six hours of sleep."

When people sleep, they alternate between states of REM and non-REM sleep cycles. REM sleep is the stage in which the brain is still active and awake, so to speak. Non-REM sleep, on the other hand, is a state in which the brain is asleep. Short sleepers spend less time in REM sleep, which allows their body and brain to be well rested even with only a short period of sleep.

"I was thinking it was weird for him to just sleep out in the open like that. So that's how it is, huh..." said Mikitani.

Kouenji certainly had extraordinary physical abilities. But even so, after prolonged periods of intense travel and repeated tasks, fatigue should've started to set in more and more. By getting in a good rest right here, Kouenji was successfully able to keep a high level of physical readiness.

If what Kouenji said was true, that he was really a "super short sleeper," that meant that not only did he have physical abilities far beyond the average person, but also that his resilience

was similarly out of the ordinary. For the first time during this endeavor, Kiriyma felt a slight feeling of urgency arising within him. Everyone was feeling tired and fatigued, trying to find the right pace. Their legs screamed out for rest just from walking around. Their spirits were just about at the breaking point, wailing that they didn't want to do this exam anymore. These were the commonly held feelings that most students had deep down, in their heart of hearts.

It was precisely because Kiriyma had been working under that premise that he had assumed it would not be difficult to contain Kouenji. However, if that entire premise were to fall apart, then...

"By the way, do you still have business with me?" asked Kouenji.

"Look, it doesn't matter if you've got energy to spare or not. Just be a good kid and—"

An irritated Mikitani was just about to finish giving Kouenji that order when Kiriyma suddenly stepped in and interrupted him.

"No, we don't have any business with you. Don't pay us any mind," said Kiriyma.

Kiriyma decided they should avoid direct demands as much as possible, and instead proceed in a calm, collected manner. Mikitani was frustrated, but ultimately complied with Kiriyma's rather lenient approach.

"*Fu fu*. You say that, yet he still seems quite belligerent," said Kouenji.

Kouenji didn't seem to pay any mind whatsoever to the "advice" or threats coming from the third-year students. While they were talking, the third designated area for the day had been announced. Kouenji looked at his tablet and immediately started walking in the direction of his next area.

"He's not the sort of guy who'll listen to advice, Kiriyma," Mikitani huffed.

"You might be right about that," said Kiriyma.

"Besides, all that junk about being a super short sleeper or whatever? I'm sure that was all just a bluff."

However, it was true that while many students were already experiencing a significant drop in efficiency, Kouenji had kept a good pace. His condition was almost completely unchanged from how it was at the start of the exam. It was obvious that he had been working out incessantly every day, and that he saw this special exam on an uninhabited island as nothing more than part of his normal training. At least that was how Kiriyama analyzed the situation, anyway.

Kiriyama came to a decision on the matter. "We don't have any other choice," he announced. "We're going to switch up our strategy. Suppress his ability to register for Tasks." He gave everyone present orders to hunt down Kouenji.

However, Mikitani must have felt frustrated with the order because his lips curled defiantly.

"I'm the one in command here. Do not break formation, Mikitani," said Kiriyama, sternly.

"Tch..."

The third-year students, though feeling bewildered at how Kouenji constantly did things in his own bizarre way, started to expand the scope of their coverage. The eighteen of them moved into a triangular formation, keeping Kouenji positioned at the center. In addition, Kiriyama kept in contact with his allies, communicating with them via walkie-talkie. Kouenji, meanwhile, continued walking along without a thought as to what would happen from here on out. He kept right on moving, never coming to a complete stop.

Kiriyama had come up with a total of three plans. The first was to simply persuade Kouenji to give up on first place through persuasion. Of course, that method also involved having Kouenji surrounded by a number of people and applying pressure to him. The second was to stay on the move and surround Kouenji, keeping him in check. The third plan was to get ahead of any Tasks that Kouenji was going for. With a total of seven groups involved—meaning Kiriyama's group plus the six Free Groups—if

they blocked Kouenji's way, it would inevitably make it that much more difficult for him to register for any Tasks. Furthermore, if everyone turned up and did whatever they could just for the sake of crushing the underclassman, then the chances of Kouenji winning those Tasks would be lowered, even if he managed to register successfully.

Still, Tasks had different conditions for participation, but certain criteria were fixed. To be precise, there were two distinct models of participation for Tasks. In one case, a certain number of total people could participate, each from their own respective groups. In the other, a whole group would take part collectively. In the latter case, since not all members of each Free Group were present, that meant they wouldn't be able to fulfill the participation requirements. However, most of those Tasks still required two or more people from a single group to sign up. Therefore, since Kouenji was working alone, he could only sign up for Tasks in which a person was allowed to register alone. And even in those cases, the third-year students following him would be eligible to take part in those Tasks as well.

The third-year students managed to follow Kouenji around for a while without losing their cool, but little by little, they started to become impatient. Kouenji's walking speed was so fast that an outsider observer might have mistaken it for racewalking. Just keeping up with him used a great deal of stamina. Walking at Kouenji's pace was beginning to feel intensely tiring.

They had to adjust to a completely unfamiliar walking speed, and the exhaustion was starting to overwhelm them. They felt like it would have been easier if they had just started running instead.

"Kouenji! Quit tryin' to look like such a tough guy!" shouted Mikitani. He was flustered, having concluded that Kouenji was just pushing ahead as a false show of bravado.

"Oh dear, what a fuss you're making. Well then, let's pick up the pace a little bit, shall we?" said Kouenji as he started to walk again.

"You're not gettin' away this time! Box him in!" shouted Mikitani.

The third-year students, who had been keeping themselves at a distance as they chased after him, started to surround the underclassman again. However, just before they could fully enclose him, Kouenji managed to slip through in an instant.

"You're kidding?!" wailed one of the third-year students, though his words were drowned out by the wind.

Kouenji's legs were practically a blur as he broke into a run. It was a brilliant dash, like he was running on a well-maintained track. Then, he proceeded to quickly weave through the trees at a speed that would make even a seasoned sprinter lose face. Out of the twelve students present that made up the so-called Free Groups, many were quite confident in their physical abilities. Even if you just looked at OAA, they all had rankings of B or better in physical ability. They were essentially soldiers, so to speak, that Nagumo and Kiriayama had assembled to monopolize Tasks.

"After him! Do *not* let him get away!" shouted Mikitani.

"Wait, Mikitani! Don't make a move on your own!" warned Kiriayama.

"Shut up! Like hell I'm lettin' him get away a second time!" roared Mikitani. "Catch him and hold him down by force!"

Mikitani and several of the other students ignored the orders they were given and ran after Kouenji.

"Unbelievable..." huffed Kiriayama.

He hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should have also given chase. But then Kiriayama calmly looked down at his tablet and re-thought his strategy. It was hard to imagine that Kouenji had just run off for no reason at all. He tried to reason whether Kouenji was headed toward a designated area or a Task.

"There is one Task nearby, in E3, that Kouenji could sign up for," he muttered, "and it looks like the reward for first place in that Task is eight points... However, it wouldn't be surprising if he prioritized taking the first place Early Bird Bonus of ten points... Where is his designated area?"

D4 was the most likely candidate, but it could have been some other random area as well.

"...He's not the kind of opponent you can break down and analyze," Kiriyma concluded.

The third-year had become acutely aware of the fact that he was dealing with someone for whom logic was not a valid option; simply put, Kouenji's thoughts and actions were crazy.

5.3

IN THE END, Kouenji went for the Task in E3. He arrived at his destination in the blink of an eye and successfully registered for the Task. A few minutes later, Mikitani and the rest who had been giving chase caught up with him. However, they were forced to wait until the Task was over; one other person had registered after Kouenji did and took the last spot so the Task was fully booked. The Task in question was an English test. Though there were participants representing all three grade levels, the level of the content was standardized.

In the end, a third-year student named Doumichi who was considered brilliant even amongst the third-year students took first place, but only by a narrow margin above Kouenji, who came in second. As a result, Kouenji was awarded four points. Since they were still under the watchful eyes of the teaching staff, Mikitani and the others decided to rush in only once Kouenji moved away from the Task site. Unfortunately for them, Kouenji dashed away before that could happen.

Reacting too late to the situation, Mikitani and the others were forced to wait. They could only run after Kouenji, whose speed made it impossible for anyone to catch up with him. They didn't manage to surround him again until just before three in the afternoon, when he arrived at his third designated area for the day. There, Mikitani and the others successfully managed to corner him for the third time.

"Hm. You lot are really giving it your all," said Kouenji.

"We can't just sit around and let you do whatever you want!" shouted Mikitani.

They tried to get ahead of Kouenji to whatever Tasks he was headed to on the eleventh day, but in the end, they hadn't managed to stop him, not even once. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that their pride as third-year students had been torn to shreds. Nagumo would be deeply disappointed when he learned about

these results. The word “amicable” no longer had any meaning in this situation.

“This is your last warning, Kouenji,” declared Kiriyma, giving the Free Groups the order to circle around him. “It’s just for tomorrow. Just one day. Just listen to what we’re ordering you to do and do nothing. That’s all.”

If they could hold him for one day, that alone would be enough to ensure that Nagumo would end up in first place. The important part was to prevent Kouenji from taking the top spot once more.

“H-hey, Nagumo said to keep him down for two days...!” said Mikitani. “Don’t you mean tomorrow and the day after?”

“We won’t be able to confirm which groups are in the top ten the day after tomorrow,” Kiriyma replied. “I don’t think any groups are going to be coming after us that strongly. We should focus on boosting our own scores rather than trying to keep someone else down.”

That was Kiriyma’s own decision that he had made after watching the situation with Kouenji unfold from up close.

“It wouldn’t be a good idea for us to devote three whole days to Kouenji,” he added.

“In that case, we should just leave the bare minimum number of guards with him so we can keep him tied down for the next two days!” shouted Mikitani.

“Do you honestly think Kouenji will let that happen?” asked Kiriyma.

If they kept Kouenji down for just one day, he still had a good chance of being able to hang in there at either second or third in the rankings. However, if Kouenji had to forego getting points for two whole days, it was possible that he’d never make it to the winner’s circle at all.

“There is no way he’d accept a situation where he would lose,” said Kiriyma.

“Well, that depends on how we do things,” argued Mikitani. He had been feeling dissatisfied with Kiriyma all this time but had

followed him up until now in spite of that. Now, however, he was staging a revolt.

"...You think that you can do it?" Kiriyma asked him.

"Yeah, I can. And when I show you that I can pull it off, I'll have myself a ticket into Class A." With that, Mikitani stepped forward, pushing Kiriyma out of his way.

He then turned his attention back to Kouenji. "You heard what I said earlier," Mikitani growled. "You're going to sit tight tomorrow and the day after."

"Is that a request?" asked Kouenji.

"No, that's an order."

"I imagine that this is a question I won't get an answer to, but what happens if I refuse?"

"Worst case, you'll get expelled," said Mikitani, as several of his allies moved in closer to Kouenji.

Even without saying it outright, it was clear as day that they were willing to hold Kouenji down through violence. Despite being threatened, Kouenji's fearless grin never faded. He simply waited to see what the third-year students would do.

"Since you're not giving me an answer, can I take it to mean you're not gonna comply with my order?" demanded Mikitani.

"I don't obey anyone," said Kouenji.

"In that case, I've got no choice but to *make* you obey. That all right, Kiriyma?" said Mikitani, turning his way partway through.

"As long as Kouenji complies, I'll leave it to your judgment," said Kiriyma.

Mikitani laughed scornfully, acting confident and assured. But, at the same time the final designated area for the eleventh day of the exam was announced, Kouenji stood up. Upon seeing this, Mikitani hurriedly issued the order for the others to circle around Kouenji.

"Didn't I just tell you? You're going to stay put," he told the second-year.

Since they were so close that they could easily reach out and touch one another, the only way Kouenji could move forward would be to forcefully push the third-year students out of the way.

"I can't say that this is a beautiful situation for me to be in," said Kouenji. "I do not have a preference for men."

"What are you gonna do then, huh?" said Mikitani. "If you try and push us out of your way, we'll take that as a declaration of war."

"*Fu fu*, yes, I suppose you might," Kouenji chuckled, taking a step forward.

That one large step was enough for Kouenji to come into contact with Mikitani, who was standing right in front of him. However, he made no attempt to push Mikitani out of the way with his arm, not even as a pretense. He simply started walking forward normally, and they just so happened to bump into one another, shoulder to shoulder.

In short, it was an attempt on Kouenji's part to push his way through by force without actually raising a hand against anyone. It could have been interpreted as a shove, but Mikitani was confident that he'd be able to stand his ground thanks to his physique. This was an opportunity for him to prove that being fast and being powerful were two different things.

"Tch!"

But Mikitani felt like a large rock had just slowly crashed into him, and before he knew it, he found himself forced to the side as Kouenji opened up a path for himself. Kouenji, on the other hand, moved like he hadn't even hit an obstacle at all. He just quietly walked on ahead, as if nothing had been in his way.

"Hey, wait! You jerk!" shouted a flustered Mikitani, grabbing onto Kouenji's shoulder.

But he was unable to stop Kouenji from moving with such superhuman strength. Mikitani told himself that if he simply allowed Kouenji to walk away right before his very eyes, then the situation would only repeat itself. He tried to put up resistance, but Kouenji's legs kept moving. When Mikitani saw that Kiriyama was

watching this happen, Mikitani clicked his tongue and turned to look at his allies.

He called one of them over and the two tried once more to stop Kouenji. Morooka joined in to try and stop the underclassman, but it looked like he was getting pushed away and he lost his balance. He fell over in an exaggerated fashion and made a show of being in pain. Once Mikitani saw this, he put himself directly in front of Kouenji and stopped him from walking any further.

"Ow! You might've broke my arm!" wailed Morooka, ranting and raving, making a spectacle like a soccer athlete trying to show how badly they were hurt.

"Looks like you did something pretty terrible, Kouenji," Mikitani said. "I think you really hurt Morooka."

"It looks to me like he's faking it," said Kouenji.

"No matter what you say, it doesn't change the fact that you pushed Morooka out of your way," said Mikitani.

With their positions suddenly reversed, all of the third-year students were now trying to surround Kouenji to keep him from escaping completely. They had tossed the more conservative strategy that they had been sticking with completely out the window.

"Hm, I'm afraid this is a turn of events that even someone such as myself cannot overlook. What to do, what to do," mused Kouenji.

"Whoa there, Kouenji, you've got a look on your face like you want to punch all your senpais' lights out. But you *do* understand that even if you did manage to beat us up somehow, you'd be in big trouble, right?" warned Mikitani. He felt sure that there was no way Kouenji would start throwing punches.

Kouenji didn't deny what Mikitani said. He just calmly went along with it.

"I do not intend to show any mercy to anyone who tries to stop my advance," he said. "Much less anyone who dares to bare their fangs at me."

So Kouenji was willing to resort to violence.

Mikitani's expression stiffened for a moment. "And what do you think's gonna happen if we report it to the school?" he demanded.

"What's going to happen?" repeated Kouenji. "Well, your names as third-year students would be sullied, branded as those who'd lower themselves to gang up on a student from a lower grade level. That's all that would happen, no?"

There was no need for Kouenji to bother confirming whether Mikitani's and the other third-year students' watches were working properly. After all, if they were broken, it would've been completely pointless to try and reach Tasks ahead of him in order to enter before he could sign up.

"Well, I think it's about time I take my leave now, don't you agree?" Kouenji said. "You hanging around me has been putting a damper on my chances of getting the next Early Bird Bonus."

More than ten minutes had passed since the designated area had been announced. Kouenji knew that his rivals would already be headed there and that he ought to have been moving toward it too. It was certainly still possible for him to come back from this delay and get to the designated area first, but it was unclear how things would play out.

"Sorry... But we're not lettin' you go," said Mikitani, with firm determination, telling Kouenji in no uncertain terms that he was willing to throw down.

"You realize that I can't keep being nice to you forever, you know," replied Kouenji.

"So, what, you're gonna bare your fangs at us, then?" asked Mikitani.

The third-year students had been utterly bewildered by the way Kouenji had been acting, but now they remembered what their role was here. Even though they understood the shamefulness of this scenario, with a bunch of them ganging up on a younger student, they also figured that if this was the only way that they'd survive this situation, they couldn't afford to worry about appearances.

Normally, the person being cornered in a situation like this would have realized by now that there was no way out, but Kouenji was different. He was a man who wasn't interested in anything but himself. He was thinking only of how to take this turn of events and transform it into something beautiful.

Even on an uninhabited island, Kouenji had kept his blond hair impeccable; it was so beautifully lustrous that it put any girls' locks to shame. He lightly stroked his disheveled bangs for a moment and smiled broadly.

Mikitani, momentarily awe-struck, backed away.

"Time is money," said Kouenji. He slowly reached out his arms in a gesture that signaled he was ready and willing to accept whatever the third-year students could throw at him. "Come at me quickly."

"Are you sure about this, Mikitani?" asked one of the third-year students. "Are we *seriously* going to do this?"

"...Yeah. If push comes to shove, we'll just pin him down. Let's do this!" shouted Mikitani.

As soon as those words left his mouth, three people rushed at Kouenji. One of the students approached him from behind to try and get him in a Nelson hold, while the other two rushed him from the front and the left, respectively.

At first glance, it might have seemed like it would be difficult to deal with three people all at once. However, the third-years weren't particularly experienced when it came to fighting, nor were they very well-coordinated. They had simply come at Kouenji at the same time. No one had been seriously trying to land a punch or anything. If anything, all three of them were expecting that one of the others would handle it.

Kouenji avoided all of them with a brilliant side-step, forcing the shocked third-year students into a three-way head-on collision.

"Ow! Hey, watch where yer goin'!"

"You're one to talk!"

It was far from beautiful teamwork. The third-year students bickered as if their fight was with each other.

Mikitani, the only one accustomed to fighting, shouted at his allies, "Hey, don't forget about who we're really after here! Kouenji's the one we want!" Unfortunately, his allies were on the verge of self-destruction.

5.4

JUST MOMENTS LATER, the entirely exhausted third-year students were all down on their knees around Kouenji, broken and out of breath. Kouenji had not thrown a single punch, and yet their spirits had been crushed as he rendered their attacks useless.

"Huff, huff... Damn it... Who, or what, the hell are you, anyway?" wheezed a terrified Mikitani, starting to back away. "You're like a monster or something, seriously... Wouldn't it have been a lot easier for you to just shake us off instead...?"

Kouenji noticed that a gap had been opened.

"It'd be a hassle having to deal with you following me around forever," he replied simply. "It's like having dead leaves blowing in my face all the time. Not a pleasant feeling."

Hearing that, Kiriyama began to calmly analyze the scene, despite the tricky situation that they were in.

"I see," he said. "I suppose it's certainly true that Mikitani would have been prepared to chase after you, no matter how far you went. At least, he would have before. But, if he were to see for himself the overwhelming difference in ability between you and him, his spirit would most likely falter. You're probably the only person who would come up with the idea to break your opponent's spirit without fighting back *and* have the ability to follow through with such an extraordinary feat."

Though Kouenji had given up on the Early Bird Bonus for his designated area, he had completely shut down the third-years, rendering them unwilling to attack further. Thanks to Kouenji's decision, Kiriyama and his followers found the rug pulled out from under them.

"Are you okay, Mikitani?" asked Kiriyama.

"Y-yeah," groaned Mikitani. "I'm not hurt, but... Ugh."

Some students had fallen or been knocked to the ground as a result of their own actions, but they were basically unharmed. At

most, they had only slight scrapes on their hands. In the face of such overwhelming power, Kouenji had managed to show them the difference between his abilities and theirs without taking a single swing at any of the upperclassmen.

"Well then, I'll be on my way now," he announced. "I trust you don't mind?"

"Do whatever you want, Kouenji," huffed Mikitani.

"In that case, please excuse me. *Adieu!*" said Kouenji, jovially.

There wasn't anyone remaining who could stand in his way. With that, Kouenji simply left.

Afterward, Mikitani muttered to himself, heartbroken, "What the hell *is* he, anyway? Is he really a high schooler?"

"There are always people who'll do something beyond your initial calculations. Just like Nagumo," said Kiriyma.

"In the end, is that really all we can do? Just crawl on the ground like this forever!?" Mikitani pounded his clenched fist against the ground, frustrated with his own inadequacy. "Ugh, that little freak! He made a fool of me! Damn it! Damn it!!!"

"Our fight is not over yet," said Kiriyma, looking over in the direction in which Kouenji had left, though he was already out of sight by now.

Kiriyma took his walkie-talkie in hand.

"Are you plannin' on reporting my failure to Nagumo?" asked Mikitani.

"What would there be to gain by doing that?" Kiriyma replied. "I've already decided that I'm going to go for the win."

"Y-yeah, guess you're right."

"Don't worry, Mikitani. I had already assumed from the very beginning that Kouenji was beyond the realm of the ordinary. But every opponent has their weak points. As the saying goes, 'the greater embraces the lesser,' after all."

Mikitani nodded quietly, feeling somewhat grateful for such words. Kiriyma, on the other hand, wasn't even the least bit

shaken or upset about what had just transpired. On the contrary, he had expected it from the very start. His overarching strategy was to catch Kouenji by surprise once the underclassman was convinced that he had gotten rid of every obstacle standing in his way.

Though many people had gone after him to block his path, they hadn't really done much harm to Kouenji at all. As a result, Kouenji would have gotten the distinct impression that the third-year students really weren't that big a deal. And that was exactly what Kiriyama wanted.

5.5

IT WAS JUST BEFORE five o'clock in the afternoon on the eleventh day of the exam. I had arrived at my final designated area for the day, J10, just in time, and found myself getting momentarily distracted by the scenery.

Getting points and gathering supplies from Tasks was important, but what concerned me more was manipulating my score. It was surprisingly difficult to keep myself in eleventh place. I needed to make sure that I hit my designated areas in order to avoid being penalized, but at the same time, I needed to make sure that I kept my point total close to that of the group in tenth place. Yesterday, on the tenth day of the exam, the third designated area had been randomly assigned. The second area was in F4, but the third was in B9. I decided to give up on trying to get there almost immediately. Then, the fourth designated area for the day was in C9. I didn't manage to make it to that one either, and that left me with two consecutive misses.

This morning, however, I managed to make it to my first designated area on time, which was in area C8. That meant I successfully avoided getting a penalty. However, I hadn't been able to make it to the following area, which was another randomly assigned one in H9. I did make it to I9 when it was designated afterward, but I had a rough time doing so. It had been a very difficult day.

If you had to cover a long distance to reach a designated area, even just once, the rest of your travels would be affected by it. Once again, I became painfully aware of the main reason my overall score was not improving.

I reached area J10 after making my way through a path full of steep inclines and rocky terrain. When I got there, though, I could hear the voices of people talking with each other up ahead.

Thinking that I might know who they were, I decided to take a quick peek. The voices sounded as if they were coming from the west—the same direction as the ocean. When I reached them, I

found a single group made up of three girls from Class 2-B: Isoyama Nagisa, Morofuji Rika, and Shiina Hiyori.

And...then I saw there was actually another group of second-year students there too. I hadn't seen them at all since the exam had started. The second group included Ishizaki Daiichi, Nishino Takeko, and Tsube Hitomi. I was sure that these groups must have started in different Tables originally. Did their designated areas overlap this time?

"Oh? Why, if it isn't Ayanokouji-kun," said Hiyori.

The other five people were still in the middle of their conversation so they hadn't realized I was there yet. Only Hiyori seemed to have noticed me, perhaps because she had sensed that someone was nearby. As soon as our eyes met, she waved at me.

"You're looking like you're in better shape than I thought you'd be," I told her.

"It's thanks to everyone's hard work," she replied. "We expanded our maximum group size to six people."

From the sound of it, Ishizaki's group must've merged with hers. To be completely honest, there seemed to be many students here lacking in ability, but I figured that Hiyori could make a strong contribution thanks to her smarts. She'd likely support her group from that angle. However, even if I was being generous, I couldn't exactly say that she was endowed with strong physical abilities. But considering the overall makeup of the group, I supposed they were well-balanced in terms of functionality.

"Had you planned on joining up with Ishizaki and the others from the beginning?" I asked.

"Yes, that's right," said Hiyori. "There were several groups on the short list to merge and we were one of them."

She didn't deny it at all, and instead openly admitted it. She then turned her gaze toward Ishizaki and the others. They were happily chatting away while watching the sun go down, as if the setting would help relieve their fatigue. Everyone in the group seemed to be getting along, because just about everyone in it had

come from Class 2-B. Tsube, the only student from a different class, blended into the group quite well.

"Ayanokouji-kun, have you had any changes in your health?" asked Hiyori.

Even though she could see that there wasn't anyone following me anymore, Hiyori didn't seem especially concerned about that.

"Not really, no," I replied. "So far, so good, anyway."

"I didn't think that I needed to worry, but please be careful," she said. "A single injury could result in elimination."

"I know," I assured her.

Hiyori beckoned me to come join her with a wave of her hand, so I decided to sit down beside her.



"Three more days to go," she remarked.

"Seems that way, yeah," I replied.

I didn't think that there was any particularly deep meaning behind her comment. We sat there and quietly stared out at the ocean, letting it lift our spirits. Generally, in a situation like this, when people met with a dear friend or someone that they were close with, they typically ask about how things were going. This was a battle for survival, so people would inevitably be concerned about their friends.

However, Hiyori didn't seem like she had any questions for me, like how many points I had or anything. I didn't get the sense that it was because she wasn't interested though. Rather, it was more like she believed there was no way I could get expelled.

"Hey, Ayanokouji!" shouted Ishizaki, beaming. He must have finally noticed me there because he was grinning at me now. He had an incredibly happy look on his face for some reason.

The rest of the group seemed to have noticed me there right after that, but they quickly grabbed Ishizaki by the shoulder when he tried to walk closer.

"What gives?" huffed Ishizaki.

"Don't get in their way," said Nishino.

"Huh?" said Ishizaki. "It ain't like Ayanokouji hates me or nothin', right?"

"That's not what we're talking about..." said Nishino.

"Now, now," said Tsube. "That's exactly one of Ishizaki-kun's good points, don't you think?"

"Uh, good points? I'd say it's more that he simply doesn't have a clue about social situations, but whatever," said Nishino.

"Well, that's... I suppose I can't really deny that," said Tsube.

It seemed like Nishino and Tsube had opened up to one another quite a bit. This was probably what you'd expect to see in many groups after spending such a long time fighting together on this uninhabited island. If people cooperated to the best of their

ability to avoid getting expelled, it'd be easier to overcome the trivial barriers that separated them.

But at the same time, there was something cruel about it too. Once this special exam was over, the class-based battles would resume, and a future where classes tried to take each other down awaited us. When that time came, there would probably be more than a few students who would not be able to make normal, rational decisions.

Since I was from Class D, I determined that I probably wouldn't have much to talk to this group about, so I tried to get up and leave. But when I stood up to walk away, Ishizaki quickly scrambled toward me in a panic, grabbing me by the shoulder.

"Hey, sorry for keepin' ya, dude!" he said. "But, hey, I'm feelin' kinda outta my element here, bein' the only guy. Why don't you stick around for a bit, Ayanokouji?"

"Stick around...?" I repeated.

"I mean, we don't got any more exam stuff to do today. I'm sure you were plannin' on campin' around I9 anyway, right?"

J10, which had been my last designated area, wasn't the most suitable place to set up camp. The ground there was rocky and there were intense winds. With that in mind, I had intended on staying somewhere around I10 while avoiding the coast, as Ishizaki had suggested. But, well...

"That's a marvelous idea," said Hiyori, in complete agreement with Ishizaki.

She got up and approached me as she spoke. I was relatively close with Hiyori and Ishizaki, I supposed, so there wouldn't be many problems in that regard. I had to wonder how the other girls felt about it.

"Sure, that's fine with me!" said Tsube. "Don't you agree? I mean, Ayanokouji-kun seems like he wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Yeah," Nishino agreed easily.

Well, apparently, there wasn't a single objection to the idea. I thought to myself that this group had such a comfortable, friendly vibe about them that it somehow made you forget that an intense

special exam was underway. This was the kind of feeling you tended to see in Ichinose's class. I supposed this meant that little by little, Ryuuken's class was starting to undergo a gradual transformation.

5.6

“AYANOKOUJI-SENPAI. Ayanokouji-senpai...!”

Late into the night when I was fast asleep, I found myself woken up by the sound of someone calling my name. They were speaking in a hushed whisper, quiet enough so not to be heard by anyone else in the surrounding area. The voice seemed to be coming from right next to my tent. I checked the time on my wristwatch and saw that it was just after two-thirty in the morning.

“It’s me. It’s Nanase.”

I immediately shot up, fully awake, and peeked my head out of my tent. Out in the deep darkness, I could see a panicked Nanase, illuminated by the light of her tablet.

“What are you doing at this hour?” I asked. “You’re not hurt, are you?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” she said. “I was in I9, just like you, senpai. To tell you the truth, I saw you from afar yesterday evening. I decided to avoid making direct contact then since I was working with Housen-kun at the time.”

“...And?”

“I have some urgent news that I wanted to tell you,” she said. “So, today... Well, no, I suppose it was technically yesterday, to be precise, since the date’s changed, but... Anyway, I overheard Housen-kun talking. The first-year students are going to launch a large-scale attack against you on the twelfth day of the exam, Ayanokouji-senpai.”

“A large-scale attack?” I asked. “Did he say that he wanted you to be part of it too, Nanase?”

“Oh, uh... No. Well, let’s see. Perhaps I should start from the beginning...”

After calming down and catching her breath, Nanase began to explain it all to me. It was unclear at what time of what day this had happened, but apparently Housen had been asked to go to a

meeting with Takahashi, Yagami, Tsubaki, and Utomiya, but he ignored them. However, a student who was likely a messenger of one of those four appeared on the ninth day of the exam with a walkie-talkie in hand, and once again requested for Housen's cooperation with them on something.

The request was that he would help force me into being eliminated during the endgame stage of the uninhabited island exam. They also intended to hunt down and take out the other upperclassman students who were going it alone in this exam in a similar fashion. The specific details of the plan were to be communicated on the day it would occur, and apparently Housen still had the walkie-talkie on him, even now. From the sound of things, Nanase had been told that Housen had no intention whatsoever of cooperating and that he was only pretending to go along with it. He was planning on finding some way to take advantage of the situation.

So, they were going to come after me in the endgame of the exam... Taking steps in advance had been worth it.

"They made the right call, not conveying the exact details of the plan until the very last minute," I remarked.

If word had gotten out, such as what exactly they were planning to do and when, it would have made it that much easier for me to come up with countermeasures. The truth was that they hadn't yet given any details to Housen because there was a possibility that he would betray them.

"Who is going to give the orders?" I asked.

"I do not know," Nanase replied. "But I do know that it was mostly Tsubaki-san that I heard speaking over the walkie-talkie."

"She seems like the kind of person who doesn't come out in the open very much though," I observed.

"I am of the same opinion," Nanase agreed. "If I had to say, I got the impression that Class C mostly rallied around Utomiya-kun, if anyone. It's just that, well, Utomiya-kun and Housen-kun don't get along at all. Whenever they get into a discussion, they start fighting almost immediately. It's possible they specifically chose Tsubaki-san to function as an intermediary in this case."

That was possible. But it was also possible that someone like Yagami or Takahashi might be pulling the strings from behind the scenes.

"Well, even though we only know the date that this is going to happen, I'm grateful. Anyway, even though it's this late, it's probably best that you don't stay too long. If they find out that you gave me information, it could spell trouble later," I warned her.

My safety aside, it was possible that this could disrupt Nanase's life at school in the days to come. For better or for worse, she still had to spend her days in Class 1-D with Housen. I instructed her to leave before Housen realized that she was gone.

"Okay," she agreed. "I will be sure to contact you if there are any other major developments."

"Oh, no, that's okay," I told her. "I appreciate that, but what you've done for me so far during this exam is plenty. Even if you do happen to see the first-year students making a move, you don't have to come tell me. There's no need to help me so recklessly, against your better judgment."

"But—"

"I've gotten plenty of information from you, Nanase," I insisted, cutting her off. "Now you should do what you need to be doing, as a member of Housen and Amasawa's group."

If Nanase lost all her credibility with her classmates, I wouldn't be able to get any information from her in the future. If that happened, her value to me would drop dramatically.

"If you say so, Ayanokouji-senpai, then...okay, I understand," she replied, bowing deeply.

With that, she left, running off into the darkness. When she had completely disappeared from view, I took out my tablet and thought things through a little. My drowsiness was completely gone, and I stared at the screen. I could assume that the information Nanase had overheard was the genuine truth. However, whether things would actually proceed as described was another matter.

The details of Class 1-D were still unknown to me, but Housen was the type of person who used a similar power as Ryuuuen to subjugate his class. However, while they were alike in that respect, when dealing with obstacles, Housen tended to put himself at the center of his plans whenever he decided to make a move. In consideration of that tendency, he had kept Nanase by his side ever since he had started at our school.

Nanase certainly had incredible mental fortitude, far beyond that of ordinary first-year high-school students. There was no doubt that her respectable academic abilities and elevated physical prowess made her a valuable asset. But the degree of trust that Housen placed in Nanase was still completely unclear. If he didn't trust her, then would he have let her hear about the first-years' surprise attack?

I doubted that Housen would think that Nanase was possibly my ally all on his own. However, I wouldn't be surprised if he felt like there was something off. If Amasawa got involved and let something slip, then it was possible that he knew something. In any case, the idea that the first-years were planning to attack me wasn't surprising. I had assumed from the very beginning that they'd come after me during this uninhabited island exam since I already had a bounty on my head anyway. I appreciated that Nanase had come to report this to me, but nothing about what I was planning to do was going to change.

5.7

I MANAGED TO GET in a little bit of sleep after that. Then, when the clock struck six o'clock that morning, I used the GPS search. If today really was the day that the plan was being set in motion, then I should have been able to see some unusual movements, primarily among the first-year students, including Housen.

"And it looks like...there's nothing unusual about their positioning," I muttered to myself.

Housen's group, who were also in my Table, was positioned nearby. Aside from that, though, the rest were at least three spaces away from me. No one seemed to be setting up any kind of attack at the moment. Since it was difficult to imagine that they would make a move out in the open and in front of other people, I supposed that as long as Ishizaki and the others were near, I should be safe.

Hiyori, Ishizaki, and the rest of their group started to wake up and were getting ready for the twelfth day of the exam. Once everyone was prepared to move, we all started walking together.

"Ugh, this sucks, dude, havin' to go uphill already first thing in the mornin,'" grumbled Ishizaki, who was apparently still a little sleepy and not fully awake yet.

Nishino shot him down. "Nothin' we can do 'bout it. If we suddenly found ourselves in a designated area, we'd lose out on points."

They probably had many back-and-forth exchanges just like that over these past ten plus days. The rest of the group focused on walking, ignoring Ishizaki and Nishino's bickering.

"Ayanokouji-kun, haven't you ever felt lonely being all alone in this test for so long?" asked Hiyori as she walked beside me.

"Not especially, no. If anything, I feel like it's been pretty easy," I replied.

"I...guess I think it would be a little lonely and scary, myself," she said.

"Scary, huh? I can't really imagine you being scared of anything," I told her.

I had the impression that she had really thick skin when it came to these kinds of topics, since she was always so nonchalant about things. I expected that even if she were to see some kind of psychic or spiritual phenomenon, she'd just clap her hands and say, "Wow, that's amazing" or something.

"I'm actually a pretty big scaredy-cat, you know, even now," Hiyori admitted. "That's why I think you're amazing, Ayanokouji-kun. Honestly, I do."

"I think what Horikita and Ibuki are doing is more amazing, though. Don't you?" I said in return.

The longer that those two battled against solitude, the weaker their metal states would become. They'd start worrying about things that didn't really matter. They would begin to see or sense things that weren't really there, rattled by the sound of the wind or the shaking of a nearby tree.

"Yes, that's true... A girl trying to make it on this uninhabited island all alone... That would be impossible for me," said Hiyori.

When she imagined it, Hiyori had a somewhat fearful look on her face, just for a moment. I wondered if I was able to see this rare side of her just because of this uninhabited island.

Before I realized it, Ishizaki, who had been walking on ahead of us, turned back to look at Hiyori and me.

"Man, though, you two sure get along great, huh?" he said as he watched us.

"Hey, you really need to stop stickin' your nose where it doesn't belong," hissed Nishino, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck.

Ishizaki didn't seem to pay it any mind though and went on, "You guys should jus' start datin' already! Then you can come on over to our class, 'kay? 'Kay?"

"You are jumpin' WAY too far ahead!" shouted Nishino. She swung a closed fist down hard on Ishizaki's head, giving him a good whack. Ishizaki clutched his head and let out a yelp.

"Ishizaki-kun sure is a funny one, isn't he?" said Hiyori, giggling lightly, seemingly unbothered by his words.

Yeah, it'd be a hassle if you were to honestly entertain every little thing that came out of his mouth. I decided to just casually ignore it, letting it float in one ear and out the other.

"Damn, dude! That *hurt*!" said Ishizaki. "Dontcha think that's what we need if we're gonna bring Ayanokouji over and make 'im our ally?"

"No, I don't think so at all. Besides, *you're* the one who seems so super enthusiastic about Ayanokouji-kun here," replied Nishino.

I supposed that, from Nishino's point of view, since she didn't know the specific details about our situation, this must have all looked rather strange. I wouldn't be surprised if she just saw this as Ishizaki trying way too hard to invite me into their class just because I got a perfect score on a test.

"Nah, man, it's more like, well y'know, *that*? ...It's like we're on the same wavelength. Yeah, that," said Ishizaki.

"Wavelength. Yeah, I can't imagine there's anyone on *your* wavelength," Nishino said.

Shot down by Nishino's harsh criticism, Ishizaki apparently couldn't take it anymore because he shot me a pleading glance, looking for me to help him.

"That's not true," Hiyori spoke up. "If you look at Ishizaki-kun this way, you, well, get...it."

Everyone present cocked their heads to the side, puzzled.

"'It'? What's 'it,' exactly?" asked Nishino.

"It's just it," said Hiyori. "I won't answer anything more than that."

"...O-okay. Anyway, aren't you glad? Gettin' complimented by Shiina-san and all," teased Nishino.

"Y-yeah!" said Ishizaki. "I mean, I don't really get what 'it' is s'posed to mean, but gettin' complimented doesn't feel too bad!"

Hiyori probably just hadn't been able to think of anything specific. But there was no way that I could've said such a cruel thing aloud, so I just quietly let their conversation wash over me.

When the clock struck seven o'clock later that morning, our first designated areas for the day were announced. Mine was area H10. Hiyori and the others had a different designated area, J9, so it didn't seem like we were going to be competing with one another. I wouldn't have welcomed the idea of fighting people in my own grade level, so thank goodness for that.

"Looks like this is where we split, Ayanokouji. See ya later," said Ishizaki.

"Yeah. There's only a little bit of the exam left, but don't let your guard down, and keep giving it your best," I replied.

Ishizaki motioned for a high five, so I gave him one. We then went our separate ways. After I walked a little way away though, I felt like I heard voices coming from behind me. When I turned to look, I saw Ishizaki and Hiyori waving at me. I waved back at them, and then I proceeded to head toward area H10.

From that point on, I repeated my typical GPS search every hour throughout the day, but I couldn't see any changes in the first-year students' movements, not even by five o'clock in the evening. Nanase had taken on so much risk to tell me about their plan of attack, but it seemed like the information had been faulty.

Perhaps Amasawa knew about Nanase's betrayal and let the others know that the information had leaked. Or maybe they intended to carry out the plan today, but it ended up being postponed or canceled due to some kind of accident. In any case, I couldn't lose focus tomorrow, the thirteenth day of the exam, or on the final day either.

I had to forego reaching both the third and fourth designated areas of the day. The first of the two had been randomly assigned, which in turn caused me to miss the other. Although I didn't lose too much ground in terms of the rankings, using the search

function so much had made me drop down to sixteenth place. I had to reach my designated areas tomorrow, no matter what.

Chapter 6: Each and Every Calculation

WE WILL NOW REWIND THE CLOCK SLIGHTLY, GOING BACK TO THE NINTH DAY OF THE UNINHABITED ISLAND EXAM: THE DAY AFTER NANASE PARTED WAYS WITH AYANOKOUJI. ALTHOUGH NANASE, HOSEN, AND AMASAWA WERE A GROUP OF THREE, HOSEN HAD BEEN WORKING ENTIRELY ON HIS OWN EVER SINCE THE FIRST DAY OF THE EXAM. HE WAS STILL LYING IN HIS TENT WHEN THE DESIGNATED AREA WAS ANNOUNCED THAT MORNING AT SEVEN O'CLOCK. SHORTLY AFTER EIGHT O'CLOCK, A FIGURE APPROACHED AND CALLED OUT TO HIM.

"Good morning, Hosen-kun."

"Huh?"

"It's me. It's Nanase."

"I could tell that from your voice," he said. "Why did ya come here?"

"Why? We're in a group together. There's nothing unnatural about us staying in contact," she said, matter-of-factly.

IT WAS A SERIOUS ANSWER, BUT HOSEN LAUGHED SCORNFULLY WHEN HE HEARD IT.

"Yeah, like you can talk," he scoffed. "Sure seems like you had a lot of fun together with Ayanokouji. Did it pay off?"

"It...did not," Nanase said. "I was not a match for him."

"Ha. You probably just took 'im head-on, without usin' a woman's weapons, didn't ya?" replied Hosen.

"A...woman's weapons?" repeated Nanase.

IT WAS CLEAR THAT SHE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT HOSEN WAS TALKING ABOUT, BUT HE WENT ON ANYWAY.

"You got a big chest, but it's like you got nothin' in your head," he mocked her, exasperated.

"Excuse me, but I don't understand what relationship there is between the size of my chest and my head," said Nanase. "Not one

bit."

"Whatever. Just forget it. Anyway, so? Did you come here just to give me that report?" he asked.

Housen proceeded to take out his tablet and used the GPS search without hesitating at all. Not only did he not know who might have been following Nanase, he had also decided that he needed to be wary of whoever might be nearby. However, he didn't see any signs of anyone that he had been keeping track of anywhere in the vicinity.

"The plan that I produced to try and get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled on my own has failed," Nanase said. "So, I came here thinking that I might be able to get your help, Housen-kun. If you have a plan, please let me hear it."

First, she had gone off on her own, and now she was coming to him to ask for his help. Housen simply couldn't trust Nanase. Though really, he could never trust anyone in the first place.

"Get lost," he told her. "I'll handle it myself."

"...I will wait here until you change your mind, then," said Nanase.

"Forget about it. Get to the designated area instead. What you can do right now is avoid us gettin' a penalty," said Housen, trying to get rid of her.

But Nanase showed no signs of budging. Housen ignored her, closed his eyes, and let time pass. After about ten minutes had gone by, Nanase called out to him once more.

"Housen-kun."

"What, you still don't wanna go? You're wastin' time here, y'know that?"

"It appears that we have a visitor," said Nanase.

Housen opened his eyes only slightly and saw that there was another silhouette in his view aside from Nanase's.

"U-um, Housen-kun... It's me," said the student, not offering their name.

"Who's 'me'? I don't know who the hell you're s'posed to be," said Housen gruffly, his words coarse.

"Uh... I'm...K-Katagiri...from Class C."

"Don't know, don't care," replied Housen.

"You can talk to me instead," Nanase said. "What's the matter?"

"That's... Well, uh, I have something that I need to give to Housen-kun," said Katagiri.

"Something you need to give to him? What in the world is it?" asked Nanase.

"W-well, I'm not supposed to tell anyone but Housen-kun, and—"

Housen seemed entirely disinterested as he listened to the student, but he must have reconsidered the situation. He popped his head out of his tent and proceeded to exit it and stand upright, looking down at Katagiri thanks to his massive frame.

"If it's somethin' borin', I'm gonna punch your lights out, got it?" said Housen.

"H-here!" Katagiri wailed and held out a walkie-talkie, eyes shut tight, shaking.

"That looks like a walkie-talkie," said Nanase.

"Y-you can use this to talk with Utomiya-kun," explained Katagiri, conveying the message to Housen despite being terrified.

"Heh. What, he wanted to contact me so badly that he was willin' to send over a nobody like you, huh?" said Housen, swiping the device from Katagiri as if stealing it.

"What the hell are you thinkin' anyway, going through all the hassle of sendin' someone over to try and get in touch with me?" he spoke into the walkie-talkie. "What, you wanna play, Utomiya?"

Housen didn't get a response back. He proceeded to turn on his tablet to verify Utomiya's location on the map.

"I dunno if you just didn't notice me callin' you or if you're ignorin' me or whatever," he went on, "but this is your first and last

chance. You got that?"

After Housen told the person on the other end that this was their final warning, he finally got a response.

"I didn't want to contact you. It's just that I can't avoid it if we're going to carry out this plan," said Utomiya.

"Plan, huh? What plan?" said Housen.

"Did you already forget what happened on the sixth day?"

"Oh yeah. You said somethin' 'bout getting together for a secret meeting or whatever. Yeah, sorry, dude, I forgot."

Nanase's expression stiffened a little when she heard that. She didn't know anything about what happened since she had been accompanying Ayanokouji at the time. Housen shot her a sidelong glance, but he continued to listen to the person on the other end of the walkie-talkie, without moving.

"I took the fact that you'd ignore the meeting into consideration," said Utomiya, flatly.

"That so? And?"

"We're going to be executing a strategy to save the first-years soon."

"Save?" repeated Housen.

After Housen said that last line to Utomiya, he momentarily stopped transmitting so that he wouldn't be heard. Nanase hurriedly took her tablet out from her backpack and showed him a list of the bottom ten groups in the rankings. At the present moment, there seemed to be four groups of first-year students in danger of being expelled.

"There are two groups from Class 1-D there too," said Nanase.

"Hah," Housen scoffed. "I don't care if garbage like them disappears or not, big deal. Don't tell me he seriously thinks that I'm gonna do somethin' to help our classmates, does he?"

"Stay alert. I think he might be plotting something," said Nanase.

"Shut the hell up," huffed Housen, adding that he already figured as much.

He switched the transmit button back on.

"I don't know what you're doin' or whatever," he told Utomiya, "but what's it got to do with me?"

Nanase intuitively sensed that some form of bargaining had already begun. For the time being, she remained completely silent and listened to their conversation. Their location was made clearly apparent via the GPS search. She figured that, without a doubt, they would have searched the area around Housen before reaching out to talk. Nanase had the impression that whoever was on the other end of the line deliberately chose not to mention that.

"Because...if we're going to save people, then you're someone we absolutely need," said Utomiya.

Since Utomiya was speaking via the walkie-talkie, they couldn't see the expression on his face. However, Housen felt like there were some hidden parts to this conversation and that Utomiya was saying things he didn't really mean. Housen wasn't so stupid as to not see through that.

"Did someone say that to you?" said Housen. "Well, ain't that somethin'!"

"If you're gonna turn me down, then just say you refuse. I'm only discussing this with you as a matter of course so I can say I went through the proper procedures here. I thought we could do this successfully without you in the first place."

"In that case, we're done here. I refuse," replied Housen curtly, ready to end the transmission.

He held the walkie-talkie firmly in his hand, seeming like he was about to toss it aside any moment. But instead, he just stood there, waiting for a response from Utomiya.

"...Housen."

Though Utomiya was irritated, he called out Housen's name. Housen responded with silence.

"So, this means we can't get you to cooperate. Is that it?"

Considering Utomiya's nature, he should've ended the call immediately when Housen refused. But seeing as he didn't, Housen took that to mean that there was someone else involved in this request.

"Wait," he said. "No one said anythin' about not cooperating."

"*What...?*"

Utomiya sounded a little bit flustered on the other end of the line. Housen could guess that he'd been expecting Housen would outright refuse the offer.

"If you come all the way over here, get down on your knees in front of me, and beg for my help, then I'll give you a hand. Got it?"

"*Screw you. Who in their right mind would grovel to you?*"

"Then this whole conversation never happened. You sure you're okay with that, Tsubaki?" asked Housen, directly addressing the girl listening in on their conversation on Utomiya's end.

"*You noticed? Or did you do a GPS search?*" asked Utomiya.

"Like I'd bother wastin' a whole point on somethin' so obvious," said Housen. "I've known the whole time that she's a real shady chick."

That was a lie on his part. He *had* used the GPS search earlier and saw that Utomiya and Tsubaki were in the same position, but he passed it off as if it were his own intuition.

"*Looks like I can't let Utomiya-kun handle this alone after all, I guess,*" said Tsubaki.

Housen chuckled to himself at that. "What, does that mean you don't trust Utomiya?"

"*Only when it concerns you, Housen-kun,*" Tsubaki replied. "*Everyone knows that you two get along like cats and dogs. I'm not willing to let unnecessary emotions cause our negotiations to fall apart.*"

"Okay, so what'd ya mean about all that 'save the first-years' stuff?" asked Housen.

"You already know that four of the groups in the bottom ten are first-year students, don't you?" said Tsubaki. "And on top of that, two of those groups are from Class 1-D. At this rate, when this special exam is over, the damage our grade level will sustain will be significant. And that includes your class too, Housen-kun."

To someone who held the position of Class 1-D's leader, this was certainly a grave situation. At least, it should have been. You would expect the leader of that class to be panicking, thinking that they had to do something about it. However, Housen wasn't just unfazed; it was like he didn't even care at all.

"So?" he said. "You're not seriously sayin' that we're gonna try and save all the first-years at the bottom of the rankings, are you?"

"Before I answer, there's just one thing I want to clear up. It's safe for us to assume that Nanase-san is on your side, right?" asked Tsubaki.

It was the first time during the conversation that she had mentioned Nanase's presence. Tsubaki was trying to learn more about the periods of silence and the tactless answers Housen was giving her.

"More or less," said Housen. "She's just somebody who happens to be a little bit useful out of a class that's full of garbage."

"I see," Tsubaki said. "In that case, never mind. I'll proceed with what I was going to tell you. And to answer your question, yes, that's correct. I intend to save everyone, which includes those four groups in the bottom ten right now, and a fifth group that is about to fall into there as well."

"You sure talk a big game, but can you actually do it? I mean, you haven't exactly done anything noteworthy so far. If you're usin' up my valuable time for no reason at all, I'm not gonna show you any mercy. Got it?"

"Though you say your time is so valuable, it really seems like you've been taking it slow," said Tsubaki. Her words indicated that she had been monitoring Housen since the initial stages of the exam via GPS search.

"Hey, how 'bout I beat your little lackey Katagiri half to death and send this kid right back to you? Just for fun?" replied Housen.

The first-year in question cowered, face stiffening in terror. Even the slightest change in Housen's temperament was enough to make most students tremble in fear.

"Don't get carried away, Housen," Utomiya cut in. *"If you lay a hand on Katagiri, I'll make you pay."*

"Hey, hold on, Utomiya-kun. Don't interrupt," said Tsubaki.

"But—"

As Utomiya and Tsubaki discussed things on their end, the call was momentarily put on hold.

"What the hell are you doin'? Huh?" sneered Housen, looking over at Katagiri.

"Eep!"

Katagiri had unintentionally prepared to flee, perhaps because Housen's smile looked so creepy.

"Tch. Lame. Hey, just get outta here already," said Housen, telling the other student to leave.

"B-but...the walkie-talkie..." Katagiri stammered.

"I'll hang on to it for now," said Housen.

"But..."

"Katagiri-kun, I won't say that you did anything wrong here," said Nanase, stepping into the conversation. "But I think that you should perhaps just leave it with Housen-kun."

She gave Katagiri a look that also seemed to say, "*There's no telling what's going to happen if you don't back down here.*" Housen's glare from behind must have been more than Katagiri could bear, because the student turned and fled in terror. Katagiri bolted and nearly toppled over, but ultimately managed to get away.

"Moron," huffed Housen.

"That was rather heavy-handed," said Nanase.

"That's how I do things," he said. "You knew that already, didn't ya?"

After a brief exchange, Tsubaki got back on the walkie-talkie.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting. Can we resume our discussion?" she asked.

"Yeah, fine, whatever. But that Katagiri kid left the walkie-talkie here and went off somewhere."

"You were being threatening, weren't you?" said Tsubaki without pause, not even needing to guess that's exactly what Housen did.

"Man, must be real tough, bein' bad in a fight," said Housen. "Means that the battle's already decided 'fore it even starts. It's the same for you, right, Tsubaki?"

"It's certainly true that in a physical fight, I wouldn't be able to win, no matter how hard I tried. But this is different."

"This?"

"Meaning when it comes to using my head. My brains," said Tsubaki.

Housen unintentionally started laughing at her reply. She had said it so seriously that he couldn't imagine she wasn't joking.

"Ha... If you're actually smarter than I am, then I guess you would be a big deal," said Housen.

"There are ways of forcefully rescuing groups that are in distress," Tsubaki went on. *"We just need as many people as possible to pull it off. It looks like the upperclassmen are already enacting a similar strategy. I simply wanted to enlist the help of Class 1-D."* Which was to say, this was precisely why she was asking Housen for his help, despite the fact he had just been doing whatever he pleased until now.

"Yeah, yeah, I'd love to help, really, but I've got other stuff to do. I'm real busy right now," said Housen.

Tsubaki and Utomiya knew that Housen had a lot of free time on his hands because he hadn't moved at all, even though the designated area had already been announced. But Housen had

deliberately chosen to respond that way, just to see how they would react.

"Busy, huh...? As in, you're busy trying to get Ayanokouji expelled?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's it. I don't care how many pieces of garbage disappear from my class. Ain't got nothin' to do with me," said Housen.

"But how are you planning to get him expelled?" Tsubaki asked. "It's already the morning of the eighth day of the exam, and Ayanokouji-senpai is working all alone. And yet, despite that, his name hasn't appeared in the bottom ten of the rankings. According to the rules, the only two conditions by which someone could be expelled in this exam are if they are eliminated along with the rest of their group or if, based on their scores, they fall to the bottom of the rankings."

Considering how many points Ayanokouji had, he was clearly not going to appear in the bottom ten.

"It seems like a few individual students were eliminated in the first week," Tsubaki continued, "but there have been zero group eliminations so far. As the situation starts to get tougher, we may start to see group eliminations at some point during the second week."

"That's true," Utomiya spoke up alongside Tsubaki. "Some groups are already close to running out of food."

Utomiya and his team had already enacted relief measures on several occasions, offering help to first-year groups in need of food.

"If those five groups get eliminated first, it would become practically impossible to get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled, wouldn't it? I guess you could think of helping the first-year students as helping to get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled, then. Couldn't you?" said Tsubaki.

Just then, for the first time during their conversation, Housen's smile began to fade. A hint of seriousness started to appear in his expression.

"Okay, so we're gonna save the first-years, then?" asked Housen. "Well, it doesn't sound like a bad idea, but... Let's hear how you're gonna pull it off."

"I already told you," Tsubaki said. *"We're going to come together as a grade, just like the upperclassmen are doing. We'll have the groups that can afford to do so absorb the groups that are falling to the bottom, thereby pulling them out of the bottom ten. If necessary, I think we might want to try snatching away Tasks from the second-year and third-year groups that are falling in the rankings as well."*

"I don't think it's gonna be that easy to get people to through all the hassle of comin' together just like that though," said Housen. "Right? Class A and Class B are involved. There's no way they're gonna help D or C."

"I don't think you need to worry about that. They already decided to collaborate with us a while ago. Now we're just waiting for your compliance, Housen-kun," said Tsubaki. If Class 1-D promised to commit to solidarity, they could start making their move.

"Not a bad story," Housen agreed. "But I don't see any guarantee that we're gonna win. After all, if we're all usin' the same strategy, then that just means we're all on the same playing field. The only difference is the amount of experience we each got, and that means the end result is the first-years are gonna lose."

Though Housen had appeared to only have been halfway paying attention to the conversation, he had actually been running a simulation of Tsubaki's strategy in his mind. He had concluded that although the probability of saving the first-year students might increase by going through with this plan, they wouldn't be able to overcome the disadvantages.

"That's true," Tsubaki conceded. *"If things keep going as they are, we may not be able to bring the number of sacrifices from our grade level down to zero."*

"Hold up, what you jus' said was weird, don't ya think? Weren't you just taking about saving *all* of the first-years?"

"If every grade level uses the same strategy, then our grade will be at a disadvantage. It's exactly as you interpreted it, Housen-kun. So why don't we just work on getting other groups eliminated before the end of the final day?" That was where Tsubaki's true nature and intentions started to come into focus. *"There are still some upperclassmen who are working alone. We just need to sink them."*

"I gotcha. If five people going it on their own fail, then we can definitely save the first-years," said Housen.

"At first I thought that if we were going to make a play, we'd do it when everyone was starting to get exhausted," Tsubaki said. *"We originally planned for this to happen on days eight through ten of the exam, when we reached the second half. But some unexpected things happened."*

Two thoughts immediately sprang into Housen's mind. First, Tsubaki must've been referring to Housen's absence at the meeting on the sixth day. Secondly, of course, there was the fact that nearly the entire seventh day had been wasted thanks to the poor weather conditions, giving everyone a chance to recover their energy.

"So? Tell me specifically what you're askin' me to do."

"You remember the organizer of this exam suggested something to us earlier, don't you? He said that he wouldn't mind if we sabotaged other groups through acts of violence. You were already planning to beat up Ayanokouji-senpai anyway, weren't you?"

"Well, yeah, that's the only way," said Housen.

Though that was what he said, it wasn't how he truly felt deep down. No matter what other strategies there might be, he had decided that when it was time to crush Ayanokouji, he would do it personally, with his own two hands.

"But it's difficult to just waltz up to Ayanokouji-senpai and beat him up, even if he is working alone. He's always on the move. Which is exactly why you haven't been able to find the opportunity to do so yet, Housen-kun. But if there was a wide net cast around

him, then things would be different," said Tsubaki, implying that she would take care of arranging that.

"Starting with Utomiya-kun and you, Housen-kun, I looked up how many first-year students were good in a fight, confident enough to get violent, and who also wouldn't hesitate to go through with it. If he were to be thoroughly surrounded, then we could block off all possible escape routes."

"So, you're tellin' me to cooperate with you since you'll handle gettin' everything set up?" asked Housen.

"Yep."

"Why would we go along with such a dangerous plan?" Housen demanded. "I mean, Utomiya aside, I can't imagine anybody would do this for free."

"Obviously," Tsubaki agreed. *"We've made an agreement with those who said they'll cooperate with us in the form of a 500,000-point bonus if the plan succeeds. I thought it would be a necessary expense to reduce your share of the work, Housen-kun."*

The proposal was that they would share the Private Points received from orchestrating Ayanokouji's expulsion.

"Hold up, Tsubaki," Utomiya said. *"Acts of violence are forbidden on principle. Are people really going to help for just 500,000?"*

It sounded like this was the first time Utomiya was hearing the exact details of the operation too. Housen could hear his voice clearly through the walkie-talkie. It was right then that Housen realized that Tsubaki had intentionally leaked something that Utomiya didn't know. Normally, you could only hear voices coming through the walkie-talkie if the speaker was holding the button down. If Utomiya was about to say something inconvenient, she could have just let go of the button. In a way, Tsubaki had indirectly clued in Housen to her own secretive nature.

"It would've been impossible for me to ask people to do this on the first day, of course," Tsubaki explained. *"But during the second half of the exam things have gotten rough, both mentally and physically. The stress that the students are struggling with is*

considerable. Everyone is in a state of conflict between wanting to take it easy and being comfortable or wanting to do something drastic. And, obviously, I think that people would feel very hesitant to make that first strike. Which is exactly why I want to have you take the lead, Housen-kun."

Tsubaki had calmly analyzed the situation and said that executing the plan would be simple.

"When there are practically no cars on the road, more than a few people would want to ignore the red light at a crosswalk. However, when there's someone else watching, it makes it difficult to take that first step into the road. But if one person starts to cross the street, things change." Clearly, she wanted Housen to take on that role.

"Well, it ain't like I hate that way of doing things," said Housen. "But the school ain't stupid."

"When that time comes, it'll just end up with both parties being to blame in the fight. Both sides would just heatedly testify against the other in a he-said, she-said scenario, and either side could end up getting expelled. At that point, I'll assume responsibility as the ringleader who gave the first-years their instructions."

"Huh?" Housen blinked.

"I don't have any lingering attachment to this school or anything like that," Tsubaki insisted. *"I feel like I could just quit and leave right away, I guess. Besides, I've given other people in my group Private Points and the Half Off card."* So, she was fine even if the responsibility fell on her entire group and not just herself as the one who hatched the plan.

"Man, people who can self-destruct sure are scary. I'm seein' you in a whole new light," said Housen, expressing his admiration. Tsubaki had come to this discussion with a powerful weapon in her possession.

"I know I didn't tell you the plan before, Utomiya-kun, but are you against it?" Tsubaki asked.

"...No," replied Utomiya. "If anything, I was thinking that it was pointless for us to just try and pull off some random scheme. I've been observing Ayanokouji on my own, and it's definitely no coincidence that he has a twenty-million-point bounty on his head. I think that he became a target precisely because he's clearly some kind of bizarre entity. Even if we tried to trap him within the limits of the rules, he'd evade us. If you're prepared to do this, then I have no right to stop you."

It wasn't that Utomiya was opposed to violence. He was more concerned about the possibility of underestimating their opponent. But if Tsubaki was going to take full responsibility, the situation was different. If Housen, Utomiya, and the others were simply being used in this scheme, that would be a different story for them. It was possible that they'd be penalized in some way, but it was difficult to imagine that the school would expel the whole lot of them.

"It'll be difficult for us to get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled if we take him head-on," said Tsubaki. "That's why I think that this uninhabited island was arranged for us to use as our stage, where we won't be under such watchful eyes."

"I see. So, this wasn't a coincidence," mused Utomiya.

Housen closed the map on his tablet and switched on the record function.

"So, it was you alone who came up with this plan to get Ayanokouji eliminated through violence, right, Tsubaki?" he prompted.

"That's right."

"And if we follow you, none of us first-years are going to get expelled. Can you guarantee that?"

"I promise. On the off chance something happens, I'll assume responsibility," said Tsubaki.

Once Housen heard that, he was satisfied and switched the recording function off.

"So, did you properly record that, as proof? Having my testimony makes you feel relieved, doesn't it?" said Tsubaki,

having seen right through him.

At that response, a smug smile of satisfaction appeared on Housen's face.

"So? When are we doing this?" he asked.

"I can't say yet. I can't just divulge information about that decision so easily," said Tsubaki.

"So, you're saying that you don't trust me," said Housen. "Being secretive is fine and all, but it ain't like I can help you like this."

"*That's what the walkie-talkies are for,*" said Tsubaki.

The walkie-talkie that Housen had snatched away from Katagiri had been meant for him from the very beginning. Even if Housen had just gone ahead and stolen it, the result would've been the same.

"So that's how it is, huh," said Housen.

"We'll contact you again when we see another opportunity," said Tsubaki. "Thanks." She ended the call right then and there.

"She sure seems like a cunning chick," Housen said with a chuckle, and put the walkie-talkie into his pocket.

"What are you going to do?" asked Nanase.

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to go along with Tsubaki's plan," Housen replied. "I was gonna crush Ayanokouji by myself anyway."

In that case, repeated GPS searches would be necessary. If Tsubaki was willing to provide that, Housen had decided it would be worth it to just accept the free ride.

"I get to make as much trouble as I want and all the blame will fall on Tsubaki as the ringleader," he said. "This is almost too good to be true."

"Don't you feel that there's something suspicious about this, though?" asked Nanase. "Like...we're being used?"

"If it comes to that, I'd welcome it," said Housen. "Anyway, that's what the situation is."

"...I will cooperate too," said Nanase.

"Oh?"

"I personally want to protect the Class 1-D groups as well," she said. "Please allow me to stay by your side until we receive more detailed information from Tsubaki-san."

Housen laughed at her offer to help. "Fine. Do whatever you want."

6.1

Now, WE'LL MOVE forward in time, to 6:51 in the morning on the thirteenth day of the special exam. Utomiya was looking at Tsubaki, who stared up at the sky beside the tent.

"What are you thinking about, Tsubaki?" he asked.

"I was just running through the plan in my head one last time," she replied. "Did you need something?"

"No, I just thought I'd come talk to you before we start the operation, I guess," said Utomiya. "Since I figured my relationship with you might end here, after all."

"That's true," said Tsubaki.

Since this could be the last conversation they'd have together, they shared their thoughts with one another.

"Why didn't you just use the walkie-talkie to communicate with me?" asked Utomiya.

"Because you can't really tell what someone is thinking unless you see their face when you talk. You understand what I mean, don't you? After hearing my conversation with Housen-kun?"

"That's true. I don't even know what he was thinking at all, but I still can't trust him one bit."

"The reason you can't trust him is *because* he's Housen-kun, right?" said Tsubaki.

Utomiya looked away, embarrassed. Tsubaki had hit the nail on the head.

"You're the only one in our grade level that I can put my trust in, Utomiya-kun," she went on. "I wanted you to hear the plan directly from me and to tell me exactly what you thought."

A somewhat self-deprecating smile appeared on Tsubaki's face for just a moment before her expression smoothed out again.

Though Tsubaki had just voiced her trust in him, Utomiya remembered that there was still something he needed to check.

"How are preparations coming along?" he asked.

"Do you want to see the screenshot I took when I ran the GPS search earlier?" she asked in response, turning her tablet toward him. She showed off the image she had saved after using the search function.

Ayanokouji had made camp in E5. The first-year students were positioned in D4 and E6.

"The placement is perfect," said Utomiya. "Just as you planned, Tsubaki."

"Well, we have been preparing for this very carefully. The terrain is on our side."

Tsubaki slowly looked up at Utomiya, who was still looking at the screen intently. Then, another person approached the two of them.

"Tsubaki-san, may I have a moment?" It was Yagami, the leader of Class 1-B and a member of Utomiya's group.

"Preparations are already taken care of, so I guess I have time to talk..." grumbled Tsubaki, a suspicious look crossing her face.

"To tell you the truth, there's something I'd really like you to hear," said Yagami.

Just as he tried to start a conversation with Tsubaki, Utomiya stepped in to stop him.

"Sorry to ask you to put that on hold, but there's something I'd like to talk with you about first, Yagami," said Utomiya with a stern tone.

"What is it?"

"Where did you go off to yesterday? When you just suddenly disappeared?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. My watch stopped working, so I had to rush back to the starting point," explained Yagami, showing Utomiya his wristwatch on his left arm.

"It stopped working, huh? That's the second time that's happened, isn't it?" said Utomiya, becoming increasingly wary. He couldn't help feeling that there was something suspicious going on. "What are you plotting, Yagami?"

"I find it rather upsetting that you suspect me of plotting something just because my watch stopped working. Your watch stopped working once before too, Utomiya-kun, several days ago. Does that mean I should be suspicious of you as well?"

"But in my case, it was because of a simple malfunction," said Utomiya.

"That's just like what happened with mine," Yagami insisted.

Yagami kept smiling this entire time, but Utomiya glared at him.

"Hey, you two, can you please not fight at a time like this?" said Tsubaki. "We are all friends here, more or less. Aren't we?"

"...Sorry," Utomiya said. "I'm probably just a little too on edge right now, since we're about to start the plan."

"I went a little too far too. I apologize," said Yagami.

"So, did you spend that entire day exchanging your watch for a new one?" asked Tsubaki. "Or was there another reason you were busy? If so, can I hear what that is?"

"Well, regarding today's operation, I went ahead and arranged for a gift from me to you, Tsubaki-san," said Yagami.

"A gift?" she repeated.

"The plan was to hunt down Ayanokouji-senpai and drive him into a corner, but things won't necessarily go to plan, correct?" said Yagami.

This was a rather disturbing thing to say right before they were about to execute such an important strategy. And it wasn't Tsubaki, but rather the person standing next to her, Utomiya, who reacted to this.

"What are you talking about, Yagami? Even if the plan fails

—"

Yagami cut him off. "I am not going to carry out a plan with the intention of failing." He spoke in a slightly more forceful tone of voice and addressed Tsubaki more directly, as if trying to talk over Utomiya's attempts to shoot him down.

"The strategy that you've devised is perfect, of course, Tsubaki-san," Yagami went on. "Our battle formation is so airtight that there isn't even a gap wide enough for an ant to slip through. We're going to challenge him with the maximum amount of strength that we first-year students can possibly muster, which is why I have no doubts as to our success. However, don't you also think it would be best to also take all possible precautions?"

Though Tsubaki felt there was something suspicious about Yagami as he eloquently blabbed on and on, she listened quietly and urged him to continue.

"Personally, I don't want to do anything irregular," she said. "But do tell me what you want to say."

In the back of her mind, Tsubaki told herself that she could just decide to accept or reject his proposal once he explained it.

"Tsubaki-san, I believe that you're going to repeatedly use the GPS search function to keep track of Ayanokouji-senpai's location as we hunt him down," said Yagami. "But doing so would inevitably consume a large number of points, correct?"

"Which is why we've prepared spare tablets from other groups," added Utomiya.

Yagami quickly told Utomiya that he understood as much, just to placate him. He then continued speaking. "However, we can't say that would be an efficient method, even if we're being charitable. Do you understand why that is?"

"If we don't know where Ayanokouji-senpai's designated areas are, we can't predict his movements," replied Tsubaki.

Yagami, as if satisfied by her response, nodded once.

"That's correct. If we could predict what kind of movements Ayanokouji-senpai is going to make, like whether he's headed to a designated area, going after a Task, simply running away, or whether he's prioritizing something while choosing to discard

something else, then our level of efficiency would increase dramatically."

"If it were that easy to find all that out, then we wouldn't be having any trouble," replied Tsubaki. "That's why we've prepared multiple tablets to conduct GPS searches as many times as needed."

"I have spent a considerable amount of time researching the matter to see what I can do to be of use," Yagami said. "The most important thing is for us to find out which of the twelve possible Tables Ayanokouji-senpai has been assigned to."

Tsubaki had been fiddling with her hair and seemed disinterested, but her hand stopped moving when she heard that. At that exact same moment, Utomiya stopped protesting as well.

"Meaning that you know?" asked Tsubaki.

"Yes. Well, technically, no, not *me* specifically," Yagami said. "Rather, it's this tablet that can tell us, actually." He held out a single tablet in his hands.

"And why is that?" asked Tsubaki.

"This is something I've borrowed from one of my peers in Class 1-B who is in another group," explained Yagami. "The owner of this tablet just so happens to be in the same Table as Ayanokouji-senpai."

"In other words, if we have that, then we can decipher Ayanokouji-senpai's movements without any time delay."

Yagami slowly nodded. If they could know what Ayanokouji's designated area was at the same time that he found out, then it would be easy to get ahead of him.

"Can you really say for sure that this tablet belongs to someone from the same Table as Ayanokouji?" Utomiya asked.

Yagami cast Utomiya a sidelong glance for having rudely butted into the conversation, and then continued conversing with Tsubaki.

"As for the question of how I found out, well—"

"You used the GPS search over and over to identify what Table, yes," said Tsubaki, answering for him.

Tsubaki had managed to see through what Yagami had done without even needing to give it another thought.

"Impressive...just as I'd expect. Was it unnecessary for me to have done all that?" asked Yagami.

Yagami had thought he could surprise Tsubaki a little bit, but instead had been surprised himself.

"No. If you could lend me that tablet, I'd appreciate it," Tsubaki told him. "When I consider how much we would have had to spend from here on out, I would like to avoid pointless waste as much as possible. Is that okay with you, though?"

"We're all in this together," said Yagami. "Your success, Tsubaki-san, will lead to my success as well. Besides, speaking as a representative of our grade, though my and Utomiya-kun's group has been fighting hard in this exam, it's become difficult for us to break into the top three. Now that things have come to this, we have no other choice but to put our best efforts elsewhere."

They had gathered here today like this because they couldn't make much more of a difference with the number of points that they had managed to earn thus far. If they had been in a position where they could have shot for first place, they wouldn't have time to stand around and meet right now.

"And on top of that," Yagami went on, "if you don't accept my proposal, then I won't be able to provide you with insurance."

"Insurance?" Tsubaki repeated. "What are you talking about?"

"Our first priority in carrying out your strategy, Tsubaki-san, is to corner Ayanokouji-senpai and force him into elimination. But that could end in failure for whatever reason, like if, for example, Ayanokouji-senpai were acting together with a third party on the day we went after him. We can't attack him in the presence of others, after all."

"We don't have to worry about that. He's basically been all on his own since the eighth day," said Utomiya, rebutting Yagami's

claim and indicating that they'd already investigated the matter.

But Yagami simply shook his head.

"That may be so, but we can't say for sure whether he'll be alone on the thirteenth day," he said.

"That's certainly true. So?" said Tsubaki.

"In the event the unexpected happens and the plan ends in failure, we can change up our methods and switch to a plan that focuses on making him miss his designated areas, thereby snatching away his points," Yagami proposed. "And then tomorrow, the fourteenth and final day of the exam, there will be three more designated areas to hit via the Basic Movement System. We'll stop him from getting to all of those as well."

"So, you're saying that we're going to get him hit with penalties five times?" said Utomiya.

"No, actually, we can get him a maximum of seven penalties," Yagami said. "For people in Ayanokouji-senpai's Table, the third designated area on the twelfth day was randomly assigned and it was quite far away, all the way in area D4. The fourth area was then in D2. Ayanokouji-senpai didn't make it in time to either of those, meaning that he had two misses in a row. I have already confirmed that he's shifted his attention to focusing on Tasks instead."

"Assuming that it ends up as seven penalties, that means he'll have twenty-eight points taken away... That's not an insignificant amount," said Tsubaki.

Only two days remained in the exam, so losing twenty-eight points in that time would be quite a significant blow. Utomiya was realizing the magnitude of the insurance that Yagami had produced.

"Ayanokouji-senpai is currently acting alone," Yagami added. "It's unclear how many points he has exactly at present, but since he is alone, it's probably not many. Besides, he might end up using the GPS search himself during our attack. If we can get ahead of him and block off any Tasks as well, then it's highly likely we'll have a chance to sink him down to the bottom five."

"Well, that's certainly true," said Tsubaki.

"If we successfully manage to get Ayanokouji-senpai eliminated by way of this insurance policy, then what do you say that we divide the bounty so that I get a five-million-point share and you get a ten-million-point share, Tsubaki-san? I imagine that the groups that fail to catch Ayanokouji-senpai will agree to receiving a five-million-point share as well," said Yagami.

"Not a bad idea," said Utomiya. "What do you think, Tsubaki?"

Utomiya was genuinely surprised by Yagami's proposal, but in contrast, Tsubaki barely gave any reaction to it.

"Tsubaki, I think that we should accept the insurance policy," he added, giving his support to the idea again.

"Well, if you've gone as far as to provide me with a tablet from the same Table, then there's no way that I wouldn't go ahead with that plan. But..." Tsubaki paused, taking out yet another tablet.

She now had her own tablet, a spare tablet, and this third tablet.

"What is that?" asked Utomiya.

"Another tablet with the same Table as Ayanokouji-senpai," said Tsubaki.

"Wait, what? When did you...?" sputtered Utomiya, trailing off before he could finish his thought.

Tsubaki already had everything she needed at her fingertips, without even needing Yagami to have gone to such lengths.

"You are beyond my expectations, Tsubaki-san," said Yagami. "This means that you also came up with the same back-up plan."

"In that case, why didn't you say anything before?" asked Utomiya.

"I just didn't really like the fact that Yagami had come up with the same idea of blocking the designated areas," said Tsubaki. "I thought that I'd feign ignorance and let it slide, but his plan was just too much like mine."

Thinking that this was a somewhat childish reason, Yagami and Utomiya briefly exchanged glances.

"In that case, I suppose I can no longer accept a reward, can I?" said Yagami. "I withdraw my request for the 5,000,000 points and I'll watch what happens from a short distance away."

"Thanks. It's hard to do this when there's someone nearby that you honestly can't trust, so that helps."

Tsubaki made that straightforward comment without even trying to sugarcoat it. Yagami took it in stride and without complaint. After Yagami left and was some distance away, Utomiya leaned over to talk to Tsubaki.

"Tsubaki. Supposing if we were able to defeat Ayanokouji by physical means, would he still be eliminated?" asked Utomiya.

"Since those methods are coercive, it's not like there wouldn't be any problems for us," Tsubaki said. "If we were to assume the worst-case scenario, then I'd say there's a nonzero possibility that only we first-year students who set up the attack in the first place would be the ones to get expelled in the end."

"If that includes the groups that are helping us, then that means a significant number of people could get expelled," said Utomiya. His expression hardened at the thought of only the first-year students getting kicked out of school.

"However, in reality, the probability of that happening is closer to zero," Tsubaki told him. "The one who would suffer the most serious punishment would be me and me alone as the mastermind behind the whole thing. After all, the school really couldn't expel ten or twenty first-year students."

"That in and of itself would be a problem, though. Are you really planning to bear the entire punishment yourself?"

"I was the one who originally suggested that we get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled when the special exam was announced to us," Tsubaki replied. "You just went along with it, Utomiya-kun."

"Well, yeah, but..."

Utomiya recalled the special exam that had been held shortly after he had enrolled in this school where they had been partnered

up with second-year students. To top it all off, there was an additional, unique special exam that offered twenty million points for whoever could get Ayanokouji Kiyotaka expelled. Initially, Utomiya had expressed his disgust at this and suggested that Class 1-C just sit out and watch from the sidelines. However, Tsubaki had repeatedly tried to persuade him otherwise and made him her ally.

She told him that the twenty million points would be a great asset for Class 1-C if they were going to aim for a higher class in the future. When Utomiya asked Tsubaki about the kinds of measures they would take in trying to force Ayanokouji's expulsion, she immediately told him what she planned to do. She said that she would pair up with Ayanokouji for the test and self-destruct to take him down, deliberately choosing to forfeit the exam.

Tsubaki would have been expelled and the twenty-million-point reward would have gone to her collaborator, Utomiya. Tsubaki then told Utomiya that she wanted the points to be used for the good of Class 1-C in the future.

"When you first came to me with this plan, you said that you didn't want to go into too much detail about it, like regarding your circumstances," said Utomiya.

"Do you care? About the reason I'm fine with getting expelled, I mean?"

"I'd...be lying if I said that I didn't care. It's unusual to want to get kicked out of a school so soon after getting in."

"Well, I'll admit that Class 1-C is a lot more comfortable than I thought it would be," Tsubaki said. "That's why I decided that if I was going to get kicked out anyway, I might as well do something for the sake of the class and *then* give up."

That was all that Tsubaki had said. Sure enough, it didn't seem like she was going to talk about her circumstances after all. Utomiya, feeling like it would be against the rules for him to ask her any more questions, directed his gaze toward the woods.

"Shouldn't I be going too, after all?" he said. "I'm confident I can take Ayanokouji in a fight, one-on-one."

"That's a no-go," said Tsubaki. "You're indispensable to Class 1-C, Utomiya-kun. Besides, there would be a possibility that you could end up being judged in similar fashion to me, even if I took responsibility. Let the others handle Ayanokouji-senpai."

"That would be enough if he were a normal opponent. But Ayanokouji is worth a 20,000,000-point bounty. He's not normal. And considering the fact that Housen made the first move against him and didn't do so well, we should do what we can."

"I suppose so. I'm sure it's safe for me to assume that you're at Housen's level too."

Even so, Tsubaki did not give Utomiya the sign to go on ahead. She instructed him to stay put.

"All right... I'll stay close and watch your fight," he agreed.

As he tried to put enough distance between himself and her so that he wouldn't be in her way, Tsubaki called over to him. "Hey, Utomiya-kun?"

"What is it?" he asked.

"You seem like you're pretty darn strong. Where did you learn to fight? You're not a delinquent, are you?"

"It's not that important. Besides, there's no need for either of us to pry into each other's affairs," said Utomiya.

"That's true," Tsubaki conceded. "But let me ask one thing, just in case... You're not hiding anything else from me, are you?"

"Hiding anything?" said Utomiya. "No, nothing. My head's only useful for fighting."

"In this case, that's a good thing," said Tsubaki.

When seven o'clock came, the test began for the day. With her walkie-talkie in one hand and her tablet in the other, Tsubaki opened her mouth to begin issuing orders to the groups. Ayanokouji's destination, C3, was displayed on the tablet she was holding.

"This is a message to all groups. The enemy's designated area is C3. Groups in D4, you are on standby. Groups in E6, start moving north and prepare for a pincer attack. Even if you do see

him, you are forbidden to make contact until I give you permission to go ahead."

She then quietly ended the transmission.

"After eliminating Ayanokouji-senpai, we'll take out several second-year and third-year students who are working alone before I get discovered... Who should we go after, I wonder?" she muttered to herself.

Tsubaki began to organize her final thoughts on who to target.

6.2

I NOTICED SOMETHING UNUSUAL around seven o'clock that morning when the designated area was announced. Mine was C3, by the way. I performed a GPS search just as I had been doing over the past several days as a customary practice, and I started scanning for any rivals who might've been racing me to reach the same area. Among the results, I noticed that three prominent first-year students were clustered together. They were labelled as Utomiya, Tsubaki, and Yagami.

Utomiya and Yagami were in the same group, so there wasn't anything particularly strange about those two being together. However, Tsubaki being there gave me pause. On top of that, I didn't see any other members of their respective groups aside from them. But then, I recalled what Nanase had told me the other day and had a hunch about what was happening.

Today was the day that the first-year students were going to launch their attack.

Naturally, the first-year student groups had been scattered all across the island, but I noticed that their positions had changed significantly from when I checked yesterday evening. Quite a few groups had amassed in areas D4 and E6 and were effectively surrounding me.

"Should I get moving, then?" I muttered to myself.

Even on a large, uninhabited island like this, it would be difficult to completely avoid bumping into enemies head-on if they were using the GPS search to its limits. The fact that Nanase and I were in the same Table had been known for several days now, so I had to assume that they had determined what designated areas I would be headed toward. In that case, I couldn't simply continue as normal and head to C3. On the other hand, getting hit with penalties now that we had gotten into the exam's endgame would be quite risky.

As of yesterday, I had missed two designated areas in a row. If I failed to reach the remaining seven designated areas, how far would I fall in the rankings? I didn't know if they had intentionally timed their attack to come after I had missed those two areas or if it was just a coincidence, but either way, this was the perfect time for them to strike.

"It seems like they know how to fight, at the very least," I remarked.

They had made the right call in deciding not to force things prematurely, holding off on attacking me at night or in the early morning. If they attacked in the middle of the night when visibility was poor and I could slip away, it would've been impossible for them to catch me, no matter how many times they used the GPS search. And if they attacked in the early morning, it would have been difficult for them to come up with a solid plan of attack without knowing my next designated area.

Still, they certainly had a fair number of people on this. I had kept in mind the possibility that an exceedingly small number of particularly capable people, such as Housen, might come after me to try something, but this was beyond the scale of my expectations.

Housen's position had remained unchanged since last night, and he was still in area D4.

If I headed toward my designated area, we'd certainly bump into one another. If I was attacked by the first-years, it was highly likely that the school administrators would advocate for me. But at the same time, I would become established as someone bizarre and unsettling among the entire school, and my goal of trying to lead a normal life at school would be shot.

Even the teachers who didn't know anything about me or the situation might change their impressions of me and think I was unusual. Although the teachers positioned at Task locations guaranteed my safety in those spots, letting myself get chased by a swarm of people would hardly be a wise decision. And, while I did have the option of trying to collaborate with other students, I thought it best to assume that my enemies were not only the

first-year students, but also the third-year students under Nagumo's banner.

At present, running away from the first-years again and again until they ran out of steam and gave up on pursuing me was one viable option. Ten minutes after I had finished packing up my tent and getting ready, I did another search. It picked up GPS signatures from the younger students who were closing in around me. I could tell that they were approaching—and fast.

What Nanase had told me before was that if they found me, they'd resort to violence. That warning was about to become a reality. Whoever was behind this plan was clearly not afraid of expulsion. In the unlikely event that things went sideways, the ringleader had to be completely prepared to accept responsibility for it. If that was the case, I figured I should do everything and anything possible to avoid careless hostilities. It might even mean I would have to ignore a total of six designated areas, including the ones I had missed yesterday.

Surrounded by rivers and mountains, I was tempted to flee by crossing the mountains, but that wasn't a wise choice, considering their positioning. It was a far better bet for me to escape to the south, even if it was a little dangerous. Perhaps if I chose to stay far away from my designated areas, my enemies wouldn't pursue me too much. I took something out of my backpack and started walking.

6.3

HOW ARE THINGS GOING, Tsubaki-san?" asked Yagami. He was concerned that he still hadn't heard any reports yet over the walkie-talkie.

It was around eight o'clock in the morning. If things were proceeding well, the first-year student groups should have been making contact with Ayanokouji around this time.

"Don't panic," Tsubaki told him. "So far, everything is going according to plan. Things have been going so well that it's almost scary."

"I'm glad to hear that," Yagami said.

Ayanokouji was making a clean detour to avoid being caught by groups of first-year students that were closing the distance between themselves and him. It was unclear exactly how often he was using the search function, but

it was obvious that he was using it regularly. If they could get him to waste as many points as possible, that was the best they could hope for. Tsubaki had been willing to resort to violence, but she thought that it would be much better if they could crush Ayanokouji without doing so.

If they could manage to keep making Ayanokouji miss his designated areas, that would open up a path to victory where they wouldn't even need to make contact. If Ayanokouji couldn't stand it and tried to force his way through, all they'd have to do was beat him back. Right now, they had surrounded him without fully trapping him, intentionally leaving little paths that were easy for him to escape through.

Tsubaki was spending the points that she had accumulated without hesitation, running GPS searches in ten-minute intervals. It wasn't as if she had been earning points through the twelfth day so that she could win the exam, after all. It was all so that she could use them for this plan, at this very moment.

Just after nine o'clock that morning, they confirmed that Ayanokouji had missed his third designated area in a row. His next destination, D2, was displayed on Tsubaki's tablet. He was currently fleeing to C6, so he'd still have a tough time reaching his designated area even without people standing in his way. Two groups were still on the move to hunt him down. Even without updates coming every ten minutes, his movements were easy to predict. If he continued as he was so far, it was possible that Ayanokouji could pass between areas B4 and C5 and move northward.

Therefore, Tsubaki instructed the remaining three groups to converge in C4. Then, determining that it would be clever to just sit back and keep an eye on the situation for a while, she took a break and stopped searching for an hour. A little after ten o'clock, she checked everyone's positions again to get a grasp on the situation. Ayanokouji was trying to pass between areas B5 and C5, just as she had guessed that he would. The two groups that were giving chase were just about to enter B5 as well.

"We won't let him get away."

Tsubaki instructed the groups that entered C4 to go after Ayanokouji as he came down the mountain. The intention was to get ahead of him and then lead him toward areas B4 and B3. From that point forward, Tsubaki once again started performing searches every ten minutes to get an understanding of everyone's overall positioning. Then, just as she had predicted, Ayanokouji headed north toward B4 in order to escape the first-year students who had gotten ahead of him. Upon seeing that, the three groups started moving north from C4 in pursuit, to prevent him from escaping.

"May I ask you one question, Tsubaki-san?" asked Yagami.

"What?"

Yagami was standing some distance apart from Tsubaki and fiddling around with a tablet, like she was. He turned to look at her.

"If you were to give more detailed instructions, wouldn't we be able to corner Ayanokouji-senpai?" he said. "It looks to me like progress is a little less than satisfactory."

"Irritating..." answered Tsubaki, speaking in such a quiet voice that Yagami was unable to hear her.

Tsubaki decided to ignore him. After another thirty minutes had passed, though, there was trouble. The three groups that she had ordered to move north from C4 had hardly moved at all. Even if they had encountered some kind of issue while on the move, why would all three groups come to a complete stop? Tsubaki started conducting GPS searches at even shorter intervals now, doing it every five minutes rather than every ten for updates on their positions.

"They really haven't been moving..." she whispered.

The three groups giving chase hadn't left C4, even though Ayanokouji was trying to cut through to B3 now. At the rate things were going, there was a possibility that Ayanokouji might actually make it to C3.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?" asked Tsubaki, calling the groups over the walkie-talkie.

She didn't get a response.

"Strange..." she muttered.

Tsubaki guessed that this wasn't the result of a simple accident that had befallen the three groups.

"What's the matter, Tsubaki-san?" asked Yagami, seeing the clouded expression on her face. He peeked at her tablet without asking. "Did something happen?"

"Three of the five groups of first-years that we dispatched stopped moving," she replied. "The three that stopped all have something in common too. They were all in the same position, and groups of second-year students were there as well."

Considering that there were over 400 people on the island for this special exam, it wasn't especially unusual for many groups to pass one another. Therefore, Tsubaki hadn't been paying that issue much mind until now.

"Respond," said Tsubaki, once again calling to them via walkie-talkie.

But no matter how long she waited, she still didn't receive an answer.

"Could it be that they've simply suffered some kind of accident?" Yagami suggested. "Many, many groups are constantly on the move in search of designated areas and Tasks on the island. I think that arbitrarily deciding that something is wrong could be dangerous."

"Even though three groups just so happened to be blocked by second-years?" she rebutted.

"W-well, yes, that does appear true, but..."

After another five minutes had passed, Tsubaki, suppressing a desire to be impatient and enduring, refreshed the search results.

"It looks like they've started moving again, more or less. But they seem quite sluggish, don't they?" remarked Yagami.

"Those groups of second-years are sticking close to them, after all," said Tsubaki.

Meanwhile, Ayanokouji slipped through B4, descended the mountains into B3, and was heading toward C3. Now that it had come to this, Tsubaki figured that she had no choice but to just let the two other groups that were giving chase handle it. However... she noticed that the two groups chasing Ayanokouji from behind had also stopped moving. Groups of second-year students were sticking to them too, just like the other three groups.

"It certainly appears as though we're being sabotaged by some second-years, but...if that's the case, then who in the...?" Yagami trailed off. Without asking, he took the liberty of touching Tsubaki's tablet to check what was going on.

"Hey! Don't butt in," said Tsubaki, brushing him off.

"Wh-what?!" sputtered Yagami.

"I'm letting you stay here because we're allies for the time being, but I don't remember allowing you to touch my things without my permission."

Tsubaki's eyes burned as she glared at him, causing Yagami to take a step back.



"I understand..." he said. "But even so, I would like to share my opinion. Shouldn't we check to see which second-year students are impeding our progress?"

"Yeah, yeah," she answered, not needing to be told. She had been planning on checking for herself anyway.

Tsubaki proceeded to use her tablet to look for the second-year students who might've been sabotaging their efforts. However, among the five groups, she didn't see a single student that she had previously flagged for concern.

"It appears that the second-year leaders aren't taking part," remarked Yagami.

"And on top of that, it looks like there's an even distribution of students from all four classes, with no noticeable bias toward any particular one," added Tsubaki.

"So this isn't one specific second-year class? They're moving together, as the will of the entire grade?"

Tsubaki had come to the same conclusion, but there was something about it that bothered her. She couldn't imagine that their entire grade would come together to protect Ayanokouji.

"So that's what's happening..." she muttered. There was one answer that came to her mind from looking at this situation. "Those five groups of second-year students don't know why they've been asked to stop us."

"You mean that they're helping Ayanokouji-senpai without even knowing what's going on?" asked Yagami.

"I'm sure that the reason they were given could have been anything," replied Tsubaki. "They could have basically been given a light task. Maybe they were just asked to go and sabotage first-years from reaching designated areas and taking Tasks to protect some second-year student. Right?"

After getting a grasp on the current situation, Tsubaki proceeded to look back through the search records from that day. She flipped through screenshots and tracked the locations of these upperclassmen.

"Their execution is too good," she said. "They knew about our attack today from the beginning. Our plans were leaked. That's the only conclusion I can draw."

"There are only two days left in the special exam. I don't think there's anything strange about our opponents being so wary. Ayanokouji-senpai himself must have known that there was a bounty on his head, so he likely laid the groundwork for this operation in advance," reasoned Yagami. His words suggested he didn't find it surprising they had known about the attack. After all, now that they were in the second half of the exam, there were fewer days left for the attack to occur as time went on.

"As we're the ones initiating the attack, we just need to devote our time to carrying it out right now," Tsubaki told him. "And it's not as though the second-years can protect Ayanokouji-senpai around the clock, can they? The special exam is still on, after all."

With only two days remaining in the exam, this was the time to earn as many points as possible.

"That's certainly true..." said Yagami.

"Another thing that bothers me, though, is how easily they got around us," Tsubaki said. "It's no simple task to capture five targets when they're scattered and moving separately."

Yagami couldn't provide an answer to that question. He raised his hand to his lips, deep in thought.

"You don't see why?" Tsubaki asked. "This just proves that there's a commander hiding in the shadows on their side."

"You mean that there's someone lurking behind the scenes and giving orders, just like you, Tsubaki-san?"

She nodded. She pulled up a map of the entire island and looked it over. Right now, somewhere among all the GPS signatures on the screen, there was someone who was looking at the unfolding war efforts, just like she was. And this person was giving precise orders to keep the first-year student groups contained.

"Personally, I say that we should consider momentarily suspending our operation," said Yagami.

"Why?" she asked.

"Don't tell me you're thinking about pushing through by force. Are you? That would be dangerous."

"I'm not going to do that," said Tsubaki. "With five groups of students contained right now, there's no way we could pull off something so daring."

"Then why won't you pause the operation?"

"Because it would yield the same result either way."

"The...same?" repeated Yagami.

Everything that was happening now was still within the realm of Tsubaki's expectations, planned right from the very beginning. In fact, if anything, she felt grateful for the groups that had come forward to sabotage their efforts.

"Though we don't know who is giving the orders on their side, I'll teach them that the information you can see with your eyes isn't everything," she said.

"What in the world are you going to do?" asked Yagami.

"Most likely, their commander noticed the five groups of first-year students moving last night," said Tsubaki.

"I see. Which means that whoever it was, they were constantly searching, even throughout the night," said Yagami.

"As I said before, the second-years have to deal with the exam as well," said Tsubaki. "We've readied five groups for this, so they went ahead and prepared five of their own in similar fashion. They were skillfully positioned ahead of us to strike back. If they had prepared six or seven groups for this task, then that would mean they were neglecting the special exam."

"Isn't it possible that they have one or two more groups in reserve, just in case?"

"True, there could be, but from what we can see right now, there are only five groups of second-years moving irregularly. Don't you think that means they feel confident enough to deal with

us using the same number of students as we are? But that's going to cost them dearly."

Walkie-talkie in hand, Tsubaki issued new orders.

"There's no one left to interfere anymore. You can go ahead and make things happen however you want."

"Who did you just contact?" said Yagami. "There isn't a single group in the vicinity that we can move anymore..."

"I already told you. The information you can see with your eyes isn't everything," said Tsubaki.

After giving those orders, she paused and thought for a moment. She wondered what upperclassman could have been involved in this battle.

"While Ayanokouji was on the run...?" she muttered. "No, that'd be impossible. Even I don't have the kind of charisma to control and command the other classes. And I don't have that kind of time right now either." She was speaking in such a faint voice that Yagami wasn't able to hear her musings despite standing right next to her.

All Yagami could tell was that she was moving her lips. When Tsubaki was thinking like this, she tended to talk through her reasoning in such a quiet voice that no one around her could listen in. No matter how quietly she spoke, though, she always cleared her mind by vocalizing her thoughts. To use an analogy, it was similar to rearranging a dresser that had clothes haphazardly shoved inside. She was taking them out, one by one, and then neatly putting them back inside to make everything nice and tidy.

"It's safe to assume that Ayanokouji was in contact with whoever is involved in this situation right now, and that he asked for their help earlier," Tsubaki mused quietly. "In that case, he could have been preparing for this movement from an early stage."

"Huh? Did you say something?" asked Yagami quizzically.

"Nothing. Don't worry about it," said Tsubaki, sounding a little irritated and down.

Had something that resembled words reached his ears through her repeated whisperings? Tsubaki wondered. She

lowered her gaze once more to look at her tablet.

6.4

SAKAYANAGI TOOK A SINGLE SIP of water as she stared out at the ocean. The sea glittered brilliantly, like diamonds. The sip was more to wet her lips than for hydration. It was now five minutes after seven in the morning—exactly the same time that Tsubaki started executing her plan.

"Seems like they're on the move," said Sakayanagi.

Looking down at her tablet, she issued her orders via the walkie-talkie in her hand. She had continuously used the GPS search function for three nights in a row, meaning the nights of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth days of the exam. She had done so because she knew that in order to surround Ayanokouji, his opponents would need to make moves outside of the regular exam hours.

"It looks like everyone is in position," she said into her walkie-talkie. "So, let's begin, shall we?"

"That's all well and good, but there's no guarantee that we'll be able to bump into each other just by proceeding to the same area, right?" replied a somewhat languid voice.

The voice belonged to a student in her class named Tsukasaki. Sakayanagi had already explained to him that they would be sabotaging the first-year students and blocking them from Tasks today. Tsukasaki was currently on his way to the location she had ordered him to go.

"Over the past twelve days, the terrain on this island has undergone gradual changes, bit by bit," Sakayanagi told him. "Do you understand what that means?"

"The terrain changed...? You mean like after people passed through the area?"

"Exactly right," she said. "Students and teachers move about and across the island day after day. In fact, you've chosen a quick and safe route to take yourself today, Tsukasaki-kun. Would you say that you went about doing that naturally?"

Though the changes to the topography were slight, there were more than a few paths where you could clearly make out people's footprints made since the storm.

"More importantly, if you've decided on a destination, it is not difficult to guess which route to take."

"Even though I know you shouldn't be able to really see the path, you almost can," answered Tsukasaki.

Though she was only looking at the map via her tablet, Sakayanagi could indeed see the uninhabited island three-dimensionally. She ran through some realistic simulations in her head, figuring out who was advancing where and how they were moving. From there, she went on to determine exactly who was behind the overall strategies as they moved about the map. After all that, she spent some time gazing out at the ocean.

Roughly thirty minutes later, she looked at her tablet again.

"Now then," she said, "since this is the time when people will be headed to designated areas and Tasks, there should be hardly anyone who isn't moving."

By further refining her search and focusing only at the first-year students, Sakayanagi was instantly able to narrow down the list of suspects. From there, she discovered that there were three GPS signatures that had not moved at all since seven o'clock that morning, the start of the day's exam period.

"Yagami Takuya-kun, Utomiya Riku-kun, and Tsubaki Sakurako-san," Sakayanagi mused. "Now then, which one is my opponent, I wonder? Or perhaps all three of them are?"

She narrowed her eyes into a happy squint, chuckling to herself. She began to think back to the person who had brought this rather interesting battle to her. It had happened three days ago.

Now, let's return to the night of the tenth day of this special exam. Sakayanagi had been contacted by Takemoto's group via walkie-talkie.

"Why are you contacting me at such a late hour? Are you in trouble?" asked Sakayanagi.

She had thought, perhaps, that there had been some kind of accident, but apparently that was not the case.

"No, no, it's not like that. Actually, Ayanokouji wants to talk with you," replied Takemoto.

"Ayanokouji-kun?" replied Sakayanagi.

At that unexpected name, Sakayanagi felt her slight drowsiness vanish in a flash. She was instantly completely awake and alert.

"I'd really appreciate it if you could talk to him. I kind of owe him and—"

"Of course I can. I do not mind at all. Please, pass the walkie-talkie to him," said Sakayanagi.

"Hold on just a minute," replied Takemoto.

There were a few moments of silence.

"Sakayanagi?" Ayanokouji's voice came over the device.

"Good evening, Ayanokouji-kun," she replied. It was such a graceful greeting that one could almost forget that they were in the middle of a special exam on an uninhabited island.

"Seems like your class is really coordinating together well," said Ayanokouji.

"Yes. I was able to get in contact with Ryuuuen-kun and Horikita-san as well," said Sakayanagi. "Things are proceeding quite smoothly. Also, while I am not privy to all the details, from the sounds of things it seems like Takemoto-kun and the others are indebted to you."

"And your group is really jumping up in the rankings, Sakayanagi. You're in fifth now, right? You've put yourself in a good enough position to slip into the top spots."

"It's not as though I am entirely free from concerns, however," replied Sakayanagi.

"That so?"

"Have you met with Ichinose-san?" asked Sakayanagi.

"No. I haven't even seen her once during this exam. Is something the matter?" asked Ayanokouji.

"I received a call saying there's something a little strange going on with her," Sakayanagi told him. "I am concerned that she's been here in body but not in spirit, so to speak, over the past several days."

This was a particularly long, drawn-out marathon of a special exam. It was not unusual for someone to become sick or disheartened.

"At any rate, what can I do for you?" she asked.

"There's a favor I'd like to ask of you, Sakayanagi," replied Ayanokouji.

"In that case, do not feel shy," she said. "Please, tell me what it is. I will return the favor we owe you for helping my classmates."

"It involves the White Room."

"This sounds like it will be quite an interesting favor then."

Since Sakayanagi also knew about the matter of Acting Director Tsukishiro, Ayanokouji explained that Nanase was one of the agents that Tsukishiro had sent in after him. He also explained that, aside from Nanase, there was a student from the White Room lurking in the shadows. He then went on to tell her that there was an extremely high possibility that Amasawa Ichika was that White Room student.

"I wish you would have told me about this sooner," said Sakayanagi, disappointed. She sounded like she felt that she had missed an opportunity to have some fun.

"I didn't tell you because nothing was certain," answered Ayanokouji.

"So, you would like me to handle this Amasawa Ichika-san?"

"No... That's not quite what I'm asking."

Ayanokouji found himself flustered by Sakayanagi being able to say something so outrageous in such a forthright way, without batting an eye.

"To tell you the truth, there's another thorn in my side," he continued.

Ayanokouji then got to the matter at hand and told Sakayanagi about the bounty that had been placed on him by Nagumo and Tsukishiro. Sakayanagi was the sole person among all the second-years who knew Ayanokouji's real background, as she had known him since they were both very young. The reason Ayanokouji hadn't spoken with her about these matters until now was because the problems he was dealing with were major, of course, but he also hadn't counted her as his *ally* before.

Besides, there was no changing the fact that at their school, once students were placed into different classes, they were enemies until graduation. Ayanokouji had thought it was entirely possible that Sakayanagi might use information related to the White Room to win. But from his conversations with her, he knew that the risk of that happening was not that high. And in this particular case, after weighing that small risk against this new issue he was facing, he found that the situation had changed.

"So, you're telling me that in the near future, the first-years will start to move against you, Ayanokouji-kun," said Sakayanagi.

"Yep, that's right. I wanted to ask you to deal with them for me," he replied.

"I do not think that anyone could manage to drive you into a corner though, Ayanokouji-kun. At least not anyone other than a student of the White Room like yourself."

"I suspect that the first-years are going to take drastic measures. The best way for them to get me expelled would be to take advantage of the fact that I'm working alone. In that case, I can expect that they'll aggressively block me from Tasks, and if they try anything beyond that, it'll likely prevent me from reaching my designated areas," he explained.

Sakayanagi believed that no matter how many people might come after him, if Ayanokouji were to adopt more aggressive measures of his own, it wouldn't be difficult for him to repel his opponents. However, this would not be a desirable way to deal with the situation by any means.

"If you become someone that the first-years cannot defeat even after mustering the totality of their strength, then your name will be on the lips of every student in our school in a heartbeat, Ayanokouji-kun. Personally...I'm not sure whether I would be pleased or saddened by such a thing. I feel conflicted," said Sakayanagi.

"If you had to choose one, then I'd prefer that you be sad about it," said Ayanokouji. *"Besides, it's possible that Tsukishiro could still be plotting something. I'd like to concentrate on that, if possible."*

"I understand the situation."

"It's inevitable that the burden that falls on you will get bigger, Sakayanagi."

"I know. If I'm going to be monitoring you constantly, that means I'll inevitably run the risk of needing to use the GPS search function on a regular basis."

In the end, there were certain things that would have to be entrusted to Sakayanagi's side, no matter what.

"Please, do not worry," she went on. "I already have a firm understanding of the point totals of all groups belonging to Class A."

"Well, I guess...that's because you've been in close contact with each other and coordinated so carefully," Ayanokouji said.

"That's because this exam's structure is such that we can see the point totals for the groups in the bottom ten until the twelfth day of the exam, and it is extremely important to have an understanding of which groups are in trouble and which groups have some breathing room," Sakayanagi explained. "There are several groups that have a certain degree of leeway, but not to the extent that they'd be able to break into the top ten. So, supposing even if we were to use the GPS search function multiple times, once per group, we should have more than enough to cover those expenses until the final day."

Her strategy was made possible thanks to both her own perfect leadership of Class A and the fact that her class had joined

forces with a group that would never, under any circumstances, betray them—Ichinose's Class C. It was fair to say that this was a strategy that Class D could never have implemented. Even just the cost of providing walkie-talkies was nothing to scoff at.

"We just have to keep the first-years coming after you in check, yes?" she asked.

"I take it that means that you're going to help?"

"This exam was getting a little boring anyway," said Sakayanagi. "I was just helping classmates clear Tasks. Besides, this favor of yours seems like it might offer some significant benefits to me as well."

"*Meaning?*" he asked.

"Meaning that what I'm doing for you is far too great to serve simply as payback for what you've done for Takemoto-kun," replied Sakayanagi. "In other words, this'll be the start of a new debt that you'll owe me. Wouldn't you agree?"

"That's painfully true," Ayanokouji agreed. *"But how about this? If you get me satisfactory results, then we'll say I owe you a favor instead of a debt."*

"It's decided, then. I'll go ahead and get started on the preparations."

"Oh, and also, if you don't mind, could I hold onto this walkie-talkie?" asked Ayanokouji. *"As a loan?"*

"Of course you may. I was already planning on letting you have it. It'll make it easier if we can stay connected with one another. Well then, could I ask that you please hand it back to Takemoto-kun for the moment? I'll have him give it back to you after I have explained the situation, Ayanokouji-kun."

Sakayanagi had a warm smile on her face as she recalled what happened on the tenth night of the exam. It was a wonderful memory. Displayed on her tablet, she spotted the five groups she had dispatched to stop the first-years.

"Now then, we've managed to stop those five suspicious groups from moving. Shall I go ahead and identify who planned this attack?" she mused.

Walkie-talkie in hand, Sakayanagi proceeded to contact the students of Class A.

6.5

"Um, TSUBAKI-SAN?" said Yagami.

"What now?" asked Tsubaki.

"While I don't know exactly what you're planning to do at this point, I think that it was a mistake to not have given detailed instructions to our five groups in anticipation of something like this happening," he said. "Surely it shouldn't have been all that difficult for our groups to have escaped before the second-years surrounded them, no?"

A total of five first-year groups had been dispatched. Even if someone had marked and been watching all five of them, actually *catching* them here on such a vast island shouldn't have been so easy. Yagami was suggesting that the fact that those five groups had been stopped so easily indicated a strategic error.

"Even if our groups had to somehow force their way past to make their escape, we could have come up with any number of excuses after the fact. Maybe our fellow first-years feared an entanglement with their senpais, or something to that effect. If only you had consulted with me sooner, then we—"

"You're saying this happened because I was careless?" asked Tsubaki.

"If you want to phrase it so harshly, then yes, that's precisely it," Yagami retorted.

Looking at the dissatisfied look on Yagami's face, Tsubaki spoke up once more to respond to his criticisms.

"Well, since it's all done, I guess I'll tell you... It's actually the opposite."

"What do you mean?" he asked, puzzled.

"They didn't catch my groups," said Tsubaki. "I captured my opponent's groups."

"U-um, but... I apologize, I'm afraid I still don't quite understand."

"Five groups were dispatched to go after Ayanakouji-senpai to get him expelled," Tsubaki said. "Even if those groups had been able to track him down and push him into a position where they would see him for what he really is, and even if there was a substantial difference in their physical abilities, Ayanokouji-senpai would just cut his way through, wouldn't he? Rumor has it that his physical abilities might be close to Housen-kun's. What I'm saying is that I had no intention of having those five groups run into Ayanokouji-senpai from the beginning."

Yagami cocked his head to the side, confused.

"If you put it that way, though, it sounds like you're saying that the groups we sent after Ayanokouji-senpai had no way of beating him in the first place," he said. "There was no point to this strategy."

"Our objectives are twofold. The first is to probe into Ayanokouji-senpai's thought process. Things like what he likes and what he dislikes," explained Tsubaki, drumming on her tablet with her index finger, making a *tap-tap* noise.

"He was more reluctant to make direct contact with the first-year students than to incur the penalty for missing his designated areas. He's been avoiding Tasks where instructors are present and staying clear of second- and third-years. What we can interpret from this is that he has an extreme dislike of standing out, and he's willing to take on penalties to avoid the spotlight."

"Even if we were doing all of this to learn his behavioral patterns though, there wasn't any need for our groups to be captured," insisted Yagami.

"There's something more important here, don't you understand? By doing this, we've caught the groups that were trying to protect Ayanokouji-senpai."

When Yagami heard that, he let out a surprised gasp.

"What we need to avoid now is letting someone else interfere as we're eliminating Ayanokouji-senpai," Tsubaki went on. "And the only person capable of eliminating him, apart from Utomiya-kun, would be Housen-kun."

Yagami finally understood what Tsubaki was getting at. He tried to search for Housen's GPS signature, but he couldn't find him anywhere.

"So, that's what you meant when you said something about what you see with your eyes not being everything," he said, realizing what the plan had been all along.

Having provided her explanation at last, Tsubaki decided to brush off any unnecessary distractions for the moment.

"Please allow me to ask you one final question," said Yagami. "If Housen-kun hadn't accepted your request to assist us in this matter, would this strategy have been possible?"

"No, it's not like that," she said. "Not exactly. You would be correct in saying that we decided to carry out this operation because we were absolutely sure that Housen-kun would be on board with the plan. He seemed like he was already fully prepared to fight alone anyway. Still, in the unlikely event that Housen-kun hadn't gone along with it, then I would've sent Utomiya-kun instead. In any case, I have perfectly managed to create an environment where a one-on-one confrontation will be unavoidable. All that's left to do now is to wait for the two of them to go at it. Win or lose, everything will turn out just fine."

Ayanokouji, who was working alone, would inevitably be eliminated.

6.6

A YOUNG MAN of exceptional size and stature among all the students in school ran through the woods at a breakneck pace. He had but one goal: defeating Ayanokouji Kiyotaka from Class 2-D.

Acts of violence were not recommended in this uninhabited island exam. Well, they weren't exactly endorsed in terms of what was acceptable behavior. However, unlike at school where students were monitored via surveillance cameras, there were no eyes on the students on this uninhabited island.

It would've been possible to figure out what was happening by examining a single student's wristwatch. Tsubaki had come up with and proposed the idea of surrounding and attacking Ayanokouji. But, even from the very beginning, this certain student was uninterested in being involved. It wasn't easy to find a specific person on a vast, uninhabited island like this. However, there was a reason why he finally agreed to take part in the plan.

Repeated GPS searches were necessary to pull this plan off, and if someone were to interfere, it would've all been for nothing. However, if someone were to take command, they could be useful and remove such obstacles. It was precisely because Housen had thought as much that he decided to pretend to follow Tsubaki's instructions. He would find Ayanokouji and finish him off in a one-on-one showdown, without anyone else getting in the way. And he could do it all without any extra effort on his part.

Now that Housen was only a short distance from Ayanokouji, he tossed his walkie-talkie aside. Doing so was the same as declaring that he was done following Tsubaki from that point forward. Then, Housen took out his own tablet and used the GPS search to confirm the home stretch of his hunt. On the map, he confirmed that Ayanokouji Kiyotaka's GPS signature was about 300 meters ahead of him. Housen was going to get closer to Ayanokouji than any other first-year student had before.

Just a little bit further. Housen was already rejoicing at the idea of being able to throw down in a serious fistfight. But then...

On the screen, right before Housen's eyes, a single GPS signature appeared, catching his attention as if someone was blocking his path. He thought it was just a simple coincidence and didn't bother confirming their identity. Just ahead, at the end of his line of sight, all Housen could see was that he was about to capture Ayanokouji.

"Found you, Ayanokouji-senpai!!!" he shouted, unable to contain his excitement.

Ayanokouji turned and noticed Housen standing there.

"Oh, Housen." Ayanokouji stopped walking and looked at him calmly.

"I've been waitin' for this time to come!" announced Housen.

"I was expecting you to come and see me much earlier," said Ayanokouji. "Guess you're calmer and more composed than I thought."

"That's 'cause it's a bummer when someone gets in the way when you're 'bout to throw down with someone," said Housen.

"What are you talking about?" asked Ayanokouji.

"Don't pretend ya don't get it," said Housen. "I already know that Nanase ran to you and tattled. She gave ya a friendly warning."

"Oh, I see. You deliberately made time so Nanase would come and tell me about the attack a day early."

"I thought it'd be the kind of cheap little trick that I hate, but it turned out to be pretty convenient for me. I just decided to put it to good use!" shouted Housen. He clenched his fists and slammed them together.

One would certainly have believed without any doubt that an honest-to-goodness fistfight would begin in less than ten seconds.

"That's a pretty tall order there, Housen. Don't you think?"

"Huh?"

Though they were in a place where the stage should have been set for a one-on-one confrontation, another young man barred Housen's path, not even projecting a shadow.

"Hurry up and get lost," sneered Housen. "You're in the way."

The other student had been lying in wait, as if he had foreseen Housen's arrival. Ayanokouji shared a brief glance with him and then quickly disappeared into the woods. Housen wanted to run after him immediately, but it would have been difficult to ignore this other person standing right in front of him.

"The hell are *you* doin' here, Ryuuen?" demanded Housen.

"Took the words right outta my mouth, Housen," the other replied. "What are *you* doin' in a place like this?"

Just from that brief comment, Housen immediately understood the situation.

"What...? *Heh.* Seems like we got intercepted somewhere, huh?"

He laughed in amusement, now realizing what was going on.

"So it wasn't a coincidence that those other first-years got caught by you second-years then," he added.

The people that Tsubaki had sent to hunt down Ayanokouji were in the same positions as second-year students, their respective GPS signatures overlapping on the map. None of them were moving from their respective locations. This proved that, just as Tsubaki was controlling the first-year students, there was someone else controlling the second-years.

"Is it you?" said Housen. "Nah, I don't get the feelin' it is."

If Ryuuen had been the second-years' commander, he would have had a tablet and a walkie-talkie, as those would have been indispensable items for giving orders. However, as far as Housen could tell, Ryuuen wasn't even wearing a backpack. Besides, it would have been difficult for someone fighting on the front lines to issue out commands to multiple groups.

"You finished sortin' out the situation?" Ryuuen asked.

"Dunno. But what I'm about to do is none of your business anyway."

Though Housen had come to understand what was going on, one thing he couldn't wrap his mind around was why Ryuuen had

become one of the people working to prevent Ayanokouji from getting expelled.

"Unfortunately for you, it *is* my business," replied Ryuuuen. With a thin smile on his lips, he started walking slowly toward Housen. "Y'know, I've been pretty busy, and my wallet's gotten a bit thin. I can be a bit of a mercenary if the situation calls for it."

"Money, huh?" Housen said. "But do you seriously think that you can stop me?"

"What? You seriously think that I *can't*?" Ryuuuen sneered.

Both flashed wicked grins at one another, standing extremely close to one another just an arm's distance between them. Ryuuuen was the first to throw a punch. Without taking his eyes off Housen, the second-year swung his left fist straight at him. Since there was a clear difference in power and resilience between the two due to differences in their physiques, Ryuuuen aimed for Housen's jaw.

"Oof... That's a mischievous left hand ya got there," said Housen.

Even though Ryuuuen had thrown the first punch in this fight, Housen had already prepared himself for war. He hadn't let his guard down at all and caught Ryuuuen's fist out in front of his chest, showing him a big, open-mouthed grin.

"Damn, dude, your breath *stinks*," said Ryuuuen. "Don't spew your nasty air at me, you gorilla."

"Only thing you got going for you is your mouth," Housen mocked. "Come on, why don't you show me the pride and skill of a second-year? Bring it!"

Housen released his grip on Ryuuuen's fist for a moment. But just when Ryuuuen thought he was being let go, Housen immediately clamped down his fingers and gripped his fist once more. He pulled Ryuuuen in close and then slammed his forehead against the older student's.

"Ugh!!!"

The unexpected blow violently rocked Ryuuuen's brain, causing him to stagger about wildly. It wasn't as though he didn't have any experience with this sort of thing. If anything, when it

came to being right in the middle of a fight, he had a much more impressive record than the average delinquent. It was just unlucky for him that his opponent's résumé was several times longer.

"Oraah!"

Ryuuen, unable to stand up straight again to move out of the way of Housen's incoming attack, took a kick right to the abdomen. He fell to the ground hard, landing on his back. This gave Housen a huge opening to exploit, but Housen just howled with laughter, not moving from his spot.

"That's all you've got? You were talking such a big game, but it ain't even been ten seconds yet, y'know?" he scoffed. "Don't make me laugh, man."

"Ugh... Damn, your head's as hard as a rock," grunted Ryuuen. "Are you sure your skull isn't just filled with 'em? You damn ape."

Ryuuen immediately hopped back up onto his feet and started throwing insults to provoke Housen again. At the sound of this, the underclassman just scratched the back of his head, seemingly exasperated.

"Guess I was expectin' too much, anyway," Housen said. "I should've known you weren't even worth it."

"Can't imagine there's anybody out there who could satisfy you though," argued Ryuuen.

"There is," said Housen. "Ayanokouji, who just strolled on past you, idiot. Now hurry up and get the hell out of here."

"Oh?" replied Ryuuen. The smile had disappeared from his face. "What? You're talkin' like you know it too, Housen."

"Know what? That the fact he looks all harmless on the outside is all just an act? Guess that means he's for real, huh."

"I thought there were only a few people who knew what that dude was like, deep down," Ryuuen said. "Seems like this really is something we've got in common, then."

They each sounded more as if they were monologuing than having a conversation, trying to convince the other of what they

thought.

"I've started feelin' interested in you for the first time, Housen. When and where did you throw down with him? And what was the result?"

"What, you infatuated with Ayanokouji too or somethin', Ryuuuen?" replied Housen, mockingly.

The biggest reason Ryuuuen had chosen to stay at this school was to get revenge on Ayanokouji. And that was why he could never allow Ayanokouji to be defeated, whether it be in a fight or something else, even by someone like Housen whose abilities as a fighter far exceeded those of a typical high-school student. Housen, noticing both the passion in Ryuuuen's words and also what seemed to be a kind of murderous intent behind them, snorted.

"Relax. Things with me and him ain't even been settled. Or maybe more like they ain't even gotten started yet."

Housen then quickly snapped his head to the left and right, cracking his neck, and started approaching Ryuuuen.

"I've never seen anybody just stop my punches like that before, all calmly like they were nothin'. And I definitely never saw anybody look like they didn't even feel any pain after gettin' stabbed with a knife," said Housen.

When Ryuuuen heard the words "stabbed with a knife," some memories immediately stirred within his mind. He recalled that Ayanokouji had, for a time, worn some bandages over his hand, and knew he had a scar.

"*Tch.* Sounds like he's been havin' a lot of fun without me, huh?" Ryuuuen scowled.

Even though Ryuuuen had been hit twice by Housen, there was no change in the look in his eyes as he glared at the underclassman. Despite seeing such an ominous sight, Housen didn't put up his guard. He simply went after Ryuuuen even harder. Housen was always ready for battle, and he had never worried about being proud or careless in a fight in the first place. That was even more evident now, considering that the person he was facing

off against was none other than Ryuuen, who had made quite a bad reputation for himself in junior high.

Housen kicked him, and then, with swiftness you wouldn't expect from someone so large, he closed in on Ryuuen once more. Ryuuen braced himself, trying to guard his face. Unfortunately, the first-year knocked him off his guard and threw a punch straight for it, using so much force that if Ryuuen hadn't been blocking, it could've easily broken his nose.

Ryuuen managed to get up, but he was quickly and violently slammed down to the ground once again. From that last blow, Housen could tell that the difference in their abilities in a one-on-one fight was clear as day. The upperclassman immediately started to push himself up, but Housen connected a vicious kick to his face, as though he had been waiting for just that moment. He sent Ryuuen crumpling backwards onto the ground with great force.

"Looks like yer pretty busy fallin' asleep and gettin' back up, huh?" Housen sneered.

Less than a minute after their actual fight had started, the winner was already obvious to anyone watching.

"That friggin' hurt, you jackass..." huffed Ryuuen.

"*Ha ha!*" Housen guffawed. "You're just like I thought you'd be, Ryuuen. That's all you've got!"

Housen hollered in triumph, but the situation itself was clear enough without the need for him to shout. The gap in their fighting ability had been obvious from the start, and it was too vast for Ryuuen to possibly overcome it. Even so, Ryuuen's will to fight showed no signs of breaking whatsoever.

Eighty percent of the people who went up against Housen had their spirit broken with just one blow. Another ten percent tried to act tough and bluff their way out. The remaining ten percent fell into total despair after the second or third blow. However, despite the damage Housen had already inflicted, the look in Ryuuen's eyes hadn't changed at all. That was precisely why Housen was trying to bring him down with words, trying to force him to see the difference between them. In a mental exchange like that, however, Ryuuen was one step ahead.

"Seems like you're havin' fun, but do you really think you've won?" he taunted. Though he was in pain, he didn't stop smirking. Ryuuken picked himself up once more, sitting upright.

"Don't make me laugh," Housen replied, standing before him. "As if someone like you could possibly compete with me." He seized Ryuuken by the scruff of his collar, holding him up.

"In the end, you're just a guy who can't get anythin' done unless he's usin' small fries to do his dirty work."

"Winnin' one-on-one isn't everything nowadays, y'know?" said Ryuuken. "In fact, back when we were in junior high, our opinions of the world weren't all that different."

He was trying to use logic against Housen to get him riled up.

"Seems like you'd prefer just sneaking around to avoid direct conflicts. What a touching effort," said Housen.

Ryuuken's attempts to shake Housen weren't meaningless, not completely. Unfortunately, they just weren't doing enough damage to be effective. Nothing changed the position they were in now; the fact remained that in a fistfight, Housen had an overwhelming advantage. But just then, while Housen still had his hands on him, Ryuuken swung wide with his left hand. He opened his hand before it connected, slapping the dirt he'd been holding right into Housen's eyes.

"Agh!"

The attack took Housen by surprise, but he defended himself with his free hand while his other was busy wiping away the dust.

"Yer really in for it now!" shouted Housen.

"That so?!"

This time, Ryuuken swung his right arm, once again aiming for his opponent's eyes. He flung some more sand he had been holding onto at him.

"I told you, yer *really* in for it!" Housen roared.

Though Ryuuken had tossed the sand from his dominant hand, Housen had managed to block it with his arm without much

difficulty. Ever since he had picked up Ryuuuen earlier, he'd been paying close attention to both of Ryuuuen's clenched fists.

"If those're the kinda cheap tricks a small fry like you's gotta rely on in a fight, no wonder you never stood a chance against me!"

Then, just as Ryuuuen was about to launch his counterattack, Housen quickly hit him again, slamming his fist into the right side of Ryuuuen's face. The punch was a quick jab, more focused on speed than force. Housen followed up with a blow to the left side of Ryuuuen's face, and then switched back to the right, delivering a barrage of blows like a boxer hitting a sandbag.

Even though the savage beating Ryuuuen was getting was leading him to lose consciousness, he shot a quick glare at Housen. The sharp gleam in his eyes caught Housen's gaze for just a moment and pierced right through him. Housen's field of vision wavered for a moment as watched Ryuuuen fall over onto the ground, like the upperclassman was getting blown away.

"Oof..."

Ryuuuen twisted his body as Housen worked him over, delivering a spinning kick just as he was about to fall. The kick just slightly grazed the tip of Housen's chin. Housen hadn't intended on letting himself get hit even once. Frustrated, he pressed closer to Ryuuuen, grabbing his red bangs with his left hand, holding his head up.

"Satisfied with your little payback shot there, huh?" he bellowed. "Huh?! I'm gonna kill you!"

Before Ryuuuen could hold up his arm to defend himself, Housen slammed his right fist into Ryuuuen's abdomen again and again.

"There ain't a single person out there who can beat *me* in a fight!" he roared.

Just as Housen landed his seventh blow, Ryuuuen's wristwatch started sounding an alarm.

"*Ha ha ha!* You're tryin' to act all cool, but your body's already hit its limit! It's screamin' for mercy, huh? Your watch is a

lot more honest than you are!"

The students' watches were designed to detect abnormalities in status such as heart rate, and Ryuuen's was issuing a Warning Alert.

"Damn, you really are a friggin' gorilla..." Ryuuen groaned.
"Guess I'll at least admit you're good in a fight..."

Housen interpreted Ryuuen's compliment to mean that he was yielding. The first-year smiled in triumph as he let go of Ryuuen's bangs. Unable to get back to his feet, Ryuuen just laid there, crumpled on the ground. The Warning Alert echoed uselessly into the woods.

"Your Warnin' Alert's goin' beep-beep, huh?" Housen taunted.
"Guessing that means you can't take much more, right? It's all right to just be honest and admit it. You don't gotta hide it, y'know?"

"Ha... Quit jokin'. My watch is just broken, ain't it?" said Ryuuen.

He lowered his gaze toward his watch, grinning, but it was obvious to just about anyone that he was truly hurt. Disgusted by such an unsightly spectacle, Housen spat on the ground near his feet, bored.

"See ya, Ryuuen. You weren't even fun."

"Hold up," said Ryuuen. "I'm wonderin' why you think that you've won."

"Wuzzat?"

"Did I say I lost this fight?" Ryuuen asked him. "Even once?"

Even Housen was beyond exasperated at hearing that. He was taken aback for a moment, but he regained his composure in the next. Although this situation was entirely one-sided with one person heaping abuse on the other, Ryuuen didn't look dead in the eyes yet. Just as he insisted, Ryuuen hadn't given up.

"I'll admit, you're tough mentally, at least," said Housen.
"But...you ain't gonna last forever!"

Human beings are creatures that are sensitive to pain. Even the strongest person alive would still feel pain at being hit with blows as powerful as the ones Housen dealt out. It was just a matter of how many hits you could stand. Even if you could endure them, it would be impossible to overcome that overwhelming disparity.

Although Ryuuken's Warning Alert went off for a second time, it didn't faze Housen. He then proceeded to inflict even more pain on Ryuuken in an even more precise manner.

After getting hit by countless attacks from the first-year, Ryuuken's wristwatch finally upgraded from a Warning Alert to an Emergency Alert. At this rate, if the situation didn't change in the next five minutes or so, some of the teaching staff and a medical crew would be on their way to his location.

"Your body's being honest, I guess," Housen told him. "Enough already. Just accept that this situation is hopeless for you."

"Ah..." Ryuuken sighed. "The pain is so numbing... It feels good..."

He didn't even glance at his wristwatch. He simply stood up, with an eerie grin on his face. Right then and there, for the first time, Housen realized that Ryuuken's indomitable will was the real deal.

"Dude, what even *are* you?" Housen demanded. "Why do you keep on tryin' when you can hardly stand? Being stubborn isn't getting you anywhere."

Ryuuken brought his watch up to his ear, as if the piercing, shrill sound of the Emergency Alert was an alarm clock to wake himself up.

"Stubborn?" Ryuuken repeated. "Hah! Y'know, that way of thinkin' is just plain wrong."

At that point, Housen thought that Ryuuken would have silenced the Emergency Alert. But in the end, he didn't. He simply lowered his arms and shoved his hands into his pockets.

"This fight ain't over yet," said Ryuuken.

"You insane? You realize that if you call the kiddie police here, you're gonna get eliminated, right?"

"And in that case, you realize that you'd not only get eliminated, but expelled too, right?" countered Ryuuen. His unspoken question was how exactly the school would judge the situation if they saw what happened here.

Sure, Housen had received a slight kick to the jaw, but he had essentially suffered no external injuries. The likelihood that the school would interpret this incident as a one-sided act of violence could not be ignored.

"What, seriously?" Housen sneered. "There's no way you can beat me, so you're just gonna play the victim instead? Lame. You're so *lame*, Ryuuen."

Depending on how things played out, considering their current positions, the tables seemed to have been turned. Even so, Housen wasn't that intimidated. He had already decided to use violence to bring Ayanokouji to his knees in the first place; the time to feel any reservations had long since passed.

"If the kiddie police are so, so scary, then wouldn't it be better for ya to just turn tail and withdraw?" Ryuuen taunted him.

"What a load of bull," said Housen.

He had determined that Ryuuen's strategy was to deliberately keep his Warning Alert on. He moved forward once again, stepping toward Ryuuen.

"My GPS has been turned off for a long time," he said. "If I just beat the ever lovin' crap outta you before they get here, then there ain't no problem."

Even if the school administrators rushed to their location, it would take about thirty minutes for them to arrive.

"*Ku ku.* Yeah, I suspected as much," replied Ryuuen.

Ryuuen welcomed the other boy to come and try to attack him, even though Housen wasn't intimidated by his threats. Ryuuen didn't even remove his hands from his pockets.

"If you ain't gonna put up your guard, then just go back to sleep!" shouted Housen. He clenched his right hand into a fist, not wanting to waste any more time.

Likewise, Ryuuen removed both of his fists from his pockets.

"Don't think for one second your cheap little tricks are gonna work on me!" Housen yelled.

Housen's intuition had told him that Ryuuen was clutching something in his hands, but that didn't stop him at all. He launched his right fist at Ryuuen in another straight punch, fully intending to shatter Ryuuen's spirit with it.

Seeing the punch coming his way, Ryuuen simply took it head-on, holding his arms up to block, but without opening either of his palms. Housen tried to wrench his arms open to get through his guard, but something happened in that next instant.

"Raaaah!!!"

Two shadows leapt out from a blind spot amongst the trees and landed right behind Housen, grabbing hold of him.

"Wha—?!"

It was no wonder that Housen was so shocked by these completely unexpected new arrivals. When Housen had used the GPS search just a few minutes prior, he hadn't picked up any other signatures in the area except for Ayanokouji and Ryuuen. Even if they ran straight for this location after Housen and Ryuuen started fighting, there was no way someone could have gotten here in time. And yet, despite all of that, these two young men were here, holding Housen's right and left arms. It was almost like they were ghosts.

If it were only Ishizaki, that would be one thing, but Albert was here as well, someone whose physique was in no way inferior to Housen's. Not even Housen could continue to stand his ground in this situation. Albert held his dominant right arm, while Ishizaki pinned the left.

"The hell?! GRAHH!!!"

Housen desperately struggled to keep up his rampage, but not even someone with a build as large and powerful as his could

shake the two of them off that easily. In the next instant, Ryuuen was back in Housen's face. He had now dropped his guard and wore an ominous grin.

"It's simple," said Ryuuen. "When a watch is busted, it can't get picked up by the GPS search."

Ryuuen had instructed Ishizaki and Albert to keep their GPS functions disabled over the past few days and had them accompany him. Housen understood now that when he walked into this fight thinking that it was going to be one-on-one, he had already fallen for Ryuuen's scheme.

"What, you seriously plannin' on fightin' me three-on-one, huh? Huh?!" he barked.

"Don't bellow so loud, ya ape," taunted Ryuuen. "Your execution begins now. Got it?"

Ryuuen clenched his fists once again and began throwing punches at Housen's face over and over without an ounce of hesitation. Housen jerked his head to the left and right, and after suffering repeated blows for what seemed like an eternity, he fell to down to his knees. Housen howled, knees trembling, but Ryuuen simply kept on punching without letting up at all.

Eventually, thanks to the beating he had been given, Housen's knees gave out and he collapsed to the ground. Just as his head dropped into the perfect position, Ryuuen held him in place with both hands and rammed his knee right into Housen's nose.

"Urk...!" Housen sputtered incoherently, and he fell to the ground on his back for the first time during their altercation.

Ryuuen signaled to his two classmates with his eyes, and they each pinned down Housen's arms again, just as they had while Housen was still standing.

"Gorillas gotta be handcuffed at all times, after all," Ryuuen said, brushing back his hair as he straddled Housen. "You really did a number on me, though, huh, Housen?"

"Lookin' down on me... You piece of shit!" shouted Housen.



"Lookin' down on you? *Heh*. What in the world's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're a damned small fry who can't even fight somebody one-on-one!"

"*Ku ku*. Don't make me laugh. Like I'd be stupid enough to challenge a gorilla all on my own," said Ryuuen, laughing as he raised his fist in the air.

Then, without hesitation, he brought it down hard, savagely striking Housen's cheek.

"Oh, yeah, that reminds me," he added. "Don't worry, Housen, I ain't gonna tell ya to cry. Nothing's gonna change even if you do apologize, anyway."

Housen wasn't so weak that a blow like that would do him in, even in a totally defenseless state like this. Rather, it only pissed him off and made him struggle harder. Albert and Ishizaki did their best to keep him subdued.

"You pieces of shit! Out of my way, you small fries!!" he howled.

"Quit strugglin,'" Ryuuen told him. "We're just about to start cookin', y'know? And I'm gonna work you over pretty thoroughly, so enjoy it."

Ryuuen slammed his fist down a second time and then a third. Even so, Housen wasn't whining tearfully; he was bellowing angrily.

"Guess you weren't braggin' when you said you were good in a fight, after all," said Ryuuen, amused.

Housen had proven, both physically and mentally, that he could rise to the occasion in battle. Ryuuen had concluded that had the fight had been established as a three-on-one contest from the very beginning, his own side would have been on the losing end. That was how much Ryuuen acknowledged the strength of Housen Kazuomi, the person before him right now.

However, in a battle, it was occasionally a quick, spur-of-the-moment decision that spelled victory or defeat. A single punch, a

single fall, something like that could change everything. A split-second of carelessness and arrogance could turn the tables. Ryuuuen had brought a one-sided beatdown upon Housen, and sure enough, even Housen was starting to lose strength.

"Damn, you're hard as a rock. My arm's startin' to hurt," said Ryuuuen, smiling as he gently blew on his reddened fist.

"*Huff, huff...* You loser..." wheezed Housen.

Using his dominant right arm, he tried to wrestle himself free from Albert, but it was no use.

"Never thought you'd have an underling like him... Didn't expect that." Housen glared at Albert. If you compared the two on strength alone, Albert was in no way inferior to the first-year.

"Yo, Biggie... Why the hell are you followin' Ryuuuen, anyway? Huh?"

And in terms of pure combat ability, it was clear that Albert was a cut above Ryuuuen.

"Well, it's certainly true that I couldn't beat a guy like Albert no matter how hard I tried, even if I came after him a couple times," said Ryuuuen.

"Then why?" asked Housen.

"You just don't get it, do you, Housen? Just bein' freakishly strong ain't enough for someone to stand at the top."

As someone who had always fought alone, an explanation like that was completely beyond Housen's grasp.

"*Ku ku,*" Ryuuuen chuckled. "Well, in Albert's case, I figure it's more just camaraderie, I guess."

Although Albert preferred not to engage in unnecessary fights, he had determined that following Ryuuuen's lead was the best course of action in order to keep the class together. This was exactly why he never hesitated to lend a hand, even though the things he was asked to do were sometimes outrageous. Though going along with Ryuuuen's instructions had at times meant that Albert was required to injure his fellow comrades, he had decided to follow Ryuuuen anyway because he believed that it would

ultimately be for the benefit of his classmates. Albert was, by nature, a tender-hearted young man who did not like violence.

"Don't think this means you've won, Ryuuen!" snapped Housen.

"Well, I figure it probably wouldn't make any sense to you," said Ryuuen. "Losin' like this, I mean. But as far as I'm concerned, it doesn't matter how we got here. The last one standin' is the winner."

Ryuuen personally didn't have any lofty ideals about the concept of a one-on-one fight, so he hadn't been hoping for one, not even from the beginning. To him, Housen's provocations were meaningless. If anything, he took them as the grief-stricken cries of a loser and basked in the joy they brought him.

"G-goddamn it...!"

After being smacked around dozens of times, even Housen was reaching his limit. At this point, even if there hadn't been anyone holding down his arms, it wouldn't have been so easy for him to defeat Ryuuen anymore.

"Remember this..." Housen panted. "Even if you beat me right here, next time we meet, I'm gonna kill you right on the spot."

"Eh, I ain't plannin' on letting a gorilla get his revenge on me though..." Ryuuen said. "If you're gonna do somethin', just make sure you do it good. You got that? Winnin' ain't that simple. Even if you beat the crap outta me, if you end up gettin' expelled 'cause of it, then you lose."

"What kinda bull—"

Before Housen could finish, Ryuuen swung for him with a straight punch, hitting him right in the cheek and knocking him out cold.

With Housen unconscious, the outcome of their fight had been decided. Ryuuen slowly got back to his feet. Wiping the blood off his fists, he turned to look up at the sky and let out an exhausted sigh.

"Phew... That was a bone-breakin' fight," he muttered.

"Still though, talk about a real crazy dude..." said Ishizaki. "I seriously thought he was a monster or somethin'."

"It would've been stupid to go toe-to-toe with a thing like him," replied Ryuuuen.

Albert nodded his head in agreement.

"Good work, you two," said Ryuuuen, offering them words of appreciation.

"N-nah, dude! I mean, all we did was back you up! Right, Albert?" exclaimed Ishizaki, flustered.

Neither Ishizaki nor Albert had any significant, obvious wounds. That was because Ryuuuen had decided that if he was going to drag them both into this fight, he needed to avoid letting them get hurt. If more people had gotten needlessly injured, this fight couldn't be written off as a simple scuffle.

"You two should get goin'," said Ryuuuen. "Wouldn't be surprised if some teachers showed up any minute now."

A fair amount of time had passed since his watch had started emitting the Emergency Alert.

"Um, what 'bout you though, Ryuuuen-san...?" asked Ishizaki, sheepishly.

"Well, this situation is what it is," Ryuuuen replied. "Even if I tried to continue, it ain't like the school would let me carry on so easily."

Just like the unconscious Housen, Ryuuuen had also suffered some serious injuries.

"I'll just let myself get eliminated, like Housen," he said.

"Are you sure that's okay?" asked Ishizaki.

"I've already entrusted everythin' that needs to get done to Katsuragi. Though it has gotten pretty tough to break into the top three."

If Ryuuuen had just let Housen go, there was a chance that he would've headed after Ayanokouji and found him again. And if Ryuuuen disappeared after the fight, having beat up Housen, that would've been a problem in itself too. With how things stood, the

school would determine that they had a one-on-one fight, and they would both be eliminated. Ryuuen had determined that this plan was the cleanest way of going about the situation, not to mention the only solution, really.

"...That's pretty disappointin' though," said Ishizaki.

As of yesterday, Ryuuen and Katsuragi's group were in fifth place. Though there was only a slight chance of it, there was a possibility that they could've climbed even higher in the rankings. Ishizaki lamented over that fact.

"Nah, not really," Ryuuen said with a thin smile. It sounded as though he'd remembered something.

Ishizaki and Albert exchanged glances, not really understanding the reasoning behind what Ryuuen had said.

"I'll tell ya 'bout it soon enough," he promised them. "But for now, get goin'."

Ishizaki and Albert both wanted to make sure that they made it through this exam together with their groups, so they had to avoid getting left behind. The two needed to exchange their watches for new ones and join up with their groups as soon as possible. They ran off toward the starting area as quickly as they could.

Once they were gone, Ryuuen sat down on Housen's unconscious body, using it like a bench.

6.7

THANKS FOR THE REPORT. You can head back to the exam now," said Tsubaki, quietly ending the transmission on her walkie-talkie.

"I take it that means the results were not favorable?" asked Yagami. Based on the look on her face, he guessed that the plan didn't seem to be going well.

"I sent someone to the location where Housen-kun was supposed to have made contact," Tsubaki told him. "Apparently, the teachers had already collected him and were taking him back to the starting point. From the sounds of it, he had an altercation with someone named Ryuuen from Class 2-B, and both were seriously injured. Well, I already found it suspicious that Ayanokouji-senpai was still on the move anyway."

If Housen had been waiting for a one-on-one match with Ayanokouji, then Ayanokouji's GPS signature shouldn't have moved from that spot. It was odd that it hadn't stayed there.

"Admittedly, I do not know very much about that particular person, but I suppose this means that he managed to stop Housen-kun," said Yagami.

There's something off about this situation. Tsubaki pursed her lips into a pout and wondered why the operation had failed. Ayanokouji's designated areas were C3 and D2, and the first-years had been in the perfect positions to encircle him. However, one could also say that the first-years' advantage had also given their opponents more time.

"This isn't the end of our attempt to drive Ayanokouji-senpai toward expulsion, is it?" Yagami tried to press Tsubaki for answers. "If we're going to ensure that we save those in our grade, then we need to crush the other single-person units. If you have a plan to continue the operation, I'd like to hear it."

Tsubaki simply averted her gaze and muttered, disinterested.

"It's not worth getting involved in any more risky business beyond this," she said. "Even if we force the issue and manage to help some groups who are failing now, in the long run, people like that are destined to disappear."

"Meaning that...we're going to withdraw?" asked Yagami.

"I don't like this," said Tsubaki. "My strategy might have been doomed to fail from the very beginning."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Talk about the bounty on Ayanokouji-senpai's head has been going around, and he's been extremely cautious. More importantly, if we can't even trust our fellow first-year students, then this plan is foolish."

Rather than feeling disheartened, what Tsubaki disliked about failing was the unsettling disturbance that followed.

"I should have just done this alone," she said. "I could kick myself." She regretted what had happened deeply.

But when Tsubaki lowered her tablet, she noticed something.

"Huh...?" she muttered.

She realized that Utomiya wasn't there.

"What's the matter?" asked Yagami.

"Where's Utomiya-kun?" asked Tsubaki.

Yagami also acted as though he was only just now noticing that Utomiya wasn't there. "I thought he was nearby? At least he was about thirty minutes ago..."

That was when Tsubaki threw herself into a battle with an enemy that couldn't be seen on the tablet. Sensing that there was something troubling going on, she brought up the screenshot of the map from ten minutes ago and proceeded to look for Utomiya's last location. He was shown to have been about 400 meters southwest of where they now stood.

"What are you doing...?" she wondered aloud.

There was only one other GPS signature near Utomiya's, and it belonged to a student from Class 2-A named Kitou Hayato. The

instant Tsubaki saw the name, she took her walkie-talkie in hand.

6.8

VISIBILITY WAS POOR among the trees, but a large young man ran through the woods anyway. His destination was the campsite where Tsubaki Sakurako, Yagami Takuya, and Utomiya Riku had been staying. He had been given instructions by Sakayanagi; she had entrusted him with the task of finding out the identity of the enemy leader. As Kitou ran, trying to scan the area for signs of the campsite, he caught sight of a lone figure just ahead. It looked to be another young man. He stood there, watching Kitou, as though he planned on barring his path.

Kitou didn't recall seeing this person's face before, but he immediately recognized that this was not an ally. There was still some distance between them, so Kitou tried to take a different route, but as soon as the other person noticed him changing direction, they followed suit. Now aware that he was most definitely an enemy, Kitou stopped running and turned directly toward him.

"You got some business over here?" Although his opponent was an upperclassman, Utomiya forgot to speak politely. His voice was hostile, and there was an aggressive look in his eyes.

"If I remember right, you're Kitou Hayato... My senpai, right?" he added. He spoke more calmly now, remembering his manners and managing to be a bit more polite.

Though the second-year had originally been working alone, Utomiya remembered removing this upperclassman from his list of targets when Kitou joined up with a group over the course of the exam. However, Utomiya figured that telling him that he had known of him from the very beginning might arouse suspicion, so he addressed him as though he had not really been aware of him until now.

"I'm in a hurry right now," said Kitou, intentionally refusing to engage. He tried to pass, but when he went to move, the first-year grabbed him by the shoulder to stop him.

"...What?" said Kitou. He glared at Utomiya, irritated.

Utomiya simply shot back a sharp look of his own. "Sorry, but I'm not planning on letting you get any farther than this."

"What?" repeated Kitou, brow furrowed in puzzlement.

Utomiya threw a punch right at Kitou's face. Kitou calmly avoided it and put some distance between them.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

Just then, Utomiya rushed in close and moved to grab his upperclassman by the collar.

"I told you," Utomiya growled. "I'm not planning to let you get any farther than this."



"What's your name?" asked Kitou.

"Utomiya Riku. Class 1-C."

Utomiya. He was one of the people that Sakayanagi had ordered him to investigate. Since he had come here to stop Kitou, that ruled him out as the enemy commander.

Utomiya, for his own part, had surmised that Kitou must have been sent here on someone else's orders as well.

"Who ordered you to come here?" barked Utomiya.

But Kitou showed no sign that he would give up any names.

"Even if you're an upperclassman, I'm not going to show you any mercy," Utomiya warned him.

At that, Kitou's eyes lit up and sharpened. He thrust a thick arm right at Utomiya's neck. Utomiya didn't panic at all and calmly kept his distance, evading the attack easily. However, due to his quick evasive maneuver, the walkie-talkie in his pocket fell to the ground near Kitou's feet.

"Damn...!" he shouted.

Even if Utomiya rushed and tried to press in close to Kitou again, leaping at him would be a stupid decision, considering the other student's stance. A tense standoff between the two ensued for a while, but the silence was broken thanks to someone else.

"Utomiya-kun? What are you doing?"

Tsubaki's voice could be heard coming from the walkie-talkie laying on the ground near Kitou's feet.

"Tch..."

Utomiya clicked his tongue and looked down at the fallen device. Tsubaki seemed to suspect something suspicious going on when she didn't get a response to her first question, so she spoke once more:

"Weren't you supposed to be following my orders?"

Utomiya was still looking for an opportunity to pounce, but Kitou motioned at him, signaling with his hand that he could relax.

Kitou bent down and picked up the walkie-talkie at his feet, and, to Utomiya's total surprise, casually tossed it over to the first-year.

"Hmph. What the... I mean, what are you plotting, senpai?" asked Utomiya, sounding as though all the ill will had left his body.

"My objective is complete," said Kitou, flatly.

Kitou had determined that there was no longer any need for him to fight, so he picked up his belongings and turned back. He heard Tsubaki's voice coming from the walkie-talkie, so he had concluded that she was the enemy commander. Kitou turned his back to Utomiya and started to leave, leaving himself completely open.

"Utomiya-kun, if you can hear me, then calm down. Fighting with Kitou-senpai right here and now would be a bad idea."

Utomiya didn't answer right away. He could only stare at the device for a while, and as he did, Kitou completely disappeared from view.

"...It's me." Utomiya finally spoke up now that he was alone.

"Are you okay? What happened with Kitou-senpai?"

"He just left," Utomiya said. "I watched him go."

"Why did you do something so inconsiderate?" Tsubaki scolded him. *"If things went badly, you could've been expelled along with him, Utomiya-kun. Don't you see? Or did you do that to keep the second-years from getting close to me?"*

"No, it's not like that... I'm sorry. It was a selfish decision on my part. I just thought that, even if the plan didn't work so well this time, it still wasn't necessary for us to let our opponents get too much information about us. I wanted to stop them from getting close to you, Tsubaki."

"Well, I'm not going to criticize you over something that's already passed. But was this your idea, Utomiya-kun?"

There was a brief period of silence before Utomiya answered.

"Well... Y-yeah, it was mine," he said. "It was selfish."

Perhaps it was because he sounded upset, but Tsubaki remained silent on the other end of the line for a while before

speaking again.

"I see. Anyway, for the time being, if you can move, head on back."

"Got it."

Utomiya ended the transmission and looked down at his tablet. Then, he took the walkie-talkie in hand once more, entered in a different code, and started transmitting again.

"I got rid of that pesky second-year insect," he said. "They should be satisfied. They think that Tsubaki is the commander."

"Excellent work. Just as I'd expect from you, Utomiya-kun."

"So, what about Tsubaki's plan?" asked Utomiya.

"It failed, just as you wished. Still, I think it was a mediocre plan that was never going to succeed anyway. I probably didn't even need to go out of my way to make sure Ayanokouji-senpai was warned ahead of time."

"I'm ending the transmission."

Taking care not to pointlessly prolong the conversation, Utomiya powered down his walkie-talkie.

Chapter 7: The Man Called Tsukishiro

THAT MORNING, I woke up somewhere along the right edge of area E3. I went to check the map on my tablet. As a result of avoiding the first-years' assault all day yesterday, I hadn't set foot in even a single designated area the entire day. Although Sakayanagi had informed me that the first-years had withdrawn in the afternoon, I still didn't dare head to my designated areas after that. Instead, I just participated in Tasks that appeared along my escape route and scored the bare minimum level of points needed for me to continue.

The one o'clock designated area yesterday had been randomly assigned and was in area F3. The designated area after that was in G3 at three o'clock. I opened the map app and brought up the screenshot that showed my GPS search results as of one o'clock in the afternoon yesterday. At the time, there had been five first-year groups following me around. After that, I had been certain they would let Housen handle the rest, since he had been approaching me with his GPS turned off. I was sure that was the plan.

It was also clear from my subsequent search results that after Housen had confronted Ryuuen and they had settled their match, all the groups withdrew and went back to their normal exam activities. However...while Sakayanagi and I were focusing our attention on those enemies, several disparate groups of first-year students had gathered and moved ahead of me in the direction of my designated areas.

I thought there was something suspicious about these groups because as soon as three o'clock in the afternoon rolled around and my fourth designated area for the day was announced, they started moving west and heading toward area F4. The paths were narrow there, and it would've been difficult for me to escape if they blocked my way. In order to avoid them, I was forced to take a considerable detour.

"I avoided the danger just in case, but that's going to cost me quite a bit. It'll put that much more strain on my last day," I muttered to myself.

As a result of trying to avoid encounters with those students, I ended up missing my designated areas six consecutive times. I was facing four consecutive penalties. I needed to get out of this situation as soon as possible. If I missed three more areas, then my penalties would cost me eighteen more points. My total score was currently 119 points, but I was far, far from being completely in the clear to avoid expulsion. According to my estimations, the safe zone for me would be around 105 points. If I fell below that mark, then it wouldn't be surprising at all if I ended up being expelled from school.

That was why I had moved about in the middle of the night last night. I had successfully managed to reach the vicinity of area G3, which, again, had been the fourth and final designated area of the previous day. Since we couldn't check the leaderboards anymore, we'd have to fight our way through the final day while only guessing at our rankings. The rankings as of the night of the twelfth day might not have been entirely dependable, after all. Things seemed like they should be fine since there had been a total of 157 groups, but in reality, many of those groups had likely merged with one another by now. I needed to assume that the number of groups had decreased considerably.

Doubtless, some of those groups' main goal would be to save their classmates on the final day. If a group that was close to 200 points merged with a group that had fewer points, they would immediately overtake me in the rankings. I couldn't ignore the impact that doubled score values on the final day would have either. The strategy that the first-year students came up with had slowly but surely pushed me down the path toward expulsion.

It was possible that there were still first-year students waiting for me up ahead, but the GPS search function was no longer a practical option for me. My seven o'clock designated area was H3. I couldn't exactly say that it was a particularly good position even if I was being charitable, considering that it was in the mountains. But since I had no way to predict what was going

to happen, I didn't have any other choice. It was going to take me nearly two hours to get from here to there, even if I took the shortest possible route.

I couldn't sit around hemming and hawing. I had no idea if I might find myself forced into a close battle to see if I'd even be able to reach my designated areas today, a day when many students would be tackling Tasks with doubled point values. I could lose even more ground in the rankings by noon.

Just when I had packed up my things and set out, I received a call from Sakayanagi on the walkie-talkie.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun," she said pleasantly. *"It would seem you had quite an ordeal yesterday."*

"I made it through thanks to you, Sakayanagi," I replied.

"Will you be all right? With those penalties? Though it does seem as though you've moved quite a bit over the course of the night."

She had noticed my movements via the GPS search.

"My first designated area is H3," I told her. "I don't have much time to spare, but I think I can make it in time."

"H3, you say?" she muttered, repeating my designated area with deep interest.

It sounded like there was something on her mind. As I continued moving, Sakayanagi kept the conversation going.

"Truthfully, there is one thing that is troubling me," she said. *"Ichinose-san seems to have disappeared. She was nowhere to be found this morning."*

"She disappeared? You think there was an accident?" I asked.

"No, I believe that she left voluntarily. There's been something odd about her these past few days."

Come to think of it, I remembered her saying something earlier about Ichinose seeming off.

"Why are you telling me this, though? I can't imagine that there's anything I can do about it that'll help."

"Actually, I performed a GPS search to find Ichinose-san's location and discovered that she was in E3, the same as you, Ayanokouji-kun. However, she was at the opposite end, near area D3."

Even if she was in the same area, there was quite a bit of distance between borders, end to end. And besides, I had already entered F3 by this point.

"What was your last designated area yesterday, Sakayanagi?" I asked.

"D5," she replied. "*Ichinose-san was there too.*"

That meant that Ichinose had set out early this morning without telling anyone and somehow made it all the way to area E3. Why?

"This morning, I noticed that our point total had gone down by one," Sakayanagi said. *"I checked with everyone else in our group and there was no evidence to suggest any of them used the GPS search. It would seem that Ichinose-san was the one who used it. It's currently unclear whether she intends to reach area E3 or some other area further away, but wouldn't it be rational to assume that she left to meet with someone?"*

"Yeah, you're right about that," I agreed. "If she was in your fourth designated area yesterday, then that's just about the only reason she could have for moving about so early in the morning."

"I thought perhaps she might have left to find you, Ayanokouji-kun, but—"

"Sorry, but I have no idea why she would," I told her. "And I haven't seen Ichinose even once during this entire exam so far. I guess if I wait, then Ichinose might come around to the F3 side, but unfortunately, I'm in kind of a hurry right now. What are you going to do?"

"Our first designated area of the day is area E6, so that's where our group ought to be heading. While this means that we will be discarding our chances of getting the Early Bird Bonus, we have no other choice but to ignore it for now. Even if, at worst,

Ichinose is eliminated from the exam, it won't have a significant negative impact on us since it's the last day."

At seven members, Sakayanagi's group was impressively large. They had been in fourth place as of the end of the twelfth day, so they were in a prime position to shoot for the winner's podium. Losing Ichinose now would be a serious blow. Putting it another way, this meant that Ichinose had chosen to do something selfish on the final and most important day of the exam. She was the sort of person who went above and beyond for her friends, more than other people did, which made what she was doing right now totally incomprehensible.

"Sounds like you've got it rough, too," I told Sakayanagi.

"*Accidents happen,*" she said. "*Well, I suppose even if we leave things be, the special exam is going to be over in just half a day, so I don't think there will be any problems. If you do happen to see her, though, please ask her what's going on.*"

She added that continuing this conversation any further would only be a hindrance to me, so she stopped transmitting then and there.

"Where is Ichinose headed...?" I asked myself aloud.

As I continued walking, I put the walkie-talkie away in my backpack and took out my tablet. I didn't need to worry about charging it anymore since it was the final day. I had about 31 percent battery life remaining, so I figured that it would be fine. The map filled up the screen, showing me the designated area that I ought to have been heading toward, as well as various Tasks scattered here and there. Over these past two weeks, Tasks really had appeared everywhere throughout the entire island.

However, at least for this final day, I could see that no Tasks had appeared in the northern part of the island, meaning in any of the areas marked 1 through 3. Rather, many Tasks seemed to have been concentrated in the central and southern parts of the island in the areas marked 5 through 10, more specifically in areas A through E. This made sense, considering that this was the final day of the exam and doing things that way would guide people back to the starting area.

Moving quickly to reach my designated areas and to take on Tasks would be a wise choice. I did want to use my GPS search to locate Ichinose, but right now I was in danger of getting expelled. I needed to save every point I could if I was going to increase my chances of survival.

7.1

MY SECOND DESIGNATED AREA for the day was revealed to be area I2, in the northeast corner of the uninhabited island. I had managed to stop the penalties from racking up, so it was a safe place for me to go for the time being. Students were basically supposed to walk straight back to the starting point once the exam ended at three o'clock this afternoon, but the school was apparently planning to collect students here and there as needed via a boat that was patrolling the island, depending on how things went at the end. It seemed like the patrol boat would be coming to area J6, which was nearby, at five o'clock.

"It's the endgame and my designated areas are popping up in some really ridiculous places..." I muttered to myself.

While the circumstances of the exam were technically the same for everyone, with Tasks concentrated on the south side of the island, my designated area was located at the area furthest northeast. I was tempted to bemoan my luck that I was clearly in a bad Table, but there was nothing I could have done anyway. It would have been easier for me to just accept that and be done with it, but I was beginning to sense that there was something disturbing going on.

I hadn't passed any other students in a while, not a single one. I hadn't even *seen* any other students. Though this island was vast, there were many opportunities to spot or overhear other people as long as you kept up with the Basic Movement system. Of course, it wasn't hard to understand why I hadn't bumped into any of the students from my Table yesterday, as I hadn't arrived at my final designated area. What this indicated to me was that most students were already heading down to the southern part of the island, where the Tasks were concentrated. Perhaps I could touch down in I2 and then ignore my final designated area for the day in favor of Tasks.

A narrow river in H3 divided the area. It couldn't be used as a shortcut, which made that area a pain in the rear as it inevitably

forced me to take a detour. The silver lining was that all I needed to do was walk along the river, so there wasn't any need to worry about getting lost. If I didn't panic and just made my way southwest along its banks, once I reached the point where I could cross the river, I could head northeast from there. I figured it would be a good idea to just walk along the water until I reached the mountains, and that was exactly how I got to the other side.

Once I got near the center of area H3 though, something happened.

"Ayanokouji-kuuuuuun!"

I was just walking along and listening to the sound of the flowing river when I heard someone calling my name from far away. The voice came from the north side of the river, from where I just crossed. When I looked in that direction, I spotted Ichinose, covered in mud. She was looking over at me and was completely out of breath.

"Ichinose... You came all the way to H3?"

If I remembered correctly, according to what Sakayanagi had said, Ichinose should've been in area E3. It was just after ten in the morning right now. If I assumed that the sun started to rise around five-thirty in the morning, then that meant Ichinose must've walked for about four and a half hours to get here. And she would have had to walk at a rather fast pace at that.

"I...I came to see you, Ayanokouji-kun!" shouted Ichinose from the other side of the river, though the fact that she was exhausted and out of breath made it tough for her to get the words out.

"I'm coming over to you right now!" she added, breaking into a run along the riverside. She wobbled and staggered as she moved.

Her heavy-looking backpack must have been weighing her down because she tossed it to the ground right then. Her gait looked incredibly unsteady, like she was limping. She had probably reached the limits of her physical strength, and it must have taken a backbreaking level of effort for her to have come this far. I hurriedly headed back the way I came to meet up with her. After

about five minutes of us both running along the riverside, we reached a point where we could cross and meet up. I crossed over to the north side since I couldn't force Ichinose to push herself.

"I, I finally... I finally caught up... Please wait, I'm coming," Ichinose panted, heading toward me.

I wondered if she felt responsible for following me here and calling out to me or something. She struggled desperately to stay on her feet, summoning all her strength to walk, and she approached me, one step at a time. She was completely out of breath by the time she arrived before me, and now she couldn't even seem to stand anymore. She pitched forward, falling.

"Oof!"

I caught Ichinose just as she was about to fall.

"What in the world is the matter, Ichinose?" I asked.

Ichinose looked up at me, her mouth moving quickly, as she desperately tried to sort out her words.

"Th-there's something I have to tell you, Ayanokouji-kun, no matter what!" she pleaded.

"Something to tell me?" I repeated.

"I was so, so worried!" she said, frantic. "I was so worried for such a long time. I worried what I should do, and... I have to protect my friends and my classmates, but..."

What in the world was she talking about? I couldn't understand what she was getting at, but at the very least, I could tell that she was trying her absolute hardest to tell me whatever it was.

"But still, even so, I was worried about you, Ayanokouji-kun...which is why, no matter what, I had to—"

I hadn't had any contact with Ichinose at all during the course of this special exam. I was sure something unexpected had happened. She had traveled frantically for four hours just to come and tell me about it.

"I, I... My watch broke, so, I thought I'd go back to the starting point and exchange it, but...when I did, Acting Director

Tsukishiro and Shiba-sensei, they said...!"

Ichinose was exhausted to the point that she couldn't even catch her breath anymore. She spoke in gasps. I didn't know when all this had happened, but it sounded like she had been worrying about this for several days.

"Th-they said that if you were still here on the final day of the exam, that they were going to call you to I2 and bury you, Ayanokouji-kun!" she wailed.

I2. Bury. It was certainly true that if someone overheard a conversation like that, they'd find it very disturbing. I figured the reason Tsukishiro and this other teacher had so carelessly allowed Ichinose to overhear their conversation was because her watch had been broken, so she wouldn't have had a GPS signature for them to sense.

"You said something about protecting your classmates... Does that mean that Tsukishiro threatened to do something to them?" I asked.

Ichinose seemed momentarily surprised by my correct guess. She nodded repeatedly.

"He, he said that if I told you, Ayanokouji-kun, that...that he'd expel my classmates... But, but, I just couldn't abandon you, Ayanokouji-kun!" she wailed.

"You should have not cared about it and just abandoned me," I told her. "I am your enemy, after all."

In this situation, she should have been thinking to herself, "*Hopefully that Ayanokouji will get expelled,*" and been satisfied with that. It would have been better if she had. When Ichinose heard me say that, though, she vehemently, emphatically shook her head.

"I couldn't do that! Ayanokouji-kun, you're... I mean, you're... You're not my enemy, Ayanokouji-kun!" she shouted, clutching the front of my shirt.

"I think that I *am* your enemy, though," I answered.

"But, I... But to me, you're—"

She already had a firm hold on my shirt, but now her grip tightened even more.

"B-because, because I love you, Ayanokouji-kun!" she shouted.

Most likely, Ichinose hadn't expected she would let those words leave her lips. Once they had, though, she covered her mouth and averted her eyes.

"N-no, that's not what I—! Wh-what I just, I, um?!" she squeaked.

It was like she couldn't grasp what had just happened either. She panicked, quickly shaking her head repeatedly.

"Wait, what did I just say?!" she wailed.

She was flustered, unable to comprehend what was happening, as if the memory of what she had just said had fled.

"Do you want me to repeat it? What you just told me?" I asked her.

"Y-yes... Ah, I mean, no! I just remembered what I said, so you don't have to say it after all!!!" she wailed.

"...Thank you, Ichinose."

"Wh-wh-wha—?!"

I had to express my thanks to her once again. She had put me ahead of her classmates, and even ahead of her own group, the people she had joined in hopes of winning this exam. I wasn't going to make light of or disrespect her feelings.

"If you hadn't given me this warning, then I don't know what might have happened to me," I told her.

Perhaps this was actually a huge crossroads for me. Had I not met Ichinose here, I would've gone on to I2, not expecting Tsukishiro to be there. It was certainly true that he would have threatened Ichinose too, to keep her quiet. But here she was, right in front of me. She was willing to take the risk to tell me everything that was going on.

"Was what you said before the truth?" I asked.

"O-oh, well that, it's just, um—it's not like *that*," she said, flustered. "I mean, you know?"

"If it's not like that, then please take it back right now," I said. "I'll get the wrong idea."

"...Um, well... It's...not exactly the wrong idea..." she answered, meekly.

She had tried to deny it at first, but now, she seemed convinced that she couldn't talk her way out of it anymore.

"...I....I do love you..." she said softly.

She spoke so quietly, and in such a faint voice, that it was like her words vanished into the air as soon as they passed her lips. But I heard it.

"Also, I, um, I've noticed that I've probably felt this way for a while now... I-I'm sorry," said Ichinose.

There was nothing for her to apologize for.

"To be honest, I didn't expect that you would think of me that way," I said. "I'm a little shocked."

"I-I'm sorry... It probably bothers you, right?"

"Not at all. It's just that I can't respond to your feelings right this minute."

"Ye... Yeah, I, I figured that I'm not really good enough or a good match for you, Ayanokouji-kun..."

"That's not true. There are a few things that I still need to take care of right now though, so I don't think that I can answer 'yes' or 'no' at the moment. Not with the way things are."

Besides, I needed to avoid telling her about Kei. Even if Ichinose would be even more hurt and resentful if she found out about her later, we were at the tail end of the uninhabited island exam right now. There was still some time left, so I shouldn't do anything that would rob her of her will to fight in this exam.

"I'm sure it might not be easy to accept," I said, "but that's the best answer I can give you right now."

"Yeah... I understand." Ichinose nodded. She wasn't upset or angry in the slightest.

"I'm planning on heading to I2 anyway," I told her. "There's something I need to do there."

"B-but you can't! It's dangerous!" she exclaimed.

"If I don't go, then I won't be able to protect you or your precious classmates, will I?" I replied.

I was sure that Ichinose should have understood that herself since she had agonized over it so much. It was easy to imagine that Tsukishiro would find out that she had told me something. However, I thought that I needed to teach Tsukishiro that this wasn't a predicament for me. Instead, this would be my comeback.

"Take a nice, long break, and then try and join back up with your group, okay?" I told her, gently stroking her head.

It was time for me to go to I2.

7.2

THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN I2 and I3 was quite rocky. There were even some bushes there that came up past my knees.

"Think this'll be a good place," I said to myself.

I took off my backpack and hid it in one of the bushes. I didn't know what awaited me from this point forward, and I figured that my stuff would only get in the way. I decided to leave everything behind, including my tablet. If I headed toward the seaside, then I could probably make my way back to this rocky area without getting lost.

So, according to Ichinose, this was the place Tsukishiro was planning to bury me, huh? Perhaps the other groups in my Table were actually being shown completely different designated areas. I didn't want to waste a point conducting a search just to find that out for sure, though.

Besides, now that I knew that Ichinose was involved, the option of not going to I2 had disappeared. If I chose not to go, Tsukishiro would show Ichinose's class no mercy. It was hard for me to even guess what kind of awful punishment he would dole out in retaliation.

I finished getting ready and was just starting to walk toward I2 when...

"Hey, Ayanokouji. What a coincidence."

It was Nagumo, tablet in hand. He looked over at me as though deeply interested in something.

Given the situation, it was odd for anyone else to be in the vicinity. Aside from the bounty on my head, was it possible that this young man was involved with Tsukishiro in some way? No, I figured that the title of student council president probably didn't mean much of anything to Tsukishiro. Nagumo being here didn't necessarily mean that there was a connection between him and that matter. Still, I thought I ought to be cautious.

"Student Council President Nagumo, why are you in a place like this?" I asked.

Even with just a quick look around the area, I didn't see any other students that could possibly be a member of Nagumo's group.

"Relax. It's only you and me here," said Nagumo, trying to ease my concerns. Perhaps he had used the GPS search.

"There aren't any Tasks nearby. Where exactly did you come from?" I asked.

Nagumo had come from somewhere in the southeast.

"I was playing around on the sandy beaches in I4," said Nagumo. "The uninhabited island exam is pretty much finished already, after all."

To think he was playing around, having a good time on the beach while almost all of the other students were whipping themselves up into a frenzy trying to collect points for the final day.

"Is that what you'd call the luxury of being king?" I asked.

Nagumo didn't answer the question. He only laughed.

"Even if that were true, I suppose I could say something similar back at you, Ayanokouji. You came all the way to a place like this even though it's not a designated area. There are no Tasks either. Were you meeting with Honami?"

It wasn't surprising that he brought her name up. Even if Nagumo hadn't seen Ichinose directly, if he used the GPS search, it would have been clear that she was in the proximity.

"Is it a problem if I did?"

"Nah," said Nagumo. "Not really? Well, I suppose if you two were together even now, then there would be a lot I could say, but you're alone, and that means that you have some other purpose. What's over in I2?"

Though I decided to just let his question slide, Nagumo continued speaking, as though he were trying to change the subject.

"The uninhabited island exam's already over, right?" he said. "I was just thinking that I'd come and talk to you, at least once. There aren't many situations at school where I, as the student council president, can talk with you alone, just the two of us."

"That's certainly true," I agreed.

I was simply a student who hung back in the shadows. He, on the other hand, was the head of the student council, someone intimidating enough to quiet a crying child. We were a mismatched pair. Still, I couldn't imagine that he had come all this way just to make small talk.

"I get the sense that you were aware that the first-year students were going to come after me," I told him.

"Not a bad guess," said Nagumo.

There was a twenty-million-point bounty on my head. Someone would receive those points if they got me expelled. Even though Tsukishiro was the one who spearheaded the idea, it was an undeniable fact that Nagumo was involved. A man in his position could have easily monitored the situation via GPS searches regardless of the time of day. If he had watched my and the first-years' movements yesterday, then it would have been obvious to him that they had mounted their attack.

Nagumo could see the whole picture for this particular special exam as well as I could. No, actually, he could see it *better*. If he had gotten here without any difficulty, it could only be because he knew what I was about to do.

"Don't think badly of me because of the whole bounty thing, okay?" he said. "It wasn't my idea in the first place."

"It was Acting Director Tsukishiro's," I acknowledged.

"If you know that much already, then this conversation will be brief. The points all came from the Acting Director. I only put my name on it as student council president."

The question of whether Nagumo had wanted to be part of the plan was irrelevant. If it had been an order from the acting director, he wouldn't have had a choice but to obey.

"If it were a demand from the acting director, then I can understand why you would go along with it," I said. "But the Student Council President Nagumo that I know would've rejected such an idea. That's what I think."

"I would have, sure," Nagumo agreed, "if it had been any student other than you when he came to me about the bounty. But of all people, he named you. The only man to win the praise of Horikita-senpai."

It was as if Nagumo was looking through me and could see Horikita Manabu standing behind me instead.

"Answer me, Ayanokouji. What are you planning on doing now?"

It would have been easy to tell him not to worry about me, that I was someone completely insignificant. But I was sure that Nagumo wouldn't be deterred by words as simple as that. Since I didn't know what exactly was lying in wait ahead, I wanted to make the most of the time I had left.

"It has nothing to do with the Student Council President," I told him. "Shouldn't you be concentrating on the final part of the special exam instead of worrying about someone like me? In terms of scores, Kouenji must be closing in on you fast. If you don't head back, you won't be able to earn the Early Bird Bonus. You won't be able to participate in some of the Tasks either, if you stick around here."

There was still a possibility that I could turn this situation around.

"Don't worry about that. I have Kouenji perfectly under control for the final day," said Nagumo, taking a walkie-talkie out of his back pocket.

I took that to mean that even if he were some distance away, everything would be fine if he just gave his people instructions.

"I was curious about why you came here," he went on, "but since you can't answer my question, I'll ask a new one. Actually, it's more of a demand. I want to know if you're really good enough

to fulfill Horikita-senpai's lofty expectations. Show me what you can really do."

So that was the real reason he had come here then.

"You're not telling me you want me to engage in a fistfight with the student council president here, are you?" I asked.

"I wouldn't reject one, per se," he admitted. "But personally, I'd prefer something more proper and straightforward. Even after this uninhabited island exam is over, there will still be opportunities for students from different grade levels to fight each other. I'll deal with you during one of those times."

The student council president was directly targeting me.

"You already understand where we stand from how things went in this exam though, right?" I said. "Between you and me, it was no contest."

The fact of the matter was that Nagumo consistently hovered around first and second place throughout this exam. Kouenji was close behind him, and there was a chance that he could turn things around, but there was no denying that it was still going to be a difficult battle.

"There's one of you, and seven of us. It would've been crazy if we actually competed against each other," said Nagumo.

"Kouenji is good enough to be your opponent if you're looking for one though, right?" I said. "He is an odd one, but his skills are undeniable. I, on the other hand, didn't even break into the top ten during this exam, not even once." I urged Nagumo to reconsider Kouenji as a more viable choice for a fight.

"Well, he's more than I expected, that's for sure. He was the only opponent in this test worth attacking," said Nagumo.

Though he sounded like he was somewhat approving of Kouenji, he also shrugged his shoulders in exasperation. I guessed that part about attacking Kouenji was exactly what he was using that walkie-talkie for right now.

"I'm sure that using the entirety of the third-year class to jump ahead and take the Early Bird Bonuses, not to mention

monopolizing all the Tasks, is a feat that only you could pull off, Student Council President," I said.

Unlike the first-years and second-years, almost all of the third-year students' groups were under Nagumo's control. If he wanted to contain Kouenji for sure, he could certainly have done so by mobilizing his entire grade. It wouldn't matter how much stamina Kouenji had, or how fast he was, or how proficient he was at clearing Tasks.

Groups summoned from all over could have circled Kouenji and taken away every opportunity from him, right at the root. As a result, he would only be able to earn Arrival Bonuses from the Basic Movement system. Meanwhile, Nagumo and his teammates could widen the gap just by collecting Arrival Bonuses for their group.

"I should have guessed, but wow. You figured out all of that. When'd you notice?" asked Nagumo.

"I had my suspicions that there was something going on since the Beach Flags event," I replied. "I noticed Vice President Kiriyma left a spot open in the roster. They must have deliberately chosen not to fill it, because they wanted it open for someone else."

That spot had been reserved for the Student Council President. However, since I arrived before Nagumo did, Kiriyma had no choice but to fill in that remaining space with one of his available teammates—leaving Nagumo to leisurely play around while waiting for Kiriyma and the others to finish the Task.

"I always thought that you and the Vice President were enemies," I added, "but apparently not."

"Even though he hates me, he's willing to work together if it means he'll graduate from Class A," said Nagumo.

"Which means that aside from anyone totally outside the norm like Kouenji, no regular students could raise a hand against you, huh?"

Nagumo laughed, as though he found what I'd said amusing.

"That's not how you really feel at all though, is it?" he said.
"You don't think I'm a great person, not for a moment."

"That's—"

I tried to deny it, but Nagumo silenced me with a gesture of his hand.

"I'm sure you're thinking that I won by brute force alone, by mobilizing the third-years. But that's not true. Now, I'm going to show you my psychic abilities."

"Psychic abilities?" I repeated.

"I'm going to guess what your group ranking was at the end of the twelfth day."

Only the top ten and bottom ten groups were displayed publicly. If you excluded those twenty groups from the total 157, that left you with 137, albeit with the assumption that none of them had merged. So, of course, I was the only one who knew my exact ranking. At the end of the twelfth day, before the date had changed, I had been in sixteenth place.

"You were in...eleventh place, right?" said Nagumo.

Though he answered with confidence, he was slightly off. But I couldn't exactly laugh him off for being wrong. I had used the GPS search function repeatedly on the twelfth day in preparation for the first-years' attack. Hypothetically, if I hadn't spent those extra points, it was entirely possible that I would have been in eleventh place.

Considering the rules, it was impossible to know the rankings of all the groups—which meant that there was a good reason for Nagumo to have come to that conclusion.

"Actually, I might've been a little bit off," he mused. "You're probably somewhere around fifteenth or sixteenth. Right?"

"That's right," I replied. "I'm honestly impressed."

I sincerely acknowledged his ability, and Nagumo simply said, "Of course," in response, calmly accepting it as the truth.

"I was just kidding around about that psychic stuff. I just assumed that if you really were hiding incredible abilities, there

wasn't any range of rankings you could be in *except* for that."

Apparently, the student known as Nagumo was much, much better than I'd previously thought.

"You've been keeping yourself slightly behind tenth place so you wouldn't stand out," he continued. "And you've been positioning yourself so that you could jump ahead of the people at the top of the rankings at any given time. Right? If Kouenji and I clashed and we each dropped down in the rankings, you could go for an upset."

I had avoided drawing attention to myself with the intention of lurking in the shadows until the end of the twelfth day. When people started to feel fatigued during the home stretch of the exam and the people in the top ranks started to slow down their pace of collecting points, I would have raced for a spot among the winners by scoring a bunch of points all at once, depending on how the situation played out. Well, no, rather, that's what I had *intended* to do.

"Did you realize it? That it would have been impossible from the beginning, I mean," added Nagumo, asking if I understood that the strategy that I had come up with had immediately been rendered ineffective thanks to him.

"You know how Kuronaga's group, from the third-years, was in tenth place for a long, long time? That was me, keeping them in tenth. I kept them there so that I could shut down anyone who might have tried to turn the tables on me by racking up points while staying out of sight."

The gap between my scores and the ninth and tenth groups had been widening, and it had gotten increasingly difficult for me to shoot for those top spots, day by day. Based on what Nagumo was saying, that had been part of his strategy too. Everything went as he planned. He forced out the enemies that couldn't be seen, narrowing the field down to only the enemies that he could keep an eye on.

"I've always doubted your abilities, but now it's clear to me," said Nagumo. "You have earned the right to fight and be crushed by me. So, rejoice."

"Was it part of your strategy to go out of your way to take command and target Kouenji on the final day of the exam too, Student Council President?" I asked.

"I could have easily earned 400 or even 500 points if I had wanted to," Nagumo said, "but that would've posed a slight problem. Besides, that wouldn't have been interesting, would it? I gave the second-years and first-years some hope that they might be able to win. And on top of that, if it ends up being a close race and Kouenji loses, then I might get the chance to see the frustration on his face."

As someone in the most powerful group, Nagumo had fought rather comfortably for the past two weeks. And now, on the final day of the exam, he was considering making a display of his presence by sinking Kouenji and taking first place for himself. If Nagumo was serious, he could even find out how many points a particular group had. He could find out whether they were earning the Early Bird Bonuses, what kinds of results they were pulling in Tasks, and so on. He could learn those things either via GPS searches or through the eyes of his allies.

Even now on the final day when the scores were unknown, it was safe to assume that Nagumo knew exactly how many points Kouenji had. That meant it was possible for Nagumo to stage a dramatic victory, for example by pulling ahead by just one single point.

"Well, I don't really care about Kouenji anymore," he said. "What do I care about is the last thing that I'm going to do at this school. I'm going to eat you alive, Ayanokouji."

Nagumo had constantly chased after Horikita Manabu's shadow. And now, he was trying to superimpose that person's image on top of me. I thought he must be trying to make his position with Horikita Manabu clear by overtaking him, albeit in an unconventional way, by defeating me soundly and decisively.

"Unfortunately, Horikita is the leader of Class 2-D," I told him. "Even if there was another special exam where we could compete against you third-years, I'm not going to be fighting you, Student Council President Nagumo."

"In that case, I guess I have no other choice but to drag you out to the front of the stage by force then, huh? Including the matter of the bounty on your head."

It sounded like he was willing to bring everything and anything about that situation to light too.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to be hurrying on ahead now," I replied. "Let's continue this conversation another time."

"Do you think I'll let you get away that easily?" Nagumo said. "I have no intention of letting you go until you say that you'll throw down against me. Y'know?"

He started walking after me, as though he were intending to follow me. If something was lying in wait ahead, Nagumo would end up getting dragged into it. My opponent was Tsukishiro. In the worst-case scenario, Nagumo could lose everything that he had built and be expelled thanks to the authority that man wielded.

Even if I tried to persuade Nagumo with words, he most likely wouldn't comply. And I obviously couldn't spin a convincing enough lie that I'd promise to do something when the time was right. I stopped and turned around.

"So, do you think you want to fight—"

Nagumo had mistaken the reason for my turning around and was delighted. He thought that I was going to agree. Instead, I shoved him hard and without warning, thrusting my hand against his chest. He must not have thought that a younger student would have the gall to lay a hand on him because he didn't resist at all. He crumpled to the ground, falling on his backside. The tablet he was holding and the walkie-talkie that had been in his pocket spilled out onto the ground.

"Wha—"

He seemed unable to understand what had just happened. I figured I'd take care of what needed to be done before he could wrap his head around the situation.

"Student Council President Nagumo," I said, "even now, I still have a high opinion of you. You have different abilities than President Horikita does, and you've risen to the top of this school,

brilliantly. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that not only have you maintained the top spot in this special exam with plenty of room to spare, but you have also completely dominated it."

He was still calm. I continued speaking before he remembered his anger.

"It's simply that there are some places that you should not tread. Please withdraw here."

"*Hah...* Don't mess with me, Ayanokouji. You really think you can order me around?"

"It is precisely because you are my senpai, and thus someone I ought to respect, that I'm not going to go easy on you," I replied.



"Huh? What are you—"

I looked right into Nagumo's eyes with all the killing intent I could muster.

"Huh?!"

"I told you to withdraw. Do you understand?" I told him sternly.

Nagumo quickly shot upright, jumping back to his feet, as if to refuse to recognize the fear that I had instilled within him.

"Okay, that's enough, do you hear me? You are the first person who has disrespected me this much, Ayanokouji, you—"

Just then, a voice came through the walkie-talkie that he had dropped.

"It worked great, Nagumo. This is the third time in a row that we've blocked Kouenji from a Task. Give us your next orders."

The voice of a joyful third-year student came clearly through the device. It sounded like their plan to suppress Kouenji was coming along well. Nagumo glared at me, but didn't react to the voice at all.

"Hey, Nagumo, our people aren't gonna move unless you give the order. Don't we need to keep attacking until the end of the exam to make sure that Kouenji falls to second place?"

"Don't you need to answer that?" I asked.

Even from just the part of the conversation that I could hear, I got the sense that the message was important to Nagumo. He silently took the walkie-talkie in hand and turned the knob so that it was pointed to the Off indicator, powering it down.

"Kouenji isn't what's important to me," he said.

He walked up to me, not even bothering to brush the dirt from himself.

"I'll take you on and beat you thoroughly into the ground. I'm making that my final point of business as student council president."

Willpower, was it? He was trying to rouse himself as student council president and shake off the intimidation he felt from me.

"I—?!"

Without warning, I punched Nagumo right in the solar plexus without batting an eye.

"A...yano...ko—!"

Immediately rendered unable to breathe, Nagumo collapsed right on the spot, temporarily losing consciousness. I caught his body as he fell and propped him up against a large tree, placing him out of direct sunlight. Since he wasn't going to be listening to any of my unsolicited advice, this was the only way I could have dealt with the situation. Nagumo's watch must have detected an abnormality because the Warning Alert sounded for five seconds.

I figured it wouldn't be long before he woke up, perhaps just twenty or thirty minutes. At any rate, this would save him from getting involved in whatever came next. Of course, there was no avoiding the fact that other problems would emerge again after this uninhabited island exam was over, but even that was a trivial concern right now. I needed to deal with Tsukishiro, and the path ahead would not open until that matter had been resolved.

7.3

IT WAS JUST AFTER ten o'clock in the morning on the final day of the exam, and I—that is to say, Horikita Suzune—was heading north along the border of I4 and I3 toward area I2. I was wringing out every last bit of energy I had for the final stretch, as this was the final day. The special exam was finally almost over.

Fortunately, as of just before midnight last night, no one from Class 2-D had been in the bottom ten groups. The bottom five, the ones in danger of getting expelled, were all third-year groups. Still, I couldn't be completely relaxed about this. Considering the fact that those five groups could still join with other groups which would inevitably raise their point scores, it was possible that the rankings could change at the last minute. It was very possible that some of them could easily swap with the groups that were just barely managing to hold onto sixth and seventh place. If I were to take this idea to its logical extreme, if all the groups in the bottom ten were to merge with groups in higher positions, then all ten of those groups could break themselves out of the bottom of the rankings.

My designated area, displayed on my tablet, was I7. It was in the opposite direction of I2, where I was headed. Ignoring the designated area that I should have been headed toward could have been interpreted as a reckless act. Why was I doing such a thing, you ask? The answer to that could be found on the slip of paper that I held in my right hand. When I had woken up in my tent this morning, I had found this paper, folded up small, secretly tucked inside the entrance.

When I unfolded it, I saw four things written, without any real order or sequence to them: "Noon," "AK," "Expelled," and "I2."

My first two thoughts when I saw this were as follows: First, I thought that the person who had written this note had very neat handwriting. So much so that I wanted to use it as a reference to improve my own. The second thought I had was that pens and paper were not handed out for free as supplies for this exam.

"How many points was it for a notebook and a pen, anyway...?" I muttered to myself.

I vaguely remembered that those items were listed in the uninhabited island manual, but I didn't remember exactly how many points they were as I had deemed them worthless. Though I supposed, in hindsight, I might have needed the notebook if my tablet had run out of battery life or if it had suddenly stopped working. At any rate, someone rather eccentric had purchased the notebook and writing tools and sent me this coded message.

"Well, no, this message is far too simple for me to say that it's a code," I uttered, correcting myself.

"I2" referred to the area on this uninhabited island. "Noon" clearly referred to the time. Since the note had been delivered to me on the final day of the exam, that indicated to me that there was something happening today, the fourteenth day. If this were a simple prank, then that would be all there was to it, but the two other things written on the note made me think otherwise.

"Expelled" and "AK." Putting aside the first word, the problem was the "AK" part. If another student saw this message, they surely would not have understood its meaning. The instant I saw it, though, I understood what it meant. Those were Ayanokouji Kiyotaka's initials.

"If I were to consider the meaning of the message as it stands," I said to myself, "it says that Ayanokouji-kun will get expelled at noon in I2..."

What a ridiculous notion, I thought. That was why, when the designated area was announced this morning at seven o'clock, I had intended to ignore the message. Still, I was a little concerned that Ayanokouji-kun's GPS signature was in E3. I thought that if he got closer to I2 as time went on, then perhaps this might not have been a simple joke. With that in mind, I decided to give the matter some time and then use the GPS search again.

As a result, I learned that Ayanokouji-kun had left F3 and was currently making his way through G3. *If he continues at this rate, if he really heads to I2, then...* I considered this. Driven by that hunch, I decided to head north to confirm what was going on.

There was a bounty on his head, after all; the probability that this had something to do with said bounty could not be dismissed.

There was still some time before noon, but I wondered how far Ayanokouji-kun might have gone. Of course, there was still the possibility that this was all just a simple coincidence, and that he was already headed toward another area. I felt the desire to use the GPS search welling up inside me, but I firmly reined in that impulse.

My score was good enough to place me conceivably in the top 50 percent. However, if I abandoned designated areas and Tasks from this point on, and especially if I used the search function, then I wouldn't know where I might stand in the rankings. In any case, if I was wasting my time coming this way, I decided that I might as well just continue all the way to I2.

Just as the river came into view, I heard a voice coming from behind me.

"Ah! I finally caught up with you! Wait right there, Horikita!"

"...What are you doing here?" I asked in return.

It was Ibuki-san, glaring at me, completely out of breath. I didn't get the sense that she had appeared here by chance, which made me think that she had deliberately gone through the trouble of using the GPS search to chase after me.

"Your score. Show me your score," she huffed.

"Wait a minute. What in the world are you saying?"

Showing up entirely unexpectedly and demanding that I, her enemy, show her my score? I couldn't even begin to understand what she was thinking.

"I told you before, didn't I? That I wasn't going to lose to you in this special exam," barked Ibuki-san, thrusting her index finger at me intensely, pointing right at my eyes.

"There's no need to check that right now," I told her. "Can't you just wait until the exam's finished?"

"There's no guarantee that all of the groups' points will be shown at the end of the special exam," she argued.

"That certainly might end up being the case," I conceded.
"What's important are the top and bottom groups, after all."

There was no guarantee that all the rankings of the numerous other groups would be viewable right away. Of course, it was also possible that they would publicly announce all the scores as a matter of course too.

"So, you're going to let me confirm it right here and now," she ordered.

From the sound of it, she wanted to make it absolutely clear which one of us had scored more points as of the final day of the exam.

"This is so incredibly stupid that I can't even believe it... But you must be serious about this if you went through all the trouble of coming here. How many times did you use the GPS search?" I asked.

"...Three times," she answered. "You were close, so I thought now would be the only time to do this." Ibuki-san had used the GPS search three times and come all this way...for this.

"I appreciate all the effort you went through," I said sarcastically.

"I don't need your appreciation. Just show me your score. My score is 131 points!" she announced confidently, as if to say, "*How about that?*"

"Thank you for telling me even though I didn't ask," I said. "But there are two things I'd like to say. First, there's no proof that what you're telling me is your real score."

"Huh? In that case, how about I show you!?" she shouted.

Ibuki-san was about to take her tablet out from her backpack, but I stopped her from doing so.

"Second," I went on, "even if you do show me your actual score, I'm not going to tell you mine."

"Huh? What the hell? Are you saying that you're the same as *him*?" she sneered.

Him? Though I was a little curious, I continued saying my piece anyway.

"Though we are both second-years, we are enemies. I don't want to run the risk of disclosing information to you."

At this point in time, I couldn't imagine that my name would appear in the bottom ten. However, the scores would keep changing until the very last minute. Even though it was the last day, there was a nonzero possibility that giving information to Ibuki-san could result in the rug being pulled out from under me.

"I get it," she said. "Hearing my score made you scared, huh? You're losing to me, aren't you?"

"Even if you keep talking about who is winning and who is losing, I'm still not going to answer," I said firmly.

Even though I had repeatedly told Ibuki-san that I had no intention of sharing any information with her, she kept snapping back at me.

"Why can't you just admit it already?" she huffed. "That you can't beat my score?"

"Sure, I'll do that for you. I admit it. Now you can go back to the exam."

I figured that if it satisfied her, I'd go along with her demands.

"...You're really pissin' me off," she grumbled. "Show me your actual score."

"I gave in and admitted it, and you're still not satisfied?" I asked.

"I wanna know your actual score. And I wanna know how much I beat you by," she added.

"This is so stupid..."

"It's very important to me," she insisted.

"I'm sorry, but I need to be moving on."

"Trying to run away?"

"I'm heading to my designated area. It's funny that you would describe that as running away."

I turned and hurried off toward I2. Ibuki-san must really have thought that I was running away because she followed me, giving chase.

"Do you have a designated area up north? Or are you just chasing me?" I asked.

"What I want to know right now is your score," she answered. "Once I find that out, I'll go back to my own designated area."

I figured that meant she would stubbornly remain fixated on me—and me alone—no matter where I went. I honestly did not want to end up getting held up here for such a bizarre reason. Even if I was just being led around by this single piece of paper, I still didn't want to waste my time.

"...I give in," I told her.

"Y-you do? So, you're finally admitting that you lose?" said Ibuki-san.

"That's not what I meant. I'm saying that I've given in to that thing you have that resembles a kind of stubborn persistence. I've earned 145 points. Unfortunately for you, you came close, but I beat you in points earned."

I revealed the information that I should have kept hidden. That was the reason I had declared that I had given in earlier.

"Wait, you beat me? If you're saying that you beat me, then show me proof. I want evidence," demanded Ibuki-san.

Of course, she would say that. But I had no intention of stopping anymore. I just wanted to get to I2 as soon as possible and make sure that Ayanokouji-kun was safe.

"...Fine."

In terms of efficiency... Well, no, actually, I couldn't imagine that this was the right tactic. But letting Ibuki-san know what my score was on the final day of the special exam would most likely not have a significant impact. I didn't want to waste a single

second of a single minute. I took off my backpack and reached for my tablet in the outer pouch. Ibuki-san still had a stern look on her face, and it didn't seem like her expression would change as she waited for me to show her my point total.

I had the tablet in my hands. I was just about to press the power button. But just then, Ibuki-san and I both, at almost the exact same time, sensed a powerful presence ahead and looked up. It was someone who made no attempt to conceal their presence, either.

"Found youuuuu!"

It was an innocent-sounding voice, like a child calling out to a playmate.

"Hello there, Horikita-senpai."

Seeing this girl appear before us from seemingly out of nowhere, Ibuki-san didn't even try to hide the dissatisfied look on her face.

"...Who's that?" she huffed.

"It's Amasawa Ichika-san, from Class 1-A," I answered.

It was possible that Amasawa had just so happened to show up here, but something seemed strange. Feeling on edge, I turned my attention to her, though I was still holding onto my tablet. The whole situation with the bounty that the first-years were after and what was written on that slip of paper I found this morning... It couldn't be her, could it?

"Oh, don't worry about me," said Amasawa-san. "You can keep doing what you were doing, 'kay?"

"No, we can't," I informed her. "We were discussing private matters."

I was sure that Ibuki-san was well aware that I wanted as few other people as possible to know my score. I was also sure that she understood that was why I didn't want to show her my tablet right now to prove whether she won or lost.

I gently urged Amasawa-san to leave, but she wasn't budging. Seeing this, Ibuki-san must have lost her patience

because she spoke up.

"You're interrupting us," she huffed, sounding irritated.

"So, how's Sudou-senpai, Horikita-senpai?" asked Amasawa-san.

"Huh? You ignorin' me?" grumbled Ibuki-san.

Even though Amasawa-san should have heard Ibuki-san's question, she acted as if she didn't. She must not have been planning to leave right away because she set her backpack down and rolled her shoulders.

"...He's well," I replied. "He was saved, thanks to you. I'm incredibly grateful for that."

She smiled brightly at me, but I didn't get the sense of anything even remotely like an apology from her. Did she think I wasn't worth apologizing to for how she had acted toward and responded to Ayanokouji-kun? Or, perhaps, did she think she hadn't done anything wrong in the first place?

"I told you that you're interrupting us. We've got an engagement of our own here, so get out of here," snapped Ibuki-san.

"An engagement?" Amasawa-san repeated. "Didn't you just selfishly barge in and demand Horikita-senpai's time though, Ibuki-senpai?"

It sounded as though she had been listening in on our conversation for a while. Perhaps it really was true that she had been here, eavesdropping.

"Even so, it's got nothing to do with you," Ibuki-san said.
"Beat it."

Ibuki-san's tone was becoming more and more stern. If this went any further, Ibuki-san might've really started getting physical. But even though she was being threatened, Amasawa-san just smiled, as though she found it all amusing.

Putting Ibuki-san aside for the moment, I turned my attention back to Amasawa-san. "I'm wondering what you're after,

Amasawa-san," I told her. I didn't want to waste any more time, but I didn't have any other choice.

"Tch." Ibuki clicked her tongue in irritation. But still, she waited too, probably because she sensed that she didn't have a choice either.

"I have one question I'd like to ask you," said Amasawa-san. "Where are you going from here, Horikita-senpai?"

"Right now, I'm speaking with Ibuki-san right here," I replied, "but after I'm finished, I'm planning to head toward area F3 right away."

That was a lie, of course. I had already intended on giving up on my designated area. But there was no benefit in telling Amasawa-san that. She had colluded with other first-year students in their plan to get Ayanokouji-kun expelled so they could collect the bounty on his head. It was safer for me to not say anything unnecessary in matters related to him. That was what I had decided, anyway, but I soon realized my mistake.

"You're a liar, Horikita-senpai," Amasawa-san declared. "Your designated area isn't that way, is it?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" I asked. "Are you trying to trap me with some strange trick?"

"It's pointless to try and fool me," she responded immediately. "Your designated area, where you're supposed to be going, is I7. Am I wrong, Horikita-senpai?"

The area that she had mentioned was exactly the place that I was supposed to be headed to next. She couldn't have guessed that by mere coincidence. Judging from the look on her face, I could only imagine that she had intended to catch me in that trap from the very start of this conversation.

"We second-years have our own way of fighting," I told her. "It's not like we can tell the absolute truth about everything."

After I told her that, I continued right away.

"Besides, I think it's inevitable that we'd be wary of someone who tried to take down Ayanokouji-kun."

I smoothly transitioned from one topic to the next. The first-years were our enemy. There was no need for us to show any shame.

"Hmm. Well, you might be right about that," she said.

Though that was what she said, it was as if my words never even reached her ears. I couldn't help but feel that, based on her attitude, she had come here with a predetermined conclusion in mind.

"So, where are you going, Horikita-senpai?" she pressed. "It couldn't be...I2, could it?"

It seemed that I had guessed right, but in a bad way.

"You seem to have figured out quite a few things," I said. "But I've only just decided to head to I2 as of this morning. You're an exceptionally good guesser, aren't you?"

Even if she had used the GPS search and pinpointed my location, it wouldn't have been easy for her to get ahead of me like this. If that was the case, then I could assume that Amasawa also had something to do with that piece of paper I found this morning. While I wondered whether to question her about it, Ibuki-san stepped forward instead.

"Hey, how much longer are you gonna drag out this boring conservation?" she snapped.

I certainly felt frustrated too. At this rate, I was going to be forced to deal with Amasawa-san on top of all the time I had already wasted on Ibuki-san.

"Ibuki-san."

I decided to power on my tablet and show my score to her, resigning myself to disclosing my own personal information. Inevitably, Ibuki-san would also see that I had earned three additional group member slots, but since it was the endgame and I hadn't used them, I figured there was virtually no harm done. From her point of view, something like my maximum group size was probably completely irrelevant.

The moment that she saw my score, Ibuki-san faintly clicked her tongue. Then, scratching her head, she put her irritation into

words...loudly.

"Huh? Seriously? HUH?! This sucks," she grumbled.

I supposed this was a somewhat cruel conclusion for Ibuki-san after all the hard work that she put in over the past two weeks. That being said, I still thought that she performed admirably. The fact that she was able to achieve a score on level with mine, even though she had a lower level of academic ability, was something that she should look back on proudly.

"Well then, if we're done here, you can head to your designated area," I told her. "You still have a chance to turn things around, since we earn double points on the final day."

"Well, yeah, sure, I guess that's true... But what the hell is this about you giving up on your designated area?" Amasawa-san's words must have piqued her curiosity.

"This is your chance, Ibuki-san," I said. "For reasons I'm not going to go into, I will not be scoring any points from this point."

I tried to signal to her with my eyes. *Surely you can understand without me having to explain everything from the beginning, right?*

"Well, you're right that our contest isn't over until the uninhabited island exam is finished," she said, exasperated. "If you're telling me that you're staying put, then I won't lie, I'll be more than happy to go ahead and turn the tables on you."

She must have been satisfied, at least to some extent, because she turned her back to me and started walking away. At any rate, I had succeeded in getting her away from here for the time being. As I put my tablet away, tucking it into my backpack, I focused my attention back on dealing with Amasawa-san.

"I'm going to be heading over to I2 now," I informed her. "What are you going to do?"

"Why are you giving up on your designated area and going to I2, which is totally irrelevant to you?" she asked. "There aren't even any Tasks there. I mean, we *are* still in the middle of the special exam, right? Aren't we?"

"I think you know the answer to that better than anyone," I replied. "Don't you?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"Don't play dumb with me. You slipped this piece of paper into my tent while I was sleeping. Why did you do that?"

I held out the small, folded paper between the thumb and index finger of my left hand.

"...Paper?" said Amasawa-san. "If you don't mind, could you show it to me for a sec?"

This was practically a textbook example of an unconvincing performance. But I supposed I had no more use for this piece of paper anyway. I handed it over to Amasawa-san, who I believed to be its original owner. When she received it, she unfolded it and read its contents.

"A bunch of things scribbled in no particular order... 'Noon,' 'AK,' 'Expelled,' and 'I2,'" said Amasawa-san, closing her eyes for a moment as she read the note aloud. "For the love of... Just how much do you like playing these games...?"

"Games?" I repeated. "What exactly are you planning on involving Ayanokouji-kun and me in?"

"I dunno," said Amasawa-san. "Seems like I'm nothing more than just another participant, just like you, senpai."

"Don't try and fool me. The fact that you appeared right here proves that you're the one who wrote that note."

Amasawa-san smiled, looking somewhat annoyed, and began tearing up the paper. She ripped it seven or eight times and then proceeded to toss the scattered pieces away.

"Did you sense anything disturbing about the four things written in that note?" she asked.

"That Ayanokouji-kun might get expelled," I replied. "It was quite easy to interpret the message that way."

"Hmm."

It sounded as if she knew more about the situation than I did. At any rate, it was a waste of time for me to play word games

with her any longer. I slung my backpack over my shoulders once more and started walking toward her.

Amasawa-san snapped at me, just as I was about to walk past her. "I'm not happy about this. You don't know *aaaaanything* about Ayanokouji-senpai at all, and you're just pretending to be his ally because you're classmates. I gotta wonder about that, I really do. You don't know anything about Ayanokouji-senpai, do you, Horikita-senpai?" she added.

That didn't sit well with me for some reason, and I stopped in my tracks.

"So, then, would you say that you know a lot more about him than I do?" I asked.

When I cast a glance at her, she met my gaze with an overbearing glance of her own, smiling broadly and triumphantly.

"Of course," she declared. "I know Ayanokouji-senpai very, *verrrrry* well. Like, I know why he's so cool, so smart...and so much stronger than everyone else."

I found it hard to believe that a first-year student who had only just started attending our school could know so much about Ayanokouji-kun. Did that mean that they had been acquainted with each other since junior high school or earlier, in that case? Just like how Kushida-san and I had known each other since junior high?

Amasawa-san continued speaking, not caring about my reaction.

"So, what do you know, Horikita-senpai?"

What did I know? He was... Since I enrolled in this school, Ayanokouji-kun was my very first...friend. Yes, I supposed that it would be fair to say that we were friends, more or less. Since we just so happened to sit next to one another in class, we ended up talking about lots of different things... At first, I thought he was just an ordinary student, but he turned out to be much, much smarter than I could have ever imagined.

Even my older brother recognized his talents early on, finding Ayanokouji-kun to be well-versed in martial arts. But he was also someone who usually hid himself away and just wanted to live a

quiet life at school. Although there were a few people who knew about his true abilities, really, there were a lot of rumors and lies, making it hard to discern the truth from fiction.

"Yes, I suppose you might be right," I answered. "I might not really know anything about him. I cannot deny that."

When I thought about Ayanokouji-kun again, I couldn't help but come to that conclusion. Perhaps Amasawa-san was well aware of that too. She smiled happily at what I said, taking my words as a declaration of defeat.

"But."

"But?"

Surely, that was not what was important. *It's not about how much I know about him right now*, I thought to myself.

"I want to continue getting to know more and more about him from here on out, until the time we graduate. As a classmate... As a friend. Until I know far more than you do right now," I declared.

That was my wish at present. That feeling was the sincere truth. He had certainly caused me some grief more than once or twice, but he was an indispensable person to our class. He was a valuable ally that we could not afford to lose. If he was in danger right now, then of course I would go running to save him. That was precisely the reason I was heading over to I2, even though I was going as far as giving up on my designated area.

Now, I had once again reaffirmed what it was that I was trying to do. That the choice I was making was not the wrong one. If everything turned out to have simply been baseless fears, then that would have been perfectly fine as well.

"Do you really think that you can be of any use?" asked Amasawa-san. "Someone like you, Horikita-senpai?"

"I may not be skilled enough yet at this point in time, but I intend to become someone who can help him when he's in trouble."

Our lives as students at this school had really only just started, and we were just beginning to turn the pages. This

conversation, which I could have interpreted as a waste of time, might have held some great meaning after all. I needed to be grateful to her, then, for making me realize all of this. As I was about to walk away though, Amasawa-san stretched out her right arm, blocking my path. When I looked at her face again, her smile was long gone. Instead, she looked at me with severe murderous intent.

"I've learned something from our conversation here," I told her. "That something really is about to happen in I2. If not, then there would be no reason for you to be trying so desperately to keep me here."

I couldn't afford to waste any more time here.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"After everything I've said, don't you understand? I'm going to I2 to save Ayanokouji-kun."

It was my first step in becoming someone who could help him when he was in trouble, just as I said earlier.

"Don't make me laugh," Amasawa-san scoffed. "There's no way that Ayanokouji-senpai would look to someone like you for help, Horikita-senpai."

"That might be true at present, at the very least," I admitted.

"Meaning that in the future, it'll be different?" she asked.

I nodded, then turned back to look at her.

"Oh, and there's one more thing I've come to understand from our conversation," I told her. "That you really do not want to let me go to I2. Which means that you were not the one who sent me this piece of paper."

When I tried to move past Amasawa-san's outstretched arm, she quickly moved to stand in front of me, blocking my path once again.

"I'm not letting you go, Horikita-senpai," she said firmly.

"The more you try and stop me, the more I feel that I absolutely must go to him. Judging from the way you're talking, I'm guessing that he must be in trouble right now. Right?"

It didn't matter how much she knew about the situation. The one thing that I was sure of was that there was obviously something going on with Ayanokouji-kun.

"You really think you can go?" taunted Amasawa-san.

"Yes, I really think I can," I answered decisively. *Even if I have to remove any obstacles standing in my way by force.*

"Hmmm. Wow, I can really, really feel your determination loud and clear. I'll wait for you just long enough so you can put your stuff down."

She clearly meant that she was planning to keep me here, even if she had to use force in return. I figured that it would be best to assume this was no simple verbal threat. I took her at her word and slowly lowered my backpack down to the ground, near my feet.

"I'll just tell you this up front. I am an experienced martial artist," I cautioned her.

"I know."

"...I see. You are quite well informed."

"And let me tell you something up front," she retorted, "I'm super strong, so you better be ready for me."

From the moment that she unveiled her anger, I could instinctively sense that she was no ordinary child. I was sure that wasn't just some random conclusion on my part either; this was real. It was certainly true that I was getting increasingly fatigued due to being on an uninhabited island for this exam. But the same was true for Amasawa-san here as well. Since she appeared to be in fine physical condition, I couldn't say that we were evenly matched in that regard.

In any case, I was not going to be easily defeated. I slowly positioned myself into a stance and observed Amasawa-san's behavior. She didn't seem to be getting into any particular stance herself. She simply looked at me with an unsettling expression on her face.

"If you're saying that you're going to see Ayanokouji-senpai, then I think I'll play with you a little bit. To stop you."

Amasawa-san took a step forward with her left foot, and then—

"Wha—?!"

I had been completely alert and thought I was ready for her, but in the instant she started to move, I sensed intense danger coming in my direction. I hopped backwards to get out of the way. She hadn't put much power behind her movements when she'd reached out toward me with her arm. Was she trying to grab hold of me? At any rate, I avoided the first blow. Or so I thought, at least. The next thing I knew, Amasawa-san had grabbed me, clutching onto my right sleeve and the fabric around my chest.

"That's im—" I sputtered.

As I almost silently muttered those words, my field of vision started to spin. I felt pain shoot through my back, and I realized that I had just gotten shoulder thrown.

"One point for meeee! Heh, just kiddin'!"

"Koff!" I hacked painfully, unable to breathe.

"Come on now, you can't let your guard down, silly." Amasawa had a wicked grin on her face as she looked down at me. "All right. Back on your feet. Let's go, stand up, stand up."

It was unnecessary to reiterate just how humiliating this experience was. I understood well enough just from getting grabbed by her once that Amasawa-san possessed incredible physical abilities. I had assumed that since we were both women, even if there was a difference in our level of skill, it would have only been slight. Ingenuity, quick-wittedness, a flash of opportunity, luck—I thought it would be possible for any one of those things to lead to a turnaround. But that line of thinking might have been naïve.

At any rate, the damage done to my back wasn't something I could just shrug off. Fortunately, I had landed on soil, but it was still going to take some time for me to recover. If Amasawa-san was so proud of her overwhelmingly superior position, I decided I'd take advantage of that as much as possible. I purposefully spent a prolonged time on the process of getting back up.

"Don't worry, I'll wait. You can rest up for five, even ten minutes," said Amasawa-san.

"Of course you'd say that, since your intention is to keep me from going to Ayanokouji-kun," I replied.

"It's best to settle things without having to fight, right? I'm sure you must think so too, Horikita-senpai."

That was certainly true. The uninhabited island exam had been going smoothly up to this point. We were only just starting our altercation here in the endgame. If I wasn't careful, I could very well end up being eliminated and become the only one here to be expelled from school.

"...One more time," I announced.

Once the pain in my back had subsided, I once again entered a fighting stance, the same one as before. Even with my knowledge of martial arts, it didn't mean I was good at raw, bare-knuckle fights like this. I could only demonstrate the abilities I had acquired, just as I had learned them. I was surprised by how fast Amasawa-san moved, but I had my own ideas about how to fight due to my specialty: namely, judo.

Once, an assistant karate instructor taught me what to do when a man came at you to try and grab you and push you down to the ground. I remembered that lesson, tucked away deep in my memory, and thought I would try and put it into practice here. I wasn't exactly of sound enough mind to be able to adjust it by feel and go easy on my opponent, but I decided that since Amasawa-san was the one I was facing now, I probably didn't need to worry about that. I tossed aside any thoughts about how she was younger than me and instead made myself focus on the idea that I was fighting a superior opponent.

"A ha ha!"

Just when I was focusing on the slight changes not just on Amasawa-san's face, but also in her legs and shoulders, she laughed, as though she were amused.

"Yeah, yeah. I can tell, Horikita-senpai. I know exactly how you feel. But, hey, y'know...?"

I wouldn't play along with her mind games. In that moment, I focused all my attention, all my reflexes, on watching to determine what her first move would—

Just as I was counting the seconds, not even sparing time to blink, I saw her right leg coming straight at me. I tried to intercept her attack, but then I realized that she had switched up and quickly swung her left leg at me instead, connecting with the side of my torso.

A jolt of pain shot through me. "Ngh!"

She had kicked me hard enough to knock me back down to the ground, inflicting so much agonizing pain that I felt as if I might start crying or just lose consciousness. The only thing I could do with my arms in that moment, as I couldn't even defend myself with them, was to simply catch myself as I hit the earth. I rolled along the ground two or three times. Though I understood how it had all happened, I still felt confused.

"Did you think this fight was mostly going to be judo? Pretty naïve of you to think that," she taunted.

"U-ur...k...!"

I reflexively held my right side, where she had kicked me, closing my eyes. The pain was so intense that I felt my spirit shatter in an instant. This was the second time that I had felt such overwhelming, despair-inducing strength. I hadn't felt like this since...that time we confronted Housen-kun, which wasn't all that long ago. With events like that happening in such quick succession, I felt like I was losing confidence in myself.

"I guess none of this year's batch of first-years are just cute underclassmen..." I huffed.

"Oh, so does that mean that you *used* to be a cute girl last year, Horikita-senpai?" she retorted. "Unlike me?"

I figured she would say something mean-spirited in response to my jab, but that still really hurt to hear. Even though we were different types of people, I didn't think I was totally lacking in the cuteness department myself... Just as I tried to stand back up, though, I felt overwhelmed by a sensation that felt like all the

energy had just drained out of me. Just one shoulder throw and a single kick had sapped more of my strength than I imagined.

"Who are you?" I asked. "It seems like you know Ayanokouji-kun from long ago..."

One thing was for certain: Amasawa-san possessed a bizarre strength, just like he did. I had caught glimpses of that power before from Ayanokouji-kun, both when he faced my brother and when he faced Housen-kun.

"Yeah, well, there's no way I'd tell you something like that, senpai."

"I suppose so. You don't seem like the kind of person who would answer so easily."

At any rate, there weren't exactly many positives in this situation, not with Amasawa-san playing around with me like this. From her point of view, she just needed to keep me from getting to Ayanokouji-kun, so I supposed it didn't matter to her how much time she spent on this fight. For me to move forward, I would need to avoid taking any more damage.

"You know, actually," Amasawa-san started, "it's like...I'm really disappointed in you, in a lot of ways. You're nowhere near as superior as you seem to think you are, Horikita-senpai, are you? That's exactly why Ayanokouji-senpai won't talk 'bout anything with you."

She looked at me as though she was peering straight into my heart.

"You say things like how you want to save him, but in reality, you can't even *trust* him, and you just want to know what he thinks about you."

"...You might be right about that," I conceded.

"But it's like I told you before, Horikita-senpai. Ayanokouji-senpai can't count on someone like you."

"Even if that were true, I'd rather hear that from his mouth, not yours."

"Can't you understand how that would just be so tactless?" she shot back. She wasn't even attempting to hide her irritation with me anymore.

Amasawa-san then came up beside me.

"Kushida-senpai still has more worth seeing," she added.

"Kushida-san? Why did you just mention her name...?"

"Stand up, Horikita-senpai. Talking to you any more would just piss me off, so let's end this already."

She gave me a moment to get back up and regain my stance at least, which was a small mercy. In that instant, I decided that I couldn't give up this fight until the bitter end. I got back to my feet and focused all my attention on trying to detect Amasawa-san's next attack. I realized that I was repeating myself, doing the same thing as before, but that was all I could do. I didn't really have any other choice.

"Bye-byeeee!" taunted Amasawa-san.

She drew in closer with fleet-footed steps. *Should I catch her attack? Avoid it?* I was sure that I wouldn't succeed with either option though. In that case, I decided that I'd at least get in one good shot, as retaliation. And—!

Smack! I heard the dull sound of a fist hitting something, right near my ear. But no pain came.

Then, a figure appeared before me, blocking my line of sight.

"Why are you...?" I stammered.

The student who had caught the fist that had been coming straight for me didn't even turn around to look at me. She spat. I stared at Ibuki-san's small figure. She should have left minutes ago.

"Ow... Damn, that's quite a punch you got," she huffed.

"And nice catch!" said Amasawa-san. "I'm a little bit surprised by you just showing up here out of the blue."

I was unable to wrap my mind around what was happening anymore and was equally unable to move. Just then, Ibuki-san looked back and glared at me.

"I'm the one who's going to defeat you," she said, letting go of Amasawa-san's fist. "I don't wanna see you lose to some random first-year from who-knows-where."

Amasawa-san once again put some distance between us.

"Hi there! I'm Amasawa Ichika-chan. Please remember my name, okay, Ibuki-senpaiii?"

"I don't have a good memory for names and junk. If you want to make me remember who you are, then you gotta leave that much of an impression on me. Got it?" snapped Ibuki-san.

"*A ha ha!* You're kinda funny," said Amasawa-san.

"I'll play around with her," Ibuki-san told me. "Why don't you just go wherever it was you wanted to go?"

"What are you saying? Weren't you going to keep trying your hardest to beat me in this exam?"

"You're giving up on your designated area, right? It's pointless for me to turn things around and win because of something like that," she said.

And you came back just because of that? I wanted to ask in return. But I swallowed my words.

"She's unbelievably strong," I told her. "You might come to regret this. Are you sure you're all right doing that?"

"The hell are you on about?" said Ibuki-san. "You trying to tell me that I'm going to lose?"

"That's how strong of an opponent she is."

"Yeah, I don't think I'm going to lose to someone like Ibuki-senpaiiiii," Amasawa-san interjected.

"...Heh, bring it on," said Ibuki-san.

Amasawa-san's casual threat seemed to have had the opposite effect, instead lighting a fire under Ibuki-san.

"Supposing you do beat Amasawa-san," I said, "it's entirely possible that you could overdo it. Your Emergency Alert might start going off, and you'd be eliminated. Since you're alone, you're at risk of being expelled."

"Aren't you in the same boat?" she replied.

"Huh? Well, yes, I am," I conceded.

"I'm confident that I'm stronger than you," said Ibuki-san. She made a gesture with her hand, telling me to hurry up and go.

"Which one of you is gonna fight me?" Amasawa-san called out. "Come on, decide already."

"I'll fight her," I announced.

"Yeah, is that really something the person who was just about to lose minutes ago should be saying? Look, you're in the way, so just get outta here," snapped Ibuki-san.

"This is my fight," I insisted. "It has nothing to do with you."

"You're spouting nonsense, you know that, right?" Ibuki-san said. "Did you hit your head and go nuts or something?"

"I just—"

This wasn't working. I wasn't going to be able to stop Ibuki-san with any half-hearted attempts. But I couldn't just let her handle this fight, either. I grabbed her by the shoulders and forcefully shoved her back.

"What are you doing?!" she shouted.

"I've been trying to put this delicately so I wouldn't upset you, but I'm just going to come out and say it. You cannot beat her."

"Don't screw with me," she huffed. "Don't just make assumptions before we even start."

"It's the truth," I said. "I couldn't even do a single thing against her, so there's no way that you can beat her."

If Amasawa-san had lit a fire in Ibuki-san, then I was going to fan the flames until they became a raging inferno.

"All right then, show me some proof th—"

I thrust out my left arm toward Ibuki-san before she could finish speaking.

"What?"

"I'm not intending on fighting a losing battle," I said. "If you're going to jump into this fight too, then you're going to have to show me your resolve. Join my group. That way, if one of us is completely incapacitated, the other can retreat. That way, we won't be disqualified."

She balked. "You're kidding, right? Why would I ever join up with you?"

"I already told you. You need to show me your resolve," I replied. "If you're not ready to do that, then don't butt into this fight."

"I don't like this..." she whined.

"You don't *have* to like it, but if you're going to be a part of this, I want to be able to count on you."

"This seriously sucks. This sucks so hard it makes me want to die. But...I guess I couldn't laugh it off if you got expelled because of some first-year," Ibuki-san sighed.

We both understood that we were conflicted about what to do here. But even so, we brought our watches together. You needed about ten seconds for the link to be finalized. I supposed that if Amasawa-san wanted to stop us, she could have done something, but she didn't show any signs of moving. She just kept watching us with amusement.

"It's not a bad strategy," she said. "If two people going it solo came together and made a group, then they'd be able to avoid getting expelled even if one of them gets seriously injured."

She had her back to us, quietly putting more distance between us. I couldn't imagine that it was because she sensed there was danger in a two-on-one fight and was trying to pull back. After getting a reasonable distance away, she turned again and looked back at us.

"But, you know, you've made one miscalculation, Horikita-senpai."

"Oh? What in the world do you mean by that?" I asked.



"The idea that you'll be okay even if one of you gets eliminated. You know, if you turn that logic around, it means that there'll be no problem for me even if I completely and utterly destroy one of you."

A huge grin lit up her face. It was pure evil, the likes of which I had never seen before.

"What, you mean we pissed you off or something? Fine by me. Bring it," said Ibuki-san.

Ibuki-san looked somewhat amused by all of this, even though she should have sensed how strong our opponent was. Just then, we heard the notification that indicated that the link was complete.

"Now then... I wonder which one of you I'll break first!" shouted Amasawa-san.

With that, she suddenly broke into a full run. A look of intense fury spread over her whole face. She hadn't taken on any stance or form, but simply reached out in our direction, seemingly planning to grab us.

"A ha ha! A ha ha ha ha ha!!!"

She let out a shrill laugh, with a wicked, warped smile on her face that made her look completely inhuman. Was she coming after me? Or Ibuki-san? I figured that in her eyes, I was the more revolting person here, so if I had to guess, chances were that I was the more likely target.

"Here we go, Ibuki-san! On your left!" I shouted.

"Don't order me around!" she snapped back, but she still listened and moved to the left.

At the same time, I went right, watching to confirm which one of us Amasawa-san would go after. Amasawa-san was heading straight for the both of us and didn't seem like she had any intention whatsoever of playing games. I wondered if she was planning to keep us from making any decisions until the very last second. If that was the case, then I would just keep my eyes on her and take my time to find out. Since both sides moved at the

same time, with Amasawa-san on one and Ibuki-san and I on the other, the distance between us closed rather quickly. We clashed.

My punch and Ibuki-san's breathing weren't in perfect sync or anything, so, naturally, it wasn't like our attacks on Amasawa-san were perfectly timed. Still, no normal person would be able to respond to a punch like that so easily. And yet despite that fact, Amasawa-san brilliantly dodged our attacks as though she had been trained to handle such things. Then, to keep up our bombardment, Ibuki-san and I continued throwing out blows without stopping.

"Okey dokey, that's enough of that!" said Amasawa-san, effortlessly catching our attempts and shutting down our attack even though we weren't holding back at all.

"What is *with* this first-year...?!" Ibuki-san growled.

"You're telling me..." I replied.

Ibuki-san and I stood together side-by-side, gazing at Amasawa-san. We were completely out of breath. Sure, we were trying to push on ahead as an impromptu mismatched team, but even so, it was still two-on-one. Normally, we should have been dominating, but instead, we were being pushed around. Amasawa-san was more than I'd imagined... No, actually, she was wildly beyond the realm of my imagination. She seemed to be someone with abilities so far out of the scope of common sense. Amasawa-san held onto our dominant arms. If we carelessly tried to kick her, she would probably hit us with a counterattack.

"Ibuki-san, don't just stupidly try and attack her!" I shouted.

"Lemme go!" screamed Ibuki-san.

She must not have been able to put up with being restrained. She was flexible and stretched her body as much as she could, trying to land a kick on Amasawa-san. However, it was like Amasawa-san had been waiting for that to happen. She made use of her grip on Ibuki-san's dominant arm to make her lose her footing.

"Ngh!!!"

"I believe I said that was enough of that, didn't I?" taunted Amasawa-san.

In that exact moment, as we were being restrained, I felt that something was off. Something was indescribably wrong with the progression of this battle. I sensed the clear difference in power between us. Did that mean that Amasawa-san was only playing with us? She seemed to have been fighting with only the bare minimum amount of movement for a while now. What if she hadn't waited and given me time to recover when we were fighting one-on-one earlier?

Still though, something didn't feel right. With her strength, she should have been able to subdue us easily. I thought of at least one strategy that we could try. At any rate, we needed to get out of this situation, for the time being.

"Hah!"

I thrust out my left arm, figuring that I might as well try something, but Amasawa-san brushed my attack off, just like she had done with Ibuki-san's.

"All right, let's start over, 'kay?" she announced, looking down on us with a big grin on her face.

She let go of us and, once again put some distance between us.

"Weren't you supposed to not be the same as me?" snapped Ibuki-san.

"Unlike you, I *let* her do that to me so things would happen this way... So that we would start over," I replied.

"What a lame excuse," Ibuki-san sighed.

I supposed that anyone else watching us right now probably would have said the same thing.

"If you seriously think you can underestimate me, I'm going to teach you a thing or two..." growled Ibuki-san, looking at Amasawa-san.

Just as she was getting back up and was about to launch herself at Amasawa-san all on her own, I quickly grabbed her arm

to stop her.

"What're you doing?!" she snapped at me.

"Now that we're on the same side, I'm going to need you to follow my lead," I said. "Can you do that?"

"Huh? You think that I can't?" she huffed.

"Look, if you don't follow me, then there's no point to any of this. You should understand Amasawa-san's strength perfectly well by now. Neither I nor you can win alone against her."

"Even if that's true, I absolutely, positively refuse to do what you tell me. Forget it," said Ibuki-san.

I kept thinking about this. How could I reach Ibuki-san? What was the best possible solution? Hypothetically, if Ayanokouji-kun were here now, what would he have done in my situation? How could I make two people who normally didn't get along at all work together, even if it was just for right here and now?

"Ibuki-san."

"I already told you, no," she answered flatly.

"I understand quite well that you and I are like oil and water. I realize that our relationship has become what it is after we had something of a petty quarrel during the uninhabited island exam last year. But there is one thing about you that I must acknowledge."

Yes, I was going to do what was necessary right now, without hesitation.

"You hold your own well in a fight," I told her. "You stand toe-to-toe with me in that regard. No, actually, I believe you have a slight edge on me."

"Huh? What's all this about? You trying to flatter me all of a sudden?"

"However," I continued, "your fighting style is specialized for one-on-one fights. I'm more familiar when it comes to what moves to make when fighting a powerful opponent in a two-on-one setting. I suppose that in asking you to cooperate with me—well,

cooperate might be the wrong word for you... Lend me your strength."

At that, Ibuki-san turned to look at me, but just for a moment.

"In terms of strength, you are equal to me, or perhaps even better. But that's it. Aside from that, we're on completely different levels. You can't handle yourself academically, you can't lead your class, and you can't work together with anyone. I'm sorry, but going ahead and calling yourself my rival is quite conceited," I added.

If she was going to get angry with me, then I'd let her get mad. But I wasn't going to stop talking before I said what needed to be said.

"I think that the time has come for you to come out of your shell too, Ibuki Mio-san."

"...What are you even talking about?" she asked.

"If you keep pressing on ahead as you are right now, alone, you will surely find yourself in danger of being expelled at some point," I answered.

"Whatever," she said. "I don't really care if that happens."

"But if that does happen, that will mean you've lost to me, completely and utterly. There would be no contest. Are you okay with that?"

"What was that?" She blinked.

"You can't possibly call yourself my rival if you just wind up getting yourself expelled in such an underwhelming fashion," I said. "You need to face the situation and try as hard as you possibly can, for as long as you can, and grow into a rival that can intimidate me."

"Uggggh." Ibuki-san groaned. "Fine. I get it. I get it already, so just shut up! I'll do what you tell me. Just right here and now, though. All right?"

"Excellent," I replied.

"So, what do we do?"

"We're going to go after Amasawa-san at the same time, just like before," I told her. "But actually *hitting* her is only our secondary objective. I want you to stand your ground and make sure that you absolutely do not let yourself get caught. And I want you to keep on attacking her, over and over."

"Wait, secondary? What's that going to accomplish?" asked Ibuki-san.

"If my hunch is correct, then...this will give us a chance to turn things around and win. When I give you the signal, attack with all your might."

Ibuki-san moved away from me at that point, though she didn't look entirely convinced by what I said.

"Strategy meeting over?" said Amasawa-san. "Well then, shall we get started on round two?"

Ibuki-san and I split up and broke into a run at the exact same moment, with one of us going left and the other going right as we closed in on Amasawa-san. I had strictly forbidden us from getting in too close so that we wouldn't get caught. While keeping within a distance to be able to reach out with our fists, I timed my move and then thrust my arm out.

If Amasawa-san didn't do anything in response to my move, then my attack would land. Therefore, as she needed to continue to respond to each attack that came her way, her nerves would be wearing down, at least to some degree. I needed to remain calm, unpanicked, and ready to quickly move away if I sensed danger. If I were alone, I probably wouldn't have been able to get away at all. This was a fighting style that would only work right now, at this very moment, because we were able to pull her attention in two different directions.

We still hadn't found any openings yet. *Come on, quickly, quickly, before I run out of breath!* By keeping up this flurry of dangerous attacks, the sharpness of Amasawa-san's movements began to dull. Although she still had a smile on her face, she was clearly starting to lose her stamina.

"...Now!!!" I shouted.

I swung my right fist as hard as I possibly could at Amasawa-san, not letting this golden opportunity pass me by. If I had tried this attack moments earlier in our fight, she would have easily brushed me off with just one hand. But this time, she took on a defensive stance. Even though I didn't land a direct hit, Ibuki-san managed to get behind her while the first-year blocked my attack.

Ibuki-san kicked off the ground, dashing toward Amasawa-san. She threw a punch, and though Amasawa-san tried to turn and block it, Ibuki-san managed to hit her square in the face. Amasawa-san's body shook from the impact of that first blow hitting home.

"Haaaah!" I shouted.

I dropped down low into a crouch. I thrust my arm out with force, driving my fist into Amasawa-san's abdomen. She was not in a defensive stance this time either. I exhaled, and Amasawa-san collapsed onto the ground. In that same instant, I straddled her and prevented her from moving to get back up.

"*Huff... It... It really worked...*" said Ibuki-san.

"*H-huff... Phew... That's enough, Amasawa-san... I acknowledge your strength, but your lack of stamina proved to be fatal,*" I told her.

Somehow, I had been able to exploit her all-too-surprising weakness and managed to turn the tables on her.

"Oh, did I get found out? That I have a weak constitution?" she replied.

Even though I was straddling her, the girl wasn't flustered at all. She chuckled, sticking her tongue out playfully. I happened to look down at her clothes and couldn't believe what I saw. A bit of skin was visible from under the fabric, just barely peeking out. Without thinking, I grabbed her gym uniform shirt and forcefully pulled it up to her navel.

"You— What are these injuries...?" I sputtered.

She had deep marks all over, like bruises. The wounds on her body looked purposeful, like they had been inflicted as a kind of

punishment. They were completely unlike the mark left from the one thrusting punch I hit her with earlier. These injuries had been inflicted before our fight even began.

"I had a little bit of a tussle myself before I met up with you two," said Amasawa-san.

Normally, it would have been hard to hide that level of pain. Her face should have been twisted in agony this whole time. It should've been difficult for her to even walk. And yet she had taken on the two us while in such a ragged state—and had the upper hand as well. It wasn't that she was lacking in stamina. From the beginning, she had been fighting while on the verge of collapsing. She had held her own in battle while in need of recovery, far more so than I did...

The truth of the situation almost made me dizzy. I tried to imagine who could have inflicted injuries this severe on Amasawa-san when she was in top form. Even if I were to include the boys in those possibilities, the only person I could think of that would come close would be someone like Housen-kun.

"Do you want to know who did this to me? It might have been Housen-kun," she teased.

There was no doubt whatsoever that Housen-kun's abilities were extraordinary. He certainly might have been able to gain the upper hand against an opponent like Amasawa-san, whose incredible strength defied the norm. But just from this encounter with her, I had come to understand something about her personality: I couldn't imagine that she would tell me anything honestly.

She presented me with one possible answer just to satisfy me and nothing more. If that was the case...did that mean that there was someone else out there powerful enough to overwhelm Amasawa-san? Even if I widened the scope and considered all the students at our school, I couldn't think of anyone that fit the bill. Yamada-kun, perhaps. But, no, I supposed there wouldn't be any benefit for him in doing something like this.

"Sorry, but I'm having a tough time believing you. Who was it, really?" I asked.

"I can't answer that question... And—!"

I had let my guard down. Amasawa-san didn't miss the opening I'd made for her when she noticed how shaken I was by the state of her injuries.

"Hey, what are you doing?!" shouted Ibuki-san.

"Sorry... I was careless," I replied.

It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but I had let Amasawa-san slip away.

"Well then, looks like we're back to where we started, huh, you two?" taunted Amasawa-san.

Our opponent was severely wounded from head to toe. Nevertheless, the situation was once again in her favor. Could we put her down again? To be honest, I wasn't confident that we could. But we had no other choice but to try.

It seemed like she had other ideas, though, because she went over to her backpack and took out her tablet.

"Seems like it's over now," she said. "Well, that was kind of fun, but time's up, I guess."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It means we're done here. If you want to go on ahead, be my guest!" She was allowing us to pass, no longer showing any sign of the strong resistance she had put up until that point.

Was this some kind of trap? While I was still trying to get a grasp on the situation, Amasawa-san started walking off.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Where? Hmm. Maybe my designated area for the time being, I guess. I mean, I do still have to do this special exam thingy a bit, more or less."

At any rate, I supposed I could let her withdraw here so I could go ahead and check on Ayanokouji-kun—

"Oh, yeah, that reminds me," said Amasawa-san. "I don't think you're gonna need to run after Ayanokouji-senpai anymore. Y'know?"

"...Why?"

"Because everything's already over. If you think I'm lying, though, why don't you go and check?"

"What...about Ayanokouji-kun?" I asked.

Amasawa-san cast her eyes down slightly at that question.

"Why don't you look for yourself?" she said. "But you might regret not making it there in time."

She seemed intent on withdrawing, and Amasawa-san just made her way past us. Had she already been done in by someone?

"What are you gonna do?" asked Ibuki-san. "Chase after Ayanokouji? That's why we fought Amasawa, right?"

"Yes, I'm going after him," I answered.

Ayanokouji-kun was just up ahead. There was no way I could turn back without checking on him myself now that we had come this far.

"In that case, I'll go too," said Ibuki-san.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because if Ayanokouji is in trouble, then I wanna be there to laugh at him," she replied.

"You really are deeply spiteful at heart," I said.

We hurriedly threw our backpacks over our shoulders once more and ran toward I2.

7.4

I HAD CROSSED THE BOUNDARY between areas and arrived in I2, but there was no notification on my watch to indicate that I had done so. Normally, I would have suspected this was due to some kind of tracking error in the GPS, but that didn't seem likely in this particular case. If that was the reason, then I'd probably need to move as close to the center of the area as possible to make up for the tracking error with the watch. However, I hadn't experienced a situation like this even once over these past two weeks.

I supposed that this might have just been one of those inevitable things since the center of this area would have been the tip of the island. Even if Ichinose had not come to me earlier and I had come to this area without knowing anything, it might not have mattered; things had been designed in such a way that I would have arrived by this route anyway. I walked slowly along the inescapable path before me.

After less than ten minutes of walking, more and more light gradually began to penetrate the deep, dense woods, and I was able to see the ocean beyond and the blue skies above. Despite coming this far, I still hadn't received any response from my watch at all. Instead, I spotted two adults standing on the small beach up ahead.

One of them was a man who was quite familiar to me: Acting Director Tsukishiro. He wore a jersey and looked somewhat cheerful. The other was Shiba-sensei, the homeroom instructor for Class 1-D. An unusual pair to be sure, but from the looks of things, they were here together.

"I see you've decided to take a very aggressive approach, Acting Director Tsukishiro," I called out to him as I walked along the sandy beach.

"Nothing was working. Things just haven't gone right at all," he replied. "This was the only feasible option, you see."

I thought back over the past fourteen days that I had spent enduring this special exam. It was clear to me that Tsukishiro's final "trap" was to lure me here to I2. Still, there were some things that bothered me. There were no designated areas nor Tasks around this northeastern section, so no other students were likely to wander through. But at the same time, I could have just abandoned the idea of going after this designated area and pursued Tasks instead as I had originally planned. Or I could have been working with someone like Nanase, or even another person from my Table.

It was absurd to think that Tsukishiro would have arranged this meeting by leaving so many variables to mere chance. That meant that my coming here had already been determined, since at least yesterday, or perhaps even earlier. Nanase falling before me in defeat, and the two of us going our separate ways. My strategy to remain hidden somewhere around eleventh place in the rankings before shooting for the higher ranks, and continuing to act alone just for that purpose. The timing and the details of the attack by the first-years. I had little doubt that Tsukishiro's side had accounted for all those things from the very beginning.

"So, what's going to happen to me after this?" I asked.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a small boat. It was anchored. The motor was left running though, and it rocked with the waves. It was ready to launch at any moment.

"If at all possible, we would like for you to follow our instructions and come aboard with us," said Tsukishiro.

"There will be an announcement that Ayanokouji Kiyotaka has withdrawn voluntarily. That's how the matter will be settled. Amicably," added Shiba-sensei.

"Do you think that I'd choose the option of obediently getting into the boat?" I asked.

"I suppose you have a point," said Tsukishiro. "If you were obedient, then there wouldn't have been any need for us to go to the trouble of coming to an uninhabited island."

"Also, there doesn't seem to be any particular connection between you and Shiba-sensei at school, but I suppose this means

he's on your side, Acting Director Tsukishiro."

Since I had no prior contact with this teacher, I supposed that he might have been assigned as a watchdog for Amasawa. Now that the need for such a role had disappeared, he didn't seem to have any intentions of hiding any longer. My being here in the northeast corner of the island, where there was nothing at all happening, might have seemed suspicious, but Ichinose and Nagumo were here too. I supposed, in that sense, they had served their purpose as well, as a kind of camouflage.

In any case, it was safe to assume that this watchdog of sorts was on Tsukishiro's side. He didn't appear to be carrying anything visibly dangerous.

"Had we employed weapons and the like for this task, then collecting you would have been overwhelmingly simple. Unfortunately, however, you are an asset. Because it is my duty to bring you back safely...I have decided that it's necessary to settle this with fists," said Tsukishiro. He stood on the beach with a bold grin and his arms spread wide.

Did this mean that I would need to trade blows with Tsukishiro right here and now, in the eleventh hour of the exam, if I wanted to resist? Unlike my fight with Nanase, the option of simply evading his attacks continuously was probably not going to work.

"So, I have to take you on if I'm going to avoid expulsion," I deduced.

"That's how it is, yes."

"Would it be at all possible for you to just cut me a break here?" I asked. "I'm not necessarily saying that solving matters through violence is bad, but I am a student at this school. And considering what the rules of a normal institution would be, something like this would likely be a violation."

"Indeed, it certainly might," agreed Tsukishiro. "However, Ayanokouji-kun, you are a particularly notable success story who has achieved truly remarkable results among those in the White Room. Even if you were to fight while constrained by certain rules, there's no enemy who could match you. Don't you think it foolish

to compete with others at this school? Or...perhaps you have come to find it amusing to be king of the mountain here?"

"If that were true, then would that be a disappointing development? Something that runs contrary to *that man's* wishes?" I said. "Well...no, I suppose I should call it a 'regression' rather than a development, huh."

"No, no, not at all. The White Room's dearest wish is to seize control of Japan, and in turn, the world. If you, a successful template, did feel that way, then further-developed specimens will take even greater pleasure in dominating the world, no?"

Going from controlling a small Japanese high school to suddenly seizing control over the entire world. If anyone were to hear such a fantastic story, they probably would've started snickering. Even Tsukishiro himself was probably deeply skeptical about how realistic that dream was, I bet. He was just faithfully following his orders and performing his professional duties in a cool, detached manner. Nothing more.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I didn't think that this school was much of a challenge," I said.

"Yes, I have no doubt about that," said Tsukishiro. "I'm sure that for you, this school would be equivalent to a level you'd be able to pass in your early childhood."

"But that's only if we're talking about the curriculum, though," I went on. "I'm starting to get a sense of what I should do at this school, what I want to do, and what direction I'm taking things. I think that I'm going to have plenty of fun here until I graduate. And besides, there are plenty of exceptional people outside of the White Room too."

If anything, I could say that this school was a treasure trove of talented individuals that the White Room could have never, ever produced.

"I have no intention of denigrating the students at the Advanced Nurturing High School," Tsukishiro said. "As you have said, you can find individuals with exceptional talents all throughout the world. At times, there will be people who excel in sports. Other times, you'll find those who excel academically. That,

however, is not that part that is important here. What *is* important is a person who produces such exceptional results that they can excel in any situation, and who can lead the masses."

Acting Director Tsukishiro then shot a brief glance over at Shiba.

"What about Nagumo-kun and Ichinose-san?" he asked.

"Nagumo has stopped, and Ichinose is already far away, so there isn't anything to worry about," said Shiba.

They must have calculated that I would have stopped Nagumo and Ichinose, of course.

"And regarding the unexpected signatures we picked up," he added, "it would appear that Amasawa has taken care of them."

Unexpected signatures? There weren't any designated areas or Tasks in the vicinity. Had others besides Ichinose or Nagumo come this way? If an uninvolved student did appear here, it would certainly be a nuisance for Tsukishiro. But at any rate, it sounded as though Amasawa had stalled whatever person or persons had caused this irregularity.

"I suppose that means that she has extended at least some courtesy to us then," said Tsukishiro.

"It didn't seem to me like Amasawa was aligning herself with you though, Acting Director Tsukishiro," I remarked.

"She is, simply put, a traitor," he replied. "She was the one who was chosen to bring you back, but it appears that she never had any intention of doing so in the first place."

Then, as if to declare that this pointless conversation was now over, Tsukishiro took a step forward. It wasn't a good idea for either of us to just stand around idly and waste each other's time, anyway. Tsukishiro and I gradually started closing the distance between us, little by little. Even so, there was still about five or six meters between us. I noticed Shiba-sensei moving in behind me to keep me from escaping.

"You won't say that two-against-one is unfair, will you?" said Tsukishiro. "You are, after all, the crowning achievement of the White Room. It's enough to make even *me* feel a little anxious."

In spite of his words, he looked incredibly cool and composed. My intuition told me that he believed he could handle me well even in a one-on-one fight, but despite that, he decided to team up and fight me with a partner. He wasn't being prideful at all. He took a firm, rock-solid stance.

I shifted my gaze over to the boat that was waiting for us over by the coast. As far as I could see, there was only one crew member, the captain, on board. Even if he rushed in after me as well, I still only needed to eliminate a maximum of three enemies.

"Please do not worry. You will only be fighting us two," said Tsukishiro, referring to Shiba.

Tsukishiro wasn't the sort of opponent that I could just easily take at his word with no questions asked. Although his earlier comments implied that he had come here empty-handed, I couldn't rule out the possibility that he might be carrying some kind of concealed, handheld weapon. This was a fight that put me up against two adults with unknown levels of ability, both of whom were at the level of an agent. I had to consider the risks of whether they had weapons, whether reinforcements would come, and other factors, as well. Ordinarily, the amount of multitasking required by a situation like this would've scrambled anyone's brains. However, in my case, I was under no mental duress.

Fighting while under unreasonable and disadvantageous conditions was something I was accustomed to as I had been drilled on it repeatedly from an early age. For me, doing this was the same as the unconscious process of breathing, something that was essential for a human being to live.

"The look on your face suggests that you don't think that you're going to lose," said Tsukishiro. "You don't even consider it a slight possibility."

"Do I really look like that?" I asked.

I didn't know what the end result would be. The only way for me to open a path to the future was to seize it right here. My opponents were still observing the situation, having blocked me from both the front and the back. Normally, I would have liked to make the first move, but it wasn't the best idea for me to go on

the offensive. The people standing to the front and back of me weren't students. They were representatives of the school. If I were the only one who ended up throwing a punch, that would put me at a disadvantage and at risk of expulsion.

"You aren't going to start attacking us yourself, even though you know it would be to your advantage to do so," said Tsukishiro, analyzing the situation right back. "That is just like you."

He must have known about the educational policies of the White Room in detail.

"Well then... Let us hold nothing back. Shall we begin, Shiba-sensei?" he added, calling to his companion.

As soon as Tsukishiro called his partner's name, the two adults started walking toward me at the exact same time. They weren't rushing at all. They were each cool and composed, advancing like shogi pieces being moved down the board in methodical, calculated fashion. Shiba had erased any trace of his presence, and at the same time, made his footsteps silent as he approached me from behind. Meanwhile, Tsukishiro advanced from the front. He was going to reach me in seven more steps. Six. Five. Four—

I crouched down slightly, avoiding Shiba's hands as he tried to grab my face from behind. So, the first move had come from the back after all. While I was in the process of evading Shiba's first move, Tsukishiro extended his arm, trying to grab me in a similar fashion. I evaded his reach by rolling away along the beach. I quickly got back on my feet and instantly broke into a run, keeping away from his follow-up attempts.

A cloud of dust danced in the air, carried on the sea breeze. The two adults looked at me quietly, taking their pursuit slowly. And, similarly, I was observing them too. They seemed to have been trying to gauge my skill level through the moves we were making, which was information that couldn't be understood from data alone. My feet sunk into the sand. Considering how deeply they sunk, I figured I should have taken off my shoes right away, ahead of time.

As we stood beneath the hot, blazing sun, the two men started walking toward me, once again closing the distance between us. With my face and my body facing the two of them, I backed away from them in step, keeping my distance. With my back to the ocean, I could avoid letting anyone get behind me. At the same time, I had escaped from the soft sand, now ensuring that I had a secure foothold.

"What a textbook strategy, Ayanokouji-kun," said Tsukishiro, "but it's doubtful that it's necessarily the correct one."

Even though I couldn't be grabbed from behind now, this also meant I didn't have an escape route. Tsukishiro and Shiba moved in closer. I was standing in a position where if I backed up any further, the tide would be crashing against my legs. They were still trying to grab hold of me with outstretched arms. They still apparently had no intention of trying to cause any actual harm to me by landing a blow.

"You are quite good at running away," said Tsukishiro.

Both started picking up the pace, moving faster now, and what few opportunities I had to dodge were getting taken away from me. I backed up until it felt like one of my legs was just barely touching the seawater. I couldn't stay where I was anymore, and I quickly scrambled away.

"Oh?" said Tsukishiro. "Have you given up on trying to keep your back to the water, then?"

If you could make your opponent panic, it was easier to get them to make mistakes. That was the kind of thing that ran through my mind as I moved. Shiba and Tsukishiro came after me, kicking up sand as they went. It was two against one. If either one of them caught me, it would be game over.

Four arms alternated reaching out for me in turns, and I was sure that if they saw the slightest opening, it would be all over for me. I ran and tried to keep my distance from them, but they continued to chase me down, never letting me get far. Running away in a place like this would only continue to drain my energy. It was clear that their intention was to rob me of my stamina, between the poor footing and the scorching sun. I stopped my

escape attempt midway and making full use of the momentum from my body, I stepped down with my left foot, turned around, and attacked Shiba, who was directly behind me.

"Hm?!"

Shiba's movements stiffened slightly in response to my unexpected change in trajectory. While I went for a feint with my left at first, I switched it up by taking a swing at his chest area with my right. But Shiba, sensing the danger, didn't panic and kept his distance from me. They were seemingly prioritizing avoiding blows rather than catching them.

"My oh my," said Tsukishiro. "Even while going up against the two of us, you are putting up a marvelous fight, Ayanokouji-kun."

I tried to change things up by attempting to counterattack, still avoiding the attacks coming at me from both sides, but I couldn't get a clean hit.

"But, you know, human stamina is finite. Any minute now, you'll start feeling like you need to catch your breath, no?"

"You are a difficult opponent to fight, Acting Director Tsukishiro," I replied.

"I take the initiative to do the sorts of things that others don't like to do," he said. "It's my job."

There was nothing particularly clean or dirty about the way he fought. Instead, it was clear that his goal was simply to catch me and bring me back. However, it wasn't like I was burning through my stamina for no reason either. There was something that I had gained from everything that had happened up until this point. I had found that there seemed to be a slight and unexpected difference in fighting ability between Tsukishiro and Shiba.

Tsukishiro was a four and Shiba was a six. Shiba's movements had a greater degree of sharpness. My previous hunch had assumed that Tsukishiro would have been a cut above his partner, but... At any rate, I slightly changed the balance of the degree of caution I had shown to each of them, changing it to an even fifty-fifty.

I had previously considered Shiba to be the less capable one, thinking he had been put in the rear for a reason, but it turned out to have been the opposite. They were putting more of a priority on fighting me from the back. With that in mind, I considered changing tactics by taking aim at the now-inferior Tsukishiro—but that being said, he still possessed extraordinary abilities. He was someone on an entirely different level, a higher plane of skill. It wasn't going to be easy to bring him down. In fact, if Tsukishiro realized that I made this deduction, then he might start focusing on defense instead.

I would finish off Shiba in a single blow, before giving the two of them enough time to realize that I discovered the difference in their abilities. To put it in simpler terms, the idea was that I would let them think that they were going to win, then turn around and settle this with one hit. This, right now—this moment when my opponents still planned to refrain from hitting me—was my chance. If luck was on my side, then I would be the only one dealing damage. Then, after neutralizing Shiba, I could quickly deal with Tsukishiro one-on-one, without a moment's delay.

I had spent about a second or so thinking all of this. Both men approached to attack me at the same speed as before. However, the hand that came my way, which I thought would've been open to grab me, had changed shape. It was now tightly clenched into a fist, meant to strike.

They saw through me and figured out my intentions to start trading blows with them. If they continued attacking me at this rate, then we were all going to end up getting injured. If that was the case, then I just needed to hurt them more than they hurt me, and—

I tried to focus my attention on dealing with and damaging Shiba, who was still behind me, but then something unexpected happened. I felt a cold sensation on the nape of my neck, inevitably forcing me to bring my counterattack to a halt. I took evasive action once again for what felt like the millionth time and moved away from Tsukishiro. Moments after I moved, Shiba's arm swung by me. The sound of his fist flying through the air rang in my ears.

If I had carelessly gone through with trying to trade blows with Shiba, I might have been stopped at once. Shiba's attack just then had most definitely boasted the same level of power as my own. But, more importantly...I had been looking at Tsukishiro, who I had surmised as inferior, out of the corner of my eye, and saw that he was now moving two degrees faster than I had expected.

"...I see that I really can't let down my guard with you after all, Acting Director Tsukishiro," I remarked.

I had managed to evade the attack just in time. For the first time in years, I was breaking out into a cold sweat during a fight. I wondered what would have happened had I not trusted my intuition. Not only would I have been hit by Shiba's attack just then, but I might have been left completely defenseless for Tsukishiro's subsequent strike.

As it turned out, my earlier interpretation that Tsukishiro was a four and Shiba was a six was false. It was merely a trick from my opponents. They had been intentionally keeping their abilities hidden, and then made their attack in such a way that exceeded my degree of caution.

"We intended to finish you off right then, but your reaction time really is beyond that of an ordinary person's," said Tsukishiro.

It was fortunate that I hadn't dismissed any possibilities. That I hadn't ignored how unnatural it seemed for Tsukishiro to be inferior to Shiba in terms of ability. It was safe to say that it was that fact alone that I hadn't dismissed this possibility which had led to me putting up my guard right at the very last moment. Both men were being as cautious as possible, but they weren't going to hesitate to take a risk if they thought they could gain something. It seemed that this scenario was slightly unfavorable for me...

Even if I did take out one of them first, it would be difficult for me to keep up my guard up *and* strike the other with a proper hit at the perfect moment. It was hard to imagine that this pair had come together as a team overnight.

"So, how is your analysis going, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Tsukishiro.

The fight had only begun just over two minutes ago. In that time, I had assessed a variety of ideas, but so far, none of them had proved to be decisive.

"This fight would have been easier if we simply traded blows like children, trying to take each other down with brute force alone, no?" he said. "However, we adults do not hesitate to adopt the best possible measures to avoid losing, you see. Even if those measures are unrefined and by no means what people might consider 'cool.'"

Tsukishiro had read 99 percent of my thoughts. His fighting style was precise and without indecision, and he didn't allow his own thoughts to be read. Or rather, I supposed I should say that while he *did* let me read his thoughts, he wasn't showing me the truth. In any case, I wasn't going to be able to make a decisive move in this current situation. At this rate, things were going to just get worse and worse for me; it seemed that I was going to need to take on a sizeable risk to make a difference in this situation.

"Acting Director Tsukishiro."

Someone spoke up just then, interrupting the disadvantageous impasse that I had found myself in, and it was none other than Shiba. Until this point, he had barely spoken a word as he engaged in the fight. Immediately after his name was called, Tsukishiro also seemed to notice the unusual development that had just arisen. It was something that no one here had expected to happen.

An uninvited visitor arrived.

"I was wondering what the Acting Director and a homeroom instructor were doing here in such an isolated place, fighting against a student no less. If you wouldn't mind, would you please care to enlighten me?"

"If I recall, you're—" said Shiba.

"That's Kiryuuin Fuuka, from Class 3-B," answered Tsukishiro.

Why was she here? I was the only one who was supposed to have I2 as a designated area now.

"You do not appear to be a lost little kitten to me," said Tsukishiro, slipping out of his combat-ready stance for the moment. "What can I do for you?"

"To tell you the truth, I've been watching from behind a big tree for some time now," Kiryuuin said. "But I couldn't see exactly what was happening in this two-on-one fight, so I decided to jump out from behind the tree."

There was no way that Tsukishiro and Shiba wouldn't have seen her GPS signal in the area, of course.

"Oh, you're surprised I'm here? I wonder if perhaps this is the reason? It seems that my wristwatch has stopped working because of an accident," she added with a smile, showing us the shattered face of her wristwatch. It looked like it had been smashed to pieces.

"So, I ask you, esteemed representatives of our fine educational institution, is there any problem with that?" she continued. "Even if my watch is broken, all that means is the scoring functions have been turned off. I am free to go wherever I wish."

"Oh no, no problem at all, of course," replied Tsukishiro. "It is certainly true that malfunctions are bound to occur during this test."

He showed no hint of panic at this unexpected arrival. Normally, in a situation like this, you would think that a wayward administrator would pull back when a student showed up. However, Tsukishiro understood that this was his last opportunity, so he was not backing down. Most likely, he had simply added Kiryuuin's name to the list of people that needed to be eliminated instead.

"Ayanokouji, did I do something unnecessary?" asked Kiryuuin.

If she had seen this bizarre battle between student and teachers taking place, then there was no point in trying to smooth things over for appearance's sake. Rather, I figured that I should make practical use of this happy accident that just occurred.

"That depends on what happens next. Can I assume that this means you're going to lend me a hand?" I asked in return.

Tsukishiro's strength was considerable. I could state with certainty that his fighting style, based on the accumulation of experience and skill, made him one of the most powerful opponents I ever faced, even out of everyone I could remember.

"Of course I will," replied Kiryuuin. "As your senpai, it's only natural that I protect someone younger than me, no?" She stood beside me with a smirk.

"But why did you come here anyway?" I asked.

"I saw you running around trying to escape the first-years yesterday," she said. "It piqued my curiosity, so I thought I'd stop and ask you about it, but then I thought it'd be a good idea to just let you keep running."

Did that mean that she deliberately broke her own watch and approached me without me even realizing it?

"I'm glad that my curiosity won out in the end. I've been called into a remarkably interesting turn of events as a result."

Well, it was certainly true that this was something that you normally wouldn't see.

"Shiba-sensei, I leave the matter of dealing with her to you, if you please," said Tsukishiro.

"As far as I can tell, the acting director and Shiba-sensei have a ridiculously high level of ability. I don't know exactly how much use I can be, but I probably won't last very long," said Kiryuuin. She stood beside me, gleefully holding her fists up at the ready.

"If you can keep him busy for even a second or two, it would be greatly appreciated," I replied.

"Oh, you've really said it now," said Kiryuuin. "I'll try to hold him off for a *minute* or two, at least. But Ayanokouji, can't you make yourself look more...you know?"

"Huh?" I asked.

"That blank, slovenly look on your face certainly isn't helping matters either," she said. "Hold your fists up and bring forth an aura about yourself like you're saying, 'Bring it on.' Go on."

I had never imagined that I'd be told something like that in a situation like this. However, Kiryuuin was exerting this bizarre pressure on me, and so I felt like I had no choice but to strike a pose that was more, as she put it, "you know." It was the sort of pose that you might see someone adopt in a fight scene in a TV drama.

"...How's this?" I asked.

Fu fu. Well, it's awkward, but it'll do. I'll say that you've met the bare minimum requirements," said Kiryuuin with a grin, once again striking a fighting pose herself.

"Do you have experience fighting people?" I asked.

"I am a lady. Of course I don't," she replied.

"...Are you serious?"

"Don't worry. I've been thinking that I'd like to punch someone at least once."

Kiryuuin and I moved some distance apart from each other, putting ourselves in position to establish that we were clearly going to have our own respective one-on-one fights.

"Let's settle this, Acting Director Tsukishiro."

"So, you've decided that you can win if you're facing me alone? Is that what you think?" Tsukishiro slipped back into his stance, wearing his usual smile, showing no signs of complacency or tension. "Well then, why don't you show me how good you really are in a one-on-one fight?"



I needed to regard the opponent standing in front of me as an equal adversary. If I didn't, then I'd have the rug pulled out from under me. Even so, our match would need to be decided in less than a minute. I needed to finish this while Kiryuuin was still holding Shiba back.

Tsukishiro launched his attack at me without a sound. I evaded it and then returned the favor by driving my left fist into his cheek.

"Ngh?!"

I repeatedly delivered fast jabs, at a matching tempo. They were sharp punches. Because I was focused solely on making my hits land, there wasn't a great degree of power behind each strike. But as I repeatedly landed hit after hit, Tsukishiro's smile started to fade. What I was aiming for now was his septum. Even light damage there would trigger certain effects in the human body. To be specific, tears.

If you hit someone on the bridge of their nose, it would induce tears, no matter who they were. They would flow before the pain would come. Those tears would rob you of your vision, which was all too important. It didn't matter whether you were an adult, a teenager, a young child, or an elderly person. It was simply a mechanism of the human body. As Tsukishiro's field of vision worsened, I came at him with an uppercut, hitting him right in the jaw. Tsukishiro was now looking up at the sky. He must have bit the inside of his mouth because he spat out a little blood.

"I wonder how long it's been," he mused, wiping the blood from his lips with a fearless grin. "Considering that the opponent standing before me now is but a child in his second year of high school, I must commend you. You are, without a doubt, a masterpiece."

Out of all the opponents that I'd traded blows with, Tsukishiro was, without question, one of the best. I was certain of that, even though I had determined that I could still beat him in a one-on-one fight.

"I ordinarily do not care for such violence," he added, "but this is so enjoyable that I just cannot help myself."

Tsukishiro, smiling as though he found something amusing, once again assumed a stance. But rather than coming at me with an attack right away, he began backing up slowly and steadily. I could have interpreted what he was doing as an attempt to stall until Shiba got control of Kiryuuin, I supposed, but...he wasn't getting riled up. He was calmly looking for a path to victory. Tsukishiro looked at the sand beneath his feet. It had only been an instant, at most. Without missing a beat, I lunged forward and focused power into my right fist.

"You are truly, absolutely brilliant!" said Tsukishiro.

I drove my fist into him with a twisting motion, delivering a vicious body blow. It was a direct hit, with an almost unceasing degree of force. But even so, Tsukishiro's smile didn't fade. He crumpled, losing his balance. While he was down, he snatched up some sand with his left hand and flung it at me. Then, he plunged his free hand down into the sandy beach like he was about to dig a hole with it and used it to prop himself back up.

Still, even if he managed to strike me directly with his right fist, he wasn't going to deal much damage since he hadn't been in a good position to strike in the first place. He swung his right arm at me in an uppercut, but I didn't take the punch from his right straight on. Instead, I brushed his arm aside and then grabbed it tightly, stopping him from moving.

"Ngh!"

And there, for the first time, Tsukishiro's smile completely vanished, just for a moment. My gaze was fixed on his right hand. He was holding a stun gun.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"I didn't, not until just seconds ago," I replied. "You couldn't have possibly afforded to give me even the slightest opening in this situation, and yet for some reason, you looked down at your feet for a moment like you were looking for something. When I saw you do that, I felt like there was something off. Even if your goal was to blind me with sand, there wasn't any reason for you to deliberately look to your feet."

Even when he grabbed some sand on the beach with his left hand and threw it at me earlier, I was already thinking about that possibility.

"I also felt like there was something unnatural about the way you were moving, like you were intentionally letting yourself get hit by my attack."

Considering that we were both so close in terms of ability, it was necessary for both of us to try and control the flow of the battle.

"I hadn't wanted to take this risk if it were at all possible... It was intended to be an insurance policy," he said. "But I suppose your skills were so great that they caused me to become impatient."

He relaxed his right hand, letting the stun gun fall to the beach, sticking up in the sand.

"Now then, what will you do? I have sustained quite a bit of damage, though..." said Tsukishiro.

I followed his line of sight and saw that Shiba had restrained Kiryuuin, holding her from behind. She was about to give up. Just then, Acting Director Tsukishiro raised his hand, giving some kind of signal to someone. The operator of the small boat that had been anchored nearby had something in his hands, and he tried to start coming up on land. It was obvious that this was their final trump card, meant to be used in the unlikely event they were defeated.

But I had a trump card too.

"Unfortunately, you're out of time, Acting Director Tsukishiro."

Suddenly, the small boat that Tsukishiro had called, and which had been preparing to come ashore, roared back to life. The engine came on and it departed rapidly, leaving behind the two men on the beach. The reason was probably because the boat's captain had seen another vessel coming from further out on the water.

"...That's quite a surprise," said Tsukishiro. "How did you call that boat here? I had already made the arrangements for this

meeting, of course. I had to make sure of that on the off chance that you attempted to call upon the school, you would be stopped. Besides, I thought you would have avoided letting the school find out about this."

"It's simple," I replied. "Just look at the small boat over there closely, and you'll see what I mean," I answered.

If you took a good, hard look at the approaching boat, you would see Mashima-sensei and Chabashira-sensei aboard. Tsukishiro must have presumed as much, too, after hearing what I'd said.

"What would happen if someone reported that students from Class 2-A and Class 2-D had collapsed in I2 and were in danger?" I said. "That's not an issue that could be covered up so easily, after all. I already verified that those students' respective homeroom teachers would be among those selected to take part in rescue operations should there be trouble, thanks to a previous incident. I knew that Mashima-sensei and Chabashira-sensei would rush to the scene."

To put it simply, this was a rule that the school had during this exam. The school administration had figured that it was best for the students' respective homeroom teachers to be part of the rescue crew because they could identify their students with a single glance. So, if it were reported that students from classes 2-A and 2-D had an issue, the medical crew would have no choice but to allow those homeroom instructors to accompany them, even if they didn't want to let them come along. And, if a student's Emergency Alert were to go off, there wouldn't be any time to check the GPS location of each and every person involved. If the report included a note that a student's watch was apparently broken, the response crew would be sent to investigate, even if there was no GPS response at the location in the report.

"Supposing all of the students' GPS signatures were checked, would the medical response crew not have come, and the situation not have changed, then?" asked Tsukishiro.

"Not quite. In fact, if you look at the map right now, you'll notice that one student from Class 2-A and one student from Class 2-D no longer have a GPS signature. So, if anything, I think it

would've actually increased the credibility of the report if they had checked."

"So, you were intentionally trying to stall for time from the very beginning," Tsukishiro said. "That was why you focused on escaping at first, even while at a disadvantage."

"Threatening Ichinose in such a half-baked fashion was a mistake," I told him. "If you're going to do something, you need to be thorough."

As a result, Tsukishiro had given me the chance to offer help to Sakayanagi before I came here.

"Even so, I hold an esteemed, almost unimpeachable position, you know?" said Tsukishiro, smiling. "There's no way I could do something so dangerous."

I didn't know whether what he just said was the truth or a lie.

"It would seem that having rules that require you to wear a wristwatch that gives away your position has quite a few downsides to it in an exam, wouldn't you say?" he added, seemingly surrendering.

Picking up on Tsukishiro's air of resignation, Shiba immediately let go of Kiryuuin.

"Phew..." she sighed. "Thank you for the help, Ayanokouji. I couldn't even make a dent in this guy. I was so out of my depth that it was almost funny."

Kiryuuin got down on one knee, trying to catch her breath and recover. I had watched some of her fight with Shiba, albeit out of the corner of my eye. Although she was on the defensive the whole time, she held her ground well. The fact that she had confirmed that she was clearly outclassed and had worked only to slow down her opponent without overdoing it herself was notable. If Shiba had joined in on the fight with me, alongside Tsukishiro when he was going all out, I don't know how things would have turned out.

Eventually, the boat came ashore, and Mashima and Chabashira disembarked. That walkie-talkie that I had borrowed

from Sakayanagi had come in handy right at the very end.

"So, does this mean that you're acknowledging this as my victory?" I asked.

"Well, I can't not acknowledge it, at present," he replied.

There shouldn't have been any way for Tsukishiro to turn things around anymore, not at this current time and place. If the school investigated the matter, they would find that I was the only one who had their designated area deliberately changed.

"You are certainly skirting a fine line with your score, but I suppose you should be okay," Tsukishiro conceded. "Just barely, though. As for me, considering that I have become something of an official, I suppose I wouldn't be able to avoid objections if you did find yourself in the bottom five groups."

"Don't worry," I told him. "I've been keeping an eye on staying on the safe side of the line."

"I see, so that was an unnecessary concern on my part. Well then, I believe I'll retreat for the time being."

"For the time being?" I repeated. "I'd prefer not to see any more schemes like this where you resort to committing acts of violence, thank you very much. I think that, at the very least, it goes against the foundational ideology of this school. Of course, if you're going to have me tested on my physical strength, officially, and via the school's rules, then I suppose I would see that as a welcome challenge."

Tsukishiro's smile hadn't left his face as he looked over at Mashima-sensei and Chabashira-sensei approaching.

"Please let me ask you one last thing, Acting Director Tsukishiro. Were you really, seriously trying to have me expelled? I'm sure that you were under strong restrictions, but if I were in your position, I would have gone ahead with a more reliable method of doing things."

I couldn't believe that the man standing before me was too stupid to have thought of that himself.

"You are giving me far too much credit," he said. "I did everything in my power to have you expelled in accordance with

the instructions I received from my superiors. But, in the end, that wasn't what happened, and thus I have fallen before you in defeat."

One thing that I had come to understand from all of this was that I hadn't yet seen everything Tsukishiro was truly capable of. It wasn't clear to me whether he was mixing lies and half-truths into what he told me, but I supposed I should assume that he had other aims.

"There is one request I'd like to ask of you, myself," he said. "A message to give to Amasawa-san, if you would."

"Let's hear it," I replied.

"Please tell her that because she has continuously disobeyed orders, Amasawa Ichika has been deemed a failure. She no longer has any place to return to. Whether she remains at this school or leaves, she is free to do whatever she wishes."

Was that the truth? Or a lie? I couldn't tell. Even after he admitted defeat, I didn't get the sense that he was shaken in the least. Also, even if Amasawa really *had* abandoned the White Room, I couldn't imagine that this was going to be the end of it. Only one thing was certain: I didn't think things with the White Room were resolved, even after everything that happened here. There was still something more. That was the only conclusion I could come to.

"Please show me how you'll continue to struggle desperately, up until the very end," Tsukishiro said.

He slowly got to his feet, turning to Mashima and Chabashira with both arms up in the air, like he was showing that he had given up.

"Nothing happened here," he told them. "Ayanokouji-kun and I were simply having a little chat, nothing more."

"Do you really think that'll be the end of it?" asked Mashima.

"Whether or not it will, the matter has been settled. I have no intention of resisting you two teachers. In fact, I would sincerely hope that you decide to be grateful that I am not resisting."

I glanced over at Mashima-sensei and nodded, signaling to him that it was all right.

"Well then, shall we depart?" said Tsukishiro. "The students' special exam is not yet over, after all."

After verifying that the adults were heading toward the boat, I looked over in Kiryuuin's direction. She must have been worn out after fighting with Shiba as she was down on one knee on the beach, looking out at the ocean.

"That was brilliant, Ayanokouji," she said.

"Oh no, not at all," I replied. "You were amazing, Kiryuuin-senpai. Handling Shiba-sensei yourself."

"After seeing you in action, I can't exactly take that as a compliment, not even if we're being generous. Oh, by the way, don't worry, I'm not going to tell anyone about this. But I am quite interested in hearing more about you."

I didn't expect to be seen by anyone, but fortunately for me, it was Kiryuuin who did.

"I have a somewhat complicated family situation," I told her. "That's all."

"Family situation, huh? That doesn't sound like something you can get into that easily, I suppose."

Kiryuuin got up, lightly brushed the sand off her backside, and then started walking toward the woods. By the time Kiryuuin and I left I2 together and returned to I3, Nagumo was already gone. In his place, though, were two students that I didn't expect to run into. They were both just as surprised when they saw my face.

"Now there's someone I usually don't see you palling around with, Horikita," I remarked. "Walking around together with Ibuki? Has hell frozen over? Will mochi start falling from the sky?"

"...Are you all right?" asked Horikita.

"All right in what way?" I asked in return.

"Oh, um, never mind," she said. "I just thought that maybe you had a fight with someone or something."

Kiryuuin and I briefly exchanged glances and then denied Horikita's assumptions at almost the exact same time.

"No. There wasn't anyone over there," I said.

"Then what were you doing?" asked Horikita.

"It's been a really, really exhausting two weeks. I was relaxing on the beach, away from people, looking out at the ocean," I answered.

"You're certainly carefree, aren't you?" said Horikita. "Though I suppose, knowing you, you've probably saved up the bare minimum level of points you need."

Then, Horikita shot a look at me that seemed to say, *"And why is Kiryuuin-senpai here?"*

"I happened to see a student slacking off and I brought him back. We need to take this exam seriously until the last second, after all," said Kiryuuin.

She lightly patted me on the back and then started walking away.

"Well then, when the exam's over, we'll see each other again on the boat," she added as she walked away.

Horikita, now standing directly next to me, leaned over and spoke in a small voice. "Are you really all right...?" she whispered, trying to make sure of it.

"All right how?" I replied.

"Well, it's just... There was something I heard. Well, read. It was on this small piece of paper," said Horikita.

"Paper?" I repeated.

"Never mind, don't worry about it," she said. "It's nothing. There are still a lot of things I don't understand, so I'll come and talk to you after I do some more digging myself."

I was a little curious since I didn't understand what she was talking about, but I didn't want to prolong any conversation relating to I2. I couldn't tell her about the matter of Tsukishiro, after all.

"More importantly, why are you and Ibuki here?" I asked.
"There isn't a Task in the vicinity."

Ibuki looked like she was about to say something, but Horikita stopped her.

"Ibuki-san challenged me to a contest. We were just checking each other's scores. Your GPS signature was in a strange location, so I thought I'd come and check on you," said Horikita.

"We'll say that it ended in a draw," said Ibuki.

"...How exactly did you arrive at that conclusion?" said Horikita. "I clearly won, didn't I?"

"It was a calculation error," said Ibuki. "A calculation error."

"Calculation error or not, if I'm ahead of you by even one point, it means I've won," said Horikita.

I didn't really understand what was happening here, but apparently Horikita and Ibuki had become friends through this test...maybe?

Shortly thereafter, the uninhabited island exam finally came to a close.

Chapter 8: **Announcement of the Results**

AFTER AN EXCEEDINGLY LONG two weeks, the uninhabited island exam was over. Apparently, students from a few groups had ended up getting injured because they had tried to push themselves too hard to get results on the final day. Even so, the exam had ended. The teaching staff stationed at the starting point welcomed students as they arrived, showing appreciation and admiration for their efforts.

At just after six in the evening, when the sky was just beginning to redden, the call came, signaling that all participating students had returned, and the process of getting everyone back on board was now complete. As we had been told previously, the results would be announced onboard the ship. However, likely because the school accounted for the possibility that many students would be expelled through the course of this exam, it had been decided that the lower-ranked groups would be notified ahead of time.

We were likely going to learn the truth in the not-too-distant future, sometime between when we got back to the ship and before we went to bed, but it didn't seem like the administrators wanted to turn this into a public execution before the entire student body. The bottom five groups would be called in advance to confirm whether or not the students could be saved via the relief measures that were in place. This meant that the students who could afford to protect themselves from expulsion would pay the necessary cost and thus remain at school. Students who did not have enough Private Points, or those who had the points but for some reason couldn't spend them, would be expelled at that point. They would have to pack their bags and board one of the smaller ships.

After I took my first shower in several days and finished cleaning myself off, I decided to take a stroll around the ship. I figured that, normally, a student would have used their phone by

now to communicate with friends or lovers in a situation like this, but since the school was still holding onto our phones, we weren't able to do so.

I passed by a few students from Class 2-D and we exchanged a few mutual words of praise and encouragement for our respective efforts. Then, I made my way to the deck. Once I arrived there, I saw a rather interesting pair. They were facing each other and engaged in conversation. They weren't exactly trying to hide anything about their conversation, though, and soon enough, one of them noticed me standing there. His face was covered with cuts and bruises, indicating that he had been in a fierce fistfight with Housen during the exam.

"Looks like we got interrupted," said Ryuuuen. "Anyway, you didn't forget your promise to me, did ya? And the money?"

"Of course. I haven't forgotten, Ryuuuen-kun," replied Sakayanagi. "When the time comes, please come and tell me. Any time."

With that exchange, Ryuuuen just took one brief glance at me and went back inside the ship's cabin. Sakayanagi smiled happily at his back as he walked away.

"Promise?" I asked.

"Yes. Because the strength of the first-years was unknown to us, I contacted Ryuuuen-kun and employed his services," she said. "A skilled mercenary of sorts. But, as he is someone who would not collaborate with us for free, I told him that if he were to ask me for a favor, then I would grant him one wish."

I see. So that was why Ryuuuen had appeared earlier and stood in Housen's way.

"By the way, do you know what the end result of their fight was?" I asked.

"Well now, who can say, exactly? I know that both Ryuuuen-kun and Housen-kun returned to the starting point battered and bruised, received medical attention, and then both were eliminated from the exam."

This meant that it was unclear who exactly had won the fight, but it had ended with both parties injured, causing one another to be eliminated. Still, it couldn't have been easy to make Ryuuken do anything when he had been focused solely on winning this uninhabited island exam.

"Oh, and also...are you sure it was okay to do that?" I asked. "Making a promise to him so casually?"

"Yes. It's a promise that may not be fulfilled anytime soon. And besides...that wish of his might end up strangling him in the near future," said Sakayanagi with a grin, her eyes showing a childlike innocence.

The only thing I was certain of was that it wasn't any sort of sweet promise at all, like some kind of casual date.

"More importantly, though," she went on, "I am quite glad that you are safe. Did you have any problems with the timing? Of having the GPS signal disappear, as you had instructed?"

"The timing was perfect," I replied. "I'll definitely pay back the favor."

"There is only one thing that I would like, whether it comes sooner or later. To be precise, my wish is to have a serious competition with you, Ayanokouji-kun. One where no one will interfere."

"That's a pretty difficult request," I replied.

"I understand," she said. "I know that right now, you wish to spend your days as peacefully as possible. I am very aware that you cannot risk doing anything that would make you stand out. There is no need to rush. We still have nearly a year and a half left as students at this school, after all," said Sayakanagi. As long as we got the opportunity to compete against one another at some point in some form, before graduation, that was all that mattered to her.

"It's almost six. Time for the results to be announced," she added.

"Yeah," I answered.

Which groups were at the top, and which groups had fallen short? I supposed we'd just have to go and find out.

8.1

WHEN DINNERTIME rolled around at seven o'clock, the students of Class 2-D naturally began to gather and started eating in the same area. It was to be expected. Both yesterday and today, the list of the lower-ranked groups had not been made available to us, so the only way to find out which groups had performed poorly was to go ahead and ask them directly.

"First of all... I think that's great that we were all able to make it through the special exam without a single group from Class 2-D falling by the wayside. And the fact that all students from Class 2-D are here right now is an important sign, indicating that we were able to avoid expulsion. I'm truly, truly glad," said Yousuke, speaking with wholehearted sincerity as he looked around at his classmates.

I had been a little concerned since I hadn't run into Yousuke even once during our time on the uninhabited island, but it appeared he was more preoccupied with how his friends were doing than with his own fatigue. It was certainly true that if everyone was here, that meant that Haruka and Airi's group was also safe. I decided to take a peek at the other classes in our grade level to see how they were faring.

From the looks of things, no students appeared to be missing from our grade. Everyone was salivating over their first sumptuous meal in two weeks, and they couldn't stop themselves from digging in and enjoying it. As the faculty began to gather, though, the notification came on to indicate that it was now eight o'clock, and the microphone was switched on.

"We'd like to ask you to put your conversations and your meal on hold for a moment," announced Sasaki, the homeroom instructor for Class 3-A. At this urging, the students looked up.

"First and foremost, thank you for all your efforts during the uninhabited island exam," Sasaki said, starting with words of admiration. "Excellent work, all. Many of the faculty were amazed

to see that, although there was a total of thirteen individual eliminations over the course of the exam, every group managed to survive the two weeks.

"I'm sure that some of you have already noticed that there are some classes with missing students," he went on. "As we previously explained, the bottom five groups have been penalized, and the students from those groups have been expelled. I will read those names aloud now. Please note that these groups are composed of more than one person, but only one name will be read aloud here per group, with that person being the representative of that group. A total of fifteen students from five groups have been expelled. They are as follows: Mutou, Class 3-D. Kawakami, Class 3-D. Katsumata, Class 3-C. Shinonome, Class 3-C. Mikitani, Class 3-B."

The first- and second-year students stirred at Sasaki-sensei's words. I had already confirmed that those students were most definitely near the bottom of the rankings at the end of the twelfth day of the exam, but still, the fact that every expulsion came from the third-year grade level was rather unexpected. I had assumed that Nagumo would swoop in and bail them all out. I had also expected that, in the course of that tumultuous turnover, several first-year and second-year students would've been kicked out instead. But, in the end, five groups of three from the third-year classes had disappeared.

"Also, since none of these students employed the relief measures that we had set, the expulsion of all fifteen of these students has been set in stone," added Sasaki.

Given these results, did that mean that the third-years had privately decided to let those five groups get expelled? That's what I thought at first, but from looking at the faces of the third-year students present, that apparently wasn't the case. Many of the students didn't look composed at all. Rather, they were shaking, like they couldn't believe what they had just heard. They looked frightened by these results, as though they were being made an example of.

I looked for Nagumo, but even just from looking at his side profile for only a second, nothing about him seemed different than usual. Still, maybe that little last-minute scuffle with me had something to do with this outcome.

A giant screen was turned on, and another person stepped out while an image was projected onto its white screen.

"The results of the uninhabited island special exam will now be given, and the top three groups will be announced."

It was Acting Director Tsukishiro. He didn't show the slightest indication that he had been in a fight with me. He proceeded with the announcements just as calmly as he did when he made his remarks at the start of the exam.

"In third place...from Class 2-A, Sakayanagi Arisu's group with 261 points," said Tsukishiro.

A second-year group was named and identified as the third-place winner. By taking full advantage of being the only group within our grade level with seven members, they had accumulated a fair number of points and had slowly but surely risen through the rankings, settling in nicely at third place. Ichinose had broken away from the group for about half a day on the final day of the exam, but I guessed that the effect of her departure had been minimal after all.

Ryuu and Katsuragi's group had also fought hard in terms of how many points they had collected, but Ryuu getting eliminated on the thirteenth day must have had an impact. Working alone, Katsuragi couldn't get the Early Bird Bonus anymore, and there was a decrease in the number of Tasks in which he could participate. It must have been a trying two days for him since he would have been looking for security to avoid the risk of elimination. I figured that the fact that our scores were doubled on the final day must have also worked against him.

On the other hand, Sakayanagi had carried things well. The students she had sent to stop the first-years were all people outside of her own group. The tablets used had also come from other groups, so she hadn't taken on any big risks. She managed the situation well by pitting Ryuu against a dangerous

opponent. I was sure that Ryuuuen himself should have had the foresight to see that going against Housen would have been risky. Did he take the job because he had some fateful connection with Housen, dating back to their junior high days? Or did it have something to do with the promise that Sakayanagi had mentioned?

If it was the latter, then it must have been something more attractive to him than the increased rewards he would've earned from getting third place with the Trials and Tribulations Card. At any rate, what was surprising to me was Kiriyama's group losing steam in the final stages of the exam.

Now, it was time for second place. It wasn't an exaggeration to say that this was where everything would be decided. At the end of the twelfth day of the exam, I had verified that Nagumo and Kouenji alone stood at the top of the rankings at number one and number two respectively. Even if one of them had dropped somewhat in points, I wasn't expecting there to be any shakeups based on the announcement of the third-place score. So, was it going to be Nagumo, who led the third-years, or would it be Kouenji, who forged on ahead at a breakneck pace while working alone?

"In second place...from Class 3-A, Nagumo Miyabi with 325 points."

When Tsukishiro read that out, what I heard wasn't what you might call "cheering." It was more like screaming. Without taking a moment to pause, Tsukishiro went on to announce the first-place winner.

"And in first place...from Class 2-D, Kouenji Rokusuke with 327 points."

The instant that Kouenji's name was called, every student's eyes immediately fell on him. Kouenji simply sat where he was, calm and leisurely. He wasn't boasting about his win, nor was he showing off to anyone about it. Looking at the results, there was only a difference of two points between their scores. It was such a small margin that one single, trivial incident could have overturned the results. Nevertheless, Kouenji had managed to

come in first place while operating under the toughest of conditions—by working alone.

Getting first place meant that 300 Class Points were going to be awarded to our class, and Kouenji was personally going to receive a million Private Points and one Protect Point.

"Kouenji-kun really did it after all," said Horikita.

Kouenji briefly shot a knowing look over at her. A look which seemed to say, "*You understand what this means, yes?*" And in response, all Horikita could answer with was a nod. Kouenji had, in brilliant fashion, done exactly what he had publicly promised he would. That meant he could be excused from any obligations until graduation. He was going to be spending his days here at school according to his own whims, even more so than before.

"For the love of... Well, to be honest, I can't be happy about this," Horikita said. "If anything, I'm astonished beyond words..."

"Shouldn't you be happy about it for now, at least?" I replied. "He did just single-handedly get us 300 Class Points. That's an extremely significant increase in moving us closer toward Class A. This is the second time that we've secured our escape out of Class D."

Besides, Kouenji had always done whatever he pleased, anyway. There was nothing to control him now.

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Horikita conceded. "With the points we've gained, we've closed the gap in one go. It wouldn't be surprising if we ended up swapping with B or C, given the circumstances."

"Provided we don't make some careless blunder in our daily lives and end up falling down tremendously," I added.

Class Points could be deducted rather subtly at times, after all, based on how we conducted ourselves daily and from instances of problematic behavior.

"...Please don't say something so unpleasant," said Horikita.

Once again, I thought about how significant a two-point difference could be. I thought back to when Nagumo showed up,

having deliberately gone out of his way to intercept me. I heard the voice of his comrade via the walkie-talkie back then. I had the feeling that if Nagumo had responded to that student back then, the first- and second-place winners would have been reversed—and that there likely would have been different groups being expelled from school right now.

I supposed that I wasn't going to find an answer thinking about it now, though. At any rate, this long, drawn-out special exam had come to a safe conclusion. Miraculously, we had managed to get through the summer without a single student from our grade level getting left behind. I had also unexpectedly established that Amasawa Ichika was a student from the White Room.

I didn't understand why, but she was siding with me rather than Tsukishiro, at least for now. Was this part of some premeditated strategy? Or was it Amasawa's decision alone, having betrayed the White Room? At present, I didn't have enough evidence to make a definite conclusion either way. But the information I had gained was in no way insignificant.

Still, some mysteries remained. At this rate, this summer vacation wasn't necessarily going to end so quietly.

Postscript

SINCE LAST YEAR, I have been working continuously, from sunup to sundown, without even giving myself enough time to catch my breath. And yet, there's just one project after another, endlessly, and that infinite growth continues to sap my physical and mental strength, day by day...

Oh, hello there. This is Kinugasa.

...Hm.

I...don't have anything to write about in the postscript!

Well, uh, my right thumb has been throbbing in pain lately. (It's probably not gout.)

Oh, and there's this spicy curry place that opened in my neighborhood! It's so good that I can't help myself from going there. (Yeah, who cares?)

Or, uh, there's the time that, after staring really hard at the website of a delivery place for like an hour, thinking about how I wanted to get some lunch delivered, I ended up riding my bike there and picking it up anyway after considering the additional charges and the delivery fees. (So what?)

There haven't been any particularly new or notable changes. I've just been going about my day-to-day life as it comes. Yep. That's all. I guess that's about it for recent updates? Thank you for your understanding that, as usual, this is a postscript without much in the way of actual content.

Anyway, this book was about the second half of the uninhabited island special exam. This was the fourth volume of the second-year arc, but looking back, both this book and the previous one really are massive! At any rate, even though I wrote close to 700 pages between the two books, there were still many, many more episodes that I wanted to write about. I wanted to write about the battles happening between many of the main

characters on the uninhabited island, but I couldn't do that, since that would have taken the action away from the main story, so...

If there's a demand for it, I think I'd like to try and write out episodes for each character individually, but I'm not really sure if anyone wants that, so I figure I'll just ignore that idea for now. In the main story of volume four, we saw the battle with Tsukishiro come to a close, at least for the time being. However, the story connected to the White Room is still going to continue for a little while longer yet. I'm sure that those of you who have been reading along have some guesses about what's to come.

The next volume—which will be volume 4.5—will show what happens following the special exam as the students spend their summer vacation on a luxury cruise ship. I hope you'll pay close attention to the details of the uninhabited island exam, as well as to episodes about characters that haven't previously been mentioned. There may or may not be changes in the love lives of Ayanokouji and other characters. And even matters about the White Room, which I touched on earlier, might...

Well, as I said earlier, it's going to be a summer vacation story, but I'm also planning to include several significant developments, not unlike during the uninhabited island exam, so please look forward to it. And with that, everyone, let's meet again in about four months' time, at the latest.

I'm looking forward to bringing you more stories in 2021.



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