

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE 2

YEAR

NOVEL

2

STORY: SYOUGO
KINUGASA
ART: TOMOSE SHUNSAKU



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ISHIZAKI DAICHI

A ruffian from Class 2-B who idolizes Ryuuen. Trusts Ayanokouji's strength ever since he witnessed it for himself firsthand.



KOMIYA KYOUGO

A student from Class 2-B who is part of the basketball club. He was one of the students who tried to get Sudou in trouble by staging a fake fight before.



NISHINO TAKEKO

A female student from Class 2-B. Has a very bold side, made evident by things like her opposition to Ryuuen.

TSUBAKI SAKURAKO





"You can ignore that girl."

"She's a third-year student, though. Just like you, Vice President Kiriyma. So I can't do that."

"...That's Kiryuuin. She's in Class B, same as me."

"I saw in the OAA app. She's a highly rated student, isn't she?"

"In terms of grades, yes. But Kiryuuin doesn't have anyone backing her up like Nagumo does. She doesn't even have a single real friend."

"Hey now, don't compliment me so much. You're going to make me blush."

Even though he certainly wasn't complimenting her at all, Kiryuuin wore an audacious smile.

2



WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

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NOVEL 2

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku



Seven Seas Entertainment

YOUKOSO JITSURYOKUSHIJOUSHUGI NO KYOUSHITSU E 2NENSEIHEN
VOL.2

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Chapter 1: The White Room Student's Soliloquy

THE ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL.

Right now, in one of the first-year classrooms of this particular school, an extremely crude and entirely low-level class was being held. These students were the same age as me, but they were struggling tooth and nail to solve questions that were so simple they were practically putting me to sleep. I felt like I was an adult that got mixed in together with kindergarteners.

More than a few times, I had lamented the pointlessness of being educated in this place and the fact that my time was being wasted. And during those times, a certain person came to mind. Just thinking of that person caused hatred to burst from the depths of my heart, reminding me of the reason I had to be here. Sure enough, I felt strength flow into my right hand, which was gripping my tablet.

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

When did I first learn that name? I wondered. I tried to remember, but it was difficult to recall the exact date. However, I was certain it had been etched into my memory for as long as I could remember. There wasn't a single person studying in the White Room who didn't know that name.

And why was that? Because he was simply better than any other student there, of any age, from any point in time. Because no one could surpass the fourth-generation student Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

As a result, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was held up as the perfect specimen. That one single child had an enormous impact on the White Room, and we, the fifth generation, were probably the most affected. It was said that he always got high marks, no matter how tough the curriculum was. But the same was true for me. I continued to get outstanding results among the fifth-

generation students. I had continued to prove that I was a genius, superior to everyone else.

And yet...I had never once been praised for my genius. I don't think I really need to explain the reason why. The coldhearted words that came out of my instructors' mouths were always the same.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka from last year was far more remarkable."

No matter how much effort I put in, no matter how outstanding my performance, I could never be recognized. All I ever got were commands instructing me to try and catch up to someone who was like an unreachable god. Some of the people studying in the same room as me even worshipped the deified Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. How pathetic.

The people in the White Room were being trained to be the best of the best. But now, they were abandoning that goal. There was absolutely no way people like that could survive all the way to the end in the White Room. And sure enough, they ultimately fell by the wayside, not earning so much as a scornful chuckle from me.

But that didn't mean there were never times when I felt weak, myself.

Although I didn't worship him, I had my suspicions that the person known as Ayanokouji Kiyotaka didn't actually exist, but that he was a fictional character created to inspire us. I guess my instructors were able to see right through those feelings of mine. Once day, I was taken by my instructors to one of the observation rooms used by outside visitors. It was there that I first saw Ayanokouji Kiyotaka with my own two eyes, albeit through a two-way mirror, and confirmed that he was real.

He had no way of knowing that he was being watched. His performance was amazing, though he was entirely disinterested by it. Even now, I remembered how my body unconsciously started trembling just at the sight of him. However, if you were to ask if I felt as though I had just seen a god, I would have strongly denied it. He wasn't a god. He was someone to be resented.

"Worship" was out of the question. "Hatred" was precisely the emotion necessary to inspire us. Yes—it was hatred that caused my body to tremble.

I had successfully survived the White Room precisely because I held on to that intense hatred, never forgetting it for even a moment.

In the end, though, worship and hate were nothing more one's personal thoughts and feelings. To the people in the organization, what we students thought came second. The White Room's ultimate goal wasn't to create one individual who was the pinnacle of humanity. It was to conduct research and mass-produce extraordinary, outstanding people. That was the reason for the White Room's existence. If they had a successful model, it didn't matter who that person was—it didn't matter if it was me or Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

Which was precisely why...failures had absolutely no value. So, if Ayanokouji Kiyotaka were chosen as the successful model, then what would happen to me, who was studying at this school right now? I had no idea what my reason for being would be. As a failed experiment, my life would simply be over. Stripped of value.

What a miserable end that would be. I'd be no different from the students who fell by the wayside. I absolutely could not allow that to happen. No matter what it took, I had to prove that Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was not the best. I had to make the organization recognize that I was a successful model.

Then, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity suddenly fell into my lap. Ayanokouji Kiyotaka defied orders and did not return to the re-opened White Room. I had never crossed paths with him before, but thanks to this, I had the chance to encounter him.

...That's right.

I had a unique opportunity to be able to consign him to oblivion directly myself. To do so, it would be best if I cast aside all imaginary constructs like "common sense." In a manner of speaking, one way for me to solve my problem would be...to kill him.

Chapter 2: Changing School Life

CLASS 2-D was currently in a bizarre situation, the likes of which they had never experienced before. Yukimura Teruhiko repeatedly looked towards the classroom door, his leg jerking unconsciously in short, trembling bursts.

"Why don't you chill out a little? It hasn't even been five minutes since Kiyopon left, dude. Besides, the teacher called him, right? I'm sure it's going to take a while," said one of Yukimura's classmates and close friends, Hasebe Haruka.

Sakura Airi and Miyake Akito were also present, standing by as if they were accompanying Hasebe.

"I'm calm... Don't worry," responded Yukimura, stopping his unconscious shaking after he answered.

However, it didn't seem to take long for him to lose his composure again. The sound of his right leg quietly bouncing up and down, chafing against his pant leg, could be heard.

Yukimura had tried to talk with Ayanokouji right after class that day, but he backed off once Horikita showed up. Afterward, Yukimura heard from Horikita that Ayanokouji had been called somewhere by Chabashira, so he was now waiting in the classroom for Ayanokouji to return.

Hasebe let out a deep sigh, as if expressing resignation, and looked out the window. Since she knew Yukimura didn't usually unconsciously jerk his leg like that, she quickly understood there was no point in trying to tell him to calm down.

A heavy, stifling air hung over Class 2-D. Hasebe thought that the May sky, which had brought spring with it, was vibrant and pretty.

Then she thought again about how they'd wound up in this situation. It was all because of the special exam in April, where the first- and second-year students were partnered up. And her

friend Ayanokouji Kiyotaka got a perfect score in the mathematics section of the written test, the fifth subject on the exam.

If it were a normal test, it wouldn't have been strange to see a student get a perfect score. There were regularly students who attained perfect scores on exams, and Yukimura, who was at the head of the class in terms of academics, led the way. Of course, there were also times when a student you didn't expect managed to get a perfect score, which was especially surprising. It could be the result of intense studying, or just coincidence, with what was covered on the test luckily being something they were especially good at.

But this time, things were vastly different. Of course, even though Hasebe wasn't as aware of this fact, she had noticed a few things. Ayanokouji was the sole person to get a perfect score in their class on this special exam, and in any subject. It wasn't something that could be neatly explained away by him simply studying hard beforehand, or by mere coincidence.

"It's still only been six minutes... I don't think he'll be back yet."

As Yukimura's friend, Hasebe couldn't just leave him be while he was feeling so restless, so she thought about trying to talk about something completely unrelated. But in the end, she decided to go along with what Yukimura wanted to talk about. The main reason for that was because she thought she'd be able to take his mind off those feelings of anxiousness a little, but it was also because Hasebe herself had wanted to know, since it was so incredible that Ayanokouji had managed to get a perfect score in mathematics.

"I mean, were the questions that hard?" asked Hasebe.

Yukimura nodded in response, without a moment's hesitation.

"It wasn't just that they were hard. I didn't even understand what some of the questions were trying to say," he replied, explaining that it wasn't like he simply couldn't solve the problems on the test, but rather that the questions themselves were opaque to him. "After the test ended, I looked up the questions as best as

I could remember, and found that some of them were entirely outside of the scope of what a high school student would know. In other words, they were questions we weren't even supposed to be able to answer."

"What, what the heck is that about? Have the people running this school lost their dang minds or something? Going that far outside what the test is supposed to cover...that's just on a completely different level," said Hasebe.

"It certainly is absurd, yes. It's because of that that I got dramatically lower scores in every subject. However, many of the other questions on the test weren't as difficult as Chabashira-sensei had said they would be," replied Yukimura.

Aside from the extremely difficult questions that had been snuck into the test and caught everyone off guard, there were also several easy questions mixed in too. This meant that the test was designed in such a way that you couldn't get a perfect score, but you wouldn't get too low of a score either.

"They threw in some of those questions out of consideration for us, then? To bump up the average score?" said Hasebe.

"That's because this test could have gotten students expelled. As far as our class is concerned, it was a very good thing that they did that," said Yukimura.

That in itself was something to be happy about. But as far as Yukimura was concerned, it was a trivial matter right now.

"Ayanokouji got a perfect score, which he shouldn't have been able to do. I...feel like I'm seeing some kind of magic trick."

Yukimura's anger could be seen in the fact that he had deliberately referred to Ayanokouji by his family name, rather than his first.

"K-Kiyotaka-kun is incredible, isn't he? I mean, b-being able to solve problems like that," remarked Sakura with a cautious smile, trying to ease the tension in the air.

However, it seemed to have the opposite effect. Yukimura's expression grew even sterner, with a deeper look of resignation.

"I've been working to assess the academic abilities of everyone in our class over the past year, to some degree. I'm shocked by the results of this test precisely because I had determined there was no way anyone could have solved those questions," said Yukimura.

"Tell us more," said Shinohara, one of their classmates. She'd had been listening to the Ayanokouji Group's discussion and wanted to jump in.

Many of their classmates had noticed their conversation and were listening in on what Yukimura was saying as well.

"You can confirm for yourselves it on your tablet. Is there anyone in our class who got a perfect score in even one subject? Well, no—actually, you'll understand even better if you look outside of our class too. Check out our entire grade level. Not a single person got a perfect score. Not Ichinose, and not Sakayanagi either," explained Yukimura, presenting everyone with the reality of the situation, as if to prove a point.

Through their tablets, students could see the results of classes besides Class 2-D.

"I hadn't noticed that. Huh, so, we can see scores from the other classes too. Why?" Shinohara, surprised, took the tablet that was handed to her, and slid through the displayed pages with a curious look in her eyes.

"Who knows? Maybe it's because of the introduction of the OAA app, or maybe it's for some other reason. Anyway, whatever the reason may be, the only way we'll find out is if we wait until the next test is announced," said Yukimura.

"Oh god, this is awful! Lots of people are going to be able to find out my test scores! This sucks!" grumbled Karuizawa Kei, the leader of the girls in our class.

Then, she continued speaking, going back to the original point.

"Maybe Ayanokouji-kun is a genius just when it comes to math, or something like that? You know, like how sometimes TV

dramas will have main characters who can solve murders using math?" said Karuizawa.

This was different from what Sakura had said, in the sense that Sakura had tried to ease the tension in the situation, while Karuizawa was blind to it. After hearing what she said, Yukimura rejected her idea, exasperated.

"If that were true, though, why didn't he get a perfect score in any of the previous math tests? If he could solve problems like the ones on this test, then it doesn't make sense that he didn't get perfect scores, or close to perfect scores, on all the tests we've had so far," replied Yukimura, raising his voice slightly, as if he was saying that Karuizawa was entirely missing his point.

"Dude, like, what's the point in even asking me that? I don't know. Maybe he studied super hard over spring break or something?" reasoned Karuizawa.

Yukimura was becoming increasingly frustrated with Karuizawa's off-the-mark responses.

"We're not talking about something that could be done in a brief period of time. Even if he could learn things so advanced that I can't even imagine them, it doesn't explain how he was able to solve problems that are outside the scope of what a high schooler would learn. If you don't understand that, then keep your mouth shut," snapped Yukimura.

Karuizawa, irritated by Yukimura's snarky response, was now getting close to her boiling point.

"Look, I don't know about any of that stuff. So why don't you stop getting all huffy? You're really getting on my nerves."

"Yeah, totally. Isn't it weird for you to be taking it out on Karuizawa-san, anyway?" interjected Maezono, snapping back at Yukimura and sticking up for Karuizawa.

Karuizawa, having now gained an ally, jabbed back at Yukimura by digging into what he said earlier.

"You're talking a big game, but maybe it's just that you can't understand, Yukimura-kun. Right? Maybe it's just that you really

couldn't solve those problems on your own, and they're not actually that difficult after all," said Karuizawa.

Deep down, she knew that what she just said wasn't very convincing. However, she couldn't change up her attitude, precisely because she felt that she needed to play the part of the fool in this situation. But the tension kept growing, and people's suspicions about Ayanokouji kept mounting, whether she liked it or not.

"Did you already forget what I just told you? Those were problems that not even Sakayanagi or Ichinose could solve and get full marks on," replied Yukimura.

"Then maybe he just happened to know the answers to those tough questions specifically?" asked Karuizawa.

"Look—"

Yukimura had already gone past anger into exasperation. Then, he began to explain things again, speaking as though he were trying to put his thoughts in order and wrap his mind around all of this.

"I'm... Okay, so, in other words, that means he... Well, I think what this means is that he's always been unbelievably good at math, from the very beginning."

"Okay, and that's a good thing, right? That's just like what I said before, about him being a math genius, isn't it?" said Karuizawa.

"You're missing the real point here. If he really is a genius, then he—"

"Oh, um, excuse me. I just had a thought..."

Minami Setsuya interrupted Yukimura, inserting herself into the conversation just as it was beginning to take an unexpected turn.

"It certainly is incredibly puzzling that Ayanokouji just suddenly got a perfect score. What Yukimura is saying makes sense too. But doesn't calling him a math genius also feel a little too sudden? I mean, he's never gotten incredible scores like this

before," she reasoned, backing up Yukimura's words and going on to raise some new doubts of her own, seen from a different angle. "Which is exactly why I was thinking...maybe Ayanokouji did something kind of shady or something?"

The thought that had begun to form in the minds of Yukimura and many other students was, "Ayanokouji is a math genius." Now, there was an opposing possibility that rejected that idea outright. Namely, "What if he hadn't solved those problems based on his own ability?"

"Hey, that might be true. Maybe he like, saw the answer sheet or something. Wait, didn't something like that happen in our first year? Oh yeah, dude, we had a test before where all the questions were the same as previous years!" shouted Ike Kanji loudly, as if struck by the memory of what happened.

In spring of last year, one of his classmates had obtained a test's answers from a third-year student. It was an extremely difficult exam, but anyone could get a high score they just memorized the answers.

"But if the questions on this test were exactly the same as prior years, isn't it weird that no one passed that information on to us? And on top of that, it's also strange that no one in any of the other classes noticed it either," explained Miyamoto calmly and in a composed fashion, not agreeing with what Ike was suggesting.

"So, okay then... Maybe he knew the questions and the answers in advance? Like, he got hold of that info in such a way that he couldn't come out and talk about how he did it...? Like, maybe he cheated," said Ike.

"How exactly did he cheat?" replied Shinohara, who had been standing beside Ike, jumping on his vague supposition.

"Like, maybe he hacked into the school's computer system and stole the answers, or something! That's totally possible!" shouted Ike.

"Well, that basically comes to the same thing Karui_zawa suggested though, about him being a genius..."

Yukimura's head started to hurt as he watched the disastrous spectacle of his class spiraling out of control. Yet, strangely enough, time seemed to race forward as the students grew deeply invested in this discussion. The pivotal point of the debate was whether Ayanokouji could have procured the answers to the test through some means, rather than actually solving it on his own. And that debate was getting heated.

That was probably a natural progression, though, given that Ayanokouji had never scored that highly in the past. It was Sudou Ken, who had been quietly listening up until this point, who dispelled those notions. When he rose and stood at his full height of over one hundred and eighty-six centimeters, everyone's eyes fell on him.

"You guys are really gettin' riled up about all this, but there ain't any proof that Ayanokouji cheated, is there? Don't just go makin' assumptions when the person you're talkin' about ain't even around," said Sudou.

What Sudou just said was a perfectly reasonable statement. And yet, everyone in class couldn't hide their surprise at the fact that he'd been the one to say it. Ike, Sudou's close friend who he normally hung out with, seemed especially unamused.

"Dude, what the hell, Ken? Are you seriously taking Ayanokouji's side?" snapped Ike.

"It ain't that. I mean, it ain't like anybody could've seen those test answers all that easily, right? ...I just think it's more likely that he got a perfect score based on his own smarts, is all," replied Sudou, somewhat less eloquently than before, mumbling a bit as he expressed his opinion.

"Come on man, think about it. You mentioned his smarts, but his academic ability score was lower than mine in OAA last month, though. It's obvious he did somethin' shady, or he couldn't have pulled it off," countered Miyamoto, who'd checked the OAA app once it updated after class that day, arguing once again that Ayanokouji must have cheated.

"We ain't all the same as we were back in our first year, though. We're all growin' up," said Sudou.

"Sudou-kun's totally right about that. I mean, don't you think? Besides, Sudou-kun has passed you in academic ability too, Miyamoto-kun," added Karuizawa.

Miyamoto looked a little embarrassed after getting hit by that pointed remark. It wouldn't have been an exaggeration to say that Sudou was easily one of the lowest-ranked students in their grade last year, but his academic ability score had quickly jumped up to fifty-four points in the OAA app after it was updated. Which meant that, even though it was only by a single point, he had surpassed Miyamoto's score of fifty-three points.

"O-okay, yeah, sure. Sudou has studied a ton, and I recognize that he's grown up a lot, but... But, I mean, in Ayanokouji's case, he's jumped up by way too much, though!" said Miyamoto.

"So, maybe it's possible that he's just been holdin' back then, is all. Just like Kouenji," said Sudou.

And this was where a theory similar to what Karuizawa had said earlier, about Ayanokouji being a genius only when it came to mathematics, reemerged. The debate was most definitely going in circles, and at this point, the situation was starting to take a turn for the worse.

"In that case though, isn't that like, even more of a problem? That means he hasn't been contributing to the class," argued Ike.

Meaning there were scores he could and should have secured, but didn't. It was certainly true that if Ayanokouji were hiding his abilities, then Ike's statement wasn't wrong. Sudou and his friends had always been a close-knit group, but they now found themselves facing internal conflict.

One student had determined that he couldn't just sit by and let this situation continue to boil over. He decided to step in and mediate.

"Hey everyone, let's all calm down a bit. This isn't something that we can resolve by getting all worked up right here

and now, anyway," said Hirata Yousuke, cutting in just as the atmosphere in the classroom continued to deteriorate.

Hirata usually took the initiative to play the part of peacemaker, but he had stood by in silence until now. He wanted to find out what his classmates were thinking and how they felt so that he could then use that understanding to try and resolve the situation. Now, he addressed Sudou first, speaking in a kind, gentle voice.

"Sudou-kun, isn't it about time for your club activities?" said Hirata.

"Huh? O-oh, now that you mention it, yeah." Sudou went back to being himself, as if he had just suddenly gotten hit with reality.

"Anyway, I understand that you're curious about what's going on, but there's a lot we just don't know right now. I don't think it's a good idea to let speculation get so out of hand that it gets in the way of club activities. I'm sure you understand that, 'I'll only be late just this once,' won't really fly as an excuse, right?" said Hirata.

Hirata had decided that his first priority was to reduce the number of people in the classroom right now. Sudou and the others, who'd been getting heated and had forgotten their club obligations as a result, quietly regained their composure. With the introduction of the OAA app, the number of students who cared about their own scores had increased dramatically.

Sudou was one of those students. Bag in hand, he looked briefly over at Suzune's back before quietly leaving the classroom. She hadn't spoken a single word during that entire spectacle. The rest of the students who had club activities of their own followed suit, leaving the room.

"I gotta go too. Sorry, but I'll leave handlin' Keisei to you."

"Yeah. See ya later then, Miyacchi," replied Hasebe.

Akito, another member of the Ayanokouji Group, gathered his things and left the classroom to go to the archery club. Hasebe and Sakura watched him go.

The feeling of restlessness still hung in the air. More students started to trickle out of the room here and there, making their way back to the dorms. However, more than half the class remained behind in the classroom.

2.1

WE, THE STUDENTS OF CLASS D, had just survived the very first special exam of our second year. I'd wound up with an injured left hand thanks to my little entanglement with Housen, but successfully managed to eliminate the danger of expulsion. I understood well enough that it would take some time for my wound, which was the price I had paid for my efforts, to heal completely, but there was nothing I could do about that.

I left the reception room, with Tsukishiro watching me go, and let out a small sigh as I closed the door behind me. Now, I could go back to my ordinary, carefree everyday life as a student... Well, no. Not really. Things had gotten to the point where I couldn't even entertain such naïve thoughts anymore.

Besides, my current environment had already begun to be a far cry from what you might call an ordinary, everyday life. Being summoned by the acting director to have a conversation with him was quite an unusual event, and one that would leave most students scratching their heads in confusion.

Even as I thought that, though, I resigned myself to the reality of the situation, recognizing that there was nothing I could do. I had run away to this school. I had no other choice but to accept that things like this were going to follow me forever. The only way I could be released from the chains shackling me would be to get expelled.

"Looks like the discussion's over."

"Yeah, seems that way," I replied.

Chabashira, who had been waiting for me a short distance outside of the reception room, came up to me as if it natural to do so. I felt a little bit disappointed to see her, but didn't let it show on my face. Tsukishiro didn't know I was currently working with Chabashira, the teacher in charge of our class, and Mashima-sensei, the teacher in charge of Class 2-A. Given that, it was

nothing short of unnatural for Chabashira to keep waiting around for me when Tsukishiro had called me.

The fact that Tsukishiro had used Chabashira to bring me to his office was perfectly understandable, considering her role as my homeroom teacher, but I couldn't deny the possibility that he was using this opportunity to lay a trap. That was precisely why I'd wanted her to leave without making contact with me again. If you considered what a normal teacher-and-student relationship might look like, it was entirely unnatural for a teacher to do something like stand around and wait like she had.

If the situation had been a little calmer, Chabashira might have realized that. I was sure her decision was influenced by the fact that I had gotten a perfect score on the math section of the exam and made my true abilities known to some of my classmates. I understood why this whole situation made her restless, but this was rash of her.

But, well, I supposed if there was one thing that I could say in her defense, it was that we had vastly different opinions of him. From Chabashira's perspective, Tsukishiro simply had a connection with a student's father. A student she was a homeroom instructor for. That wasn't surprising, though, considering she didn't know any background information, like about the White Room. This naturally meant there was a difference in the level of caution we showed Tsukishiro and our attitudes toward him.

Which was exactly why I wasn't going to say anything now. All I could do right now was leave as quickly as possible, so I put one foot in front of the other and made my way forward.

"You've become a bit of a celebrity now," said Chabashira.

I was wondering what she was going to say when she opened her mouth. So that was what she'd decided to go with, huh?

"I'm not happy about it, but it was a necessary measure. I just have to accept it as something within acceptable limits, I guess."

"But even putting aside the students from the other classes, how are you planning to explain this to your own classmates? You've been playing the part of the humble, inconspicuous student as much as possible so far. Now that you've gotten a perfect score on the math exam—despite how difficult some of the questions were—your classmates aren't going to leave well enough alone. Have you already made moves to prepare for that?" she asked.

As I let Chabashira's questions go in one ear and out the other, paying no real attention to her, I thought about what I was going to do from here on out. I had left my bag back in the classroom, so I had to go back.

"There was no way I could've taken steps to prepare for this beforehand. I'm going to have to start from here," I replied.

Besides, it would've been crazy for me to deliberately go out of my way to announce to everyone that I'd be getting a perfect score in the math section of the upcoming special exam.

"You're going to face some hardships. You'd best prepare yourself for an onslaught of questions," said Chabashira.

"I know."

If you already have some idea of what's going to happen next, I'd really prefer you just let me go as soon as possible, I thought.

"Is it okay if we part ways right here? If I'm caught walking around alone with my homeroom teacher, I'll end up attracting unwanted attention," I told her.

"Yes, yes, I get it," mumbled Chabashira, before walking towards the faculty lounge.

I was sure she was trying to suppress her emotions as much as possible, but it was easy to see that she was positively bursting with joy. She might act more distant than the other homeroom teachers, but in reality, Chabashira was probably the closest to her students. It was because she had lingering attachments and regrets from her own time as a student that those uncontrollable feelings welled up within her.

Her poker face was good enough to cover that up when she was dealing with normal students, but... Well, from my perspective, she was an open book. So much so that it was comical. The fact that she was easy for me to manipulate was an advantage, but right now, she was just getting in my way. There was no point in wasting more energy on her for the moment, though, so I decided to forget about her for now.

I took out my cell and tried to call Horikita. But even though the call rang, it didn't connect. I tried sending her a quick message as well, but she didn't read it.

"Well, I tried, I guess."

Horikita was most likely the most useful person I could enlist to help me get through this situation right now, considering the fact that we'd had our little wager over the math test and that whole thing about the student council over the past year. With a little explanation of what was going on, I was sure I could get her to accommodate me to some degree. I would have liked to have laid some groundwork ahead of time if possible, but it looked like I was just going to have to deal with this situation on the fly.

My classroom came into view. I wondered what the rest of the class was going to be like now that I'd gotten that perfect score in math. It would've been nice if almost all the students were already on their way back to the dorms, like usual.

Holding that hope in my heart, I returned to my classroom—and found a sight quite different from what I had hoped. It had taken me roughly less than half an hour to get back to the classroom after talking to Tsukishiro. Normally, most students would already have left the school building by now—but even though the only students currently left in the classroom were the ones who had no club activities, there were still a fair number of people around.

Of course, there could only be one reason for that: me. That was as clear as day to anyone who personally experienced both the vibe in the room and the stares of everyone there.

Horikita, the person who hadn't answered her phone moments earlier, was there too. It seemed she was more aware of what my situation was like than I had thought. I didn't have time to express my gratitude, though, because the moment I set foot in the classroom, students came up to me, eager to start firing off questions.

The very first person to come up and start barraging me with questions was one of the people from the Ayanokouji Group: Keisei. In contrast to Chabashira, who seemed positively overjoyed, the look on Keisei's face suggested he was somewhat irritated.

"Sorry about earlier, when you tried to come up to me to talk," I told him.

Keisei had tried to talk to me right after class ended for the day, only to be cut off when Horikita showed up. I had to start by apologizing for that.

"It's no big deal. More importantly, is now a good time? I have several questions I want to ask you," said Keisei.

Haruka and Airi, more members of Ayanokouji Group, came up next to us right away as well. Akito wasn't around, probably because of his club activities, which I had made mention of earlier. We had attracted quite an audience though, and a lot of people were listening in on what we were talking about.

"You... What's this about you getting a hundred points in math? I checked our entire grade level in OAA. Not even Ichinose nor Sakayanagi got a perfect score. You're the only person in our grade who did," said Keisei.

Getting a perfect score on a test, and in the process, doing just slightly better than other people had, wouldn't normally cause a scene like this. However, this test was something else entirely. The more academically advanced students understood this particularly well. The better a student someone was, the better they understood how bizarre it was to get a perfect score on this test. Even the students who weren't that good at academics were likely starting to catch on and sense something was off, considering how everyone else was reacting.

"Well, about that..." I started, trailing off.

As I started speaking, my eyes wandered. I settled my gaze on Horikita, who sat near the front of the classroom, seeking her help.

"Very well. I can explain," said Horikita.

Normally, Horikita would have been making her way back to the dormitory around this time, but she must have decided to stick around after she saw the other students hanging back in the classroom. That was the right decision. Since she was already looking in my direction, I didn't need to bother confirming that she had stayed behind to help me smooth things over.

To make sure that everyone's scattered attention was focused on one point, she rose from where she sat, out of sight, and walked up to me to stand by my side.

"I'm...asking Kiyotaka." Keisei seemed displeased by Horikita's presence, apparently deeming her an unneeded outsider who had just cut in.

"Yes, I know. But Yukimura-kun, I am the one who has the answers you're looking for," replied Horikita.

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

By deliberately using a rather curious way of expressing herself, Horikita had single-handedly managed to attract the attention of Keisei and the rest of our classmates.

"This is the kind of score that you and I couldn't get, Yukimura-kun... Actually, no, it was a score that no one in our grade level could achieve. I'm sure you're wondering how Ayanokouji-kun managed to get a perfect score, right? It is puzzling, isn't it?" said Horikita.

She had specifically directed her question at Keisei, but it was likely something that everyone in class was wondering about.

"Yeah... To be honest, I can't wrap my head around it at all. I mean, I mentioned it earlier, but the questions that came up toward the end of the test seemed impossible to solve. I just can't

understand how Kiyotaka was able to solve those problems like they were no big deal at all," said Keisei.

I did remember surprised comments from some of the people in class immediately after the test was handed to us. Starting with Keisei and Yousuke, the top-scoring students had discussed the extraordinarily difficult questions featured on the exam. The topic had come up in the Ayanokouji Group as well. I remembered that when they asked me about it, I'd given a vague response, not indicating whether I had solved the problems or not.

"Kiyotaka knew that those were the kinds of problems no one in our class could solve. And yet, he never bragged about being able to solve them. Isn't that weird? I can't even begin to imagine what that's all about... I feel guilty for even thinking this, but if he knew the answer all along, then that makes me think that it could have only been because, well, you know," said Keisei.

"So, you're suggesting he cheated... Yes, well, it's certainly not surprising that anyone would think that, I suppose," said Horikita.

Keisei had purposefully phrased his statement ambiguously, but Horikita came right out and expressed what he was suggesting in plain terms. Even though Keisei had turned away, seeming somewhat embarrassed, Horikita didn't let up and pursued the topic further.

"It's completely understandable to have doubts in this kind of situation. If I were a student who didn't know anything that was going on here, I'm sure I would have suspected Ayanokouji-kun of wrongdoing, just as Yukimura-kun did. However, the truth is that things aren't what they seem," said Horikita.

She paused, taking a breath, and briefly glanced over at all our classmates, whose eyes were on her.

"I intend to give this same explanation to the people who aren't here at a later date. But at any rate, to solve the mystery of how Ayanokouji-kun got a perfect score, I have to take you back to the beginning of spring, last year," said Horikita.

The beginning of spring, last year. In other words, immediately after we had started school.

"We changed seating assignments the other day, but I'm sure you all recall that Ayanokouji-kun and I had been seated next to one another until recently, right? As soon as I came to this school, I began talking with Ayanokouji-kun. This led me to discover, by chance, that he was an exceptionally capable student...even better than me," said Horikita.

"Wait, even better than you? Hold on. I remember Kiyotaka's scores were all just about average ever since we started school. I'm sorry, but there really didn't appear to be anything special about him. In fact, in OAA, his academic ability is ranked C—completely average—right?" argued Keisei.

Keisei had thought back on to the past and recalled it well. But Horikita was unfazed by his rebuttal.

"Of course. That's because my strategy was already in motion from our very first test," said Horikita, walking away from me, and heading up toward the podium.

She was doing it to keep everyone's eyes focused on her, probably so she could draw attention away from me. I had expected she would help me out, but she was doing an even better job of it than I had imagined.

"He had the necessary knowledge to be able to get perfect scores in math all along. Since I knew about that before anyone else did, I thought up a little strategy," said Horikita.

"...A little strategy?" asked Keisei.

I was betting he was going to have more than a few concerns regarding that point. He was probably wondering how in the world I'd obtained that kind of knowledge.

But Horikita sidestepped that issue for now, continuing with her main point. Namely, not how I had gained that kind of knowledge, but why she had hidden my academic skills.

She made that specific question alone the focus of her talk and brought everyone's attention to it.

"Last April, we, the students of Class D, were over the moon after getting a hefty sum of money deposited into our accounts. I'm ashamed to admit that I was one of them. But I had a hunch that something unexpected might happen. So, as a sort of experiment, I asked my neighbor Ayanokouji-kun for a favor. I asked him to deliberately hold back on tests. I suppose you could say I was asking him to be a reserve unit or a trump card. Of course, I asked him to make sure he stayed at a level where he wouldn't be dragging us down. Namely, at the kind of level that the school deems a C in academic ability," said Horikita.

Up until this point, my grades had been completely unremarkable. Horikita was saying that was all intentional, and in line with a strategy that she had formulated. Of course, if someone carefully thought back to what had happened a year ago, they'd find this all very odd. There were several things people could take issue with, such as the fact that Horikita wasn't the kind of person who had a good relationship with others back then, or the question of how and when she noticed my academic skills, and so on.

But for many, a year was a long, long time. Those memories were distant. Unlike with an incident so intense that the memory of it was etched deep into your hippocampus, what Horikita suggested was easy to accept precisely because nothing about it was striking or memorable, making it seem even more indistinct. Very few students would be able to clearly recall those days. Many would just think, "Oh, that's how it was?" and then fill in the blanks on their own.

Of course, things weren't going to go over that easily with someone like Keisei, whose feelings of mistrust ran deep at this point. He went after the parts that were difficult to explain away, not letting Horikita off the hook.

"...I find that all hard to believe. If you were having doubts about how this school operated, it would have been more beneficial for our class if you asked him to get high scores from the beginning. If he could get a perfect score on this exam, then it's not impossible for him to have an academic ability ranking of A or A+. Even if it's just one person's score we're talking about

here, our Class Points would have gone up, slowly but surely," argued Keisei.

He was saying that he didn't understand the benefits of holding me as a reserve unit.

"Yes, I suppose you have a point. That would be all well and good, if you were only looking for Class Points in the short term. But what if he had given it his all from the start...? What do you think would have happened to Ayanokouji-kun by now? Well, no—to put it more accurately, what kind of future could you have predicted for him?" asked Horikita.

Faced with Keisei's mistrust, she didn't run or hide, but took his concerns head on and improvised. She never faltered and the words just effortlessly came out of her mouth. It was almost like she'd had it all planned out from the start.

"What kind of future could I have predicted for him...?" repeated Keisei, not understanding the meaning of the question.

Horikita began explaining what she meant.

"Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that Ayanokouji-kun had used the full extent of his abilities right away, starting in April, as you suggested, Yukimura-kun. In that case, his name would most likely become known to Sakayanagi-san, Ichinose-san, and Ryuuuen-kun. When it comes to mathematics, he may very well be the best in our grade. If such a person were left unchecked, the other classes would think of him as an obstacle. It wouldn't be surprising if they started putting plans in motion to get rid of him," said Horikita.

"So you're saying that he might have ended up being targeted?" asked Keisei.

"Yes. That wouldn't be surprising, would it? Anything could happen at this school, after all. In fact, the school even went so far as to administer a special exam where a student was forced out by way of an in-class vote, and the truth of the matter is that Ayanokouji-kun was temporarily in danger of expulsion due to Sakayanagi-san's strategy. Although he was still considered an ordinary student at the time and was only used as something of a

scapegoat in that situation, I did have concerns that Sakayanagi-san actually saw him as a real threat and was after him," said Horikita, explaining that depending on how the situation played out, I might have been the one who got expelled instead of Yamauchi.

"Wait, hold on, that's not right. If Kiyotaka had been going all out right from the start, even if we were to compare him and Yamauchi, the results would have been as clear as day," argued Keisei.

"I'm not so sure about that. Yamauchi-kun might have conducted himself better to avoid getting expelled, and Sakayanagi-san's strategy might have become more complicated and more difficult for us to see through, as a result. In addition, Yamauchi-kun had many more close friends than Ayanokouji-kun does. It depends on what it is you're comparing, exactly," said Horikita.

Because what they were getting into now was really a pointless, circular argument, Keisei couldn't really push further on this point. Even if he did bring up what had happened on other tests, Horikita would probably just respond with something similar.

"...Okay then, why now? If Ayanokouji carelessly flaunts his ability now, we'll have the same problem, right? He's gotten everyone's attention by suddenly making a big splash. So he might become a target in the future," said Keisei.

He was essentially saying there was no difference in risk if I had started going all out a year ago versus doing so right now. But it seemed like his response was well within what Horikita had expected. She showed no signs of panicking.

"No, there is a significant difference between if he had showed off what he could do a year ago versus showing it now. Our sense of unity as a class has grown by leaps and bounds over the past year. Each and every one of us has grown. We've also become capable of making the right decisions," said Horikita.

Looking back at how we all were a year ago, even Keisei could probably see the truth of her words.

"And this isn't just limited to Ayanokouji-kun, either. For example, hmm... Yes. He isn't here right now, but I think Sudou-kun is an easy-to-understand example of this. Last year, he was a terrible student. He was, without a doubt, our class's biggest burden. But what about now? While some small traces of his rather rough-and-tumble temperament remain even now, he has shown incredible improvement. His grades have improved tremendously, in particular. That, combined with his already high level of athleticism, means his overall ability in OAA is actually higher than yours as of May, Yukimura-kun," said Horikita.

Keisei's rating had gone up in April, but after this last exam, Sudou had passed him. Horikita had presented Keisei with a fact that he wasn't about to dispute: the numerical value of one's overall ability in OAA.

"Also, I'm not entirely sure if either you or I really had the ability or the will to protect Sudou-kun when we first came to this school. Don't you agree, Yukimura-kun?" she added.

She was suggesting that it was questionable whether the same students who had argued that Sudou should have just been tossed aside and didn't even think to help him could have seriously protected their classmates. However, if Sudou were to find himself in trouble now, even Keisei would likely help everyone to think hard and produce the best strategy to help him.

"If someone were to target Ayanokouji-kun now, we can work together to protect him. That's the conclusion I've come to. And that's precisely why I had Ayanokouji-kun show off what he can do now, to start raising the bar for our class overall," said Horikita.

Some of the students here started to look convinced, seemingly saying to themselves, "Oh, okay, that makes sense." However, more than half of the students still had some doubts about the situation. That being said, Horikita probably didn't have enough material to work with to convince everyone of all of it. If her story was already plastered with lies, there would inevitably be some holes in it, no matter what she tried. Of course, she could at least put the matter temporarily to rest.

But if she had enough support, it would be a different story.

After making sure that nearly everyone's eyes were on Horikita, I looked over at Yousuke—the guy our class put absolute trust in. Even though Yousuke was facing Horikita, he occasionally pretended to look around so he could see what was going on with me. Then, when he determined that we wouldn't be noticed, he made eye contact with me.

Like with my other classmates, there were many things that I hadn't told Yousuke. If he were any other student, I was sure he would have some doubts and suspicions, just like Keisei and the others. It wouldn't have been strange if he started peppering me with scathing questions. But considering that it was Yousuke we were talking about, I didn't need to worry about any of that.

Yousuke only thought about what was in the best interest of his classmates. That was always his priority. He also understood the role he'd been given in this situation without needing me to explain.

"I think I understand, at least a little, the meaning of your strategy, to keep Ayanokouji as an ace up our sleeve. But I do have one question about that. Is mathematics the only thing that Ayanokouji is exceptionally good at?" asked Keisei.

"I cannot answer that question at this current point in time," said Horikita, calmly. "Is the student known as Ayanokouji-kun demonstrating everything he's capable of? Or is he not? Either way, by keeping the truth hidden, we can make sure he continues to be a thorn in the sides of the other classes."

"That's—"

Yousuke had been watching how Keisei's behavior. He quickly interjected now in support of Horikita, interrupting Keisei as he tried to snap back at her.

"I see. I can understand what Horikita-san is trying to say," said Yousuke.

He slowly walked up to Horikita's side.

"I don't quite understand all of what's going on, so I've just been listening this whole time. But this does make sense to me.

It's true that an enemy whose abilities you can't see in concrete terms can be rather unsettling. The other classes will most likely try to gather information since they'll want to know more. But if no one else in class really knows the truth, then it doesn't matter how deep they dig," said Yousuke, filling in the gaps of Horikita's argument while supplementing it with information that could be easily understood by everyone listening.

Horikita, having decided that Yousuke was an ally, kept in step with him and nodded.

"Yes. If we're going to attract attention in the future anyway, we should take full advantage of it. It's better to make our enemies think that he's an unknown quantity. I wouldn't be surprised if there were students standing outside our classroom right at this very moment, trying to listen in. That's the kind of school this is," said Horikita.

Everyone's gazes fell upon the hallway for a moment. Was the student named Ayanokouji only capable when it came to math? Or was he good at other things too? By making the enemy classes wonder exactly where Ayanokouji ranked and how wary they needed to be of him, the enemy would be lost. Horikita's story, intertwined with Yousuke's additional comments, started sounding more profound.

"Wow, Horikita-san is like, super amazing, isn't she? I'm honestly a little moved right now, for real." Kei dropped in a casual comment right then to drive the story home further. "Don't you think so too, Shinohara-san?" she added, turning to her friend for agreement.

She was probably trying to draw people's attention away by getting them to focus on how great Horikita was, rather than on me and my abilities. Even though I hadn't given Kei any kind of signal like I did with Yousuke, or even any kind of instructions, she intuitively knew what kind of role she could play here and acted in accordance immediately.

"I really think so too. I mean, I feel like I've been seeing Horikita-san and Ayanokouji-kun talk in secret with each other for

a long time now. I guess they were thinking about how to help our class," said Shinohara.

When Horikita first started here, she hardly talked to anyone except me. That fact ended up working in our favor right now. I supposed it also gave what Horikita was saying a certain degree of credibility.

The impeccable follow-ups from Yousuke and Kei were incredibly effective as well. The group mentality of "Well, if Yousuke and Kei think so, then I'm sure it must be true," was in full force. Even Keisei, who'd had his doubts up until this point, was no exception to that.

"A strategy to hide his true abilities, huh... I suppose it is true that the other classes are probably quite surprised right now too," remarked Keisei.

"Although I didn't have a perfect grasp of how things worked at this school, I thought it would be best to have at least one insurance policy in place. For better or for worse, Ayanokouji-kun also seems to struggle to communicate with other people, and he doesn't like being the center of attention either. That was why I asked him to keep his abilities hidden," said Horikita, stating that this was all possible because both her thoughts and mine had lined up.

She then looked away from Keisei and addressed everyone in our class.

"That is the secret of how Ayanokouji-kun got a perfect score in math. I'm sorry for shocking you all like this."

Even though Horikita had only one shot at this, with no chance of a do-over, she had performed beautifully from start to finish. But if we let the students hang out together at their leisure for too long, doubts might start welling up in them once again.

"I think it would be best if we consider the matter closed for the time being. Just as Horikita-san said earlier, we don't know if someone might be listening in," said Yousuke.

Yousuke deftly brought the conversation to a close, explaining the drawbacks of standing around and continuing this

conversation right here and now. The smarter a student was, the more doubts they would still have—but at the same time, the smart students would also be quick to understand that this wasn't something we should be discussing here and now. The proof of that was the fact that Keisei's lengthy barrage of questions had ended, and he had gone silent.

I could say that this meeting had diverted their suspicions, to a certain extent. Also, thanks to Horikita's performance—which went above and beyond what I had expected—it would be easier for me to take action in the future. Even if I showed off my abilities outside the field of mathematics, Horikita had laid the foundation for us to be able to simply explain it away, saying that I had been hiding those abilities too. That was key.

I was honestly quite grateful to her for having been able to do all this for me without us even having to meet beforehand and go over it.

2.2

THINGS CAME to a close, then. The students dispersed, going their separate ways as they usually did after classes, though it had come later today. I figured it would probably be a good idea for me to go thank Horikita and Yousuke another day. Perhaps Horikita had sensed what I was thinking, because she got up from her seat before anyone else did.

Yousuke always walked off while chatting happily with a bunch of girls, with Kei at the center of the group. Blending in with them, I grabbed my bag and stepped out into the hallway.

And thus ended my day... Well, no. Things weren't going to be so simple. Even though what had just happened was good enough to get the masses to understand the big picture, the personal issues it would cause me were an entirely different story.

A few students started following me right after I walked off. I didn't even need to think about who they were, of course. They were the members of the Ayanokouji Group. The footsteps of the student in the lead, as they approached me from behind, were especially forceful and loud.

I didn't even need to look back to understand just how frustrated Keisei was. As I continued walking, pretending not to notice anything, I heard a voice call out to me.

"Kiyotaka."

After I heard my name called, I slowly came to a stop. When I turned around and looked at the three of them standing there, I saw they did have rather grim looks on their faces, after all.

"What, you're just heading on back without even talking to us? That's kind of cruel, don't you think?" said Haruka, the most outspoken member of the group, addressing me in a forceful tone of voice.

She spoke on behalf of both Keisei, who stood in front of the group with a stern expression on his face, and of Airi, who

stood in back, looking worried. Perhaps what Haruka said had some effect on Keisei, because although he had opened his mouth to speak, looking like he was getting heated, he then closed it.

He paused, took a breath, then started again.

"Why didn't you tell us about all of this before? If it was all about hiding information, just like Horikita had said before, does that mean that you can't trust us at all?" asked Keisei.

Even though Keisei had seemed somewhat convinced by everything said in the classroom, he still looked dissatisfied. That was only natural, I supposed. I'd basically ridden roughshod over his feelings, when he had taken things seriously and been kind enough to tutor me. It was precisely because Haruka and Airi understood that that they'd followed him, worried.

The uncomplicated way out would be for me to put all of the blame on Horikita. However, I couldn't really bring myself to do something like that, since she'd played a key role in getting me through this situation earlier.

Well, no. I supposed there was no need to resort to such emotional arguments. I needed to think about the future here.

Keisei was an extremely smart student, and by no means the slowest in our class when it came to assessing a given situation. But if I didn't tackle this issue directly with him, it would probably continue to weigh heavily on his mind. And if Keisei stopped functioning properly, it would hurt our class. It would also hinder Horikita, who had taken command of that class and was acting as its leader.

"I do trust you. But I decided that not telling anyone would be best, considering what might come in the future. I was tempted to come out and tell you, because we're close. But I decided to grit my teeth and keep quiet about it."

I told them that I had made that decision voluntarily, without putting the blame on anyone else. Even though Keisei had approached the matter aggressively, what Haruka said earlier had made him hesitate a bit before coming out with everything he

wanted to say. Telling him that it was my own decision essentially forced him to retreat further from those emotions.

"I can definitely understand why you'd feel so upset with me over this, Keisei. You've done more for this group than anyone else, and on top of that, you were pushing to help me study. I'm sorry," I told him.

No one would feel great about discovering the person they'd been tutoring was hiding the fact that they were better than them. I was sure Haruka and Airi, who stood beside him, felt similarly. Haruka stood there and listened to my apology. Aside from what she said right at the beginning, she hadn't opened her mouth. I supposed that was probably because she had decided that Keisei should think about it and come to terms with things on his own, first.

"To be honest, I'm still pissed. If you didn't need me to tutor you, you should have just said so from the beginning. You could have just told me that you could have gotten through the exams without any trouble on your own," said Keisei.

"That's true," I replied.

From Keisei's perspective, my circumstances, background, and such didn't matter. I supposed it was only natural that he would have wanted me to tell him that from the start.

"And on top of that, according to what Horikita says, you're going to keep holding back and being vague in the future, right, Kiyotaka? If you can't tell us what subjects you're capable of handling and which ones you're not, I'm never going to be able to fully trust you," said Keisei.

Keisei would continue to harbor doubts. What kinds of subjects was I capable of handling? And which subjects did I actually need assistance with? As a tutor, it would undoubtedly be uncomfortable to be around someone like that.

"I'd be lying if I said that I didn't feel like saying...I want to leave the group, you know," said Keisei.

"Wait, are you being serious, Yukimuu?!" exclaimed Haruka, having remained silent up until that point.

I supposed there was no way she could have held her tongue after hearing him say something like that.

"Yeah, I am. Until we had heard that full explanation from Horikita a little while ago, I was completely planning to leave the group. Because I didn't think I could trust Kiyotaka anymore. But...well, since we've been in the same group for so long now, there's one thing I understand. I know that Kiyotaka isn't a bad guy. I suppose if he was hiding this for the good of the class, it makes sense why he wouldn't tell anyone about it. And even if he could've turned me down for tutoring help, saying that he didn't need it, I can understand how someone like Kiyotaka, who isn't good at communicating, wouldn't be able to actually come out and say that."

Keisei clenched his fists as he spoke, responding with his honest thoughts.

"It's just... Well, yeah, it's just that... It's taking me some time to get my thoughts in order, I guess," he added, intentionally letting out a big sigh afterward. "I guess it's pointless to drag this out any longer. In the end, what I want to say is—what I wanted to say is—I don't care if you're hiding your true abilities from the rest of the class. It's not like you're dragging everyone down like Kouenji, and it's not like anyone has the right to complain about you. And if I try and accuse you of stuff like that, it's only going to make things worse between us," said Keisei.

It was fair to say this whole situation had left Keisei more dissatisfied and displeased than anyone else. And yet, he was trying to swallow those feelings and keep them to himself. For the sake of the Ayanokouji Group, and for the sake of his classmates.

"I understand all that, but I can't help but feel a certain way about this. For that, I'm sorry. For the time being, I'll just consider the skills that you've shown us to be the real thing. And I'm going to assume that you're still only just adequate in every subject aside from mathematics, and I'll continue tutoring you. ...Is that okay?" said Keisei.

Considering it wouldn't have been surprising if the situation had ended our friendship for good, I was incredibly grateful for his proposal. There was no reason for me to refuse, so I nodded my head in response, agreeing to his request.

"Thank you, Keisei," I replied, expressing my gratitude to him.

Airi, after having witnessed the entire exchange, summoned up the courage to speak.

"Th-then, how about...you two shake hands, to make peace with each other? Or something?" she suggested.

"That's great! Yeah, make peace with a handshake," added Haruka, agreeing with Airi's suggestion.

Keisei, feeling the tension was hanging over us beginning to disperse, shook his head from side to side. "Oh, come on, lay off. That's embarrassing."

Despite him rejecting their suggestion, Haruka had quickly grabbed hold of Keisei's right hand. Then, at almost the exact same time, she took hold of my right hand as well.

"Okay, make up!" she exclaimed, forcing our hands together, trying to make us shake hands.

Neither of us had exactly prepared for a handshake, though, so our hands just kind of hit one another.

"I'm not gonna let go until you two shake hands, okay?" said Haruka.

"A-all right already...!" exclaimed Keisei.

Perhaps because he thought having our hands awkwardly joined together like this was more embarrassing than just doing a regular handshake, Keisei gave in. The two of us shook hands, signaling that we had officially reconciled.

"Well, I'm fine now, but Akito still doesn't know anything," said Keisei.

"Miyacchi'll probably be just fine, I bet. I think he'll accept Kiyopon just like normal. Right?" said Haruka.

Keisei thought about that for a moment, but considering what he knew of Akito, he seemed to agree with Haruka's conclusion. "...Well, I suppose, yeah."

"Whew, okay! Everything's finally back to normal. It kind of feels like this weight's been lifted off our shoulders, huh?" said Haruka, locking eyes with Airi. The two of them seemed in total agreement. "Anyway, it looks like you've become a celebrity all of a sudden, Kiyopon. Doesn't it? Wait..."

She trailed off at the end and stiffened up, staring at me intently, as if she had just remembered something.

The three of us waited for her to continue speaking, but it didn't seem like she was going to.

"What's the matter, Haruka-chan?" asked Airi, worried about Haruka, who had gone completely stiff.

Just then, Haruka started moving again, like she had been released from a spell.

"O-oh, uh, nothing, no big deal. Anyway, now that you're a celebrity, things are gonna be pretty rough for you, huh?" she said, turning back to me.

"Don't you think getting a full score might have been kind of excessive? The second highest score in our grade was Sakayanagi, with ninety-one points," said Keisei, worrying about a different matter after acknowledging things with me.

"Wait, speaking of Sakayanagi-san, she got scores close to that in every other subject too, if I remember right. Didn't she?" said Airi, thinking back on it.

A score of ninety-one points in math. And she'd gotten similarly high scores in every other subject, on top of that. Considering the elevated difficulty of these tests, there was no doubt in my mind that she really was very academically gifted, after all. I was certain that she was the best in our grade level, after me. What was most impressive was the fact that she was that good despite not having received an education in an exceptional environment like the White Room.

It was no wonder she claimed to be a genius. Because she was exactly that.

"I knew that she was smart, but since they introduced the OAA, I feel like her strengths have become even more apparent," said Keisei.

Though there was some frustration in Keisei's voice, he was openly and honestly recognizing Sakayanagi's strengths. Though we had no doubt she'd gotten high scores in the past, she was getting even better. Had she been deliberately holding back a little earlier? Or had she started to study outside of class time?

In any case, it was absolutely certain she was going to become an even more troublesome foe for us to face, and one we needed to defeat more than ever before.

"Hey, to celebrate you guys makin' up, how about we all meet up at Keyaki Mall after Miyacchi is done with his club stuff?" suggested Haruka.

No one turned down her idea.

2.3

I STOOD IN FRONT of Keyaki Mall. I had gotten there ahead of time, quietly waiting for my friends to come. We'd planned to meet up at seven o'clock that evening, and since I was the one who'd caused a bit of a scene earlier, I decided it would be best if I didn't keep anyone waiting. Especially not today.

"Huh. Guess I did get here way too early though," I muttered to myself.

It was only just after six thirty now. Even so, I didn't feel like waiting was particularly painful. If anything, it wouldn't be a stretch to say that it was one of my few unique skills. It was nice to have some time to just stand around like this and clear my head, not thinking about anything in particular.

Still, while I wouldn't say it was like I had paid a heavy price or anything, things were getting a little difficult for me. Namely the fact that me being alone would attract attention, strangely enough. Even though my test results had been disclosed to everyone except the third-year students, it wouldn't be long before I started getting the attention of every grade level. The inquisitive eyes of both upperclassmen and underclassmen were probably going to be on me for quite a while.

I didn't do anything for a while, but just stood there. Then my phone started to vibrate. There was a message in the Ayanokouji Group chat. Airi told everyone that she was just leaving from the dorms now. I saw that the message had been read by everyone else in the group, but I hadn't told them I was already here, so I just read their respective messages and did nothing else.

"Ayanokouji-kun, are you waiting for someone?"

I hadn't been paying attention, since I was looking down at my phone, but I looked up when I heard Ichinose call out to me. Standing next to her was her classmate, Kanzaki. Even though our school boasted quite an expansive campus, the areas that

students usually occupied were extremely limited. If a student were hanging around the entrance to Keyaki Mall, it was almost a certainty that they'd run into someone they knew.

"I'm going to be eating with some friends in a little bit. What about you?" I replied, answering her honestly, rather than hiding anything.

Ichinose and Kanzaki, without even exchanging looks first, replied in complete sync with each other.

"We're doing something pretty similar. Right?" said Ichinose.

"Yep," said Kanzaki.

A rather short response from Kanzaki. His gaze was more intensely focused on Ichinose than it was on me, though. Anyway —something similar, huh? But I was sure there were plenty of things that only seemed similar, without actually being that way

"That reminds me, I saw the test results. Getting a perfect score in math? That's amazing!" exclaimed Ichinose.

"From what I saw in OAA last year, though, you didn't have the kind of aptitude that indicated you were capable of getting perfect scores," said Kanzaki.

In contrast to Ichinose, who didn't ask me a single question about the matter of me concealing my abilities, Kanzaki made no effort to hide his disapproval.

"Well, there are some reasons behind that. After discussing it with my classmates, it was decided that I'd hide the fact that I could do well in math," I replied.

Even when I only explained that much, I was sure that Ichinose and Kanzaki would understand things, to a certain extent. They'd use their imaginations to fill in the gaps and flesh out the story themselves. Normally, that would've been more than enough. However, the sharp gleam in Kanzaki's eyes remained, unwavering.

"Which means you've been hiding it all this time, then. It seems you're a more dangerous opponent than I had imagined," said Kanzaki.

"Come on Kanzaki-kun, don't say it like that. Every class has its own ideas and its own strategies, you know that," replied Ichinose.

Kanzaki accepted what Ichinose said, as a matter of course. "That is certainly true, yes. And it's not as though he has used cowardly tricks like Ryuuen, either. But there are a few things that I just don't like. As you know, Ichinose, it's not so easy to get a perfect score on a test with advanced problems like that in the first place. And even though he said that was going along with what his classmates had instructed him to do—"

"Ayanokouji-kun isn't our enemy." Ichinose interrupted him, expressing a keen sense of dissatisfaction with his hostile attitude.

It was certainly unusual for Kanzaki to act this way, but if you asked me who was doing the correct thing in this situation, I'd have to say it was the person who being more openly vigilant. So, Kanzaki.

"Our alliance with them has already been dissolved. Class 2-D is, without a doubt, our enemy," said Kanzaki.

"That's... Well, but there's still no need for meaningless quarreling," replied Ichinose.

"We're not quarreling. But we need to understand what our opponent's strengths truly are," said Kanzaki.

"Yes, Ayanokouji-kun kept the fact that he was good at math a secret. That was a truth he had concealed," said Ichinose, conceding the point.

Kanzaki took a step forward, shortening the distance between us so that he was closer to me than I was to Ichinose.

"In that case, what else is there? Is being good at math the only thing he's hidden? No, I don't think so. He's probably hiding other skills. Was he hiding the impressive running speed he demonstrated during the sports festival last year on his classmates' instructions? The worst thing for us, for Class B...I mean, Class C, would be if he has other abilities he's hiding as well," said Kanzaki.

"But test scores only go so far. No matter how capable you are when it comes to academics, you can only get up to a hundred points per subject, and the highest grade you can get is an A+. Even if he got perfect scores in every subject, the difference between him and Sakayanagi-san, who came in second in our grade level, would still be rather small," reasoned Ichinose.

In fact, the difference in mine and Sakayanagi's math scores was a mere nine points. Even if we had the margin of difference spread out over all five subjects on the exam, that would only mean a total of forty-five points. Ichinose was saying that wasn't that great a threat.

"In terms of overall scores, our class is still higher. It'll be fine if our entire class works hard to make up the difference, to compensate for the points that Ayanokouji-kun is getting when he tries his hardest," she added.

"That might be true if you're only talking about written exams. But—"

"Let's not talk about this anymore, Kanzaki-kun. You understand that this isn't the kind of time and place where we should argue so vehemently, right?" said Ichinose, interrupting him once again.

Ichinose, who always strove to be a pacifist, feared it would cause a scene if they continued to have a heated discussion out in front of the Keyaki Mall, in public.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. I did lose my cool a bit," conceded Kanzaki.

Perhaps deciding nothing would be resolved right now, even if they continued arguing, he shut his mouth and averted his gaze resignedly.

"I'll be going on ahead," said Kanzaki.

And with those brief parting words, he quickly disappeared into the mall, leaving Ichinose behind. She and I quietly watched him go.

"I'm sorry. But, well, considering that the situation being what it is, Kanzaki-kun is feeling some pressure," said Ichinose.

They had been holding their position as Class B, but had now been demoted to C. It wasn't hard to see why Kanzaki was feeling pressured, since he was now being forced to change course after seeing that their battle tactics so far were no longer working. On the other hand, you could say that Ichinose, who was showing me kindness even in this situation, wasn't changing course. Kanzaki likely thought Ichinose should abandon that kind of naivete, and he wasn't wrong about that.

"Am I in the wrong...?" said Ichinose.

It wasn't like she didn't understand what Kanzaki was thinking at all. Even though she knew what he was getting at, she was still sticking to who she was. There was a world of difference between that and carrying on while not knowing anything.

"Do you remember what I told you before?" I asked her.

"Yes. You told me to keep moving forward together with my classmates, for as far as we can go," said Ichinose.

"In the future, there might be other students like Kanzaki, who are going to try and change your class. Or students who are dissatisfied with you, Ichinose, but keep those feelings to themselves. Maybe there will even be students who betray your class. It wouldn't be that surprising, considering the situation. The class you had last year, the one that was safe and protected by you alone, doesn't exist anymore," I told her.

What I just said would probably resonate more with Ichinose than with any other student in her class.

"No matter what might happen from here on out, I want you to keep on fighting while prioritizing trusting in your friends and protecting them," I added.

"Don't worry. I will definitely protect my classmates. If there ever does come a time when someone in our class must go, then I think I will be the first one to disappear," said Ichinose, resolutely.

She wasn't putting on an act. Ichinose would definitely do that if necessary. She would take responsibility for her class's fall and choose to be expelled herself before anyone else.

"Well, I'm relieved to hear that you're so determined, but I have just one complaint with that," I told her.

"A complaint...?" she repeated, cocking her head to the side in confusion, not sure at what I was getting at.

"I will never allow you to be expelled."

I needed to remind Ichinose of the most important thing there was. It was extremely important that she keep running forward, without stopping, over the course of this year. I looked into her eyes, and lit a powerful fire inside her, igniting the determination that lay deep within. It wasn't darkness that she should bear. It was a light that would never go out. And if there was a chance that she would point that light in the wrong direction, then I'd pluck it out.

"Th-that's... U-um, okay... I will...definitely stay," she mumbled, looking up at me as she spoke, seemingly embarrassed about something. She averted her eyes, like she was trying to change the subject. "Y-... You really are amazing, Ayanokouji-kun... I mean, you got a perfect score on such a difficult test and all."

"Math might be the only thing I've got going for me, though," I answered.

"Still, you're amazing. That just means that you have a special skill. Something no one else will ever beat you in."

"I could say the same for you, Ichinose. You definitely have a special skill too. Something no one else will ever beat you in," I told her.

"I wish that were true, but..."

It was just that, well, there weren't a lot of people around who could really put this particular skill to good use. This didn't mean that Ichinose wasn't blessed with good classmates. The problem lay in the one disadvantage of her particular special skill, and that was its potential to break down her classmates' individuality. Her tolerance led to a vicious cycle where the other students would rely on Ichinose so much that, as a result, they lost their individuality.

"...Well, I should be going now. I'm sure we'll draw attention if I keep bothering you, and I'd feel bad if I kept Kanzaki-kun waiting any longer," said Ichinose.

I responded with a gentle nod and watched her walk off. Thinking that it was probably just about time for me to meet up with the others right about now, I pulled out my phone again to double check.

"What were ya talkin' about with Ichinose-san?" asked Haruka, addressing me from some distance away.

When I looked over in her direction, I saw Akito, Keisei, and Airi were all with her. It looked as though everyone else in our group had met up while I had been talking with Ichinose.

"About my perfect score in math," I replied.

The second I gave them that sensible explanation, Keisei looked immediately convinced it was the truth.

"That's no surprise. The smarter someone is, the more likely they'll take notice of something like that," said Keisei.

However, Haruka didn't look convinced. She didn't press the matter too deeply though, and shortly after, her expression returned to normal. Tomorrow, May 2, was the start of Golden Week. The student body probably intended to take it easy and relax over the holiday, considering that they had just gotten through a special exam.

2.4

GOLDEN WEEK SEEMED to pass in the blink of an eye, sending us back to the usual daily grind at school. The scenery outside remained the same as ever, but little by little, our daily lives were beginning to change.

"...Hey."

Sudou was the very first person I saw that morning, when our break had ended and we returned to school. I had bumped into him near the shoe lockers. It was just a simple run-in with a fellow classmate, but it was also an example of the way our daily lives were starting to change.

"Sounds like you've had it pretty rough for a while lately. You doin' okay now?" asked Sudou.

"Yeah, it's all right. Nothing really unusual happened over Golden Week. It was pretty quiet."

"Okay, gotcha. Though, man, our break really was over in no time, huh?" said Sudou, walking in step with me, the two of us heading towards the classroom side-by-side.

Sudou, who had left the classroom to attend club activities before hearing Horikita's explanation, most likely got the details later from people like Ike or Hondou. He should have understood everything well enough without me needing to explain.

"So, you were hidin' the fact that you're real good at math because of Suzune's strategy, right?" said Sudou.

I responded with a gentle nod, signaling that he was right. Sudou then averted his eyes from me, pouting slightly, before turning and facing forward.

"Well, I guess you two have been pretty close ever since school started and all, yeah. Even though it might be too late to say it now, I do finally get it."

"It's not like we were close. If anything, I'd say that we preferred to keep each other at arm's length," I replied.

"Really? Sorry, but it didn't look like that to me though," said Sudou.

That was probably because Sudou was looking at Horikita through the filter of seeing her as a member of the other sex. It wasn't like pointing that out was going to help matters, though, so I just let it slide.

"By the way, Yousuke told me afterward that you covered for me," I told him.

"I dunno if I'd say covered or anythin'. More like I was just statin' the facts."

"You say that they were the facts, but at the time, you didn't know the real truth of the matter."

"Yeah, 'course I know that," said Sudou, sounding slightly irritated, puckering his lips once again into a slight pout. "Sounds like the fact that you're a math genius is a secret. So, is the fact that you're real good in a fight just as much of a secret too?"

As far as Sudou was concerned, chances were good he was much more concerned about that issue than my math skills.

"I don't know what you mean," I answered, pretending not to understand what he was trying to say.

However, Sudou wasn't the kind of person who would back down at something like that.

"Don't play dumb, dude. I fought Housen, so I get it. He's crazy strong. And he moved faster than anybody else I've ever fought. To be blunt, he's a monster."

He was saying he understood it all too well fact precisely because he had fought him firsthand.

"It's the first time I ever felt scared in a fight. Even now, his smile is burned into my brain," he added, stopping in his tracks, and tapping his temple with his left index finger a couple times to further illustrate his point.

"So you were scared? Even so, you looked like you were putting on a brave fight. For Horikita."

"Well, I had to, man. There was no other option. That dude's got some screws loose," said Sudou.

There was no denying that. After seeing him up close, I understood Housen's obsession with violence.

"But you still had a chance to win, I think," I said.

The reason Sudou had gotten knocked down by Housen the other day was because he suckered him with a cheap shot, when Sudou wasn't paying attention. In a situation like that, where you needed to keep your eyes on your opponent, Housen used Horikita as bait, and rendered Sudou defenseless. That moment turned out to be a fatal mistake, and their fight ended with Sudou's defeat.

"I'm not so sure about that dude... If we were to really throw down in a serious fight, I probably couldn't beat 'im," said Sudou.

Sudou was by no means a weak person. If someone with his strength and athleticism spoke that highly of Housen, then that just meant that Housen was not someone to be trifled with. Even if I were to hand-pick the best of the best, like Horikita's older brother Manabu, who trained in martial arts, or Albert, who had been born with an impressive physique, they wouldn't stand a chance against Housen in a fight.

"I mean, hold on, that ain't it. I don't wanna talk about me right now," said Sudou.

He turned to look at me.

"You... You were evenly matched with, or maybe even stronger than that monster Housen, though. You stopped him. I'm right, aren't I?"

Even if I said something like, I just happened to muster more strength than usual in the heat of the moment, it wouldn't do anything to convince Sudou otherwise. It was only natural that he would connect the dots, reasoning that since I'd gotten a perfect score in math, it wouldn't be surprising for me to be exceptional in other ways too. There were other things he could see as well, precisely because of his fondness for Horikita.

"Are you sure it's not just a simple misunderstanding, Sudou? Or did you really see it that way?" I asked.

"Yeah, I did."

Sudou grabbed my bicep with his right hand and lightly squeezed several times to see for himself what my musculature was like.

"I had a hunch ever since I saw you in the pool last year. You weren't in any clubs or anything, but you've got a really toned body. It's hard to tell when you're wearin' clothes and all, but you have incredibly toned muscles... There's no way you'd be like that unless you worked out a lot," said Sudou.

Sudou had regularly worked out and trained to improve his physique. It was pointless to try and deceive him any longer. I could claim I just worked out on my own after I rose in the mornings, but there was no way he'd believe that. He wasn't seeing the truth with his eyes. By touching my arm like his, my own body told him the truth.

"That reminds me, when we got our measurements and stuff taken before the sports festival, your grip strength was around sixty, right?" he added.

Sudou was started gradually remembering the events of last year.

"I mean, I thought that was already pretty amazin', at the time... But you were holdin' back. What is your grip strength, really?"

"No clue. Honestly, I don't know."

"You don't know?" he repeated.

"I don't remember ever getting an actual measurement of my grip strength before."

"Wait, the hell? Dude, we have like physical examinations and stuff a bunch of times, both in elementary school and junior high, right?"

I honestly had no memory of anything like that. Of course, our bodies were examined periodically in the White Room. And I

was sure they'd collected a massive amount of data on us, enough to be incomparable to the kinds of physical examinations that were conducted in a normal school.

However, that data was known only to the instructors. They didn't bother giving the students details on how they'd performed, and the students weren't especially interested in the numbers, which changed from day to day, either. They saw them only as numbers—numbers that went up or down. However, even though I'd been sticking to a daily routine to keep in shape, I was sure my physical abilities were slowly declining from what they'd been in the White Room.

"You really don't know," said Sudou, looking into my eyes, probably sensing that I wasn't lying before.

"Back then, I heard that the average grip strength for a first-year high school student was around sixty. So I adjusted my grip to purposefully score around that mark. I was trying to be as inconspicuous as possible," I replied.

I had later learned that sixty was higher than average. I remembered being surprised by that.

"Just how incredible are, you, really? The real you, I mean," asked Sudou.

An inquisitive mind included things such as envy and jealousy.

"How incredible... Huh," I repeated.

The answer to that question, and the angle you chose to approach it from, would depend on what your criteria for "incredible" were. I thought about it for a little while, but then—

"Wait, actually, you don't have to answer that. Just forget it."

Sudou withdrew his question, as if refusing my answer. Even if I came out and told him my whole life story, no one would be able to understand it, anyway. It wasn't something that could be expressed clearly in only a few short words.

"Whether you're really incredibly strong or not, it won't mean anything to me unless I see it with my own eyes, I guess," said Sudou.

He let go of my arm. It seemed he, like Keisei, was starting to come to terms with this situation.

"But, anyway, I do get that you're like, this really crazy dude. You are seriously just incredible, Ayanokouji," said Sudou.

"Does it bother you that I've kept quiet about it?" I asked.

"Well, I mean, at first, I thought like, 'What the hell?' I get how Yukimura feels. It doesn't really feel too great when you think that you're hot shit only to find out that there's someone way better hiding nearby. But it ain't like I don't understand how you feel too, Ayanokouji. You don't like to stand out for no reason, right? I guess I've come to understand that, more or less," said Sudou.

He followed this with something I hadn't expected.

"I mean, I'd be lyin' if I said that I didn't have a lot on my mind 'bout all this, but I'm gonna keep working hard and trying to grow, in my own way. It doesn't matter what other dudes think. I've decided to think 'bout things that way," he concluded.

Focusing on oneself rather than focusing on others. That was what Sudou was getting at. He was doing what was best for himself.

"Besides, no matter how incredible you are, I'm definitely better at basketball," said Sudou, wearing a big, bold grin on his face for the first time that day.

He said it with confidence and without the need for confirmation. Of course, it was an undeniable fact. Even if we played a couple rounds, the results would be as clear as day. There was no way I could beat him.

"Hey man, if we're talkin' basketball, I'd be happy to take you to school any time," he added.

"I'll pass. I don't really feel like being a punching bag, sorry," I replied.

"Ha ha ha ha! All right then, you get it, huh?"

It was easy for people to relax and feel at ease when they had something that they excelled in more than others, even if it was just one thing.

"Anyway, I ain't gonna tell anyone what happened with Housen. I feel like this whole conversation was kinda a roundabout way of us getting' here, but that was the main thing I wanted to tell you today," said Sudou.

"Gotcha."

That was really thoughtful and considerate of him. I honestly felt truly, sincerely grateful.

"Oh, um, so, I'm about to be done talkin' about Housen today and all, but...is it okay if I ask you one last thing?" asked Sudou.

"Sure, if it's something I can answer."

"Did you not think that I'd tell anybody about the fight with Housen?" he asked.

I supposed it was inevitable that question would come up during this conversation. Even though Sudou had witnessed what happened, chances were good that I might have taken some measures to make sure he stayed quiet. I had considered talking to Horikita and having her forbid Sudou from saying anything, just in case, but both the look in Sudou's eyes that night and the look in his eyes when it was revealed I got a perfect score in math gave me a fairly good idea of how he'd handle it.

"If this were the old you, I'm sure I would have taken some precautions. I probably would have asked Horikita to make sure that you kept your mouth shut," I told him.

"...If it were the old me?" said Sudou.

"As anyone can see by looking at the overall ability scores in OAA, when it comes to growth potential, you're among the best in our class. I'm sure you can assess situations calmly and rationally now, unlike before, when you were a reckless hothead. That's why I didn't do anything."

My decision was based on my own analysis of the student known as Sudou Ken. If a student like Ike or Hondou had been present for the fight with Housen...well, that would have been an entirely different story.

"It kinda feels like I'm bein' talked to by a draft coach or somethin'," said Sudou, sighing partly in exasperation and partly out of admiration. "Well, I'm totally convinced. And it sure doesn't feel bad at all if someone like you thinks I'm hot shit."

Afterward, Sudou drew in closer, bringing his face near mine.

"There's one more thing I wanna ask you. 'Bout you and Suzune, you—"

"We're not going out," I replied, cutting him off.

I responded to him quickly and decisively, emphasizing that what I had said was the truth—while at the same time putting some distance between us, because his face was way too close to mine.

"...Okay."

After hearing me come back with that answer, Sudou averted his gaze, looking somewhat embarrassed.

"Oh, well, that's the thing. I'm not, uh, really telling you not to date or nothin' like that. Suzune is... She's free to go out with whatever guy she wants, whenever she wants. Whether it's you or me or anyone. That's her business. But, um, it's like, if you were and you were hidin' it, I wouldn't show ya any mercy," said Sudou.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. In the unlikely event that that ever happens, I'll tell you immediately. Sound good?"

"Okay, good. Wait, no, not good! ...Agh, whatever," said Sudou.

He let out a deep breath, perhaps because he'd gotten through everything he wanted to hear and say.

"This might sound cold comin' from me, as Haruki's friend, but I'm real glad that you didn't get expelled durin' the class vote.

You're somebody we need if we're gonna shoot for Class A, without a doubt. Anyway, see ya later, Ayanokouji."

He headed toward the classroom, walking slightly faster than he had been. Was he doing that out of consideration for me, so people around us wouldn't notice we had been talking earlier?

"Somebody we need if we're gonna shoot for Class A, huh..." I repeated.

I never thought the day would come when I'd get such high praise from Sudou. However, I wasn't the kind of person our class needed right now. Rather, I had no doubt that Sudou was the one who was important to our class.

Chapter 3: Days Passing By

APRIL, A MONTH where some head-scratching events had happened, had come to an end. It had already been two weeks since the beginning of May. As usual, the student from the White Room didn't show any signs of making any major attempts on me yet. It seems like they had left Tsukishiro's control, but what in the world were they thinking? At any rate, I didn't really have any particular complaints as long as they let me spend my days in peace.

One mid-May morning, I met with Horikita in the lobby. The significant amount of attention I had attracted due to my test results was now beginning to quiet back down. Even my classmates passing me by in the lobby didn't give me any strange looks or anything. Of course, I'm sure that there were still many students who had their own private thoughts on the matter, but for the time being, it looked like the situation had mostly been resolved.

While I waited for Horikita, I opened the OAA app, which had just been refreshed with new data. The OAA was a system which reflected our performance every month, and it would give us a glimpse of what the new order would be like for our second year. I had gotten a perfect score in math, but my total score across all five subjects was three-hundred-and-eighty-three points. As a result, in terms of overall performance, my academic evaluation was an A-, which was slightly higher than expected. The rest of my scores were similar to what I had in my first year.

2-D Ayanokouji Kiyotaka

Second Year Results

Academic Ability: A- (81)

Physical Ability: B- (61)

Adaptability: D+ (40)

Societal Contribution: B (68)

Overall Ability: B- (62)

Students who had gotten As in their academic ability evaluations last year, like Horikita and Mii-chan, hadn't really changed, still keeping those As. It was likely that students who'd gotten a total score of four hundred points or higher on the test earned As or better on their evaluations. The OAA system had shown that there was noticeable improvement in every student's results across the board, and as I had mentioned the other day, Sudou was one of the eminent examples of this. The improvement in his evaluations, even when compared to the rest of our grade, was truly remarkable.

2-D Sudou Ken

Second Year Results

Academic Ability: C (54)

Physical Ability: A+ (96)

Adaptability: C- (42)

Societal Contribution: C+ (60)

Overall Ability: B- (63)

Considering the fact that the overall ability result for his first year was a C with a total of forty-seven points, his growth was astounding. His evaluations, boosted further by his prominent physical ability, had taken a sharp turn for the better all around. Even though this was just the evaluation given in OAA, his overall ability was ranked higher than Keisei and Akito.

If he could improve in academic ability and societal contribution in the future, then he might be able to join the ranks of people like Yousuke and Kushida. You could say that was the appeal of a student with truly outstanding ability. However, even though we were told that our evaluations would be reset, regarding our adaptability and societal contribution scores, it seems that things have...

Well, to be precise, it seemed safe for us to assume that the school had used some of last year's data as a metric as part of their evaluation process. After all, it wasn't as though a student's friendships and their communication skills suddenly changed

across the board just because they moved up a grade level. That being said, if Sudou continued to apply himself diligently for the next month, or the next six, his societal contribution scores should improve to be fair enough, at the very least.

In addition to Sudou, many other students had grown in terms of overall ability across the board, compared to last year. They were mostly students who were lacking in adaptability or societal contribution, or both, but it was safe to say that they had grown by leaps and bounds.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," said Horikita, as she came down to the lobby, arriving slightly before the time we had arranged to meet.

"I wasn't really waiting long," I replied.

We didn't need to talk about anything in the lobby and we started making our way towards school. It was easier to talk outside because things tended to progress more smoothly, regardless of the content of our discussion.

"I have to say thank you, once again. Thanks to your quick-wittedness, I didn't draw too much attention from the rest of our class. I also got the impression that the story had gotten around to the other classes as well, in similar fashion," I told her.

Chances were that the other classes would become more wary, but honestly, there had been hardly any impact. Sakayanagi from Class A has already known about me for a long time now, and Ryuuen has experienced a personal beatdown by my hands, so he knows that math isn't the only thing that I'm good at. As for Ichinose, I got the feeling that she thought that I wasn't ordinary, based on what she said.

"It was no big deal, really. I was just doing what I thought would benefit our class in the future. If I told everything that you were just selfishly holding back of your own accord, that wouldn't have gone over so well with everyone, now, would it? By the way, what would you have done, if I hadn't been there, anyway?" asked Horikita.

"Dunno. Who can say?" I replied.

I dodged the question, but ultimately, I would have tried to frame the story in an analogous way that Horikita had. I'd give an excuse at first to evade the topic on the day in question, saying that it was one of Horikita's strategies. Then, at a later date, I'd mention the topic again, mentioning something similar. Horikita seemed to have figured things out though, without me having to bother with explaining it to her verbally.

"Well, let's just say that you owe me one then," said Horikita.

"And I will quietly accept that I now owe you a favor, thanks," I replied.

Horikita then shot a glance over at my left hand.

"Is your hand okay?" she asked.

"It's getting there. It's still going to take some time to fully heal, but since it's not my dominant hand, it's not that big a deal," I told her.

"Well, in that case, that's good, but... Have you had any contact with Housen-kun since then?" she asked.

"Nah, not really. I did pass by Housen and Nanase once, but we didn't actually talk."

Both Housen and Nanase had looked over at me, but neither one of them had tried to say a word.

"Even though they didn't actually apologize or anything, I wonder if perhaps they're aware that they did something wrong, after all," said Horikita.

"Not sure. I didn't really feel like they were."

"Neither of them?"

"Yeah."

Entirely unfazed by the sheer audacity of pulling a stunt like that—those first-years certainly had guts.

"I wonder if what they said about getting twenty million points if they have you expelled is true," said Horikita.

"We don't have conclusive proof at the moment. But they most likely wouldn't have done something like that without that

kind of reward," I reasoned.

It was unthinkable to do something so pointless, risking both severe injury and expulsion, otherwise. The only possibility in that case would be that they were students sent from the White Room.

"Whether or not it's true will become clear in time," I added.

"But that's... That's not a pleasant development at all. Even though it's an entirely absurd idea, if it's some form of special exam, all four classes will likely know about it, right?" asked Horikita.

"Nanase said as much too. She told us that to make us pay attention to all the classes in her grade."

That meant there were at least three people, from the three remaining classes, who knew about me.

"Amasawa-san, from Class A... We owe her a debt of gratitude for partnering with Sudou-kun, but there's no doubt she was an accomplice to Housen-kun, right?" said Horikita.

I responded with a subtle nod. Amasawa Ichika, a student from Class 1-A, was almost certainly one of the people who knew about the twenty-million-point special exam. We didn't know who the remaining first-year students from Class B and Class C were, though.

"So as of right now, only three people have taken action to try and get you expelled?" asked Horikita.

"As far as I can tell, yeah, seems that way."

"If so, that's a little strange, don't you think? ...Housen-kun doesn't seem well-liked by the students in his grade level, to put it mildly. Do you think that the other students would really just sit back, twiddling their thumbs, and watch him outmaneuver them to snatch up the twenty million points?" asked Horikita.

That was something that had been bothering me too. But it was difficult to narrow down the reasons why. Was it because they thought Housen and Nanase couldn't get me expelled...? Or perhaps they never planned to participate in this special exam all along? Maybe they never believed the exam was legitimate in the first place.

Horikita, who was walking alongside me, probably wouldn't have an answer for any of those questions. So I thought I'd try changing directions a bit.

"Why do you think there's no indication that the first-year students are sharing information?" I asked.

Since that was something we were going to talk about anyway, I decided to go ahead and ask Horikita for her opinion.

"Yes... I suppose that if their entire grade were notified that getting you expelled was a form of special exam, then it would only be a matter of time before not only the first-year students, but also the second- and third-year students, heard about it. If our class had learned about such an absurd special exam, I'm sure we would have protested strongly. That's most likely why they are keeping us from knowing about it... Right?" reasoned Horikita.

That was most definitely correct. But there was something deeper, beyond that correct answer, that was more concerning.

"I wonder if the school administrators really approved such an extremely absurd special exam..." said Horikita.

"That's a good question. I tried to indirectly confirm whether or not they had with our homeroom teacher, Chabashira-sensei, but there was no sign that she knew about it," I replied.

In truth, I hadn't checked with her at all, but I was almost certain that she wasn't informed of it.

"If we go from there, there are two possibilities we can consider. The first is that what Nanase and Housen said was actually completely nonsense. In that case, there was no special exam that involved getting me expelled at all. But, as I said before, it'd hard to imagine that they would do something so risky without any reward, so we can eliminate that possibility," I reasoned.

"Yes," replied Horikita.

"The other is that it's possible that this isn't really a special exam at all. To put it in more precise terms, it's possible that someone enticed the first-year students into this by offering to pay them twenty million points if they have me expelled."

"I see. If someone personally put a bounty on you, then this story starts to make more sense," said Horikita.

What these people were doing was questionable, but I was sure it wasn't a violation of school rules. And I was sure that, as Horikita began to work out the situation, she would come to understand something.

Horikita continued to process the situation, gradually nearing the truth.

"So, are you saying that someone in our grade or someone in a higher grade posted a generous sum of points for that purpose?" said Horikita.

Since Horikita had no point of reference to work from that would lead her to deduce the possibility of Tsukishiro being the perpetrator, the ideas that she could come up with were inevitably limited.

"Though we can't deny the possibility that this was some sort of game set up by some of the first-year students themselves, it's hard to believe they could have arranged something like this when they've only just started school here. They have no trust or capital to work with. I'd say that the odds of that are slim," I replied.

"So, we're looking at someone who had both the ability to pay out twenty million points and is trusted by the first-year students."

As Horikita worked through this scenario, a certain person likely came to her mind.

"...The student council president," she concluded.

The words that came out of her mouth fit surprisingly well into place.

"Student Council President Nagumo couldn't possibly have something to do with this. Could he?" said Horikita.

"I'm not so sure about that. While I'm sure he doesn't like me at all, I'm skeptical that he'd be willing to come up with twenty million points to get me kicked out of school. And using first-year students when he doesn't know what kind of people they are or what kind of abilities they have? That's odd too."

If he really wanted to use someone to get me expelled, he would have been much better off using one of the third-year students, who were under his thumb.

"It's possible that he's connected somehow, though," I added.

I didn't have enough information to state with certainty that he wasn't involved in some way. And since he had the title of student council president, the first-year students wouldn't doubt him at all.

"It's possible you've made him jealous without even knowing it, actually. Student Council President Nagumo was fixated on my big brother. But my brother was always going on about you, Ayanokouji-kun. It wouldn't be surprising if he had some mixed feelings about that, like I do," said Horikita.

If Nagumo was involved, that was likely the only connection.

"Well, even though it's taken a while for us to get to this point, let me get to the main thing I wanted to discuss with you. I'll be going to the student council office after class today. I'm going to meet with Student Council President Nagumo and ask him about joining," said Horikita.

"I see."

After many twists and turns, we were finally making progress on the matter of Nagumo, which had been Horikita's brother Manabu's one lasting regret.

"But if President Nagumo doesn't give me his approval, you can't hold me responsible, okay?" said Horikita.

"I already told you before. The president's stance is that he won't turn down anyone who comes to him," I answered.

"...Yes, I suppose you did."

Horikita had been highly emotional at the time Manabu graduated, but she did seem to remember what we had talked about. Although Nagumo had said himself that he wouldn't turn away anyone who came to him, I was sure that wasn't all. She was Horikita Manabu's younger sister, who followed him everywhere. It was unthinkable that he'd ignore a person so precious.

"The reason you want me to join the student council... You said that it was to monitor Student Council President Nagumo, but it's not like you just want me to stand around and keep watch on him, right?" said Horikita.

She was asking for instructions on what she should do after joining the student council.

"I'm sure you've noticed this already, at least to some degree, but your brother and Nagumo have completely different ways of thinking. Your brother, precisely because he valued tradition, did not find Nagumo's reforms agreeable. Before he left, he said something to me. He said that the class is a unit, and everyone has a shared destiny. And that he doesn't want that framework to change," I replied.

"It's certainly true that the current student council president is trying to do the exact opposite of that," said Horikita.

"But I'm not passing judgment on which one of them is right. What I can say for sure right now is that I'm interested in seeing the reforms Nagumo is trying to pass."

That's right. Manabu's way of thinking wasn't wrong, but Nagumo's way of thinking was by no means wrong either.

"So that's why you didn't give me any specific instructions?" said Horikita.

"Yep."

"Then why do you still want me to serve on the student council? If you wanted to watch what he's going to do, there's no need for me to join the council and monitor him in the first place, is there?"

"If Nagumo does steer things in the wrong direction, there's going to be a need for someone to stop him then, won't there?" I replied.

And the person who should do that wasn't me, but Horikita Suzune, the younger sister of Horikita Manabu. Of course, it was a rather one-sided imposition, which was exactly why I made it my condition for our competition before.

"There are still some things I don't like, but I'll chalk this up as a net gain," said Horikita.

I was sure it had something to do with the topic of the bounty that Horikita herself had mentioned earlier. Joining the student council would improve her chances of being able to obtain information about that.

"I suppose I'm in no position to impose conditions on you when I had lost our wager, but would you please sit with me?" asked Horikita.

"Sit with you?" I repeated.

"Yes. I want you to come with me, so I can prove to you that I met with Student Council President Nagumo directly," said Horikita.

Meaning, she wanted to prove she wasn't lying in the unlikely event that she was denied entry into the student council.

"If Student Council President Nagumo is somehow involved with the matter of your bounty, then we might get some kind of reaction out of him," added Horikita.

Indeed. We certainly might be able to get some clues regarding the twenty million points.

"All right. So, after school?" I replied.

Having made plans with Horikita, our day had begun.

3.1

CLASS HAD ENDED for the day, and Horikita and I set off for the student council office together.

"Do you have an appointment?" I asked.

Even if you just dropped by for a surprise visit, there wasn't any proof that Nagumo would be in the office.

"Of course. I went through Chabashira-sensei and asked her to help us arrange a meeting with Student Council President Nagumo, so there's no problem. That's one more reason why I put this off until today. But it's probably a good thing that I delayed this long. Thanks to that, I feel like my motivation to join the student council has increased a bit," said Horikita.

"Because of the bounty we talked about?" I asked.

"That's right. The student council is an entity which is supposed to remain absolutely neutral. If they were to do something unfair, which placed a burden on our class alone, then... Well, if that's true, then that's an issue that needs to be fought, and fought hard."

I stealthily cast a sideways glance at Horikita's face, sensing something akin to determination.

"It's great that you're all eager to go, but don't get too carried away. There's no proof that Nagumo is involved in anything yet. And besides, even if he is involved, he's not the kind of opponent that can be dealt with so easily," I told her.

Even if it was true, I doubted Nagumo would withdraw the bounty on my head just because we asked him to.

"Of course. I'm not going to do anything careless. I'll wait until I'm absolutely certain to make a move," said Horikita.

I felt relieved to see that though fired up, she seemed to still have a great deal of self-control. Shortly after, had arrived at the student council room, and opened the door.

"Please pardon the intrusion," said Horikita, as we stepped inside the room.

Once inside the student council office, we saw that the person sitting in the president's chair was none other than Nagumo, obviously. He crossed his legs, then greeted Horikita like he was a king or something. Nothing felt out of place about it, either. The fact that he looked so perfectly suited to the part was proof that he had a certain dignity about him.

In addition, I felt like Nagumo was even more calm and composed than before. That might be because the only person who was his equal, or perhaps even his better—Horikita Manabu—was no longer here. And by his side was the vice president, Kiriyma. Kiriyma briefly cast a glance in my direction, then quickly shifted his gaze over to Horikita.

"I hear you want to talk to me about something?" asked Nagumo.

"Yes. Thank you so much for your time," said Horikita.

Kiriyma urged Horikita and I to take a seat, and so we obediently did as he instructed.

"Nah, don't worry about it. My schedule's relatively open right now, anyway," said Nagumo.

Even with me there right in front of him, Nagumo seemed the same as always. Even if it were only the barest sliver of guilt we were talking, it wouldn't be surprising if it showed up in his attitude, but...

"Anyway, what did you want to talk to me about? You didn't come here just to have a regular ol' chat, I assume, right?" said Nagumo.

Although that was a gesture meant to welcome us, that also was his way of asking Horikita to cut to the chase.

"I'm sure that your time is valuable, so I'll get straight to the point. I would like to join the student council," said Horikita, her voice carrying all through the student council office.

Upon hearing what she said, both student council members reacted in similar ways. They seemed to neither welcome nor

reject what they'd just heard, but both simply wore looks of surprise.

"You want to join the student council?" repeated Nagumo.

His expression then changed from one of surprise to one of slight anticipation.

"Well now, you could certainly call this a curious turn of events, eh? Though I admit I don't feel like just saying 'yes' outright, mind you," said Nagumo.

"Meaning you're not going to welcome me onto the council?" asked Horikita.

"That's not what I'm saying. Basically, my stance is that I won't turn away anyone who comes to me. If someone wants to join the student council, I'll let them in as long as there's room available. I'm not interested in why someone wants to join. Whether it's because of OAA, or for future employment, or some sense of justice, that's all fine," replied Nagumo.

That was the sort of thinking typical of Nagumo, who, unlike Manabu, was open to anyone.

"But you're special, Horikita Suzune. So I'm going to let you join the student council on just one condition," said Nagumo.

"And what would that condition be?" asked Horikita.

"I want you to tell me the reason why you want to join the student council at this time," said Nagumo.

Was he disturbed by me being there with Horikita? No—in a good sense, Nagumo wasn't the type of person to worry about the little things. He genuinely wanted to know the reason why Manabu's little sister wanted to join the student council. Of course, Horikita wasn't going to say that it was because she lost a bet with me. Speaking honestly, she'd still be able to join the student council that way, but that would be all. She'd most likely never be able to win Nagumo's trust, ever.

"There is some antagonism between my brother and me, so I came to this school to settle that conflict. But even after I had enrolled here, the relationship my brother and I had didn't change," said Horikita.

Nagumo listened to Horikita's words, which she spoke slowly and in a clear tone, very intently.

"I hadn't grown at all. There was no way my brother was going to recognize me. In the end, I spent an entire year unable to even talk to him. All the way up until he was just about to graduate," said Horikita.

It seemed like Horikita chose certain truths from her past to tell Nagumo.

"So, were you able to make up?" asked Nagumo.

"Yes. It was at the last possible minute, but we were able to reconcile. That was when I first developed an interest in the student council, which my older brother had dedicated his school career to. It's been a long and winding road for me, but I want to follow the same path that my brother took," said Horikita.

She'd originally had no intention of joining the student council. So if you were to ask me if everything she'd just said was how she really felt, then I'd say no, not everything. Still, by covering her statements with many little truths, she was able to cloud Nagumo's ability to discern the authenticity of her story.

"The path that your brother took, eh? That's quite a noble story," said Nagumo.

However, it was precisely because Nagumo sensed that she had done something to blur his vision that he seemed to be somewhat wary of Horikita.

"Does that mean I can assume that you're intending to eventually become student council president?" asked Nagumo.

No matter what kind of answer Horikita gave, it probably wasn't going to impress him. This was the kind of situation where a simple lie wouldn't leave a good impression.

"Yes. As I mentioned before, I wish to follow the same path my brother took, so I also intend to become student council president," said Horikita.

Horikita had, quite daringly, chosen to set a difficult goal hurdle for herself. What she said didn't seem to be a lie, either.

Now that she had decided to join the student council, it seemed like she was really prepared to follow in Manabu's footsteps.

"I see. But Honami has already been working hard for a year now as a member of the student council, albeit from behind the scenes. You do understand that means that you're lagging behind her in being considered for the position of student council president, right?" said Nagumo.

"I don't think the gap is wide enough that I can't bridge it," said Horikita, responding more quickly and more forcefully than she did with any of her previous statements.

Kiriyama, who had remained silent up until this point, turned to Nagumo and spoke. "Even though they don't really look much alike, I suppose she really is Horikita-senpai's little sister."

"I am a little uncomfortable calling you Horikita, though. I might have already called you by your first name several times already, but just double checking, is it okay for me to call you Suzune from now on?" asked Nagumo.

"Please feel free," said Horikita.

"Y'know, it was bothering me a little that we still didn't have any second-year students on the council except for Honami."

After hearing Horikita's true intentions through his direct questioning of her, Nagumo agreed to let her join the student council. He rose from his seat and walked over to where Horikita was, extending his left hand to her as she stood up to meet him. Horikita met his outstretched hand head-on, grasping it with her own.



"Welcome to the student council. Starting today, I want you to work as a member of this council without holding anything back, Suzune," said Nagumo.

"Of course," she replied.

"To celebrate you joining the council, I'll tell you something interesting. All the past student council presidents, every single one, have graduated from Class A. That's a fact. Please keep that in mind as you aim for greater heights," said Nagumo, offering words that seemed like they were meant to light a fire underneath Horikita, who was still stuck languishing in Class D.

"Please don't worry. I have absolutely no plans to graduate from any class other than A," replied Horikita.

"Well then, prove it to me and show me that it's not just talk," said Nagumo.

With that, they also finished their handshake, which had lasted a long time.

"I'm Kiriyama. I'm the vice president."

"It's a pleasure to be collaborating with you," said Horikita.

Once Horikita finished exchanging pleasantries and shaking hands with Kiriyama as well, she was officially a member of the student council. From here on out, she would be able to see Nagumo's way of doing things with her own two eyes. A meritocratic school system, which prioritized the individual. How would Horikita react to this new system, which deviated greatly from the previous one her older brother was trying to protect?

Well, it was safe to say that we were past the point where I would have any say in the matter, anyway. Especially since I'd failed to find any clues about the bounty that had been placed on me, anyway. I decided to look for the right time to leave, but just as I was wondering how to slip out of there...

"By the way, are you going to join the student council too, Ayanokouji?" asked Nagumo.

"What are you doing, Nagumo? You're going to invite him to join the student council?" said Kiriyama, surprised, as if he thought

that Nagumo's suggestion was unusual.

"It's not all that strange, though. Ayanokouji is someone Horikita-senpai had his eye on. There's no reason for us to refuse him. Besides, it seems he's the only person who got a perfect score in a subject on the special exam the other day," said Nagumo.

This was the first time Nagumo had seemed to pay attention to me during this whole conversation today. It seemed like he already knew information that had been made public only to the students in the first- and second-year grade levels.

"I'm afraid not. I don't really have what it takes to be on the student council," I answered.

"Ha, I knew you'd say that," said Nagumo.

He immediately pulled his attention away from me, as if he had only made that offer for politeness' sake. I didn't know what he was thinking about, but then he turned his gaze towards me once again.

"Ayanokouji."

After Nagumo had called my name, the two of us just sat there staring at one another in silence for a brief moment.

"Being on the student council is even more work than I had thought. It's like a mountain of work, honestly. But things are starting to settle down. I'm planning on spending some time with my underclassmen for a while over the summer," said Nagumo.

What did that statement mean? Without me even having to press the matter, Nagumo came out and said it himself.

"I'm going to play with you all, so you'd better be looking forward to it," said Nagumo.

This wasn't something along the lines of a declaration of war, or anything like that. Rather, it was akin to a lesson, from the strong to the weak.

"I'm sure that Sakayanagi, Ichinose, and Ryuuen are going to be crying tears of joy," said Nagumo.

After saying his piece, Nagumo went back to completely ignoring me, and for real this time. Just as the discussion was finally about to end, Nagumo brought something else up.

"By the way, Kiriya, why exactly did you decide to get involved for today's rather curious turn of events?" said Nagumo.

"...Meaning?" he asked.

"The other day, when those first- and second-year students had come saying that they wanted to join the student council, you didn't ask to join me to talk to them. But this time, when I was notified that Horikita wanted to meet with me, you decided to show up. Isn't that weird?" said Nagumo.

It was almost as if he was bringing it up specifically so I would hear, as I was just about to leave. This surprise attack, which came at the last possible minute, seemed to disrupt the flow of the conversation. Of course, I had no way of knowing why Kiriya was present at this meeting, but he was clearly shaken.

"I was simply curious because she's Horikita-senpai's little sister. What's wrong with that?" said Kiriya, trying to keep his cool. But his voice was a little strained.

Perhaps Nagumo was amused by this, because he replied in a jovial manner. "No, no, nothing at all, it's no big deal. Don't worry 'bout it."

He didn't pursue the matter any further, as if Kiriya's response was enough for him.

"Anyway Suzune, I'd like to get right to work and introduce you to the other members of the student council aside from Kiriya. Stay right there," said Nagumo.

"Understood."

There was no reason for me to stick around any longer since I had refused to join the student council. I left Horikita there with Nagumo and exited the office.

3.2

LEAVING THE student council office, I headed toward the school's entrance.

Kiriyama had been struggling desperately to try and overthrow Nagumo. He supported Manabu and had been trying to put several schemes into motion, including going so far as to reach out to me directly when I was a first-year student. And just as he was about to give up, Manabu's younger sister showed up, wanting to join the student council. I imagined he might have thought about taking some kind of action.

But, judging by the looks of things today, it seemed like the battle between Nagumo and Kiriyama had already been decided. It felt like there was this gap between them that was already so vast that there was no hope of overcoming it. Well, if Kiriyama hasn't given up yet, then something was going to happen eventually.

"That's that," I muttered to myself.

I was beat. I didn't want to use my brain any more today, so I figured I'd head straight back to my dorm room and then just take it easy for the rest of the day. I pulled out my phone and checked the time.

"Hey, if you don't really have any plans or anything...do you mind if I come visit your room?"

I hadn't noticed since I'd been watching that spectacle back in the student council office, but I had received a message from Kei. It had already been more than thirty minutes since it had been sent, but since it hadn't been unsent and there were no follow-up messages, it was possible that she was still waiting for a reply. Since I didn't really have any plans for the rest of the day, I decided to go ahead and send her a response.

Even though we were dating, we hadn't officially announced it yet. There were an extremely limited number of places where we could be alone together without anyone finding out. That being said, the dorms were by no means a safe bet either. Rather, if we

were spotted even once, it could be a decisive blow. I supposed we'd just have to work out a solution, together, when that time came.

I sent a message saying, "Want to come to my room?" Less than a second later, I saw that the message had been read. Had she just happened to be using her phone already? Or had she been waiting for a response this entire time?

"Yes!" she replied, short and sweet. "Is it okay if I come right now?!"

I got messages from her one after the other. I replied, letting her know that I was on my way back to the dorms now, and that I should be there in about twenty minutes, so she could come any time after that. She just had to make her way to my room, the usual way. Even if someone else was on the same floor, Kei should be able to deal with that, at least to a certain extent.

I got back to my dorm room about ten minutes later. I left the door unlocked and used the extra time to clean up a little bit. Then, I heard three loud knocks.

Kei and I had settled on several signals to use for our secret meetings. We generally used the doorbell, but in times of slight emergencies, I had asked Kei to knock three times. With the considerable number of students who were always coming and going, there were instances where we just didn't have the time to slowly open and close the door.

That was what we had settled on. Also, if we were in an extreme hurry or in dangerous situations, we allowed each other to enter without using a signal.

"I'm coming in!" said Kei in a panic as she slipped in through the door.

She pushed the door shut forcefully and let out a deep sigh, calming herself down.

"I really freaked out when I realized that the elevator had stopped on the fourth floor!" she exclaimed.

Perhaps it was because her heart rate had gone up, but Kei had brought her hand up to her chest. Well, since it was difficult to

get past people in the hallway, it was no wonder why she was in a panic.

"It's impossible for us to hide this forever," I told her.

"I know that, but..."

I put Kei's shoes away in the shoe closet. Then, just in case, I locked the door and latched the U-shaped lock shut too. That way, even in the unlikely event that someone tried to pay me a visit, we could make sure they didn't come inside and turn them away.

Still, it wasn't all that natural to use the U-shaped lock this early. I hadn't originally intended to go that far, but that had changed thanks to the precedent set with Amasawa. It was better to do this than carelessly let someone enter my room and see me here all alone with Kei. Besides, even if they said it was something urgent, it would be fine as long as I was ready to step outside instead. I'd just tell them that my room was a mess, have them wait outside, and then come out right away. Then, after I left together with the visitor, Kei would be able to quietly exit the room.

"Phew. What a relief..." said Kei, sitting on the bed, patting her chest.

"Glad to hear it."

After all, the dorms were full of students heading back to the rooms, especially in the evening. But the risks in inviting someone over in the middle of the night were even greater. It was precisely because there were fewer people around then that it would be a huge deal if people found I'd had a girl come to my room in the middle of the night. That was why daytime on our days off or weekday evenings were better, since we could make up excuses for those. Even if our relationship were exposed, it would be seen as healthy behavior.

"Want something to drink?" I asked, calling over to Kei after she had calmed back down.

When I asked her that, though, she ran from the living room over the kitchen, in a hurry.

"I'll take care of it!"

"Huh, well this is curious. You don't normally do this," I told her.

"Well, I'm sure it's really hard for you right now, with your hand injured. Besides, even I can boil water, at least," said Kei.

From the sound of it, she was apparently offering to take care of it out of concern about my injury.

"Okay then, sure, I'll let you handle it..."

"Okay, good. I'll have black tea. What would you like, Kiyotaka?" she asked.

"Hm, let's see... The same as you would be good, I guess."

I'd decided to have the same thing as her because I thought it'd be less of a burden, but what I did must have backfired because she had a disgruntled look on her face.

"Do you not have any faith in me?" she replied.

"...All right. In that case, I'll have a coffee."

"Okay, just leave it to me. You keep the stuff on the shelf over here, right?" said Kei, opening up the kitchen cupboards.

She must have noticed me looking at her, so she instructed me to go wait in the living room. I'd just be asking for more trouble if I made her angry, so I decided to quietly watch TV and wait. As soon as I took the TV remote in my hand though, I heard Kei's voice coming from the kitchen.

"Oh yeah, that reminds me. There was something I was thinking about telling you today. You know, you have a pretty big responsibility now, Kiyotaka," said Kei.

"What's this about, all of the sudden?" I asked.

"The fact that you got a perfect score in math is going to make it even harder for me to come out and announce that we're dating," said Kei.

I was wondering what she was going to say. So that's what this is about, huh? Well, I supposed it is true that if Kei were to

reveal anything about us at this stage, there was a good chance that it would cause some controversy...

"I have no idea what's going to happen if we come out about the fact that we're dating now..." she added.

"Does this mean the current situation is going to continue as-is for a while?" I asked.

"Well, there's no other way around it... I dunno, I just feel kind of awkward about it. It's like I'm going out with you because of your status," said Kei.

"Is it bad to go out with somebody for status?"

"W-well, no, I guess I wouldn't say it's bad, but..."

"For example, it's a status thing for a guy to go out with a girl who looks cute, right? Isn't it a little unfair to say that you don't want something like that?" I asked.

Of course, preferences about looks varied from person to person. There were no absolutes. But even so, I had learned that this was the case for most people, generally speaking.

Even though I had expressed a dissenting opinion about the matter of looking for status, Kei didn't answer. I was wondering what rebuttal she was forming when she slowly lifted her head to look at me.

"Y-you think I'm cute?" she asked.

Apparently, she wasn't planning to argue back. It seemed she'd had gotten stuck on what I said about dating a girl who looked cute.

"Do you think I'd want to go out with someone who wasn't cute?" I asked.

Strangely, Kei's lips seemed to quiver. She tried to look away, like she was trying to escape from my gaze, which had just been locked with hers before. The water in the kettle had begun boiling, just starting to make a simmering sound.

It wasn't just one's physical appearance that made a person cute. Personality, figure, voice, mannerisms, lineage, and

upbringing. There were all sorts of factors that could come together to make people find someone adorable.

"I... Well, um, I think you're really good-looking too, Kiyotaka."

Even though I wasn't asking her to comment on my appearance, that was what she said. Then, she retreated into the kitchen. After the water had come to a full boil, I heard liquid being poured into cups as I casually flipped through the channels on the TV. Shortly afterward, Kei came back into the living room and placed a cup of coffee on the table, a proud look on her face. Also, she seemed to have made herself a café au lait, even though she'd said she was going to have black tea.

"Thanks," I told her.

"You're welcome," replied Kei.

We spread our textbooks from our first year out on the table. We also set out notebooks and pens to stage the scene as if we were studying. That way, even if something unexpected did happen, we'd have an excuse. I'd like to avoid that scenario if possible, though.

Everything I'd laid out from the moment that Kei had entered my room was part of a defensive strategy I had produced based on what happened with Amasawa.

Anyway, Kei and I went on to spend some time chatting about silly trifles. We started talking about things like when we'd met at school today, and then in earlier days. We talked about who we ran into during Golden Week and what kinds of TV shows we watched. Kei showed me some photos she took, and we just whittled away the time.

The assorted topics of our conversation varied in length, some long, some short. Sometimes we changed topics suddenly. The time we were spending together could be seen as time wasted, but that was by no means a bad thing. Somehow, I was starting to understand what love was, little by little. I was on a stay-at-home date with Kei, who let me see all kinds of expressions on her face, from laughter to anger.

As we burned through several topics of discussion, there naturally started to be fewer and fewer things to say. The casual chatting starting to die down, and periods of silence grew more frequent. The mood in the room had clearly started to change from what it was like earlier. We were both starting to feel something for each other. We both started to become aware of something.

Well, no, it wasn't just something. We already knew what it was. Feelings of wanting to touch one another, feelings of craving the other person, were welling up inside us. But they weren't feelings that we voiced out loud. We were communicating with just our eyes. But taking that first step was by no means easy.

No matter how well you thought you understood your partner, you had to consider the unlikely risks. Even if you thought you were both headed in the same direction, you had to consider the possibility that you weren't. Negative emotions would start to erupt within you, as you wondered, "What if they reject me?"

Even so...

I met Kei's gaze, not letting her look away. "Is this okay? But, but..."

Those feelings were colliding with one another. Eventually, Kei seemed to stop fighting it. She wasn't running away from it anymore. As I felt that sensation course through my body, slowly, slowly enough that it felt like time was coming to a halt...

We brought our bodies closer together, and then our faces, shortening the distance between us. We eventually got close enough that we could feel each other's breath on our skin. I picked up the scent of milk and coffee from Kei's breath. In just two more seconds... No, in just one more second, our lips would meet.

Ding-dong!

Our time alone together was mercilessly interrupted by the sound of the doorbell. Our lips were just barely apart, so close and yet so far. My consciousness, which had been on the verge of flying away, was suddenly and violently pulled back down to reality.

"Oh, um, the door...?" stammered Kei.

Her cheeks were bright red as she pulled away from me in a panic. But I didn't exactly have the time to sit there and gaze at her for long. Let's see.

There was a visitor, not one waiting down in the lobby, but already outside my door. The intercom also clearly showed a notification that the ringing was coming from my front door. Unlike in the lobby, there were no cameras on the individual room doors, so it was impossible to know one way or another who was visiting you.

I could have just pretended to be out, but if they had seen Kei enter my room, that would be bad. It'd probably be a better idea for me to find out exactly who had come here and for what purposes.

"Wait right there," I told Kei.

"O-okay," she replied, nodding, looking somewhat nervous.

With what happened last time with Amasawa in mind, I had already put Kei's shoes in the shoe closet. That way, at first glance, it would look like I was the only one here. However, this method wasn't always advantageous. The best option would be if I could talk briefly with this visitor in the doorway. But if they did ask to come in, the situation would rapidly take a turn for the worse, and I might start looking suspicious. Because I would have created a scenario where I had brought a girl into my room and deliberately hidden her shoes to keep her undetected.

It was the right call to leave the U-shaped door lock on then, just in the off chance something might happen. That way, even if this visitor tried to barge into my room, they wouldn't be able to see whose shoes were present. And on top of that, they wouldn't be able to get into my room so easily. Also, I could buy some time by providing the visitor with some kind of reason for why I'd locked my door. That way, I could ask that we postpone meeting with them until a later time, or we could move to a different room.

Anyway, who was this person who'd come directly to my room? Horikita? Or was it a guy? As I struggled to come up with

an idea of who it might be, I looked through the peephole on the door to confirm the identity of my visitor.

The very first thing that came into view was red hair.

"Senpai!"

And then that sweet voice.

It was almost as if she knew that I was watching her through the peephole.

"It's me!"

Judging from what she was saying on the other side of the door, she was convinced that I was in. The visitor, clad in casual wear, had a broad smile on her face. It looked as though she hadn't brought anything in particular with her, as she was empty-handed.

I slowly unlocked the door and opened it.

I hadn't dealt with Class 1-A student Amasawa Ichika since the end of April. This was a rather surprising visit, as I had assumed I wouldn't be making any further contact with her. Now that I knew that she had been complicit in Housen's schemes, since she had taken the knife from my room for Housen to use later, I had expected she would keep a certain distance from me. But Amasawa, as she stood here right in front of me once again, showed no sign of feeling guilt or shame whatsoever.

She couldn't possibly think I hadn't found out about her involvement in that situation, could she? No—Amasawa's role in Housen's plans was essentially revealed when the plan was put into action.

"How did you get into the building?" I asked.

"There was another senpai who just happened to be coming inside, so I came in with them. I thought I'd surprise you," said Amasawa.

If she had called me via the intercom in the lobby, her identity would have been revealed to me no matter what. So, she took advantage of another student to avoid that, huh?

"So?" I asked.

"I was wondering if your hand's okay. I was worried about you, so I came over," said Amasawa.

There was no way the clever Amasawa would be so naïve as to think that her involvement in Housen's scheme would have gone unnoticed. Rather, she seemed to be hinting at her involvement with the way she was acting right now.

She touched the U-shaped lock on my door with her right index finger, tapping on it with slow, deliberate movements.

"Can you unlock this?" she asked.



Amasawa, a devilish smile on her face, cast a glance over at the entryway to my room, having a look at what shoes were there. Had she guessed that someone was in here after seeing the U-shaped lock? Or perhaps...

"It's already evening, can we do this tomorrow? I think it'd be a problem if I brought a kouhai into my room for no reason," I told her.

If she had really come just to check how my hand was doing, then she should leave after hearing that. However, Amasawa didn't budge an inch from where she stood. She brought her left hand up to her face, putting a finger to her lips and gesturing that she was thinking about something.

"Hey, you seem like you're alone right now. So, I was thinking I might have you feed me something," said Amasawa.

She'd changed the subject in order to try and enter my room somehow.

"I have the right to ask you to cook for me, after all, don't I? Did you forget about what I did for you by teaming up with Sudousenpai?" said Amasawa.

If she were going to try and force her way in, I supposed it was safe to assume this was how she intended to do it. In that case, I just needed to go along with it and come up with a sensible comeback.

"Sorry. I'm all out of ingredients right now. I don't have anything in the fridge," I told her.

"Oh? Is that so? Well, please make sure that you stock up." Amasawa voiced her dissatisfaction, giving me a look that seemed to show that she was both bothered and not at the same time.

"If this has to be done today, then how about I get ready and we go buy stuff together?" I suggested.

Though that would mean the end of my date with Kei, I'd avoid running into any unnecessary trouble. Since Amasawa had already met Kei once before, I didn't want her to find out that I'd been frequently inviting her to my room.

"Hm, okay, no ingredients. That's too bad," said Amasawa, with a somewhat amused smile. "Please don't close the door, okay?" she added, before briefly disappearing from view.

Then, I heard a rustling sound. She picked up a plastic bag that she seemed to have left on the floor in the hallway and showed it to me through the crack in the open door. I had made sure that she was empty-handed when I looked through the peephole in the door before. Even if she had placed something directly by her feet, it would've still been in view, if barely so. It seemed she had deliberately placed the plastic bag full of foodstuffs somewhere outside my field of view.

She had figured out exactly what kind of escape route I was trying to use. Now, my reason for not letting her inside because I was short on food wasn't going to work. I had known Amasawa was smart, but it seemed she was cleverer than I had imagined.

Well then, now that it had come to this, should I admit that I lied and try and find a different way to turn her away? If I said I wasn't feeling up to it today, and that I'd lied because I didn't want to turn her down outright, that might work. I had come up with several countermeasures after my experience with Amasawa, but I didn't think that the very first person I'd be trying them on would be Amasawa herself.

Whether she'd buy my excuses was another matter altogether. I felt confident that I could pull one over on other students, but Amasawa knew about me and Kei.

"Did you lie to me because you don't want me to come into your room?" asked Amasawa.

In less than one second of silence, Amasawa had pushed me up against a wall with no chance of escape. In that case, it was no coincidence that she had chosen this time today to pay me a visit.

"You aren't alone in there, right, senpai?" she asked.

"What makes you think that?" I replied.

So she was convinced that Kei had come to my room after all, then, and had acted accordingly. I'm sure that Kei had been watched from somewhere.

"Because I was watching her. I was watching Karuizawa-senpai the whoooole time. Ever since she got back to the dorms," said Amasawa, confirming that she'd been watching her and proving my suspicions correct.

I was guessing she'd gone out to buy food after she secretly confirmed that Kei had come to my room. Even though she had to take on the risk of getting past the auto-locking doors of the building twice, that was the strategy she'd decided to use.

"Considering the fact that you've hidden your girlfriend's shoes to make it look like she's not here, does that mean you two were doing something naughty?" said Amasawa.

"I only hid her shoes as a precaution, because we haven't told anyone about our relationship yet. That's all," I answered.

"Oh, so you finally admit it, hm? Well, it's not like I don't understand why you'd want to hide it, but I already know all about you two, so you don't have to lie to me. Okay?" said Amasawa.

She had somewhat of a pouting look on her face, as if to express her dissatisfaction at me hiding it from her.

"You know, I've been keeping your secret for the time being, out of the goodness of my heart, but...I wonder, maybe I should spill the beans?" she added.

It seemed that Amasawa had done her research, even to the point of finding out that my relationship with Kei wasn't out in the open yet. If she hadn't, she wouldn't be using it as leverage in our negotiations right now. Meaning that this whole conversation was basically a formality. If I refused her, there was a real chance she might tell everyone. If she revealed that Kei and I were dating, it might hurt Kei in the future.

It was preferable for us to disclose that information ourselves, voluntarily. In that case, I supposed I should give in. Being on the defensive left me at a disadvantage. And so, I admitted defeat.

"Wait a minute. I'll unlock the door," I told her.

"Okey dokey!" replied Amasawa.

I closed the door, and gave Kei, who had been watching me anxiously from inside the room, a look to say that it was all right. If Amasawa was going to go this far to shamelessly barge into my room, then we had no choice but to meet her head-on. I then took off the U-shaped lock, opened the door, and let Amasawa inside.

As soon as Amasawa's eyes met with Kei's—Kei having only just shown her face—she gave a mischievous grin. Kei, on the other hand, was looking back at Amasawa with a sour look, like she had just swallowed a bug.

"My oh my, this won't do. A young man and young woman, together, all alone, with the door locked?" Amasawa teased, sounding almost excited, as she took off her shoes.

"It's not like we can't be alone. There are lots of people in relationships who do this sort of thing, everywhere," argued Kei.

"Well, sure, I suppose that's true. It's just that when I look at you two, I get the feeling there's something dirty going on," said Amasawa.

I would have liked her to have shown us some evidence for saying so, but I supposed that considering the fact that we were just about to kiss earlier, I couldn't really get upset about Amasawa's point. As soon as Amasawa entered the living room area, she cast a watchful gaze over towards the bed.

"Your clothes aren't all rumpled. And the bed doesn't seem too messy, either. I guess that means you weren't doing anything, after all," said Amasawa.

"O-of course we weren't! Anyway, why the heck did you barge in here all of a sudden, anyway?!" huffed Kei.

Amasawa's appearance had caused Kei, who had been meek and sweet until now, to get really angry. I was guessing her anger was accompanied by a hint of anxiety too. She must have heard that Amasawa might expose our relationship if we offended her.

"And here I thought for sure that you were engaged in some illicit affair... I mean, I thought you were having sex," said Amasawa.

Amasawa had already been skirting the line of inappropriateness. Now, she went deliberately over the line, bringing up the topic of sex. And on top of that, she didn't direct that last comment to me, but rather, to Kei.

Kei choked up, at a loss for words. It was less that she was blushing, and more that she went completely beet red. She turned to me with a strained look on her face, which seemed to be saying, "What is she talking about?!"

Amasawa seemed to be probing us all through this encounter. And every time she did so, she would look over to check how Kei was taking it. Having realized she wouldn't get anything out of me, she was instead using Kei to gather information. Unable to let Kei bear this burden any longer, I spoke up.

"That's forbidden by the school rules," I told Amasawa.

My intention was to try and put Kei at ease after Amasawa had upset her by responding to Amasawa's probing as calmly as possible. However, Amasawa didn't seem to flinch in the slightest after hearing what I said.

"School rules? That's just a simple formality, isn't it? Just lines on paper? There are tons of kids all over the school who are obviously in relationships, making out with their SOs and stuff. If you go to the convenience store, you can even find contraceptives. To tell you the truth, I actually tried buying some. And you know what? The clerk just pretended not to see it. I guess in a situation where it's like, this is banned, that's banned, and you have young people all running wild... Well, if students ended up getting pregnant, that'd be a big problem, wouldn't it?" said Amasawa.

She proceeded to reach inside the plastic bag with her left hand, took out some contraceptives, and placed them on the table. It seemed like she'd done so to prove that she actually did go out and buy some. Well, it was certainly true that if products like these weren't available, the end result of an illicit sexual relationship would be pregnancy. I supposed that meant it was a sort of unspoken rule in this school that while having sex was ostensibly forbidden, if you were going to go ahead and do it, you needed to make you sure didn't not get caught, and also to use protection.

Kei was at a complete loss for words now. Her eyes darted back and forth between Amasawa, me, and the contraceptives on the table.

"Here. Take these as a gift from me... Well, actually, I suppose they're my way of apologizing," said Amasawa.

"I don't remember you doing anything you need to apologize for," I answered.

"Oh, come on. The injury on your hand. I was involved in that, remember? I cooperated with Housen-kun," said Amasawa, without a hint of guilt or shame in her voice.

Rather than having me make her come out and say it, she freely admitted it herself, huh?

"I-Is that true?" said Kei, who couldn't help but be taken aback by what she just heard.

I really hoped that Kei would refrain from making any unnecessary remarks right now. With just one statement of shock, she'd be handing information over to Amasawa. Amasawa would be able to judge how much I told Kei, and whether she was someone worth talking to.

"Ayanokouji-senpai. I think that maybe you've got the wrong idea about me," said Amasawa.

"The wrong idea?" I repeated.

"I'm not your enemy, Ayanokouji-senpai."

"I'm guessing you've probably noticed how I feel already, but I can't believe that."

"Really? Just because I put an idea into Housen-kun's head?" said Amasawa.

If Amasawa hadn't contacted me, things would have gone quite differently. It would've been difficult for anyone to lay the blame for Housen's self-inflicted injury at my feet, and the whole incident would've ended with his self-destruction. Well, I was sure Housen would've come up with something else on his own, but regardless, there was no doubt whatsoever that Amasawa's

involvement situation was what turned his idea into a viable strategy.

"Let me have a guess at what you're thinking right now, senpai. I modified Housen-kun's plans to have you expelled, thereby increasing the chances that you would get kicked out of school. A person like that saying that they're not your enemy? I'm sure you're thinking, 'Yeah, right, don't make me laugh.' Am I right? You know, I think you've really underestimated me, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Amasawa.

"I don't remember ever underestimating you. I think I've given you enough credit," I replied.

"Really? You sure? I don't think so."

Kei was still stunned, but she regained some of her composure after hearing what Amasawa and I were talking about.

"H-hey, wait, hold on a second. Someone was trying to have Kiyotaka expelled...? Huh? What do you mean?" asked Kei, flustered.

She'd been informed about the injury to my hand, but not in detail. After seeing Kei's flustered reaction, Amasawa smiled broadly, deeply interested.

"Oh? Ayanokouji-senpai, you didn't tell your girlfriend. Does that mean you haven't told her about the twenty million, either?"

"Wh-what is she talking about? Twenty million what?" said Kei.

It was safe to assume that Amasawa had deliberately started this conversation in order to probe my relationship with Kei.

"You can ask your boyfriend over here about the details later. Right, senpai?" said Amasawa, turning to me at the end.

Now that she'd said something like that, I was going to have to explain things to Kei afterward.

"Housen-kun and I were going to use that knife to get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled. I'm sure you realized that fact when we went shopping together, right, senpai?" said Amasawa.

Having told me all that, she now started to work on making me change my mind about her.

"That was the first time I had seen kitchen utensils here at this school. But I didn't hesitate at all when choosing the knife. And after checking with the clerk a few days later, you found out that someone else tried to buy the same knife. Which was why you were able to make a quick judgment call and prevent Housen-kun from injuring himself... Isn't that right?" said Amasawa.

The answer I had arrived at was the one that Amasawa had left traces to lead me to. But they were traces that she had left behind on purpose, choosing not to conceal them. She had assumed that I would arrive at the correct answer, and that I would prevent Housen from pulling off his scheme before he could do it. It was certainly true that if Amasawa had played her part perfectly in that situation and covered her tracks, things might have turned out differently.

"You're too kind," I told her.

"I just thought it would be sad. You being expelled, without even knowing the reason why, all because of a bounty on your head," said Amasawa.

I wondered if a normal high school student would have been able to think that far ahead. I had my doubts about that.

Amasawa Ichika. Considering her thought process, if someone told me she was the White Room student, I'd find that quite believable. But if that were the case, then telling me this much was basically the same thing as telling me her identity. What was the advantage in letting me know her identity right here and now? Or was she perhaps a genius like Sakayanagi, refining her skills in a place unrelated to the White Room? In any case, Amasawa had gone up in my mental ranking of people to watch out for.

"Ah, I'm pretty thirsty. I think I want a coffee or something," said Amasawa, demanding a drink in a coaxing, wheedling way, as if she were wanting something.

Kei had a look of blatant disgust on her face when she heard that, not even bothering to hide her displeasure at Amasawa's attitude.

"Hey, go fix a cup of coffee for Amasawa," I told Kei.

"Huh? Me?!" stammered Kei.

"If you don't want to, I can do it. Then you can talk with Amasawa."

"...I'll do it."

Given a choice between fixing some coffee and talking with Amasawa, Kei seemed to have weighed her options and chosen the better of the two. When Kei stood up and started making her way into the kitchen, Amasawa added a special request to her order, speaking at Kei's back.

"Sugar and milk, please!"

"Ngh! Okay, okay!" Kei, furious, puffed her cheeks out. Amasawa had just one more thing to add as well.

"Oh, and please don't put garbage in it because you don't like me, okay?"

"I wouldn't do something like that!" shouted Kei.

Amasawa chuckled in amusement, having deliberately made a statement meant to offend. She was, without a doubt, a devilish little imp... Well, actually, we could omit the little part. She was a full-fledged devil.

Kei had temporarily left our field of vision for a short while, leaving Amasawa and I alone in the living room. It was just the two of us. Amasawa glanced down at the textbooks and notebooks placed on the table.

"Wow, this all seems pretty contrived, doesn't it? These study guides and stuff placed here, I mean. Talk about forced."

"I guess since you were kind of biased already, you can see it that way."

Since Amasawa already had her doubts about everything Kei and I were doing right from the very beginning, it was pointless for us to try and cover anything up.

"Hmm, what's this? Let's see here. What was the convention adopted by UNESCO in 1972?" said Amasawa, reading one of the problems from a textbook.

She grabbed a mechanical pencil with her right hand and wrote the words "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" neatly in a blank space in the notebook.

"Ding, ding, ding! That's the correct answer," said Amasawa, giving herself a round of applause for getting it right.

Kei, curious about what was going on, peeked into the living room to see.

"Hey, wait a second! Don't go writing stuff in my notebook!" she shouted, warning Amasawa not to do something like that without permission.

"Oh, come on, it's fine, isn't it? I mean, just a little bit?" said Amasawa.

"No, it's not fine!" shouted Kei, pulling back in anger.

"Wow, senpai, your girlfriend...seems a little hot-tempered," said Amasawa, casually whispering into my ear.

It would be bad if Kei saw us in this position...but somehow, we managed to avoid being seen.

Kei returned from the kitchen with a cup of coffee in hand, not even making an attempt to hide her displeasure. She had made sure to include sugar and milk, just as requested.

"Here. You. Are," huffed Kei.

"Thank you oh so much, Karuizawa-sempaaaai!" replied Amasawa with a broad grin.

But she then stood up without even drinking any of the coffee.

"Well then, now that I've given you my apology gift, I think I'll be heading back now. Feel free to help yourself to that food," said Amasawa.

Having apparently finished what she came here for, she turned her back to us, preparing to leave.

"Huh? Wait, what? You're not even going to drink it?! You had me make it for you, though!" shouted Kei.

"Well, I don't particularly mind hanging out here and relaxing for a while, but is that what you want?" asked Amasawa.

"...W-well, I mean...I'd like for you to leave," said Kei.

"Yep, that's what I thought. Anyway, I'll be going now!"

So she'd deliberately had Kei make her coffee, just for fun. I guessed this was what it meant to know no fear.

Amasawa, standing up straight, left as quick as the wind. As soon as she had left, the room instantly became quiet again. However, the sweet atmosphere of just a little while ago was gone, leaving things feeling awfully strained and gloomy.

"Kiyotaka, what was with that girl?!" shouted Kei.

"That's something I'd like to know too."

"...Ugh! She really ticks me off!"

Kei was clearly quite touchy about it, but there was no point in talking about Amasawa forever. She must have wanted to change the topic herself as quickly as possible, because she came back with something else.

"Hey, explain it to me. What's this twenty-million-point reward about? Does it have anything to do with your injury, Kiyotaka?" she asked.

I wasn't keeping quiet because I wanted to keep this thing a secret or anything like that. Instead, it was because I didn't want to cause Kei any unnecessary heartache by telling her about it. But given the way things were now, there was no way I could say that. And so, I decided to tell Kei what was going on.

Chapter 4: Approaching Summer, Premonition of a Fierce Battle

MID-JUNE was almost here. There hadn't been any new special exams since the one held at the end of April, and we had basically gone back to our normal lives here at school. I saw no signs of the White Room agent that was supposed to be after me making a move either. The only inconvenient thing that happened to me was Amasawa's visit, but there was no imminent danger of expulsion.

However, it did seem like the incident had left a deep impression on Kei and me, considering that even now we were still holding off on trying to kiss again. Even in situations when the mood was getting fairly good, it was like there was this invisible wall separating us. While I wanted to remove that wall and to make progress, there was probably no need to rush things. With time, Kei should be able to break past that wall on her own and naturally move on to the next step. Which might be more effective, in the sense of helping her to grow both emotionally and mentally.

Summer was approaching steadily. At the same time, I was experiencing a daily routine that was almost too fulfilling for a high school student. The temperature outside was slowly beginning to rise, just like in years past. On particularly sunny days, the temperature started reaching as high as thirty degrees. We truly were in the transition period between spring and summer.

Having spent an extended period of time living the carefree student life now, there were some topics that I heard people talk about quite often. One of these seemed trivial: which season was your favorite? However, this proved to be a surprisingly deep and interesting topic of conversation. Even people who grew up in the same place and were raised in the same way had different answers to that question.

I had experienced all four seasons here at this school, and I was looking forward to the hot season coming once again. Now that I thought about it, I recognized that summer was my favorite

season. Maybe that was why the blue skies looked so beautiful and dazzling during this time of year.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-senpai."

As I was walking along, looking up at the bright blue sky, I was greeted by a voice coming from in front of me. It was a student from Class 1-D, Nanase Tsubasa. She seemed to be going to class by herself, as there were no friends around her.

"Oh, morning," I replied.

Considering the fact that she had been walking ahead of me, she'd probably just so happened to turn around and see me. Either that or she had some business with me and had been waiting for this.

"Is there something up in the sky?" she asked.

The reason I didn't notice Nanase was because I was concentrating on looking up at the blue sky. She must have been observing me for a while if she had noticed me doing that.

"Nothing. I was just looking at the sky," I replied.

"At the sky?" she repeated.

Nanase, now standing side-by-side with me, turned her gaze up toward the sky, like me. It was a clear blue today, without a single cloud in sight.

"It's really nice out, isn't it?" said Nanase.

"Yeah. And by the way, it's been a while."

Even though we'd passed each other while out and about, we hadn't actually had a conversation like this in a long time.

"Yes. We haven't talked for about a month and a half or so now," said Nanase.

Nanase had colluded with Housen in his plan to get me expelled from school. It would be no surprise if, like Amasawa, she'd felt it difficult to approach me under normal circumstances.

"I feel like I did something really terrible to you, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Nanase, while still looking up at the sky.

Apparently, she had more on her mind than I had imagined she would.

"Do you resent me?" she asked.

"I don't really have a reason to. It was part of a special exam, right? So there's nothing to talk about. Besides, I saw you try to protect me anyway."

Although Nanase had been complicit in Housen's schemes, she eventually leapt to my defense, without regard for the danger. I remembered that she had confronted Housen, who was being quite hostile.

"Is that special exam over yet? I didn't hear anything about a deadline," I told her.

"No, it's still ongoing. The deadline isn't until the start of the second semester," said Nanase.

So from the sounds of it, the special exam would be ongoing for a while. However, if that were the case, I found the fact that Nanase and Housen had been silent for the past month and a half was somewhat curious.

"Aren't you concerned about the fact that I haven't tried to make contact with you?" asked Nanase.

"It'd be lying if I said that didn't concern me. It makes me worry that there might be some scheming going on behind the scenes or something."

"Considering what happened the last time, I was convinced that even if we did devise a new plan, it wouldn't work so easily. Besides, it's extremely difficult for us to try and force you into a corner in the course of your daily life now that you know our objective, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Nanase.

"So you're waiting for another special exam that'll involve multiple grade levels, huh? What about the other students in your grade, though?"

"I'm not entirely sure, but I think they do already know that Housen-kun made a move."

"So, now that Housen has failed, you've all decided that you can't make any careless moves? I guess that's one benefit of my injury."

"I don't know if that's worth your left hand, though," said Nanase.

Of all the first-year students, Housen Kazuomi was one who really attracted attention, for better or for worse. The fact that he was the first to act might have been a stroke of good luck, in a way. The question was, who knew about this hidden special exam? It was easy for me to just ask Nanase about that, but...

I tried looking at her a few times, but she kept averting her gaze, so I gave up on that and faced forward again. Even if I tried asking Nanase that question, it wasn't like she was going to answer. The students in the other three classes were still staying hidden so I wouldn't know out their identities. I was sure Nanase wasn't going to sell them out, to maintain fairness. The only thing Nanase had done was make me aware of the existence of this special exam in general, to offset any disadvantage to Class 1-D.

"I sincerely appreciate your understanding," said Nanase, speaking as though she understood what I was thinking once I had remained silent for a while.

Since we were both headed to class anyway, I decided to talk about something completely unrelated.

"Seems like you've gotten completely used to things here at this school," I told her.

From the way she was acting, it looked like she had lost the innocence she had when she first arrived, now blending in with the rest of the students.

"Yes. I think the students in my class, myself included, are starting to get better at tolerating the special circumstances of this school. I'm not sure how much the upperclassmen know about this, but we first-years had our second special exam at the end of May," said Nanase.

Just as we second-years had our own battles to fight, so too did the first-years have their own.

"I haven't had this information directly confirmed by anyone, but I hear that a student has been expelled," said Nanase.

We second-year students had also heard news about someone getting expelled. One student had been expelled from the last special exam.

"It seems like you are also aware of it, then. As I expected. The expulsion was one boy from Class 1-C," said Nanase.

We'd found out because there was one student's name missing from the list in OAA. He'd had had an A in academics, so he must have been hit with some kind of penalty.

"People are always going to talk when an expulsion occurs," I answered.

"Friends who were laughing together just the day before can just up and vanish at this school. It's ruthless. What happened made me realize once more that I need to live my life here in a way that leaves me with no regrets," said Nanase.

Although her class might consider what happened to everyone else as not their problem, they didn't know when the time would come that they'd have to deal with something similar. It was especially important for them to have some sense of alarm, like Nanase. That being said, I didn't know anything about the Class Points situation in the other grade levels. Meaning that I had no information at all about who won or who lost.

"What kind of results did your class get in the special exams?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, we didn't do so well. We came in last place the previous time and in third place this time. However, this time around, it was an exceptionally close match between us, Class A, and Class B, so the gap in Class Points is quite narrow," said Nanase.

It seemed like Nanase felt that they were capable enough to not get left in the dust by Class A and Class B, but if anything, hold their own against them. On the other hand, Class C sank to the bottom of the rankings, largely because someone from their class had been expelled, most likely.

"So, is Housen behaving himself more these days? Or...?" I began, before being cut off by Nanase.

"I'd be lying if I said he wasn't exhibiting any problematic behavior. However, he wasn't involved in this most recent expulsion scandal. That's because it seems as though he's obsessed with you, Ayanokouji-senpai."

Nanase, who had been looking up at the sky for a long time, turned directly to me for the first time since our conversation began, looking at me with a wry smile.

"Though this is definitely hindsight talking, I do think that Housen-kun has calmed down somewhat, thanks to you, Ayanokouji-senpai. I think the strong emotions he'd previously directed solely at the students in our grade are now being directed at our senpai, too. Lately, he's been saying things like, 'I wanna throw down with the second-years as soon as I can!' Which makes me glad."

Well, that's... I supposed it was certainly good news for the first-year students, anyway. The Housen and I would occasionally lock eyes when I passed his large, conspicuous form, but if I recalled correctly, the look he gave me felt something like, "Bring it on already."

"Sooner or later, there might come a time when we have to fight your grade," I answered.

We had only worked together once so far. But if Nagumo's policies were strongly endorsed by the school, the day we'd end up competing with each other wasn't that far off.

"I intend to live my life here at this school without regrets," said Nanase.

"That's nice."

Just like Nanase had said earlier, a friend who was laughing with you one day might very well be gone the next. This was the sort of school where things like that could happen. That was why we had to cherish each and every day that went by, and not take anything for granted. Because each day that passed could never come back. They would be in the past.

"Ayanokouji-senpai, please try and live your life here at this school without regrets, too," said Nanase.

She said in a way that implied my days here at this school were numbered. And there seemed to be some kind of powerful conviction in her eyes as she looked at me.

"Of course. I'll make sure I don't have any regrets," I replied.

After she heard my reply, Nanase responded with a nod, seemingly satisfied.

"Well then, if you'll please excuse me." She bowed to me and went her own way, just as we neared the school building.

4.1

CONSIDERING THAT THE first-year students had had their second special exam at the end of May, it wouldn't be too surprising if we, the second-year students, had one announced any day now. It was about time for us to be ready for something like that. Then, as if to evaluate our resolve, our usual morning homeroom began.

"It seems like everyone is present. That's good."

After Chabashira had finished taking attendance, she started fiddling with her tablet, most likely to project something up on the monitor. Shortly afterward, she must have finished what she was doing, because the screen went completely white. When that happened, the students looked up at it.

"We have been together for quite a long time now. So I'm sure you probably have some idea of what this is about," said Chabashira.

A new special exam was about to begin. Even though everyone clearly had something they wanted to say, they all waited to hear what Chabashira was going to announce. After a brief period of silence, she let out a little chuckle as she took in the gazes of nearly all of the students in the class.

"Yes, we will certainly be discussing a special exam. However, to keep you in suspense for a while longer, we'll hold onto that discussion until later. First, I'm going to talk to you about summer vacation," said Chabashira, casting her gaze down at the tablet.

An image appeared on the monitor—first, a picture of a luxury cruise ship. Our class certainly had memories of a similar ship.

"Now, I'm going to start by explaining a bit about what this summer vacation will be like," said Chabashira.

The students looked at each other for a moment, their expressions conveying the joy they felt at the sweet-sounding

words that had just come out of Chabashira's mouth. However, the combination of the words "ship" and "vacation" ultimately dredged up some very different memories that had been deeply ingrained in us. Those memories reminded us that there was no way this school would let us indulge in such sweet fantasy.

As we were reminded of that fact, the picture on the monitor changed from an exterior view of the ship to an interior view. The itinerary was also displayed, in similar fashion.

"From August 4 through August 11, you'll be able to enjoy your summer vacation freely and to the absolute fullest on this luxury cruise liner. That's a total of eight days and seven nights. You can watch plays or indulge in tasty meals. And there will be nothing even remotely like a special exam held on this cruise, either," said Chabashira.

In other words, we were being promised a true, genuine vacation for about one whole week. The students who had serious doubts felt themselves relax a bit.

However, that slight easing of doubts disappeared as soon as the on-screen image faded away. It was almost like poison had been delivered right into our eyes.

"However, in order to fully enjoy this cruise, you must successfully complete the upcoming special exam," said Chabashira.

After those few brief moments of dreamlike bliss, my classmates were swiftly yanked back to reality. The act of lifting the students' hopes, only to drop them back down right after, would normally have resulted in great disappointment. However, the students instantly changed gears in their minds, adopting an attitude that showed that they were ready and willing to accept this upcoming battle.

"It seems you really have been learning," said Chabashira, an approving smile appearing on her lips, as if to express her admiration of us.

It wasn't like she had mentioned the vacation part first simply out of sheer meanness or anything. She probably wanted to prove that even though we were still Class D, we were different

from how we were a year ago. After all the trials and tribulations we'd endured, we'd learned to brace ourselves and keep our spirits up.

The very first person to ask a question was none other than Horikita, whose seat was directly in the middle. "When will this special exam begin?"

"Well, typically when we make these announcements, the special exam would be given that very same day or the next. Unfortunately, in this instance, it's still a ways off. The next special exam is going to be held during the summer break," said Chabashira.

So, the school was going to hold the special exam during summer break, after the first semester had finished? If that was the case, what concerned me was the fact that it seemed far too early for the teachers to be explaining the rules right now. What was the purpose of this announcement, if the exam was still more than a month away?

At any rate, whether we liked it or not, there was one particular special exam that sprang to the students' minds when they considered what had been said so far. Then, just as everyone seemed to be thinking the exact same thing, Chabashira spoke once more and transformed those thoughts into reality.

"You're going to participate in an 'Uninhabited Island Survival' test, and will be competing against each other."

Survival on an uninhabited island for a special exam. The battle between the classes that took place during summer break during our first year had been deeply etched into our brains. Each class competed against one another using the limited number of Class Points that we were given during that exam. Also, there were additional rules such as trying to guess who the leader for each class was and getting points by occupying zones.

"So, we have to do that again this year..." mumbled Keisei, who must have been recalling what had happened then. He would normally have quietly listened to the entire explanation of the special exam, but had probably spoken up because our class had

quite a challenging time back then, including some fierce infighting between the guys and girls.

"I'm sure you're thinking back to the uninhabited island survival exam that you took last year. However, this year's exam is going to be different from the previous ones. This will be more rigorous, more grueling than any other special exam. Of course, the Class Points and Private Points that you can earn in this exam will be significant, though," said Chabashira.

We'd been free to fight any way we wanted to in the Uninhabited Island Survival battle last year. If you were determined to win, you needed to be frugal with your assets, but if you were fine with giving up on trying to win, then you were allowed to spend your time relatively freely. That was the kind of exam it was. There were no harsh measures such as expulsion, at least not as long as the students didn't violate any important rules.

She said that this exam was going to be more rigorous and more grueling, but what changes would be implemented from last year's exam? I didn't need to worry about getting an answer to that question, though, because I was sure Chabashira was going to tell us right away.

"Let's start by going over the schedule. You can download it to your own devices later and look it over, so there's no need for you to take any notes here," explained Chabashira.

She put up the schedule for the special exam, just as she said she would, the monitor lighting up again now that something was being projected to it.

July 19: Assemble on the sports field. Depart by bus. Board the cruise ship at the harbor. Depart.

July 20: Special exam begins. Explanation of special exam, distribution of supplies, etc.

August 3: Special exam ends. Rankings will be announced onboard the cruise ship. Rewards will be handed out accordingly.

* Private Points for the month of August will be allotted after the results of the uninhabited island special exam are applied.

August 4: Start of free time on the cruise ship.

August 11: Arrive at harbor. Return to campus. Dismissal.

The closing ceremony, which would mark the end of the first semester, was going to be held on Friday the sixteenth. We were scheduled to depart three days after that. Moreover, we could tell from the schedule that the duration of this special exam would be twice as long as the previous one, at two weeks.

"Sensei, based on this schedule, won't our summer break be shortened like, a lot?" asked Nishimura, launching his question like it were an arrow.

The summer break was generally supposed to be around forty days long, but even if you counted the free days spent lounging around on the cruise ship as part of our summer break, we still were only getting about twenty-four days. It was no wonder students felt dissatisfied.

"Unfortunately, there will be no making up for that lost time. The fact of the matter is that your summer break will most definitely be shortened this year. That's just how it is," said Chabashira.

The school had stopped Nishimura's arrow dead in its tracks. I supposed that a bit of booing was unavoidable. To many students, days spent on break were more valuable than days spent learning in school.

"However, on the bright side, you'll get to spend one week on a luxury cruise ship. Depending on how you look at it, this one week you get to spend on the cruise ship might be more valuable than the two weeks of normal time that you'll be losing. And as I stated earlier, you can enjoy your time on the ship purely as a vacation period," said Chabashira.

It seemed like Chabashira was trying to encourage us to hang in there by saying all of that. We did get to ride on a cruise ship last year, but we'd had extraordinarily little time to actually enjoy it. After the uninhabited island survival exam ended, I remembered, we'd been thrust into the zodiac exam.

To the students, who lived here on campus, the outside world was so fresh and exciting. And even though we were going to be onboard a ship, we could still say we'd be able to spend our

time there differently from how we usually would. It could be the best summer vacation ever.

Even the students who had been complaining seemed to be satisfied, more or less. If you weren't satisfied, you couldn't move forward. And besides, unlike last year, we had replenished our Private Points to a certain extent, so it wasn't like we'd be inconvenienced by a lack of funds on the cruise ship. I supposed that was another reason why this might be less stressful on the students.

"Now then, let's get down to business. This is similar to the uninhabited island survival exam that you had last year, but you could say that the most significant difference here is in terms of scale. In addition to the fact that there's going to be a two-week long test period for this exam, the island that we're using for this is larger in size than the one you were on before," explained Chabashira.

An uninhabited island in the middle of the ocean was shown on the monitor. The photographs seemed to have been taken from the air.

"And this time, it won't just be students in the same grade competing. Students from every grade level will be competing against each other."

Meaning that the competition was going to be larger in scale than the previous one in many ways.

"Therefore, the number of opponents you have to fight will also be higher than ever before," added Chabashira.

Well, that was an unexpected development. This test of survival would involve all grade levels, and on top of that, students wouldn't just be facing off against opponents from their grade. That bit was particularly unexpected.

"So, wait... Doesn't that mean that the first-year students will be put at a significant disadvantage, whereas the third-year students will have an advantage?" asked Hirata, a student who despised inequality.

If this were an exam where we were *partnered* with students from other grade levels, then everyone would be equal. But that didn't seem to be the case this time. If so, it meant the difference in physical ability and experience that came with age would create a considerable handicap.

"I understand what it is you're trying to say but let me just go ahead and say that no exam is ever going to be one-hundred-percent fair. Even if we're only talking about you second-year students, you'll be competing on the same stage despite the fact that there's nearly a year's difference between those born in April and those born in March of the following year, right?" replied Chabashira.

To put it another way, though, that meant there were also cases where students in grades only a year apart might have an actual age difference of nearly two years. That would be a significant handicap.

"If a first-year student comes to you asking you for advice, it befits you as their senpai to give them at least some kind of answer. However, the exact nature of what you say to them is entirely up to you. Likewise, you could also ask a third-year student for their opinion," said Chabashira.

So, while there didn't seem to be a problem with discussing things as much as you'd like or if necessary, it *would* basically be like helping the enemy.

"There will be a minor handicap applied based on grade level, but you're basically going to be on a level playing field. So how are we going to make up for the difference in grade level, you ask? The answer is that the lower the student's grade level, the more rewards they can receive and the fewer penalties they have to worry about," said Chabashira.

Which in turn meant that the higher your grade level, the fewer rewards you might receive, and the more severe the penalties, huh? This seemed somewhat similar in structure to the special exam that was held in April, where we had to find partners. Though the test contests were the same in that exam, the penalty the second-years faced expulsion, whereas the first-years just saw

a difference in the number of Private Points they'd gain. That was a significant difference.

"Anyway, taking all of that into account, let's move on. I'm now going to explain part of the outline, regarding the new rules for the uninhabited island survival exam," said Chabashira.

The word "part" made the students exchange looks.

"That means not all of the rules are going to be revealed to you today, at this time," she added.

Chabashira instructed us to listen quietly to her explanation and then brought up a new image on the monitor. We looked up at it, seeing the word "group" stand out prominently.

"In order for you to understand the rules of the survival battle on the uninhabited island, we must begin with the rules regarding the formation of groups," said Chabashira.

It seemed the preliminary part of this particular special exam was going to be much longer than any we'd had before. This also seemed to hint at the intensity of the battle that awaited us.

"Your next special exam, which is to say, the uninhabited island survival battle, has a rule that allows you to form large groups of up to six people and cooperate with one another. The first thing that you must remember is that these large groups can be formed with any student from your grade level, regardless of class," explained Chabashira.

"So, does that mean...the other second-year students are our allies...?" muttered Horikita quietly to herself.

She'd assumed, until then, that everyone outside our own class was an enemy. Her quiet monologuing echoed throughout the room. I was sure her muttered words had reached Chabashira's ears, but she continued speaking without answering the question.

"For the next four weeks or so, from today until the end of Friday, July 16, you second-year students will be given the right to form small groups of up to three students with any partners of your choosing in your grade level. These groups will be the basis for the large groups. However, even though I said you can team up

with partners of your choosing, there are some restrictions involved. One of those is, as I just said, that you can only choose students from your grade. You cannot form a group with first-year students or third-year students," explained Chabashira.

We could work with anyone from our grade. In other words, students from Class A could team up with Class C. Apparently, first-year students were allowed to make small groups of up to four students, while third-year students could make small groups of up to three, like we second-years could. I supposed that was one of the handicaps were being doled out for each grade level. The rule in question was then clearly displayed on the monitor.

It might be possible for all four second-year classes to work together to form the strongest groups to compete in this test. If we were free to assemble ideal groups, we'd naturally have a chance at winning this thing. On the other hand, if the other grade levels were similarly able to form the best possible groups of people, we'd need to summon all our strength in order to compete with them.

"Next, we have the gender ratio. In the case of a mixed-gender small group, girls must make up at least two-thirds of the group," said Chabashira.

So groups of two boys and one girl, or just one boy and one girl, weren't allowed, huh? The possible group combinations were shown up on the monitor.

[1 Boy] [2 Boys] [3 Boys]

[1 Girl] [2 Girls] [3 Girls]

[1 Boy & 2 Girls]

Seven possible configurations. Meaning that group configurations like [2 Boys & 1 Girl] or [1 Boy and 1 Girl] would be rejected.

"What happens if you don't form a group? ...Or in the event that you can't form a group? What then?"

"As you can see from the list of possible combinations, 'groups' of just one person can be formed. There would be fewer benefits to such an approach, but it's not disallowed. The next

special exam can be conducted regardless of the number of people in your group. If anyone does want to try going it alone, they are allowed to, regardless of gender," said Chabashira.

Although the fact of the matter was that the more people in your group, the better off you were, it sounded you could still take this special exam on alone without issues.

"I'm sure that some students might feel more comfortable being on their own, but the more people in your group, the better. In addition to the advantages you gain by simply having more people, there are also special benefits for having more members. I would strongly recommend you do not choose the option of trying to go it alone in this test, except as a last resort," said Chabashira.

I supposed if that if you could handle yourself well enough, it would be all right to be on your own. But students who couldn't form a group would essentially be forced to take the exam while at a disadvantage, which meant joining a group of three was basically the minimum requirement necessary for a normal student to be ready to compete.

"There are a considerable number of benefits to forming a group, but there is one caveat. Once a group has been established, people cannot transfer to another group for any reason whatsoever," said Chabashira.

Once you'd formed your group, it seemed you were stuck together as allies until the special exam was over.

"I understand that we're unable to change our group, but we can form groups of up to six people for the special exam, correct? So far, we've only heard about being able to form small groups of up to three people. Could we please hear more about that?" asked Hirata, addressing Chabashira.

"Yes, that is a key point. When the actual special exam begins, the small groups will be allowed to form up with each other. You could have two groups of three people come together, or three groups of two people, or even six individuals. However, there are conditions for the formation of larger groups as well. In large groups of four persons or more, the group must be at least fifty percent girls," explained Chabashira.

So the gender ratio rule would change, requiring groups to have a one-to-two ratio of girls instead of two-to-three. If these restrictions were going to be changing, I supposed sticking with a small group of just one or two people in the beginning was a viable strategy.

"From everything you've heard thus far, I'm sure that some students might think that it's fine if they form their groups right after the special exam starts, but it's really not as simple as all that. Though you are free to form groups with anyone you'd like, it will be extremely difficult for you to form your ideal large group during the exam. There will be many cases where you might *want* to form a group of up to six people, but won't be able to do so," said Chabashira.

So it seemed that being in a smaller group wasn't necessarily entirely without merit. But considering the risks of having to survive on an uninhabited island alone from start to finish, it would be safer to form a group of three people at this stage after all, I supposed. If we didn't take into account students who had been expelled, there were forty students for each class in all grade levels. With four classes in each grade level, that was 160 students per grade. Since the school had clearly stated that groups of up to a maximum of six students could be formed, the minimum number of groups that could be formed in this test, for all grades combined, would be eighty-one. Since there were no guarantees that you would be able to form a group of six people during the actual test, depending on how things played out, it was possible that the number of groups competing against each other could actually be somewhere in the triple digits.

"I understand you must feel perplexed, after being told to just go ahead and form small groups of your choosing. If you don't know what the contents of this exam will be, you can't exactly narrow down what kind of people you might need," said Chabashira, sure that everyone in class had arrived at that conclusion.

She continued speaking.

"I cannot tell you exactly what the next special exam is going to be assessing you on. But I can lightly touch on what kind of

skills that you may need. That kind of thing," she added, taking a look at the students, whose expressions had tightened. "I'm sure many students were left feeling frustrated by last year's survival exam on the uninhabited island, feeling as though they were unable to really demonstrate their potential. However, it is safe for you to assume that this year's exam is going to test *all* kinds of ability. Academic ability, physical ability, emotional strength, and communication skills. There's a strong possibility you'll be able to make use of strengths other than those I just mentioned, too," explained Chabashira.

So it wasn't enough to simply be good at academics or sports. This meant that students who were good at many things would have an advantage, from the sounds of it. A connection between an uninhabited island and academics was difficult to imagine, but I supposed there were many ways in which it could be accomplished. For example, a rule that said you didn't get any food if you couldn't answer a question correctly first. A group made up of people who could only boast of their physical prowess could be eliminated all too quickly.

"Although it *is* important for you to choose students you have a good relationship with, a group's overall strengths are likely to tie directly into their performance during this special exam. I recommend that you look for the right people for the job when forming your groups," explained Chabashira.

This meant students who were talented all-rounders would simply have better odds if they teamed up with each other. However, as Chabashira had said, choosing students you got along with was an important consideration, too. Considering that we weren't sure exactly what kind of exam this would be, chances were good that cooperation would be key.

"Although I've said that the more people you have, the more advantages you'll have, the reason this is true isn't because you'll have six brains or six bodies working together. It's because there's a rule for this exam which implements a dropout system. Let's compare what would happen in a situation if Hirata tried to get through this exam by himself versus what would happen if we

were in a group of three, with Sudou and Hondou," said Chabashira.

She then typed something on her tablet. After she did so, there were two groups displayed up on the monitor. One was a group made up of just Hirata and the other was a group of three people, which included Hirata. Each name shown on the screen was colored blue.

"Let's suppose that, during the special exam, Hirata suffered some kind of unfortunate accident that made it impossible for him to continue. Naturally, if he were going this test alone, that would mean his group would be disqualified at that point, and he would be penalized," said Chabashira.

In the box for the one-person group, Hirata's name now turned red, indicating disqualification.

"On the other hand, what would happen if Hirata were forced to retire during the exam if he were in a group of three...?" said Chabashira.

Though Hirata's name in the three-person group went red, the other two names remained blue.

"Hirata would be disqualified and sent back to the cruise ship, but the remaining two members of the group would be able to continue the test without any issues. And if the group managed to stick around until the end and win first place in the exam, then Hirata would be considered as having come in first place as well, since he was also a member of the group," she explained.

So even if an individual dropped out, it would be okay as long as the rest of the group survived. That being said, the loss of any member of the group was bound to have a negative impact.

"It doesn't matter how many people you lose along the way. The group will continue to function without issue until the very last person is gone. In other words, the more people you have in your group, the more 'lives' you have, to put it simply," she added.

I see. This confirmed how significant the groups were. No matter how capable a student might be, accidents were still bound to happen, like getting injured or falling ill. In order to minimize

that risk, the formation of a group of six was essential in order to win.

"Now that you understand the importance of the groups, let's talk about the rewards," said Chabashira.

Now the real impact of this uninhabited island survival battle would become clear to us.

Rewards

FIRST PLACE GROUP

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

SECOND PLACE GROUP

200 Class Points, 500,000 Private Points

THIRD PLACE GROUP

100 Class Points, 250,000 Private Points

GROUPS IN THE TOP 50% (Including those in First through Third Place)

50,000 Private Points

GROUPS IN THE TOP 70% (Including those in First through Third Place)

10,000 Private Points

* Class Points awarded to the groups in the top three places will be transferred from the grades of the groups in the bottom three places.

Class Points will be divided evenly by the number of classes, regardless of the number of the students (rounded).

Based on the rewards shown up on the monitor, the Class Point and Private Point rewards were fairly large. If one particular class dominated the top three spots, the class rankings would be significantly shaken up.

But there were some bizarre things to take note of.

"This is the list of rewards for this particular exam. It is important for you to note that you cannot form groups with students outside your own grade for this exam, so essentially, each

grade level will be competing against each other. However, the effects of the rewards and penalties are applied based on the composition of each group. In other words, if a group made up of only Class D students takes first place, then the rewards for first place will all belong to Class D. On the other hand, if a group composed of students from all four classes wins first place, then the rewards will be divided equally among the four classes. So, if you create a group made up of the best, most capable students from each of the four classes, you might be able to increase your odds of winning, but your Class Point standing might not really change all that much," explained Chabashira.

And because the number of people in a particular group didn't factor into the equation at all, the 300 points would simply be divided out equally among the four classes. Which means that even if you did take first place in that situation, you wouldn't really be able to close the gap in Class Points. Well actually, I supposed, given we could only form three-person groups at this stage, we wouldn't be able to form any with students from all four classes in the first place. That would make it impossible for us to have any sort of ideal discussion, most likely.

"And then... The total Class Point rewards for the top three places, a massive 600 points in total, will be collected equally from the grades that fall into the bottom three groups. Say for example that the group that comes in first place is made up of second-year students, and the group in last place is made up of first-year students. That means Class Points will be collected from each of the first-year classes. The rewards for the group that comes in second correspond with the group that comes in second-to-last, and similarly, the group that comes in third place will get their rewards from the group that comes in third-to-last," explained Chabashira.

So there was a strong possibility that different grade levels would try and rob points from each other, from the sounds of it.

"Now then, I'll go on to explain what will happen in a situation where groups from the same grade level come in first and last place, respectively, for the sake of comparison. In this instance, it would be a bit of a special case. The classes included in

the group that placed in last would have to pay a hundred Class Points to the classes that had come in first place. Second-to-last place, sixty-six points. Third-to-last, thirty-three points. If a group made up of a single class comes in first place, they will still get the 300 points, as usual. However, if another group of students from the same class were to come in last place at the same time, that means a hundred points would be deducted, so the winning class would only get 200 points," explained Chabashira.

Which meant that if a group comprised of students from all four classes were to win, each class would get seventy-five Class Points. No matter how many students your class had in first place, if you happened to have students from your class in a group that placed at the bottom, it was possible that you could lose out.

"Additionally, in the event that the Class Points the school has collected is not enough to cover the payout, the school will compensate and pay the remainder. The same rule applies when collecting points from the other grade levels, as well," she added.

Apparently, even in situations where they didn't have enough Class Points to pay up, the rewards would still be guaranteed.

"Well, supposing if a group comprised of students from all four classes does finish in last, the amount that they have to pay out will be reduced, but only slightly. Last place will have to pay out seventy-five points. Second-from-last will pay out fifty points. And third-from-last will pay out twenty-five points. I suppose you could say that everyone shares the burden equally," said Chabashira.

I supposed that was kind of a bonus, in an exam where cooperation was quite difficult.

"And of course, groups that place at the bottom of the rankings will naturally suffer some penalties. The groups that place in the bottom three positions will have Class Points snatched from them, as I had mentioned earlier. But that's not all. Students in the bottom five groups will be expelled," said Chabashira.

The students gasped. Five entire groups meant it was possible that a maximum of thirty students could be expelled.

"B-but, if only students from our class are the ones who end up getting expelled, then..."

"In the worst-case scenario, that would leave only nine of you. But there's no need to worry about that. In the unlikely event that you are penalized, you could pay six million Private Points to save yourselves. That amount is divided by the number of people in a group. So, for a group of six people, it would cost one million Private Points per person," explained Chabashira.

So, even in the unlikely event that we did get hit with the expulsion penalty, there seemed to be ways that we could save ourselves.

"There is a condition, though. You must have the requisite number of points to pay out that fee to save someone on hand, on your own phones, before you board the ship. You will not be able to borrow or lend any Private Points once the exam has begun."

Which meant we didn't have the option of helping each other later. We needed to procure those points before the exam.

"But within the group that is penalized, I'm sure that there will be some students who can pay up and some who can't. What happens if one of the students in the group doesn't have enough points to cover their share?"

"Don't worry about that. Even if five out of the six people in a group come up short and can't pay their share, the sixth person, the one who does have enough to cover their share, can still save themselves by paying out that one million Private Points," said Chabashira.

Basically, if you had enough people, it seemed like you didn't need to worry about having the others dragging you down with them.

"May I ask a question?" asked Horikita, raising her hand, sitting directly facing where Chabashira was standing. "The rules state that if you team up with other classes, each class gets an equal share of the rewards. In the end, wouldn't that rule result in students choosing to form groups only with students from their own class?"

Horikita was saying that even if you did your best to win, it would be pointless if you had to split the Class Points multiple ways.

"If you decide that there's no benefit in doing so, then yes, you can simply decide to team up with your own classmates only. That's all," replied Chabashira, telling us to figure out for ourselves what to do.

There wasn't going to be a definite right answer to that question. However, if there was one thing we could be sure of, it's that if you tried to monopolize all of the rewards and only form groups with students from within your own class, the less-capable leftover groups comprised of a mishmash of students who didn't get picked for the main groups, would be forced into a difficult situation. At the same time, you'd be creating groups that would likely run the risk of getting expelled.

On the other hand, if you increased the number of classes represented in your group, the rewards would be fewer, but you would be able to create a broader group more easily and you could control the risk of being penalized. Of course, there were other risks that might come up.

As far as forming groups for the survival test on the uninhabited island went... Here was a summary of the information that Chabashira had presented to us so far.

- Survive on an uninhabited island for up to a maximum period of two weeks
- A wide variety of skills will be needed, and a high level of overall ability will be more advantageous, but cohesion cannot be ignored
- Special rewards such as Class Points, Private Points, and a Protection Point will be given to the groups that place at the top (Class Points are divided equally based on the number of classes though)
- Groups will be formed, with a minimum of one person to a maximum of six, and the more people in your group, the more

advantages you'll have (Group rankings are determined by when the last person gets eliminated from the group)

- The groups that come in last will receive penalties, expulsion is also a possibility
- In accordance with the rules, we can freely form small groups within our grade (up to a maximum of three people)
- Forming a large group during the exam will not be easy

That was a rough breakdown of everything so far, but that explanation alone wasn't enough to give us the entire picture.

"I understand that this has all been a lot to take in so far, but there is still a lot left to explain," said Chabashira.

She drew a breath, then moved on to the next part of her explanation.

"Please take a look at this."

The monitor refreshed, now showing eight items on the screen.

Basic Card Overview

Head Start: Points available at the start of the exam are multiplied by 1.5.

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

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

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

Insurance: If the owner of this card would normally be disqualified from the exam due to poor health, they are instead

given one full day to recover. Not valid in the event of disqualification due to cheating, etc.

Special Card Overview

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

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

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

"Wh-what are those all about?"

"These cards are items that will affect the uninhabited island survival exam. Everyone will receive one card. With one exception, there is no drawback to having any of these cards. Their efficacy can be roughly understood by looking at the descriptive text on the cards," explained Chabashira.

There was a total of eight kind of cards in the lineup, ranging from cards that would give you an edge in the special exam to cards that specialized in protection. The latter cards were useful in the sense that you can keep yourself safe, but if you consider that they were basically for when you're prepared for defeat, it was likely that those cards would be evaluated differently. The tricky card out of the lineup would be "Trials and Tribulations," the only one that has a disadvantageous aspect to it. If you used the card effectively, then it carried greater potential than any other rewards, but it wouldn't be easy to break into the top thirty percent.

"Each student will get one of these eight cards, selected at random. The cards will be distributed tomorrow morning. The cards that you've obtained can be transferred or traded with

students from other classes so long as they are in your grade level until the special exam officially begins. Anyone can view who holds which cards in the OAA app. You can sell your cards to anyone who wishes to buy them from you. You can even buy up a bunch of cards and hold onto multiple. However, the same card effects cannot be stacked, so there is absolutely no point in having two of the same card," explained Chabashira.

Card Overview and Rules

Both Basic Cards and Special Cards can be traded with students from within your grade level. You cannot trade with students from within your own class. Also, once a card has changed hands, it cannot be traded again. Even if multiple copies of the same kind of card are used, card effects do not stack.

This meant that a single student could theoretically hold up to a maximum of eight kinds of cards at once and could use them all. However, because the cards had positive and negative applications, it wasn't like you could activate all their effects at once. In the end, you would just have effective options at your disposal that you could use.

"Also, regarding the special cards... There are three kinds of special cards, and they'll be handed out randomly, but only one will be handed out to each grade level. Therefore, there is the possibility that, through sheer coincidence, one class may come to hold all three cards. That's all," said Chabashira.

An explanation of the uninhabited island special exam, followed by an explanation of the rewards and penalties. And then an explanation about the distribution of items called cards. And thus, we came to the end of the long overview of the uninhabited island survival exam.

"I'm sure that some of you might not have understood everything that we just went over, but by lunchtime, the special exam manual will be automatically distributed to your tablets so you can check out the information that way," said Chabashira, having now finished explaining everything to us.

The bell rang loud and clear, signaling that it was the end of our first-period class.

"I suggest that you think long and hard about what kind of group strategy you're going to produce. You have time," she added.

After giving us that bit of advice, Chabashira left the classroom. Afterward, the students began to huddle together. Kouenji, who was sitting far to the left of me, one empty seat between us, stood up, and then went out into the hall. It looked like he was simply acting according to his selfish whims, as we had come to expect, but he was walking at a quicker pace than usual. I felt like there was something off about the way Kouenji was behaving, so I decided to follow him.

I tried to soften my footsteps and anything else that might cause me to be detected so that I wouldn't be noticed. That being said, there was only so much that I could do. There weren't an infinite number of things I could hide behind, like I could on the island.

However, ordinary people didn't usually go about their day with the consideration of being followed. Even if an amateur were to try and tail another amateur, the person being followed would probably only vaguely suspect something was up.

Shortly afterward, I heard the voices of both Chabashira and Kouenji coming from around the corner. I hid near the corner, holding my breath, and listened in on their conversation.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about, Kouenji?"

"Well, teacher, I can't help but feel that you left a crucial detail out of your explanation," replied Kouenji.

I was guessing that Chabashira was probably standing face-to-face with Kouenji now, as she waited for him to ask his question.

"A crucial detail?" she asked in return.

"Namely, if a person who is taking the exam entirely on their own happens to succumb to illness or injury, what would happen to him or her as a result?" asked Kouenji.

"Ah, I was wondering what you were going to ask. What a trivial question," replied Chabashira.

Even though I couldn't actually see her, Chabashira had a somewhat amused smile on her lips when she said that.

"If I remember correctly, you bowed out of the last exam due to illness. Unfortunately, that's not going to work this year. No special exceptions will be made. You would be penalized, meaning that you'd be asked to pay six million points if you wanted to stay. And judging from what you have on hand, that would be impossible for you," said Chabashira.

"Fu fu, yes, that's certainly true. I'm the sort of man who is quite liberal with his cash flow, after all, so it seems like I am in quite the predicament here, yes."

It seemed like Kouenji had been planning to bow out of even this special exam on the uninhabited island, as expected. But there was no escape route open for a solo-participant trying to tackle this exam.

"In that case, what are you going to do? Maintain your freedom and get expelled?" asked Chabashira.

"Hmm, I wonder? Yes, yes, I wonder. Well, I don't mind if you run along now, teacher."

Kouenji must have been satisfied with the answer he had gotten from Chabashira, because he just told her to leave. I started hearing footsteps. They immediately picked up in speed, and then I couldn't hear them anymore. I'm guessing that Kouenji was going to start moving soon too. In that case, I supposed there wasn't any reason for me to hang around here for long.

I decided to leave without making a sound. But then...

"By the way, who is the person hiding over there, spying on me?" asked Kouenji.

Kouenji had noticed me hiding from him. I could tell from the way his voice carried in the hall that he must have turned around.

"Whether or not you come out is entirely up to you," he added.

It wasn't like he just blurted that out on a whim or anything. It was almost like he had the keen senses of an animal or something...

Although I could have returned to the classroom without revealing myself, I decided to face him honestly.

"Oh ho, Ayanokouji Boy. Do you have some business with me, perchance?"

He didn't seem surprised at all. If anything, he was indifferent to my presence there, acting nonchalant about it. It wasn't so much like he had been anticipating that I would have been there. It was more like he just didn't care who was there.

"Horikita told me to keep an eye on you. She said it's because she can't tell what you're going to do," I replied.

"Hmm."

Kouenji looked at me as though he were sizing me up, and then slowly started walking towards me.

"You seem to be quite good at coming up with a front to hide what you're up to. But I see neither truth nor lies from you, Ayanokouji Boy. I won't trust the words of a person like that," said Kouenji.

"I never saw you as the type of person who would trust anyone anyway," I replied.

"Fu fu fu, well, that's certainly true, yes. I do not trust anyone other than myself. Not a single person. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I'm not even interested in anyone else."

Once Kouenji got directly beside me, he stopped completely still.

"And of course, that applies even to you, Ayanokouji Boy," he added.

Even after I had gotten that perfect score in the math section of the exam, Kouenji looked no different than usual when he left the classroom earlier. And there hadn't been any signs at all of him asking anyone about it, either. I could detect no lies whatsoever in what he was saying.

"What are you planning to do for this special exam?" I asked.

"Hm, yes... I'm sure there will be more to discuss, but may I be included in your group?" asked Kouenji.

I was wondering how he was going to respond to my question. I see. So that's how it was going to be. If he partnered with at least one person, then that means Kouenji can withdraw from the exam right at the start with ease.

"Sorry, but I have to turn you down. I don't exactly have the kind of leeway to invite in the sort of person who is essentially guaranteed to bow out right when the exam begins," I replied.

"Fu fu fu. I see. Well, I suppose that's that, then," said Kouenji.

"Is it okay for you to think that way, though? Even if you find a group somewhere that'll let you in, in the end you'll be leaving the fate of your expulsion in someone else's hands," I answered.

"Yes, that certainly is true. If I simply withdraw without doing anything, that is," said Kouenji.

He resumed walking, moving past me. As he did though, he gave me a parting shot.

"I'll think long and hard about how I'm going to get through this before the exam begins."

With that, he returned to the classroom.

4.2

SPECIAL EXAMS on uninhabited islands for two years in a row. I mean, it's not like I hadn't considered it at all or anything, but..."

"I was expecting something like this to happen, and it has."

When I got back to the classroom, I saw that discussion regarding the special exam had begun. You could say was sort of a customary thing that happened now whenever we had these sorts of tests. Nearly everyone in class, Yousuke included, had gathered near Horikita's seat in the front row and were trying to sort out the situation. Kouenji had returned to his own seat, swooning over his reflection in his prized hand mirror.

"The especially important part of this special exam is that while there are certain conditions, we can team up with anyone in our own grade level."

That was most definitely a new rule that we hadn't seen in any of the special exams until now. Besides, such a rule being implemented should have been outside of the realm of what was expected at this school, in the first place.

"But what about how the Class Points are gonna be handed out when you win, though? I mean, I more or less get the idea behind it at all, because we've basically gone through somethin' kinda like it. But I don't see the benefit in teamin' up with other classes," said Sudou.

I supposed it was quite natural that Sudou would've brought that point up right away. This special exam is a battle between grade levels, but also between different classes in the same grade level. The only way to finish this exam in an efficient and effective manner was for a group consisting of only students from your own class to take first place.

Even still, the school really had come up with some interesting rules. It was much easier to aim for the top spots if your group was made up of many students from within your same

year. You'd minimize the risks, but there weren't many rewards. "Low risk, low return," I suppose they'd say. On the other hand, if you narrowed your group's focus, that meant you'd have a high-risk, high-return opportunity.

The most ideal solution would be to form two groups with three people in the same class, and then have them combine into a group of six later. However, Chabashira had mentioned earlier that it wasn't going to be easy to bring groups together how we wanted once the exam began. If we didn't get any guarantees that we would be able to form groups freely beforehand, the damage would be great if we tried something and failed.

However, it was also a fact that this particular special exam had tremendous destructive power. Supposing if the top three spots were dominated by a single class, the total number of Class Points gained would be as high as 600. And supposing if our class had managed to pull that off, it would essentially be like our magic express ticket to move on up to Class B in one shot.

"But, if we try and do this with only the people from our own class, I'm sure there are going to be gaps in talent that we aren't going to be able to make up for. And besides, if we were to form a group with students from our own class, and... Well, what if the other classes work together? In the worst-case scenario, we might end up being the only class getting left behind."

It went without saying that managing to take first place in this exam only with people from our own class would be ideal, but that was it. It was nothing more than an ideal. If any one class chooses to fight alone, they create the risk of being ganged up on by the other three classes. And if that solitary class were to lose, well, there'd be no "high return" in that situation whatsoever.

"It would be one thing if it were simply a concern about if we couldn't win. But if we were to get eliminated early, then we'd run the risk of getting expelled. Meaning, if we aren't incredibly confident that... No, as long as we don't have a completely certainty of winning on our own, forming a group of six people, blended together with students outside our class is a prerequisite."

This special exam, where the other classes were going to be both friend and foe, was shaping up to be something truly

unprecedented. If you considered that, then I suppose you'd conclude that including students right away from the beginning with the goal of unifying your objectives, would be an important strategy. However, there was no guarantee that we would be able to easily align ourselves with the other classes. Even if you understood that there's no apparent advantage in forming groups only with students from your own class, in the end, it was normal to want to outpace the other classes if possible since there were going to be a large number of Class Points moving around. That was especially true for the lower-ranked classes. So, the starting point for us would be deciding which way to go, while operating on the premise that we'll begin with forming a group, with all that in mind.

"How are Sakayanagi-san, Ryuuen-kun, and Ichinose-san going to play this?" asked Horikita.

In order to get us to come to a decision, Horikita decided to start the conversation with our whole class with that particular question, directing it at Yousuke.

"Well, I'm sure that Class A won't be stressing at all about trying to team up with other classes since they have a significant lead over the rest of us. No matter what group wins, it won't exactly be a problem for them as long as the gap in Class Points doesn't close too much. On the other hand, the rest of the classes, us included, definitely want to close that gap somehow," replied Yousuke.

Sudou, who had been listening closely to the conversation, spoke up, offering an idea that wasn't bad.

"'Kay then. How about formin' an alliance with us three? B, C, and D? If Class A is so far ahead of the rest o' us, it wouldn't be a bad thing if we were to start by workin' together with B and C to try and close the gap, right?" said Sudou.

The idea was that we would establish a common enemy, and we'd work together to attack Class A on all sides.

"They do say 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend,' after all. Trying to isolate Class A isn't a bad idea. And there's a good

chance that Ichinose-san would go along with this proposal," replied Horikita.

"But if we suggest isolating Class A, we're going to need to be prepared to bear some serious resentment. Considering Sakayanagi-san's personality, I'm sure she'll devote any and all of her resources to hunt even us, D, the lowest class, down," said Yousuke.

Normally, you would think that someone in their position would be focused on knocking down the class that was on their tail in second place, Class B. But, just like Yousuke had said, Sakayanagi tended to persistently chase after anyone she had selected to be her prey.

"We need to close the distance between ourselves and the upper classes quietly, as much as possible," he added.

"If B, C, and D are going to fight together, it's better that we're not the ones who propose the idea," said Horikita.

The idea was to set up someone else to be the spokesperson for this plan, and let them suffer Sakayanagi's, and the rest of Class A's, ire. The difficult part wasn't talking about it, but actually going through with it. The trouble with this special exam is that not everything could be solved through discussion from just within your own class. It didn't matter how heated our debates got from this point onward. Nothing was going to move forward. If we didn't understand what Class B and Class C were thinking, and if we couldn't unify our intentions and put plans into action, then we ended up with nothing more than armchair theory.

It wasn't going to be easy for our three classes to simply come together and hold a discussion. Ichinose wouldn't be an issue, but it was hard to imagine that Ryuuken would be willing to agree to it so easily. Besides, if Sakayanagi got wind of this information, then she would naturally act.

"Seems like we're going to have to make a real difficult decision..."

Even though we had a grace period of more than a month to form groups, if we went about things slowly, the other classes would be making their own moves, trying to form their own

groups, one after another. We wouldn't sit around and not take a firm stance.

"It'd sure be a huge help if one of the other classes proposed a similar plan themselves..." said Yousuke.

The students of Class D were racking their brains.

"Just figuring out how we should make a group is proving to be quite a headache," said Horikita.

In addition to the important task of forming a group, there were still other things that needed to be done too. There was the matter of the cards, which had various effects. Tomorrow morning, each and every student was going to be given one of these unique cards, which cannot be transferred between classmates. Moreover, once an item had been transferred once, its possession becomes fixed, and couldn't be returned. Meaning the only way to get a card for sure is to simply trade with a student from another class, or by buying and selling.

"It seems highly likely that everyone will start making their moves tomorrow."

"Yeah. And gathering up effective cards for your group is also going to be a point that we'll need to think about."

Today was the day when the school gave us the go ahead to start making groups for the upcoming special exam. Naturally, the situation was going to take a major turn. That included our class, D, as well.

4.3

AFTER CLASS HAD ENDED, the phones of students were who classified as exceptional in terms of academic ability or physical ability started ringing. Horikita approached me, while keeping an eye on the situation.

"Seems like they've started making their move right away. I suppose it's only natural for them to try and pull in the most talented students to their side," said Horikita.

Regardless of whatever policy the class you're in had adopted, there wasn't any harm in kicking things off with some tentative reservations.

"Have you gotten any calls or texts?" I asked.

"None."

"I see. Well, the number of people who actually have your contact information is extremely limited," I replied.

"You knew that, and yet you deliberately went ahead and said something meant to agitate me. That goes to show that you really are inconsiderate. So, did anyone try to contact you, Ayanokouji-kun? Mister 'I got a perfect score in math'? Your phone seems surprisingly quiet, doesn't it?" snapped Horikita.

Horikita had come back at me with some harsh words of her own. I decided to look at my phone, which wasn't ringing.

"Unfortunately, my battery's dead. I haven't charged it for about two or three days now," I replied.

"If you don't use your phone so often, you won't need to charge it as often," said Horikita.

As much as I'd like to deny that and say it wasn't the case, she wasn't wrong. If you didn't use your phone that much, you'd usually forget about charging it.

"Shouldn't you go ahead and give warnings to our classmates? If they carelessly start forming groups on their own, it might spell trouble later," I cautioned.

"I don't need to explain anything to them. I've already given my instructions. I summed things up in a very easy-to-understand message and sent it to everyone. You just didn't notice since your phone is dead," said Horikita, showing me her phone's screen.

—Do not finalize any group assignments until we've had the chance to discuss it within Class D.

—If you need to finalize a group assignment as soon as possible for some reason, please contact Horikita.

It seemed like Horikita had seen something like this coming and established some minimum-level ground rules.

"It's not like these rules are binding, though. Ultimately, it's up to the individual to decide, based on their discretion," said Horikita.

It was certainly true that it was up to the individual to decide who to partner up with and to whom not. You couldn't really meddle when it came to things like personal chemistry, and besides, expulsion was at stake here. Even if all four classes worked together, there was no ideal combination that would keep absolutely everyone safe from the threat of expulsion. With that in mind, all you could really do was offer some advice.

I always carried around a portable charger with me, so I plugged in my phone and got up from my seat. I figured there might be some students eavesdropping on conversations happening in our classroom.

"Any word from Ichinose? It wouldn't be surprising if she threw out a suggestion for our grade level to all work together," I asked.

"Haven't gotten anything from anyone yet so far. And there haven't been any suggestions coming from Class A or Class B, either. If our entire grade level were going to be joining together as one, we should assume that there would be an attempt to come to a mutual understanding of some kind at this current stage," said Horikita.

If students just went ahead and started forming groups based on their own wants all willy-nilly, it would gradually become

more difficult for us to coordinate. If we weren't going to have some kind of discussion at the outset, that was essentially establishing the reality that the classes in our grade level were going to be fighting one another. If Horikita wanted there to be some cooperation between our classes, she should be making her move now.

Horikita didn't show any visible signs of displeasure at the fact I got up from my seat. Instead, she got up and followed me. It seemed like she apparently still had more she wanted to say. After we got out into the hallway and she made sure that no one else was around, she started talking to me again.

"Regarding this special exam... Would you be able to get first place all by yourself?" she asked.

"Don't be absurd. All we know right now is that there's going to be a test on an uninhabited island," I replied.

"I just figured that someone like you, who got a perfect score in math, wouldn't even need a group," said Horikita.

What kind of logic was that? It seemed like she just tried throwing that out there, just asking for the impossible.

"As long as we get first place, our class will see positive results. I don't care if the first-years and third-years get second- and third-place, they can have them. I'd rather they take those places than someone else from our grade level," said Horikita.

Easier said than done.

"Well, in that case, I suppose we could form groups in such a way to prevent as many expulsions as possible, and that would make things easier, but..." I replied, pausing briefly.

But if we steered towards making strong groups to win, we would inevitably be creating some weak groups, as well.

"But it's not like everyone is going to be able to pay up the number of Private Points to save themselves," I added.

"Yes, that's true. I'd like to collect as many Private Points as possible for the students who are still feeling anxious. But if the students who I borrow any points from end up getting penalized

and expelled, that'll be almost too terrible to imagine," said Horikita.

There was hardly anything more fruitless than trying to save others only to end up taking a fall yourself.

"If you hate the thought of that happening, then you'll just have to only request points from students who have extra," I replied.

That would certainly work. But in that case, the number of students we could reach out to was quite limited.

"There are ways to do this without letting anyone get expelled, though I doubt anyone would want to do it," I added.

"You mean the idea of having people bow out right at the start, deliberately?" asked Horikita.

Apparently, Horikita had also noticed the few holes in this exam. According to the rules, only the first five groups that are taken out are expelled. In that case, if we set up five groups specifically to be sacrificed and deliberately let them get taken out, we wouldn't have to worry about any students after them getting expelled. However, to carry that idea out, a total of thirty million Private Points would need to be prepared. And, more importantly, whatever grade levels made up those bottom three spots in the exam would be handing over Class Points to whoever placed in the top three. And even if people from the same grade level took both the top and bottom ranks, the rewards would be decreased a little bit, so it was inevitable that by taking on the role of deliberately getting out, there were going to be some losses. I supposed that the reason the top three places were tied to the bottom three could be considered the school's way of preventing anyone from cheating all that easily.

"I guess we just need to survive on our own power somehow," I told her.

"Yes, it really does seem that way. May I consult with you again later?" asked Horikita, stopping in her tracks.

"As long as it's something I can help with, sure."

"That'll be plenty. Thank you."

Horikita seemed like she must have had something to talk about with someone else because she went back inside the classroom. After I watched Horikita go back inside, I decided to head for the exit.

4.4

WHILE I WAS WALKING in the hallway, making my way to the main entrance...

"Sup!"

As I stood there looking at my phone's pitch-black blank screen before it powered on, the student who called out to me was none other than Ishizaki Daichi from Class 2-B. He had a wide grin plastered on his face. I guessed that something good must have happened to him.

"Hey dude. I tried sendin' you a text, but I didn't get an answer. So I figured I'd just come over."

"Sorry. My battery ran out."

"No worries, man. Hey, I'm just gonna borrow you for a sec. 'Kay?" said Ishizaki.

"Am I being mugged or something right now?" I asked.

"What? Come on dude, now that's a good joke. I mean, hell, is there even anyone in this school who could mug you?" he replied, responding to what he thought was a joke with one of his own. "What, do you have something you gotta do or something?"

"No, I was just about to head back to my dorm."

"Yeah, I figured. In that case, ain't no problem, right? Let's go," said Ishizaki.

Ishizaki beckoned to me with an impassive smile on his face. He started walking on ahead, going faster and faster, inviting me to follow. If I just stood there and let him walk off, I'd probably lose sight of him in a flash. However, if we carelessly conducted a conversation here in the hallway and caused a commotion, we'd only end up attracting attention. Since I had time right now anyway, I decided to follow Ishizaki.

But the minute I turned the corner, an impossibly large wall suddenly appeared right before my eyes. No, wait, that's not what it was. It was Yamada Albert, Ishizaki's classmate. He was wearing

sunglasses. Then, with an air of intimidation about him, he placed his right hand on my shoulder.

"Hey," he said in English.

"...Hey," I replied similarly.

I didn't really understand what was going on right now, so I figured I'd just respond to him with the same thing he said to me. But what was happening here? This mugging that was supposedly just a joke now seemed to be a little more real.

"Hello, Ayanokouji-kun."

Right there, besides the gigantic Albert whom I had earlier thought was a wall, stood Hiyori.

"It's kind of unusual seeing you three together," I told her.

"You might be right about that," she replied.

I had thought for sure that Ryuuen would show up too, but that didn't seem like it was going to happen.

"Anyway, probably not so great to hang 'round here. Let's move," said Ishizaki.

"Move? Where to?" I asked.

"Hmm, yeah... I actually haven't really given that any thought," said Ishizaki, rubbing underneath his nose with his left index finger, chuckling sheepishly.

"Hey, I've got a bad feeling about all this, so can you please just let me leave now?" I asked.

I had the feeling that this was in no way going to be a good turn of events, so I asked for their permission to make my exit.

"Hey, the hell man? You're free, ain'tcha? We ain't lettin' you go."

"You're...not letting me go?" I repeated.

Albert, who was standing behind me, used the strength from his massive frame to hold me, binding my arms behind my back. Then Hiyori grabbed hold of my arm as well, pulling herself close. The two of them had captured me.

"I'm sorry, Ayanokouji-kun. We can't let you escape."

"Huh...?"



Finally, my mugging theory was starting to look increasingly plausible.

...Okay, that's enough of me making that joke.

Anyway, the three of them seemed like they were planning to bring me to some other location.

"We'll draw attention here. Let's go somewhere else, Ishizaki-kun."

"Yeah. But where?" he asked.

"That is a good question... Well, how about your room, Ishizaki-kun?" she asked, making a casual suggestion.

"Huh? M-my room? N-no, that's uh, kinda... I mean! No way! We can't!" cried Ishizaki, in a panic, after she had suggested we move to his room.

"Why? Is it inconvenient or something?" asked Hiyori.

"W-well, there's, uh, lots of reasons. I mean, you just asked me totally out of nowhere and all, and, uh..."

"I don't think anyone would mind if your room were a little bit messy though. Right?" said Hiyori, turning to Albert, looking for his opinion.

Albert slowly moved his large head up and down, nodding in agreement.

...Is it okay for me to assume that he understands Japanese? I mean, I'm certain that he would have to get through classes and take exams, but I'd like to hear him speak it at least once.

"Y-yeah, that's it. And it's not just a little messy, it's like, super, crazy messy! It's like, you won't even have anywhere to step, it's that bad. Oh darn, that's just too bad!" said Ishizaki.

"There's no need to worry. If necessary, we can help clean up," said Hiyori.

"No, no, no! There's like, tissues, and stuff, definitely not the kinda stuff I want a girl to help clean up!" wailed Ishizaki.

Ishizaki couldn't help but blurt out exactly what was littered around his room.

"Tissues...and stuff? What's that supposed to mean?" asked Hiyori, cocking her head to the side in apparent confusion, wondering what Ishizaki was talking about.

"Anyway, my room's a no-go! S-so hey, let's go to Albert's room!" said Ishizaki, changing the topic while still panicking.
"Yeah! I mean, Albert's room should be great, right? Right? Right!"

Ishizaki threw that suggestion out like he was trying to run away from something.

"OK."

So Albert did understand Japanese after all. He gave Ishizaki a brief response, indicating that he accepted his proposal. Then, we started to move, with Albert carrying me in his arms.

"So, um... Am I just going to be carried there like this?" I asked.

"It's all right. Yamada-kun is quite strong," said Hiyori.

Yeah, uh, that's not exactly the problem here. If anything, I felt like we were unusually conspicuous looking like this...

"It's all right. I suppose that in a way, this is kind of like sending a message," said Hiyori, the same kind-hearted smile she usually had on her face as she led on the way.

"Yeah, all right! You go, Shiina! Great idea!" shouted Ishizaki.

What in the world were they planning to do, dragging me along like this?

With that question in mind, I was brought over to the dorms.

4.5

THIS WAS THE FIRST TIME I had visited Albert's room. Even though he was much larger than the rest of the students in terms of physique, his room's layout and structure were naturally the same. However, everyone decorated their rooms in different ways, and his was a bit unique.

A large American flag and Japanese flag hung in the center of his room—and those weren't the only flags he had up. He also had countless others, including the Chinese flag, Italian flag, the flags of some African countries, and more. The others were smaller in size, but still displayed all over his walls. I felt a sense of passion in the display, particularly when I noticed these weren't simply printed on paper, but proper cloth flags.

"Albert's kinda a flag fanatic. Surprised?" asked Ishizaki.

He must have visited Albert's room several times before, which was why he was able to explain that to me in a calm manner.

"Yeah, seems that way," I replied.

After Albert released me from his hold, he urged me to take a seat. Once I had made sure everyone was now sitting, I decided to go ahead and ask them what they wanted.

"So... What are you three after?"

The three of them exchanged glances. For some reason, they all had happy smiles on their faces, like they were enjoying this. Then, Ishizaki, the representative of their group, spoke up.

"I'm just gonna come right out and say it. Here goes, this is my proposal... Form a group with us for the next special exam!" shouted Ishizaki.

Well, that was one of the things I'd predicted that this might be about. So this did have to do with the special exam, after all.

"Form...a group? Can you explain your plan in a more detail?" I asked.

"Whaddya mean, more detail? That's everything"

"Um, no, that doesn't cover nearly everything. I can't tell who exactly I'm supposed to be partnering up with."

There were four people present in this room right now. Which meant that there was one extra person. And on top of that, Hiyori, a girl, wouldn't be able to participate due to the gender ratio restrictions. Ishizaki was certain to suggest that I team up with him and Albert, but since he hadn't come right out and said exactly what he wanted me to do, I couldn't be sure.

"Honestly, with whoever, we don't really care. 'Kay? It can be with me, or Albert, or Shiina, anybody. The point is, we're askin' you to team up with people from our class," said Ishizaki.

Wow, talk about a grand and daring proposal. In a sense, it was the kind of thing that could only be suggested precisely because it was Ishizaki proposing it.

"So, you're saying that you want me to form a group with two people from Class B?" I asked.

"Yep. Then, when the exam starts, you can form up with another three-person group from Class B, makin' a six-person team. It'll be perfect. With five folks from Class B and you, Ayanokouji, you can shoot for first place," said Ishizaki.

He talked like the idea was a thing so sublime it could move one to tears. But it was significantly important that we calmly discuss this.

"Hiyori... Did you explain the rules of the special exam to Ishizaki properly? In the simplest terms possible?" I asked.

"No," she replied immediately. "I felt like if I tried to interrupt earlier, I'd end up having to correct him on something after only five seconds. I thought it would be better to just let him carry on till he was done."

Yeah, I had to wonder about that. I didn't think it was better. Well, it certainly was true that even just five seconds into his suggestion, it was clear that there were things that he didn't understand about the exam...

"Okay, even though there are many points I'd like to bring up, I'll narrow it down to two... no, three questions for the time being. First, when the special exam begins, there's no guarantee you'll be able to form the large group you want so easily," I explained.

In fact, our homeroom instructor had already told us that it wasn't going to be easy. If teaming up was as simple as "Hey, let's make a group!" "Yeah, let's!", there would be no point in forcing us to create three-person groups at this stage. If anything, it would only put us at a disadvantage. It was precisely because it was difficult to form larger groups during the exam that we were allowed to freely choose our teammates for the smaller groups right now.

"Huh, that so?" Ishizaki seemed like he didn't understand one bit. He cocked his head to the side in confusion, looking to Hiyori for an answer.

"If you sort through everything that's been explained to us, then yes, you can see that it's true. Basically, depending on how the situation plays out, it's possible we might have to cooperate with groups we didn't expect to team up with," said Hiyori.

"Oh. What's the deal with that? I don't get it at all, man."

"During the exam, there might be certain prerequisites necessary for teaming up with certain people, or to make certain groups. That's what we're talking about."

"And the heck is that supposed to mean?" asked Ishizaki.

I supposed if he'd understood what that meant, he wouldn't be struggling so much right now.

"The details are unclear. But judging by what the school has explained to us, we can be sure it's not going to be easy," said Hiyori.

"But... Even if there are conditions, we gotta get ready. We gotta start actin' on the idea of makin' groups, right?" asked Ishizaki.

"Well, if you put it that way... Yes, that's true."

"Then we're all good, right? We just gotta go ahead and prepare for the exam like I suggested, and then we'll be golden."

The fact that he could break things down in such simple terms was honestly something I kind of respected. Hiyori was also listening to Ishizaki's suggestion with an amused look.

"I mean, ain't no reason to worry 'bout stuff I don't really understand, y'know?" said Ishizaki.

Was it safe for me to say that this was one of Ishizaki Daichi's charms?

"Well, anyway... Onto my second point," I continued.

Figuring I couldn't really get him to understand my first point, I decided to just move on to the next.

"Who else have you talked to, other than me? Or are you planning to talk to anyone else?" I asked.

"Ain't really talked to anybody else, no. And not plannin' on it, either. Right?" said Ishizaki, looking to his two companions for approval.

They both nodded, indicating their agreement.

"Meaning you've only talked to me, then. And the reason for that is?"

"Well, ain't that obvious? I mean, you're just as amazin' as Ryuu-en-san... Well, no, if I had to say, I think you're even more amazin' than Ryuu-en-san is right now. It's like, you're crazy strong in a fight, and your quick thinkin' has even gotten Ryuu-en-san's seal of approval. And on top of all that, you got a perfect score in math, dude. That's just nuts. I figure, whoever controls Ayanokouji basically controls the special exam. How could I not invite you?" said Ishizaki.

"My, that's some high praise, Ayanokouji-kun. However, I agree with everything he said," added Hiyori.

Albert nodded in agreement as well, without hesitation. I'd said I was only going to bring up three points earlier, but now I wanted to raise a fourth. How much Japanese did Albert actually

understand and speak? I'd never seen him in class or anything, but I was sure that he was being taught in Japanese, so...

Anyway, Ishizaki hadn't denied that they were basically trying to win me over...

"All right then, the third thing... What's in this for me? What do I stand to gain? If I assume that everyone else in my group is going to be from Class B, and we manage to get first place in this test, then your class is going to be the only one who really gets anything," I told them.

The Class Points we'd get might be the same, but the number of Private Points earned would be very different.

"Aw, come on dude, ain't no thing. 'Course we ain't gonna screw you over so you're the only one who loses out. Right? When we move on up to Class A, we'll pay up twenty million points to welcome you into our class, Ayanokouji. Whaddya think?" said Ishizaki, answering my question in a confident, cocksure manner. "So basically, either you get your own class up to A, or our class gets up to A. Don't matter either way. There's a 50 percent chance that you're going to graduate from Class A."

The proud smile on his face seemed to be saying, "Well, how 'bout that?" His reasoning would certainly hold true if all four classes had an equal chance of getting up to Class A. In that case, my chances of getting there via either his class or mine would be 50 percent. But that wasn't how this worked. Each class had a different level of skill, making it difficult precisely calculate their chances of making it to Class A. Of course, there was no denying the fact that even having one more class I could potentially move into would be an advantage for me.

"Hiyori and Albert agree too, right?" said Ishizaki.

"Yes. We would welcome you with open arms," said Hiyori.

"Yes," said Albert, but in English.

Both of them went along with Ishizaki's proposal happily, even though they understood it was nuts. What was going on here? Anyway, if I were going to go ahead and accept this absurd proposal for the time being, there was an especially important

point I had to bring up before I could commit. I decided to go ahead and ask another question.

"Was Ryuuen the one who decided to invite me? Or was this Ishizaki's sole decision?" I asked.

Ishizaki had been answering all my questions in a casual manner so far, but he now wore a tense look for the first time in our conversation.

"It was my decision. Ryuuen-san doesn't know a thing about it."

So apparently Ishizaki had thought up this plan and made this decision all by himself. I had thought that might be the case, but wow, that really was reckless of him. If that were the case, though, I now understood why Ibuki, who usually hung around Ishizaki, wasn't here right now. Did that mean that Albert and Hiyori were Ishizaki's advocates, then?

"Have you thought about what might happen if Ryuuen were to find out about this?" I asked.

"Nope, I haven't! I mean, don't even need to! Besides...I'm ready for it."

Even though Ishizaki was shaking in his boots, he desperately tried to put up a brave front.

"The rules say there ain't any problem with formin' groups with people in other classes, anyway. So I figure, even if I decide that we need you and invite you, what's so weird about that? Y'know?"

That was true. If their class's policy stated they were to only form groups with people from their own class, I supposed Ryuuen would have no reason to be dissatisfied with Ishizaki's decision here.

"The key to this special exam is to make sure the Class Points stay with our grade and aren't taken by anyone else. Naturally, this means we need to aim for the top in the overall rankings. And Ayanokouji-kun is indispensable to achieving that goal," said Hiyori.

"Right!"

"Well, even though there are still many aspects of this plan of yours that concern me... I'd like to say that I do understand where you're coming from," I told him.

"So will you join up with us?" asked Ishizaki.

"Although I don't think you did anything wrong by inviting me, I can't say yes to you right now."

"B-but why?"

"That's because Ayanokouji-kun has his own class to consider. Right?" said Hiyori.

Even though she'd endorsed Ishizaki's plan, she still understood my reasons for refusal without needing to ask.

"Besides, I think the terms we've offered Ayanokouji-kun aren't enough, anyway," she added.

"Not enough...? What, you sayin' that twenty million points ain't enough?" said Ishizaki.

"That's not what I'm saying. If we're talking strictly in terms of the number of points, then yes, it is an exceptional amount. However, in reality, all we're really offering to him is the right to move into our class, correct?" said Hiyori.

"B-but, we can't just like, hand over twenty million and let him transfer to Sakayanagi's class or somethin'"

If Ishizaki and company said I was free to use the points they gave me however I wanted, then of course I'd go to the class that was sure to be Class A in the end. Obviously. Ishizaki's class wouldn't be able to bulk up their own power by bringing me into the fold, then.

"On top of that, you told Ayanokouji-kun it was fine for him to team up with anyone from Class B, Ishizaki-kun. But that's a problem, too. Surviving on an uninhabited island isn't a task for a single person. If you really intend to strive for first place, your chances of successfully doing so are much higher with capable teammates."

Hiyori, who had simply sat back and listened to Ishizaki lay out his proposal so far, now viciously pointed out each flaw in his

plan in turn. And every time she pointed something out, Ishizaki started to panic, sweating bullets.

"W-well, then anyone would be fine" he exclaimed.

"If it were up to me to choose a group right now... Yes, all right. I would choose Ryuuuen-kun, Kaneda-kun, and then Ayanokouji-kun to make up a group of three. I would be fine with replacing Kaneda-kun with Yamada-kun, but Ryuuuen-kun is indispensable," said Hiyori.

In terms of leadership capability, he was one of the best in our grade, and he had the guts to break the rules with his schemes. Last year, he'd been the only person left standing in his class on the uninhabited island. He even had the physical and mental fortitude to endure on said island without anyone noticing he was still around until the very last minute. The other two people she mentioned were Kaneda, the best student in their class, and Albert, a student who boasted immense physical strength. It was true that having two of those three would be essential to maximize the odds of winning.

"Don't talk crazy! Do you seriously think Ryuuuen-san will agree to my plan?!" wailed Ishizaki.

"I think he'll immediately reject it," said Hiyori.

"Obviously!" shouted Ishizaki.

"I'm sure that Kaneda-kun would, as well. He wouldn't ignore Ryuuuen-kun's orders and endorse such a careless strategy," said Hiyori.

"So, in that case, what the heck should we do?" wailed Ishizaki.

"There's nothing we can do, really. At the very least, not at this current moment," said Hiyori.

"Urgh... Well, that's a bummer..."

Ishizaki crossed his arms, racking his brain in a desperate attempt to produce an idea, but it didn't seem like anything was coming to him.

"At any rate, we were able to convey Ishizaki-kun's and our wishes, and I think we should be satisfied with that," said Hiyori.

It seemed like that had been Hiyori's objective all along, apparently. She'd known all along that they couldn't easily persuade me to join their group, and so she'd determined the most important thing was to just show me that they desired to work with me. Perhaps Albert had understood that this was a foolhardy attempt on Ishizaki's part, too, because he patted his shoulder gently.

"...All right, I get it. In that case, guess there ain't anythin' I can really do..."

Although reluctant, Ishizaki seemed convinced, at least superficially, after hearing the response to his plan.

"I don't know if I can meet your expectations. Let me think about it for now," I told them.

I had judged that was the best answer I could give them in this situation. That being said, I wasn't planning to group up with anyone at the moment because of Tsukishiro and the agent from the White Room that was hiding among the first-year students. The first semester was already almost over. There was no way they would let things continue as they were, allowing me to keep living my life here at this school.

The upcoming special exam was most likely going to the final battlefield on which Tsukishiro and I met. In other words, it was very likely he was going to launch an attack on me without any concern for appearances. If I did form a group, I'd be getting dragging those people into it. And if that happened, I'd need to make sure I was the only one who got expelled. That would be the least I could do, as a courtesy if nothing else.

Thus, I reaffirmed the situation in my mind.

4.6

WHEN I WAS DONE getting ready to head to school the next morning, I turned on my phone. I got a notification telling me that I'd received a private e-mail from the school. In the message, it was stated that I had been given the card designated "Trials and Tribulations."

"Never thought that I'd end up getting one of the special cards..." I muttered to myself.

Just when I'd thought the infamy I gained after getting that perfect score in math had finally died down...this happened. The Trials and Tribulations card was powerful, although it was a double-edged sword. Having possession of this card was likely to attract attention. It was safer and preferable to trade it with another student who needed it, but since the Trials and Tribulations card had powerful effects that could go one way or the other, it couldn't easily be handed off to someone from one of the other classes. If the group I ended up trading it to got first place, then the blame would fall squarely on me.

It was possible that Tsukishiro had slipped the card into my possession deliberately to get me expelled, but considering the fact that cards were transferrable, that was far too weak a strategy to drive me out. It was more natural to simply interpret this as luck of the draw. The two remaining special cards seemed to be in the hands of Amikura Mako from Class C and Yano Koharu from Class A, respectively. The former had drawn the "One More" card and the latter had drawn the "Nullify" card. I supposed it was fortunate that the cards had been well separated.

I left my dorm room a little earlier than I usually did, pondering about what I was going to do from here on out. When I set foot on the elevator, I bumped into Shinohara.

"Morning."

"Good morning," she replied.

Even though we were classmates, we weren't particularly close, so we didn't really do more than exchange that simple greeting as we headed down toward the lobby. The ride wasn't long. When we reached the first floor, I pressed the open button and let Shinohara off first.

In the lobby, we saw Ike, who normally showed up at school relatively late. He looked over in my direction, seeming somewhat restless. I thought he might have been waiting for Sudou, but that didn't seem to be the case, since he only exchanged a brief greeting with her as they crossed paths and then proceeded to watch her leave. Right after she went out, however, he followed her.

I slowed my own pace down somewhat, trying to keep my distance from the two of them, as to not get in their way.

"Hey, Shinohara," said Ike.

"What?" she replied.

When I got outside, I could hear Ike and Shinohara's conversation carried on the wind, although only just barely.

"Well, uh, y'know. About this whole uninhabited island exam group thingy, and all... Just wondering, have you talked with anybody yet, about teamin' up with them?" asked Ike.

"No, I haven't really talked to anyone yet about it... Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no real reason, really. Just figured I'd ask is all."

"Oh, okay... So, what about you? You're probably going to team up with Sudou-kun and Hondou-kun, right?" said Shinohara.

"That so bad? I mean, it'd be fun, bein' with those dudes," said Ike.

"Yeah, I guess."

Shinohara laughed as though she was making fun of him, but Ike didn't seem to mind at all. It seemed he had something he wanted to say, but he was desperately struggling to get the words out.

"But, I mean, dudes can make it on their own more or less, anyway, I think... 'Sides, Ken's really strong, so I think in terms of like, manpower, he'd be enough for the whole group, I think," said Ike.

"Hmm."

Although Shinohara's reaction was a little cold, it didn't seem like she disliked talking to Ike at all.

"Okay, not sure how to put this, but, uh. I should be able to lend you a hand where you need it...? So, if you're feelin' like you're in trouble, you can... Well, y'know, you can form a group with me, okay?" said Ike.

"What's that all about? Look at you, being all high and mighty," said Shinohara.

"Hey, you saw me in action last year, didn't you? I'm pretty good at the kind of stuff this exam needs," said Ike.

He was trying to sell Shinohara on the fact that she could capitalize on his skills. Basically though, the reason Ike was doing this seemed to be that he just wanted to partner up with Shinohara.

"Well, I suppose I can think about it... You want to be in the same group as me?" asked Shinohara.

"Oh, uh, hey, don't get any weird ideas or anything, okay? Look, you're like, one of the people who's in danger of getting expelled, right? That's why I'm saying that I, kindhearted guy that I am, will sacrifice myself to protect you." Ike, unable to honestly say what he wanted to, blurted out something that Shinohara was sure to take issue with.

"Excuse me? Sacrifice? What? I don't remember asking you for that!" she shouted.

And of course, considering the way that Ike had phrased his offer, there was no way she was going to graciously ask that Ike join a group with her. The mood started to sour between them, badly. Just as the vibe was getting grim, though, Kushida approached and called out to Ike from behind.

"G-good morning, Ike-kun. Do you have a minute?"

The moment Kushida called out to him, Ike averted his gaze from Shinohara and excitedly waved at her.

"Oooh, what's up?! Yeah, I'm super free right now!" he exclaimed.

He left Shinohara and approached Kushida. Shinohara simply watched him go with a somewhat cold look in her eyes.

"To tell you the truth, Kobashi-san from Class C said she wanted to invite you to join her group, Ike-kun. I think she's already at school right now. Do you think you could maybe talk about it with her?" asked Kushida.

"Seriously?! Yeah, totally, let's go! Let's get going right now!" Ike shouted. He looked incredibly excited to learn he was being requested by a girl.

"Oh, but it seems like you were just talking with Shinohara-san just now... Is it okay for Ike-kun to go talk to her?" asked Kushida, wanting to make sure that Shinohara was okay with it.

"Yeah, it's completely fine. He's been annoying me with all his babbling. Take him with you," said Shinohara.

"Hey, you're the one who's been annoyin' me!" shouted Ike.

They were each giving as good as they got. Ike was mainly at fault here, but he started walking away with Kushida with a skip in his step. Shinohara stopped where she stood, watching them go with a somewhat lonely look on her face. It wasn't long before I caught up to her and then proceeded to pass by her.

How should I put this? Ike was just the sort of guy who got carried away rather easily. It seemed he'd grown so ecstatic at being requested by a girl that he was missing something big.

"Satsuki."

Suddenly, I heard someone call Shinohara's first name from behind. I couldn't help but turn back and look at who it was.

"Oh, Komiya-kun... Hello," said Shinohara.

It turned to be none other than Komiya Kyougo from Class 2-B.

"What's wrong? Are you crying?" he asked.

"Huh? Wh-why do you ask?" she replied.

"Well, 'cause your eyes are all red."

"Oh, guess you noticed, huh? Yeah, just got some dust or something in my eye a little while ago... Ouch," said Shinohara, putting up an act, trying to cover up how she was really feeling. "Oh hey, that reminds me, Sudou-kun said that you're going to be a regular player on the basketball team. Is that right?"

"Yeah, finally."

"Well, you always practice until late, so I'd be lying if I said you didn't deserve it," said Shinohara.

She'd stood still as she talked with Komiya, so the distance between us widened as I continued to walk on. As I kept going, their voices grew fainter, until I eventually couldn't hear them anymore.

4.7

I SEE YOU'VE CERTAINLY been having your fair share of misfortunes too, having drawn the Trials and Tribulations card. I'm sure you must be the center of attention again," said Horikita, coming up to me right after she got to the classroom.

"Yeah, I was just going through the same mental agony this morning."

"It would've been nice if we could freely trade cards within our own class. A student who isn't confident they can win absolutely would not want the Trials and Tribulations card, and yet, we can't just hand it over to a student who is confident that they can win," said Horikita.

The card that Horikita had drawn was the "Half Off" card. It was a useful card to have when you suffered a

penalty, but if you were the sort of student who was shooting for a higher place in the rankings, it didn't do you much good.

"In any case, since things have turned out this way, you're simply going to have to work hard, get into the top thirty percent, and if possible, win the prize," said Horikita.

"You're talking to me like I'm a stranger or something. Aren't you worried about me at all, as a classmate?" I asked.

"If you really, really want to rely on me so badly, I'll help you, of course."

Horikita was getting increasingly brash. Or rather, she was getting to be more difficult to deal with than before. The incendiary glare she was giving me seemed to be saying, "What the heck do you want?" It made me not want to rely on her.

"Sorry, but if I find someone who wants it, then I might hand it over to them," I replied.

"What you choose to do is entirely up to you. I hope it'll be easy for you to find someone who'll take it, for sure. The Trials and

Tribulations card affects not just the person who owns it, but the entire group. It's a dangerous risk to take on," said Horikita.

It was nice that she'd explained all that so politely, but to me, it simply sounded like sarcasm.

"In case you were wondering, I was being sarcastic," she added.

"I figured."

"It's payback for the many times that you've tormented me," said Horikita.

"I don't really remember ever tormenting you, though."

While the Trials and Tribulations card was a burden to bear, it could also be a bit of a protective charm. I could expect the number of students who might offer to partner with me to decrease without me needing to do anything. In the worst-case scenario, I'd have to consider the possibility of starting the uninhabited island test alone, while holding onto this card.

"Since this is you we're talking about, is it safe to assume that you can handle things?" asked Horikita.

I could rely on Horikita, as she was the class's leader. But there were bound to be students that needed her support. It would be best if I placed as little burden on her as possible.

"Yeah, well, I'll try my best," I replied.

I told Horikita that I'd get through this on my own and then took my seat. As I was doing some digging to see who had drawn which cards, I heard a loud shout from Ike, who had arrived late to the classroom.

"Huh? Wait, you... you found someone to partner up with?!" wailed Ike.

"Yes, I did. Is something wrong with that?" asked Shinohara.

Apparently, Shinohara had decided to form a group with someone during the time she and Ike were apart. Most likely, her partner was...

"Come on, though! I just invited you to join a group before! I mean, 'sides, we're not allowed to form a group without Horikita's

permission, anyway! It's forbidden!" shouted Ike.

"It's not forbidden, though. Anyway, the group isn't even officially confirmed yet...though, I'm planning on confirming it today," said Shinohara.

"Wha—"

"And besides, what are you even talking about? What invitation? Who was the one who started drooling over another girl and ignored me?" said Shinohara.

"Hey, come on, it wasn't even like that! I even turned her down for you, you know!" shouted Ike.

"Oh, you turned her down now, huh? Ugh, you're getting on my last nerve. You really are the worst person in the world," said Shinohara.

"Who...did you form a group with, anyway?" asked Ike.

"What's that got to do with you?" she snapped.

"Nothing, really, just kinda curious," said Ike.

"Komiya-kun, from Class B. He invited me to join his group right after the special exam started yesterday," said Shinohara.

So, it was Komiya after all. Huh. I'm guessing that either Shinohara or Komiya must have mentioned the idea while they were walking to school together.

"Huh? Komiya? Wait, Komiya? That flashy showoff from the basketball team? No way!"

Deep down, Ike had probably thought that Shinohara would've joined his group. I'm sure he had been holding onto that arrogant assumption.

"He isn't a show-off. He promised to meet me at the café after class so we could discuss it," said Shinohara.

After Shinohara had said her piece, she turned her back to Ike. I'm sure that from our classmates' perspective, who had been overhearing their argument in the classroom, what they just heard sounded like an extension of their usual fights. After class had ended, Shinohara had left the classroom right away, just as she said she was going to do. Ike quietly watched Shinohara leave, but

then he left the classroom himself right after, looking as though he had just made up his mind about something.

Yousuke, having seen what happened, approached me after Ike had left the room.

"Hey, do you have a minute?" he asked.

Maybe it was because he wanted to avoid anyone else hearing our conversation, but he said he wanted to talk to me in the hallway, so I went along.

"Hey, so, about what's going on with Ike-kun. I don't think it's a good idea to just leave him be right now," said Yousuke.

"Yeah. Even though he's pretty self-centered, it's clear that his knowledge and experiences will be useful during the uninhabited island exam. It's possible that this incident with Shinohara might make him unable to utilize his full potential," I answered.

"Yes, I agree. And considering how he looked, I'm worried about what will happen if he sees Shinohara-san and Komiya-kun's discussion."

I could certainly understand why Yousuke was feeling uneasy about this. It wasn't a good idea for us to get into a dispute with Class B at this current point in time

"I think I'd like to go check things out. I was wondering if you wouldn't mind coming along, if you were okay with it? Ike-kun doesn't really like me very much, after all," said Yousuke.

If you asked me, I wasn't so sure that Ike liked me either, really. That being said, it was understandable why Yousuke felt discouraged.

"Shinohara-san said that she was going to meet up with Komiya-kun at the café, right?" said Yousuke.

"Yeah. Maybe we should head over there and check things out for the time being," I replied.

"Sure," said Yousuke.

I decided to head over to the café in Keyaki Mall together with Yousuke. While we were on the way there, we talked a little

bit about group formation plans.

"I had wanted to recommend a plan where our entire grade level would work together to fight against the first-years and third-years, but from the looks of things, it doesn't seem like the rest of the classes are intending to collaborate. If we got just the second-year students to come together and agree to not let anyone from our grade level get expelled, then it wouldn't be impossible for us to make it through without losing anyone. Though I suppose there'd be no shortage of suffering if we went along with that plan," mused Yousuke.

I had discussed as much with Horikita yesterday. We could make sure that no one got expelled by deliberately losing the exam. However, the grade that actually executed that kind of plan would inevitably suffer particularly severe damage. I suppose it would be unrealistic to expect our entire grade level to share that pain. That was exactly why, even after an entire day had passed, not a single student had come forward to make a such an idealistic pie-in-the-sky suggestion like that.

"I guess all we can do is form groups that won't leave us with any regrets," I told him.

"Guess so..." he replied.

"I'm sure you've probably been invited by quite a few people, haven't you, Yousuke?" I asked.

It was impossible that Yousuke wouldn't have been approached by people. He was popular both with men and women, and his abilities were impressive all around.

"Personally, I think that I'd like to pick two people from Class D. Rather than aiming for the top spot, I'd like to try and tackle this exam in a way to avoid penalties," said Yousuke.

If he were going to protect anyone, it would be the students of Class D, not people from the other classes. That was a natural way of thinking about things. If you're a talented and popular student, you'll have no trouble at all finding someone to partner up with. However, students who were less capable weren't going to be able to ask for help from anyone, not even people in their own class.

"Is Sakura-san okay?" asked Yousuke.

Yousuke was worried about Airi, who was part of my circle of friends, and who was the most lacking in terms of ability.

"As of now, she's looking at making a group with Akito and Haruka," I replied.

"Miyake-kun is athletic and has great motor coordination, so that group doesn't seem badly balanced at all," said Yousuke.

Although Keisei had been left out of their group, he had been approached several times by students from other classes who had wanted to scout him because of his brains. I supposed that if Keisei chose a student who could compensate for physical ability, an area that remained a concern for him, then he'd make a formidable group.

However, one problem had emerged while we were in pursuit of Ike. There was someone tailing us. Whoever it was, they had done their utmost to avoid being noticed before, but it seemed like now they were willingly allowing me to spot them, like they were prepared for it. Ike headed straight into Keyaki Mall, so now it was just me, Yousuke, and the person following behind us. This state of multiple parties tailing someone, with us tailing Ike and this mystery person tailing us, continued.

Although ignoring this person wouldn't be difficult, if things like this kept happening in the future, it was going to be troublesome. As we got near Keyaki Mall, I stopped for a moment.

"Sorry, Yousuke. Would you mind going on ahead?" I asked.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I just remembered that there's a little something I need to take care of. I think I should catch up to you in about ten minutes, give or take," I replied.

"All right. If anything happens, give me a call or text," said Yousuke.

Yousuke, without asking me for any additional details, went into Keyaki Mall, disappearing from view. Then, the student who had been following us approached, as if they thought this was their cue.

It was my classmate: Matsushita Chiaki.

"You don't seem surprised. Did you notice me following you right from the beginning?" she asked.

"I just don't show surprise in my expression is all," I replied.

Was this the first time since spring vacation that I had talked with Matsushita alone like this, just the two of us? Well, no, actually, even if you took away the "just the two of us" part, it still applied. This was the first time we had talked since back then.

"What were you talking about with Hirata-kun? About Ike-kun? About the uninhabited island exam?" she asked.

Matsushita, now standing beside me, looked up at me, as if she were trying to read me.

"And what business is that of yours, Matsushita?" I asked.

"Well, I suppose it's not so much my business as it is our business. Because you're someone particularly important in order for us to get to Class A, Ayanokouji-kun," said Matsushita.

She seemed to think very highly of me, but what was she after?

Considering how quick-witted Matsushita was, she should have known that a little bit of gentle persuasion by way of flattery wasn't going to work. But I couldn't imagine that she was approaching me right now for no reason at all.



"Don't be so alarmed. I came up to you today because I have something I needed to tell you, and as soon as possible."

"Something to tell me?" I repeated.

"The Trials and Tribulations card is an item with powerful effects, but it's difficult to handle. If you're having trouble, I think I'd like to offer you my help, Ayanokouji-kun. What do you think?" she asked.

Putting aside my own thoughts and intentions, she had shown a willingness to help me anytime because we were on the same side. When I didn't open my mouth to respond to that, she looked a little bit distressed by it.

"I guess you're not going to give me an answer unless I tell you straight out, huh?" said Matsushita.

I wasn't trying to be mean to her or anything, but I didn't want to get thrust into a conversation like this while there were so many people coming and going. It was after class, and you could start to see all kinds of students around. It wasn't like Matsushita hadn't noticed that herself. Then, without waiting for an answer from me, she started talking once again.

"You need to stay at the top of the rankings to avoid a penalty, so you're having a difficult time finding people to form a group with, right? Which is why I wanted you to rely on me if you're having trouble," said Matsushita.

After she said that, she must have forgotten something important, because she quickly spoke up and made an addendum.

"Of course, I intend to completely follow your instructions during the exam, Ayanokouji-kun."

Apparently, that was the message she had wanted to give me, going as far as deliberately tailing me to do so.

"I'm honestly happy that you're offering to help me, but you'll be penalized if we don't make the top thirty percent. Do you understand that you'll be taking that risk on too, Matsushita?" I asked.

"I understand. That's exactly why I think it's important for me to cooperate with you by helping you out, Ayanokouji-kun."

It wasn't like I thought she didn't have good intentions. But I figured that the true essence of her request must have laid elsewhere.

While suppressing my wish to hurry things up and go join up with Yousuke, I turned towards Matsushita, who was walking alongside me.

"Did you determine that your odds of survival are highest if you form a group with me?" I asked.

To put it simply, you would normally expect that the group with the Trials and Tribulations card would have a higher chance of getting expelled. Yet despite this, Matsushita had offered to help me, without concern for the dangers. I couldn't interpret that simply as something done solely out of good intentions.

"...Guess I've been found out, huh?" said Matsushita, smiling with her whole face, raising the white flag in surrender.

"I was thinking that it won't be difficult for you to stay in the top percentage of groups, Ayanokouji-kun, since, well, it's you. Even if you don't necessarily make it to the very top, it's almost a complete certainty that you'll break into the top thirty percent. It would be more dangerous for me to casually prioritize my friends and join a group haphazardly," said Matsushita.

Those were her true feelings. She weighed me against the other students she could have possibly chosen, and she ended up choosing me.

"I thought you might get snatched up, Ayanokouji-kun," she added.

So, she came to talk to me as soon as possible. That made it easier for me to understand her intentions, by coming to me with her evaluation. I was grateful for her offer, but I had no intention of coming to a firm conclusion here from the beginning. That wasn't Matsushita's fault or anything. It would've been the same regardless of whoever approached me.

"I'm not going to decide on a group now, at least not this month," I told her.

"Meaning that you're going to sit back and see what happens?" she asked.

"I want to see what the other classes are doing," I replied.

I gave her a plausible answer. But what I was concerned about was very different from what the average student was concerned about. A special exam on an uninhabited island required extensive preparation. It was impossible to imagine that Tsukishiro wasn't involved in this somehow.

It had already been a month and a half since the previous special exam, and there still hadn't been any significant movements on his end. As days went on, we were getting further away from his original scheme to have me expelled by the end of April. Because of the fact that the White Room agent had been acting at their own discretion, Tsukishiro's plans had gotten off track. Something was likely going to happen at this stage while we were forming groups. This period of time could be called the preliminary battle. There was an element of danger that not even Matsushita could read. If she got involved, she wouldn't be able to get out that easily.

"Well, it seems like I can't get a satisfactory answer now then, I suppose. I get it. In that case, please just think it over," said Matsushita.

She probably had no intention of pushing this matter too hard because she seemed to back off immediately, waving her hand to say goodbye.

"Oh, that reminds me. Here's my personal contact info," she added.

She handed me a slip of paper with her ID written on it. It seemed like she had prepared it ahead of time.

"Well, I said what I wanted to say."

Matsushita said her piece quickly and efficiently, without wasting any time. After she had made her offer, she turned on her heel and walked back towards the dormitory.

"It doesn't feel bad, getting another girl's contact information," I said to myself.

Right now, it was unclear whether I'd be able to live up to Matsushita's expectations of me in the future. Afterward, I met up with Yousuke in Keyaki Mall.

"What's the situation?" I asked.

"Well, I get the feeling that it's not going to be the worst-case scenario or anything, but, well..."

I followed Yousuke's line of sight and saw Shinohara and Komiya chatting away happily in the café, engaged in friendly conversation. And a little further away from them, I spotted Ike from behind, slouching his back like he was feeling depressed. He was watching Shinohara and Komiya quietly.

"What should we do?" asked Yousuke.

"Well, for the time being, if he doesn't show any signs of going on a rampage of charging in there, I think we can just wait and see. Just carelessly calling out to him might not lead us to a solution anyway," I replied.

Yousuke nodded in agreement.

"In the meantime, I think we should find out more about Komiya. I'm not sure what Komiya's intentions are in inviting Shinohara to join a group, but we can't make a move until we make sure what those intentions are," I replied.

"I'll think about who the best person for Ike-kun to partner up with would be, in the event that he can't partner with Shinohara-san, just in case," said Yousuke.

"Please do," I replied.

We both agreed to split up and gather information separately.

4.8

AFTER I SEPARATED from Yousuke, I gave Ishizaki, who was in Komiya's class, a call and asked him to come out. He told me that he was still at school, so I decided to walk on over to where he was. As soon as I met up with Ishizaki, he immediately ran up to me with a huge smile on his face.

"Hey dude! You're ready to pair up with us?!" he shouted.

"No, the jury is still out on that one, sorry. I actually wanted to talk to you about a different matter today," I replied.

When I told him that, Ishizaki looked a little bit disappointed, but he quickly recovered.

"What's up dude? Come on, talk to me," said Ishizaki.

I was about to launch right into what I wanted to talk to him about, but then I turned my attention to a girl that was approaching Ishizaki. It was Nishino Takeko, from Class 2-B.

"What's this? So, your business you had to take care of was meeting up with Ayanokouji-kun?" said Nishino.

"H-hey, I told you not to follow me, didn't I, Nishino? Sorry, Ayanokouji," said Ishizaki.

After Ishizaki apologized to me, he urged Nishino to go on ahead to Keyaki Mall. Nishino didn't listen to him at all, but instead approached me.

"You're close with Ishizaki, huh? It's kind of surprising to see the two of you together," said Nishino, observing me closely.

I also noticed that she didn't include any honorific after Ishizaki's name.

"Hey, you never listen to people at all! This is exactly why everybody shuns you!" shouted Ishizaki.

"Shuns her?" I repeated.

"Oh, uh, yeah, she's all alone in our class right now. She hasn't got a single friend. It's kinda a problem," said Ishizaki.

"All alone? I'm not really bothered by it though," said Nishino.

On that subject, that reminded me, Ibuki was also something of a lone wolf herself. Apparently, Nishino was quite like her.

"Anyway, just go on ahead. 'Kay?" said Ishizaki.

"Nope," said Nishino.

"N-Nope? Hey, come on... Sorry Ayanokouji, hold on just a sec. I'm gonna get her outta here," said Ishizaki.

"I'm just curious why you're sneaking around and meeting Ayanokouji-kun in secret like this, Ishizaki," said Nishino.

I hadn't ever talked with Nishino before, but she seemed to be the type of person who just said what was on her mind without hesitation. It was certainly true that a person like that tended to make a lot of enemies. However, I supposed that since Ishizaki and I were meeting together, it was understandable that she would find it curious. It might be counterproductive to just turn her away without telling her anything.

I decided to tell Nishino about what I was going to talk to Ishizaki about. First though, I wanted to give her some background context, before going on to the matter at hand.

"Ishizaki and I were in a group together during the camp thing last year. We became friends there," I told her. "I contacted Ishizaki because I want to know a few things about Komiya from Class B. And since this isn't something that we wanted people to overhear, I asked him to meet me here."

"About Komiya-kun? What do you mean?" asked Nishino.

She didn't drop the honorific in Komiya's case, apparently. With that thought in mind, I went ahead and explained what was going on.

"I heard that he promised to make a group with Shinohara, from my class. Did you know about that?" I asked.

"Nope, first I've heard 'bout it. But like, it ain't all that weird, is it?" said Ishizaki.

Partnering up with someone from another class was certainly by no means strange, no. So, it wasn't unreasonable for Ishizaki

was curious why I'd ask about it.

"So, what 'bout it?" he added.

"Even in the kindest of terms, Shinohara isn't the type of person who can perform well in the uninhabited island exam. Our class is worried about whether her forming a group with Komiya might be a problem or not. I wanted to know what kind of person he is," I answered.

"I mean, I guess he's a normal, good dude, y'know? He's pretty coordinated and stuff, and he's on the basketball team, so he's got stamina," said Ishizaki.

Ishizaki then turned to Nishino for her opinion, with a look that said "Right?" I'm guessing she must have agreed with him, because she responded with an immediate nod, as if there was no issue.

"Apparently, one of them had asked the other to be in a group, from the sounds of it. Are they going out or something?" I asked.

"Huh? U-uh, I dunno, I guess..." said Ishizaki.

"There's no way that you could find that out by asking Ishizaki, though. He doesn't know a single thing about love," said Nishino.

"Shut up! What, do you know anythin' about it?" shouted Ishizaki.

"I know more than you, at the very least. I don't think that they're dating, but I'm pretty sure that Komiya-kun likes Shinohara-san," said Nishino.

That must have sparked Ishizaki's memory, because he spoke up and told me something.

"Whoa, serious? Komiya likes Shinohara? Oh, but hey, come to think of it, I'm pretty sure he might'a said somethin' about there bein' a girl he liked in another class... Though I only have like, a vague memory of that," said Ishizaki.

If students were to form a group with each other, they would obviously want to look for certain things. There were many factors.

Talent or a bond of friendship. Or things like romantic feelings, perhaps. If, as Nishino had said, Komiya had feelings for Shinohara, then it was no wonder that he would want to form a group with her.

"But why do you care about all that, though?" asked Ishizaki.

"I saw the two of them together this morning. Since Komiya had called Shinohara by her first name, I figured they must be close. I thought there might be something going on," I replied.

"Oh... Hey, hold on. Ayanokouji, are you, maybe...? Do you like Shinohara?" asked Ishizaki.

"No."

I immediately denied it, but Ishizaki was grinning happily, like a switch had been flipped in his brain.

"Dude, come on. So, you're just pretendin' to be this quiet dude, but turns out there's a lady you like. All right, I get it," said Ishizaki.

"I said no, though. It's not true."

"Aw, don't hide it from me. You and me are buds, right?" said Ishizaki.

Well, I didn't think we were close at all until the training camp exam, though... But I supposed it was true that lately he'd been more of a friend to me than the people in my class who I hardly knew at all.

"But seriously dude, knowing you, you probably could score a much cuter girl," said Ishizaki.

If this kept going any further, there was a chance that some misguided rumors could start going around. If that happened, then Ike and Shinohara's relationship might sour even further.

"It's Ike. Ike, from my class. He's the one who has a crush on Shinohara," I told him.

"Huh? Oh what? So, it ain't you, Ayanokouji?" said Ishizaki.

"Which is why I'm here, trying to find things out," I added.

"All right, I understand what yer gettin' at now sure. But, I mean, it ain't like love is somethin' another person can just butt into though, know what I mean?" said Ishizaki.

"I agree with that. I think that getting involved in their business would be wrong," added Nishino.

"Normally, yes, I would agree with you. However, for our class, this is a situation that we can't really ignore, since Ike taking part in this exam is vital to our class," I answered.

The more strained that Ike and Shinohara's relationship became, the more chance there was that he might run off in a weird direction. This wasn't a good turn of events, because the uninhabited island special exam, a place where we could really make use of Ike's talents, was approaching. However, what I was requesting didn't offer any benefits for Class B. If anything, it would be like them helping their enemy. This wasn't something that they'd want to help us too much with. That's what I had thought, anyway.

"All right. If you need it, I'll lend ya a hand. What should I do?" asked Ishizaki.

Ishizaki offered to help me, not minding it at all.

"Wait, Ishizaki, are you being serious? You're Komiya's friend, aren't you?" said Nishino.

"So, what, am I just s'posed to abandon Ayanokouji right here, when he's in trouble?" said Ishizaki.

"Well, yes, you are supposed to abandon him. I get that you two are friendly, but we're supposed to be enemies," said Nishino.

"They do say that yesterday's enemies are tomorrow's friends, right?" replied Ishizaki.

Well, technically, he should have said "today's friends," but it was fine, so I decided to just let that slide.

"That's very kind of you to offer, but it might be tough for me if you're asking for something in return," I replied.

"Somethin' in return? Nah dude, I ain't askin' for nothing. It's normal to help a friend when they're in trouble," said Ishizaki.

Ishizaki wasn't good at lying. He seemed to be willing to give me some advice without asking for any kind of payment. I was grateful for that, but considering that he was Komiya's friend, I couldn't make an unreasonable proposal. Besides, if I carelessly tried to separate Komiya and Shinohara, it would probably be frowned upon, especially by Nishino.

"Okay then, in that case... Could you try to get Komiya to tell you how he really feels?" I asked.

"So, you just wanna know if he really likes Shinohara?" asked Ishizaki.

"Yeah, but please make sure to keep quiet about the fact that there's someone who wants to know about it," I answered.

"Yeah, 'course I'll do that. But how am I s'posed to actually ask him? Any ideas?" asked Ishizaki.

Ishizaki was struggling because he didn't have any motive to ask Komiya how he felt, but Nishino stepped in to throw him a lifeline.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you saw the two of them together having fun, didn't you? In that case, why don't you guys pretend like it was Ishizaki who actually witnessed them, and then Ishizaki can use that to ask if they're dating? Wouldn't that work? Besides, since Ishizaki is a guy who isn't very popular. It would bother him when one of his friends beat him to the punch, right?" said Nishino.

Ishizaki immediately accepted Nishino's proposal since he didn't really have many ideas of his own to work with.

"W-well, it definitely feels pretty flimsy as a reason and all, but... A-all right, I'll do it. Just wait a sec. Club stuff still hasn't started yet, and—"

Ishizaki had added that he thought the plan would probably work, and then proceeded to call Komiya.

"...Oh, hey, Komiya? Sorry for hittin' you up before your club stuff. Oh, uh, yeah, just somethin' I wanted to ask ya. Were you talkin' with Shinohara from Class D this morning? ...Dude, I knew it. Aw man, and here I thought we were like brothers in arms,

since we didn't have girlfriends and all. And here you go, leavin' me in the dust," said Ishizaki.

He asked Komiya about Shinohara, handling it better than I had expected he would.

"Oh wait, so you guys aren't really goin' out? Guess that must be true, yeah. If I find out later that you're lyin' though, we're gonna have a problem, y'know?" said Ishizaki.

He confirmed that the two of them were not dating, and then made an "okay" gesture to me with his right hand. Just then though, his expression changed slightly.

"Huh... Seriously? O-oh. All right, I getcha, huh..."

Ishizaki had been asking questions in a way that I could follow along up with so far, but the amount of information I could pick up from the conversation suddenly diminished. He began to listen intently to Komiya, who was speaking on the other end of the line.

"...That so? Huh, okay. Yeah dude, I get it. Guess that means the time has come for you to become a man. I'm pullin' for you dude, of course. Let me know how it goes, okay?" said Ishizaki.

Based on how the conversation had gone, I was able to understand what Komiya had told Ishizaki, more or less. When Ishizaki finished his call, he looked at me with a somewhat awkward expression on his face.

"So, Komiya's plannin' on telling Shinohara that he's got a thing for her. He's gonna do it on the island," said Ishizaki.

"I see," I replied.

If they formed a group, that meant they'd be together on the island for twenty-four hours a day. I'm sure there would come plenty of times when he'd have the perfect opportunity to tell Shinohara how he felt about her.

"What now? I mean, ain't no way we can stop 'em, right?" said Ishizaki.

He was right, of course. Komiya had the unassailable right to tell her how he felt. Besides, even though Ike and Shinohara both

liked each other, neither one of them had taken that first step in the first place. So if someone else were to cut in before Ike were to get there himself, well, that just meant that was the way things were meant to be. Or maybe after Komiya told her how he felt, Ike could eventually win her back...

"Anyway, thanks for the help. I think I'll talk to Horikita about all this. Oh, and if Nishino seems to be having a tough time getting a group, come talk to me. I might be able to help in some way," I replied.

"I told ya I didn't need anythin' in return though," said Ishizaki.

"Well, it's just like you told me. If you're in trouble, I'll help you out, too. As long as it's something I can do, I'll help," I told him.

"Thanks. I know you've got a lot you're dealin' with too, so hang in there," said Ishizaki, offering me some words of appreciation.

I decided to go ahead and report back to Horikita on the matter.

4.9

THAT EVENING, I called Horikita to the cafeteria. Since there were so many people around, it would be difficult for anyone to pick up on our specific conversation, even if they were trying to listen in. I told Horikita about how Ike had a crush on Shinohara but was unable to take that first step. I also told her that Komiya had a crush on her as well, and that he was planning to tell her how he felt. I also told Horikita about how deeply I think it might affect the upcoming exam. And Horikita's reaction to all of that was...

"Wouldn't it be fine to just leave them alone?"

I had halfway expected as much, but her reaction was one of cold indifference.

"You said you wanted to talk to me about something, and I was wondering what it could have been about. But this really isn't something that other people should get involved in. Besides, I do value Ike's camping skills as well. We should place him in a group to make the best use of his abilities, leaving personal feelings out of the equation," said Horikita.

"I'm not so sure about that. It seems like Ike can't get his mind off Shinohara. Depending on how things play out, it's possible that he might not be able to perform as well as he did last year. If that's all there is to it, then that would be fine, but we should consider the possibility that he'll be so preoccupied thinking about Shinohara that he'll drag his group down," I answered.

"You're saying that he'll get all weird about it and end up getting expelled?" said Horikita.

"Well, I can't say for sure that it's *impossible*."

"...In that case, that could be a problem. This is absolutely stupid," replied Horikita, letting out a bitter sigh, seeming to be at her wits' end.

"It seems like Komiya and Shinohara have promised to be in a group together, but they haven't made it official yet because of

your instructions. But if you do give them your permission, it is almost a guarantee that they will form a group together. You are the leader of Class D now. If you tell Shinohara that teaming up with Komiya is, strategically speaking, a bad move, then Shinohara couldn't go against it," I told her.

"So, you're saying that we need to stop them. But if we prevent them from being in a group together, wouldn't Komiya-kun just pick a different time to tell her how he feels? Depending on how things play out, he might even decide to tell her that very same day," said Horikita.

"We can't discount that possibility," I conceded.

"This issue is more trouble than it's worth. It's impossible for us to see what's going on before they officially become boyfriend and girlfriend," said Horikita.

"In that case, what do you think we should do?" I asked.

"Why don't we just make Ike-kun come out with it and tell Shinohara-san how he feels about her? If she responds well to it, then Ike-kun will give his utmost so that he won't be expelled, no matter what group he's placed in, right? On the other hand, if she turns him down, Ike-kun can forget about her and concentrate on the exam," said Horikita.

While I agreed that the former scenario was likely, I wasn't sure if the latter would happen that way if Ike did get rejected. There was a possibility that he'd fall into despair and just give up. But we could keep talking back and forth about this topic all day long. It was certainly true that getting Ike make his feelings with Shinohara clear at this stage would be the simplest, least time-consuming solution.

"You're good at quite a lot of things, but when it comes to love, you're really hopeless, aren't you?" said Horikita.

"I'm studying hard right now," I replied.

"For the love of... All right. I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, should I go ahead and lead Ike-kun and Shinohara-san to try and form a group together?" said Horikita.

Even though we were still in the middle of eating, Horikita took out her phone and launched the OAA app. However, when she did so, an unexpected fact came to light.

"Unfortunately, it seems like we're too late," said Horikita.

Horikita slid her phone across the table over to me and showed me the screen. In the OAA app, I could see that groups had been formed. I saw both Shinohara and Komiya's names listed together already, as two people in the same group. They were in a group of three people, together with Kinoshita Minori from Class B.

"Since it's come to this, we're going to need to take steps to make sure that Ike-kun doesn't lose motivation," said Horikita.

"Let's talk about this with Yousuke too. He's been thinking about ideas for the best group to put Ike into right now," I replied.

Completing the task of forming groups for the uninhabited island special exam was fraught with difficulties.

4.10

THAT EVENING, my stay-home date with Kei started, something that had become a regular happening for us. The topic of our conversation today mostly centered around groups, starting with Ike and Shinohara's break up due to their fight earlier.

"So, um, hey... Kiyotaka, who are you planning to group with for this exam?" asked Kei, looking up at me as she asked that question with a somewhat bashful look on her face.

"I'm not planning on joining a group with anyone right now," I told her.

"Huh? Wh-why?"

I could sense that Kei had wanted to be in a group with me, but even if we did team up, it wouldn't work out in my favor. It wasn't like she was lacking in ability or anything. It was more that, considering we would be going up against Tsukishiro, she'd be unfit for the task.

"There are definitely advantages in forming a group. However, that doesn't necessarily mean that you can't win on your own. In fact, if anything, there are advantages in being able to stand freely without being influenced by others. In addition, depending on how things go, you might be able to save other groups. If a group is about to get eliminated, you could step in and cover for them," I told her.

"So, you're saying that in general, you could be more resourceful and adaptable if you're going it alone," answered Kei.

Whether you were a boy or a girl, you were still allowed to take part in this exam by yourself. In other words, there was a chance for students who prided themselves on their versatility to be able to win on their own.

"If a student were to take first place and they were acting alone, that would mean only their class would be getting 300 Class Points," I told her.

"Do you think you could get first place, Kiyotaka? I mean, considering the fact it's you."

"What do you think?" I asked.

After I turned the question back at her, our eyes had met. We stared at each other for a while, as Kei stiffened, lost in thought.

"I-I feel like...you would get first place without even breaking a sweat. Huh? But wait, hold on. If you get first place, it'll get even harder for me to tell people that we're going out, won't it?!" she wailed, immediately starting to imagine what the future would be like, panicking.

"If you get first place all by yourself Kiyotaka, I think I'd be so happy that I'd swoon. I would think that you're super cool. But, but... Ah! I don't know what the best thing to do is!" she added.

"You're getting overly excited. Don't worry about it. It's not like getting first place is that easy," I answered.

"S-so hold on, does that mean that you don't think you can win?" she asked.

"Let's just say my chances are about fifty-fifty," I replied.

"Just saying that you have a fifty percent chance is still absolutely incredible though..." said Kei.

"Anyway, the thing you should be concerned with right now isn't who you'll be partnering with, Kei."

"Huh? Wait, isn't that really important though? If I slip up, I might get expelled," said Kei.

"That's right. There is the threat of expulsion in this special exam. If you slip into the bottom five, then you'll get penalized. However, you can't just freely choose someone to partner up with," I told her.

"Okay. To be honest though, I wanted to partner with you, Kiyotaka... I want you to protect me," said Kei.

Kei had basically asked me as much before, albeit in an indirect way. But now she had come out and honestly said how she felt.

"There are ways to save you without me having to protect you though, right? By that I mean you can hold onto the number of Private Points that you need to save yourself."

"Well, yeah, that's true, but..." said Kei, trailing off and pausing for a moment.

Although it required a substantial number of Private Points, if you put it another way, that meant that as long as you held onto that number of points, you'd never get expelled.

"So, yes, it is true. But even if you form a group of six people during the exam, you'd still need a million points to avoid getting expelled, right? I don't have that many," said Kei.

"How many points do you have left now?" I asked.

"Let's see... 240,000, I think. A-Anyway though, I have been saving points pretty well lately though!" said Kei.

I didn't really say anything that indicated I was blaming her for her lack of points though. Since I was in a comparable situation financially, I couldn't really criticize her.

"So, you're short 760,000 then," I replied.

I had about 250,000 points on hand. Even if I handed them all over to her, she would only have a total of around 500,000.

"Kei, you've got the Free Ride card, right?" I asked.

"Yeah. What's it worth, in terms of value?" she asked in return.

"I couldn't say it's a good card, to be honest. For better or worse, it seems to be the card that has the least impact on the holder. It's not the sort of card that will add to your efforts or help you when you make a mistake," I told her.

You could basically only bet on whatever group was likely to win. In terms of simple value, you could say that her card had the least value.

"Yeah...you're right," replied Kei, letting out a dejected sigh. She had already known that was the case, more or less. "You have the Trials and Tribulations card if I remember right, Kiyotaka. Yeah? It has some powerful effects if you win, but if you lose, it

would be really traumatic... Oh, well, I know that you're not going to have any problems at all of course, Kiyotaka. I was really hoping I would have gotten the Half Off or Nullify card."

I suppose that from Kei's point of view, it was natural that she would feel more appreciative of a card that could save her in this exam.

"It's not like there aren't any hopes for your card, though. Chances are there are many students who feel like the Half Off or Nullify cards are worthless. In those students' eyes, there may be value in the Free Ride card," I replied.

Unlike the Head Start and Bonus cards, her card might not really resonate with students who were confident in themselves. On the other hand, though this card was targeted for the middle-of-the-road students who didn't think they could win. Furthermore, the middle-of-the-road category was likely to be comprised of the greatest number of students, making it easier to find someone who would want to trade.

However, cards like Half Off were greatly desired by some students both in that middle range category and in the lower range category. They'd want it so badly that they could taste it. Depending on who was holding the card, some cards might seem worthless, while others might shine like they were solid gold.

"I'll take care of the points," I told her.

"Huh? You'll take care of... But how?" she asked.

"There are several ways to do so. Selling off the Trials and Tribulations card to get the funds we need is one way," I answered.

"But that means you might have to give up your card... Are you sure?" asked Kei.

"It's more important to make sure that you don't get expelled," I replied.

"O-okay... Th-thank you," she replied, blushing.

Afterwards, we went on to talk about summer vacation, which was exciting, but new developments in our relationship were being put off for later.

4.11

THE SCHOOL had allowed us to form groups of up to three people up until the summer special exam started in earnest. However, there was a conversation happening that didn't cover just that. It was also about looking ahead to the future.

"I'm glad that you've come, Ichinose-san."

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Sakayanagi-san."

It was after school on the first Friday after we were given permission to start forming groups. Sakayanagi had called Ichinose and asked her to come to the café.

"Is this a good time? I was thinking that you might have turned down my offer since I had made this request so suddenly," said Sakayanagi.

"It's a perfectly good time, no problem at all. Though to be honest, I was a little surprised since I didn't think that you'd contact me, Sakayanagi-san."

That day, just an hour before they had met up with one another at the café, Sakayanagi had suddenly contacted Ichinose and asked her to come out. If Ichinose's schedule had been packed, it wouldn't have been surprising if she had turned down the offer, of course.

"I really wanted to meet you today and talk with you, Ichinose-san."

That was a lie on Sakayanagi's part. Inviting Ichinose so suddenly and without any advance notice was part of her strategy. It was meant to give Ichinose no time to think. If they had arranged in advance to meet in a few days, Ichinose would have thought about what would be discussed. And depending on how things went, she might have even sought help from her classmates, like Kanzaki. This was a precautionary measure on Sakayanagi's part to prevent that from happening.

"At any rate, why did you accept my sudden request to meet, anyway?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Why? Well, I didn't really have any plans today," said Ichinose.

"That isn't what I meant. I have done some terrible things to you before, Ichinose-san. I thought it wouldn't be surprising if you hated me," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi had secretly gotten details about Ichinose's past out of her in their conversations as part of a plot to bring Ichinose down. Sakayanagi had tormented Ichinose by taking something from her past that she didn't want other to know and revealing it to a great number of people. If someone you trusted and talked to betrayed you, many people would end up hating that person. Or even if they didn't come to hate that person, they should feel an intense sense of distrust, and want to keep their distance.

However, not only did Ichinose immediately respond to Sakayanagi's sudden request, but she didn't give the slightest impression that she held anything resembling a grudge.

"No, actually, I don't think you've done anything particularly horrible to me, Sakayanagi-san. It's true that what I did in junior high was something that I needed to reflect on anyway, and I'm ashamed of what I did. But it's not like I had explicitly asked you to keep a secret from everyone, so it would be wrong of me to blame you for what happened," said Ichinose.

What Ichinose was saying was that in the end, she herself was the one who revealed her past, so she was the one to blame for what happened.

"You are, without a doubt, a truly good person, Ichinose-san," said Sakayanagi.

"I'm not so sure about that. I don't really know, myself," said Ichinose somewhat sheepishly, lightly scratching her cheek. She seemed to be embarrassed, averting her eyes away from Sakayanagi like she couldn't bear her gentle gaze.

"So then... What did you want to talk about?" asked Ichinose.

Perhaps Ichinose felt like it would've been awkward if they continued discussing that topic any further, because she urged Sakayanagi to start talking about the matter at hand.

"As you wish then, I'll get down to business. However, I suspect that you might feel uncomfortable about what I wish to discuss with you," said Sakayanagi.

After Sakayanagi had prefaced what she was going to say with that warning, Ichinose quietly muttered to herself. "I hope she goes easy on me."

"Please pardon my bluntness, but I'm not so sure that you'll even be able to make it back to Class B, let alone Class A. I would like to know your thoughts on the matter. Would you care to share them with me?" said Sakayanagi, pointing out the current situation that Ichinose was in without an ounce of hesitation or restraint.

"Ah ha ha... Well, that really was honest," Ichinose replied.

For a brief moment, Ichinose's mind went blank. Then, with a bitter smile on her face, she started to fan herself with her hand. Sakayanagi, with a deliberate smile plastered on her face, simply watched, and waited for an answer.

"It's certainly true that the situation we're in now isn't good, by any means," said Ichinose.

As of the first of May, there was only a twenty-six-point gap in Class Points between Ichinose's class and Ryuu'en's class, with Ichinose trying to play catch-up. Since those points fluctuated based on things like tardiness and absences every month, she thought that her class might be able to catch up if there weren't any special exams. In fact, the Class Points that her class had accumulated over the past year had largely come from smaller amounts of points being gained from those kinds of daily activities and evaluations building up over time.

However, after their positions in the rankings had been reversed and Ryuu'en's class became Class B, they didn't show a single weakness to exploit. In June, the gap between the two classes had narrowed slightly, but only by a mere two points. Ichinose could feel Ryuu'en's and his followers' strong will to never let her pass them. That was something that Sakayanagi, who was now being pursued by Ryuu'en, could sense without even needing to say anything about it.

"I am well aware that they're very formidable opponents," added Ichinose.

"Even though you're aware of that fact, there are still some things that you just can't seem to do anything about, aren't there? Ryuuuen-kun's boisterous, excessive class hasn't been causing any problems lately with their behavior, which is so surprising that it's practically unthinkable. If you cannot catch up to them from daily activities, then you have no other option but to put your heart and soul into future special exams," said Sakayanagi.

Ichinose nodded meekly. Sakayanagi was by no means intending to answer with sweet, gentle words in response, though.

"He's not the sort you can defeat so easily. It is no exaggeration to say that he would be the most difficult kind of opponent for you, Ichinose-san, as someone who takes a very honest, straightforward approach," said Sakayanagi.

That point was something that Ichinose understood quite well herself, having faced Ryuuuen directly at the year-end special exam. Ryuuuen was coercive, abnormal, and certainly wasn't loath to break the rules. Ichinose's true intention was probably to avoid fighting him, if possible.

"But, well, that's something that I can't avoid running into on the path to get to the top. And while it's true that Ryuuuen-kun is a difficult opponent to face, it's not as though you're someone who could be defeated so easily either, Sakayanagi-san," said Ichinose.

Even there had been a brief struggle with Katsuragi, who was also in Class A, they had nearly double the points that Ryuuuen's class had, creating a strong lead. Class A was undeniably far, far ahead of everyone else in the running. Even if Class A were to be defeated once or twice, it would be difficult to shake them out of first place.

"Even though there is more than two-hundred-point gap between your class and Class D, what do you think might happen, considering their momentum? Are you confident that they won't overtake you?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Horikita-san's class is also rapidly gaining strength, by leaps and bounds. In terms of individual abilities, they have people who

can stand toe-to-toe with those from any other class... When I look at things that way, I can say that I definitely do not have that much room for error," said Ichinose.

"Indeed, there are certainly several interesting and exceptionally gifted individuals in Class D. First, you have Hirata-kun and Kushida-san, both of whom have excellent communication skills and well-balanced grades. Then there's Sudou-kun, who is the sole student to have earned an A+ rating in physical ability. And you have Ayanokouji-kun, who made a surprise attack like a soldier lying in wait by getting a perfect score on the mathematics section of the exam, which was an exceptionally difficult subject. And then we have Kouenji-kun, someone whose true abilities still can't be discerned fully, making him yet another dangerous person," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi had made Ichinose once again feel the depths of what Class 2-D had to offer by deliberately making mention of their strengths.

"Lastly, there's the leader that they rally around, Horikita-san. She is quite gifted both academically and physically, and I even heard that she had joined the student council the other day," she added.

Sakayanagi had once again confirmed the situation that Ichinose was in.

"I am terribly sorry to keep saying such harsh things, but I think that it's only a matter of time before your class is demoted to being Class D, Ichinose-san."

"Well, I think there's no arguing that we do warrant that kind of evaluation right now. But—" said Ichinose, before being interrupted.

"Are you going to say something abstract, like you'll make it through hard work and friendship?" said Sakayanagi, cutting her off.

Ichinose had been made to swallow her words when Sakayanagi had precisely taken them right out of her mouth beforehand.

"It is impossible for you to win with such vague ideas. Every class has clearly grown in power over the past year, but I don't see any significant growth coming from your class, Ichinose-san."

"That's... That's not true, though. Everyone has been really coming along."

"I didn't see that you haven't grown. The problem is by how much," said Sakayanagi.

"You might not believe this, but I don't think we'll lose, Sakayanagi-san," said Ichinose.

Sakayanagi, with a faint smile on her lips, simply shook her head from side to side, slowly.

"If you look at OAA, the answer is obvious. If you compare the overall ability that all four classes have this year versus where we were at last year, you can see that your class is undoubtedly the one that has demonstrated the smallest degree of growth among them. I had thought you would have at least checked into it that much, Ichinose-san... But perhaps you already knew that and pretended not to notice anything or maybe you were too afraid to afraid to check for yourself..." said Sakayanagi.

Ichinose firmly recalled a time before when she had been alone with Sakayanagi. It was almost like an adult with a child. It was only natural that Ichinose felt like she was being talked down to, driven further and further into a corner. She was unable to say anything back to Sakayanagi, who was accurately exploiting her weakness.

"You are a smart student. In an honest and equal tête-à-tête, I don't think you would fall behind me by any means. However, you're unable to demonstrate your abilities when put in a disadvantageous position. Both then and now, you could only stay silent as your weakness was exploited. However, both I and Ryuuken-kun, who you are facing off against now, are able to bare our fangs when placed at a disadvantage. Do you understand?" said Sakayanagi.

"Ye... Yes, I do."

Those two would not doubt their strength, regardless of whatever situation they were in.

"I think it's safe to say that as you are now, Ichinose-san, you have no chance of winning."

"Is that what you called me here to talk about?" asked Ichinose.

"If I were simply trying to harass you, I could do that anytime, anywhere. I wouldn't waste precious time," said Sakayanagi.

Then, Sakayanagi decided to tell Ichinose the real reason she had called her here today.

"Why not join forces with me, Ichinose-san?"

"Huh...?"

Sakayanagi's shocking proposal came as such a surprise to Ichinose that she was at a loss for words.

"Wait, but that's—"

"A cooperative relationship between classes isn't a terrible thing. In fact, if I remember correctly, you had a similar relationship with Horikita-san from Class D during our first year, didn't you?" asked Sakayanagi.

It wasn't strange that Sakayanagi had heard about their alliance.

"Now, this is merely speculation on my part, but I believe that Class D might have already nullified their partnership with you. Even though they are at the bottom of the class rankings, they have accumulated more Class Points than any other class has in one year, and they are gaining momentum. In comparison, Ichinose-san, your class has fallen a step behind and has been demoted to Class C. From the perspective of Horikita-san and her peers, continuing to collaborate with you would have no benefit whatsoever," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi had perfectly and succinctly summed up what had happened, almost as if she had witnessed the conversation that Ichinose and Horikita had firsthand. Ichinose couldn't deny

any of that. She responded in a way that halfway sounded like she was openly admitting to it.

"Yes, I suppose so... Partnerships can't last forever," said Ichinose.

"Yes. For a collaborative partnership to be maintained, a certain condition must be met. Your class and Horikita-san's class had fulfilled that condition last year. And it was precisely because of that that you were able to successfully establish a good relationship without fighting each other in vain," said Sakayanagi.

Ichinose nodded meekly in agreement.

"And that certain condition was...the difference in Class Points," added Sakayanagi.

In fact, that was exactly it. The truth of the matter was that the reason Ichinose and Horikita's classes made a ceasefire agreement was because of the difference in Class Points they held.

"Although I don't think this was intentional, there is now quite a substantial difference between my Class A and your Class C, Ichinose-san. In other words, I think that it wouldn't be impossible for us to join forces," said Sakayanagi.

"The sad thing is though; I can't really think of this as a happy proposal. Because it implies that our class is insignificant to you, we're not even worth being cautious about, Sakayanagi-san."

"If I may be so bold, that's because that's exactly true."

The merciless reality of what Sakayanagi was saying struck Ichinose. But Ichinose didn't stop smiling. Although emotional denial would've been easy, she couldn't turn away from the reality that her class was in a crisis.

"I can't imagine that there are any benefits for you in partnering with us though, Sakayanagi-san."

"No, that's not quite true. If we look at things purely in terms of power, then yes, it is true that you come up short. However, you possess a powerful weapon that no other class has," said Sakayanagi, with a smile.

"And that weapon is...trust. I can say with absolute certainty that during the time in which our classes are allied with each other, you will not betray me, no matter what happens. That is of foremost importance in looking for an ally," said Sakayanagi.

A partner that you could rest easy about and trust to watch your back. Sakayanagi was saying that alone was worth an alliance.

"While I'm happy that you think so highly of me, we're in a situation now where we can't really care for appearances, right?" said Ichinose.

"Yes, that is true. However, I cannot imagine that you would abandon that weapon called trust, which you have built up so much so far, Ichinose-san. If you do abandon that trust and betray me, then the blame would fall squarely on me for having judged incorrectly," said Sakayanagi.

Even if this were a trap that Sakayanagi had laid for her, Ichinose couldn't help but feel that being trusted wasn't a bad thing. However, she already taken into consideration the fact that Sakayanagi was someone she couldn't drop her guard around.

"Could I ask that you please give me some more details about what you're thinking?" asked Ichinose.

"Can I take this to mean that you wish to move forward with this partnership?" replied Sakayanagi.

"...Yes, that's right."

"In that case, let's discuss."

Sakayanagi started to act, to take Class 2-C, led by Ichinose, under her banner.

"The upcoming special exam, where we need to survive on an uninhabited island has some rather troublesome rules. We can only form groups with students from our grade level and the rewards are distributed equally. This means that even if you were to bring together the best of the best from each class, it wouldn't create any gap in Class Points whatsoever," said Sakayanagi.

"Yes, you're right about that. Which is why it's inevitable that we'll have to make a group that's capable of winning from within

our own classes," said Ichinose.



"But in that scenario, you couldn't say that you're able to handpick the best of the best in forming your group, no? There would inevitably be certain areas that each class won't be able to cover on their own... However, what if two classes were to work together? I would say it'd be a different story if we could freely choose between a total of seventy-nine people," said Sakayanagi.

"So, if your class and our class worked together..."

"Although you wouldn't be able to chip away at the lead that Class A has, you would be able to overtake Ryuuuen-kun's class and widen the gap with Class D as well," said Sakayanagi.

"But... If we do this, that means we'll be losing an opportunity to catch up to your class then, Sakayanagi-san."

"As we head into the second and third semesters, isn't your first priority to return to a stable position? Even if you refuse to join forces with me here, that doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to win. Am I wrong?"

"Well..."

"On the other hand, if you lose to the other classes, you will be demoted to Class D, Ichinose-san. You will lose out on a lot of Class Points, thereby putting you in an extremely tricky situation. If that were to happen, it would be close to impossible for you to aim for Class A, wouldn't it?" said Sakayanagi.

Ichinose had once again fallen silent, unable to respond to what Sakayanagi had said.

"I think that you still harbor some doubts about me. But I don't think there are going to be many chances for the other classes to team up with each other. Neither Class B nor Class D would ever join forces with me, as they are intending to catch up to Class A. Their only option would be for D, C, and Class B to form a clique and to challenge Class A together. That way, they could form strong groups," said Sakayanagi.

No matter how strong Class A was, if B, C, and D worked together, Class A's chances of winning would be slim.

"I'd be lying if I said that I haven't thought about that myself already," said Ichinose.

"Yes, quite. However, D, C, and B working together isn't a realistic strategy. Ichinose-san, have you received word from anyone about that yet, in the few days since we've been notified that we're allowed to create groups?" asked Sakayanagi.

Ichinose, eyes cast downward, slowly shook her head from side to side.

"If three classes joined forces, that would mean the Class Point rewards would be divided equally amongst them. Even if you did your utmost and were able to take first place, you would only close the gap between us by a mere one hundred points. If you placed second, then sixty-seven points. And if you got third, that would be thirty-three points," said Sakayanagi.

Even if Classes 2-B, 2-C, and 2-D had managed to secure all of the top positions, that would still only decrease Class A's lead by a mere 200 points. Although that was by no means a small amount, it would be difficult to monopolize the top spots in this special exam in the first place.

"It's natural to want to win on your own, and to close the gap by 300 or 400 points," said Sakayanagi.

"But, if we enter a partnership, Sakayanagi-san, then Horikita-san and Ryuuen-kun might make a partnership, to... And besides, there are people who have already formed their own groups in our own classes already, aren't there?" said Ichinose.

"Yes. Rather, I've been waiting for the group-building to begin. So, while we are currently seeing a trend where the individual classes want to join forces and instead compete on their own, I propose that we team up, and focus on a main fighting force," said Sakayanagi.

"And what would this main fighting force be?"

"Just like last year, I am unable to move around on the island, because of my legs. However, I am allowed to participate. Albeit in a somewhat special position, though."

"Special?"

"Students who are unable to participate due to reasons like illness or injury are eliminated from the beginning, yes? However, I

will be participating in this exam as a 'partially-eliminated' student."

"Partially eliminated?"

"I cannot walk around freely on the island because of the state of my legs. However, I have the right to remain at the starting point and compete just like everyone else, while adhering to the same rules. Meaning that if you come seeking my opinion, I can give it to you, and if there's a difficult problem, we can solve it together. However, if the point comes where I am the sole remaining person in my group, then my group will be eliminated from the exam," said Sakayanagi.

"So that's what you mean when you say you're participating via a special position then," replied Ichinose.

Although there would be a need to be a way to remain in contact, Ichinose immediately understood that having Sakayanagi function as the brain of a group could be a major factor in the exam.

"You can freely choose anyone out of myself, Hashimoto-kun, Kitou-kun, or Masumi-san. We are undeniably the main fighting force of Class A. And from Class B, I suppose that would be you, Ichinose-san, Kanzaki-kun, and then Shibata-kun."

All the students that Sakayanagi had just listed then had not yet formed a group and were monitoring the situation. At this current stage, there were no inconveniences for either side.

"That's right. If you consider that physical strength will be required on the island, I think that's true. However, there's no guarantee that we'll be able to merge groups as we'd wish once the actual special exam begins, right?" asked Ichinose.

"Although it will be difficult to merge groups, it's not exactly impossible," replied Sakayanagi, smiling broadly.

Her smile showed that she was confident that they could form groups no matter what difficulties there were.

"Sakayanagi-san, may I tell you my honest thoughts?" asked Ichinose.

"Of course."

"Sakayanagi-san, you really don't want B, C, and D to fight together. Even more so than I had originally thought. Actually, if anything, you're afraid of that happening, aren't you?" said Ichinose.

"What makes you say that?" asked Sakayanagi.

"You said that I and my class are partners that you can trust, and I think that you really do mean that. However, the most important thing for you is that you want to avoid a situation where B, C, and Class D were to work together and get on Class A's tail. It's certainly true that the amount of Class Points we could earn if we won would decrease, but there's no guarantee that the three classes below you won't continue to work together in the future, should that happen," said Ichinose.

Ichinose, who had been relentlessly pushed around during this whole conversation so far by Sakayanagi, struck back with the feelings she had been holding onto.

"If we successfully managed to pull it off, the idea of the three classes banding together and chasing after Class A, then that would mean you'd be forced into fighting an uphill battle from this point onward, Sakayanagi-san... Am I wrong about that?" said Ichinose.

Sakayanagi looked surprised, albeit only a little, after witnessing Ichinose's counterattack, since she had only been on the defensive this whole time.

"Apparently, it looks as though I've underestimated you a little, Ichinose-san."

Sakayanagi didn't care at all if any of the classes below her happened to win this particular special exam on their own and gain the 300 Class Points. The most important thing to Sakayanagi, whose Class A was so substantially far ahead, the thing that she wanted to avoid the most, was the three lower classes banding together and gaining a sense of solidarity. What Sakayanagi was doing here was making a preemptive move in anticipation of more tests like this that may come in the future.

If there were someone who could rally the three other classes together, it was highly likely that person was Ichinose

Honami. Which is exactly why Sakayanagi had decided to take Ichinose into her hands first.

"So, regarding my proposal to form a partnership, does this mean you will not accept? Or will you?" asked Sakayanagi.

After acknowledging what Ichinose had said, Sakayanagi had come out and pressed for Ichinose's cooperation.

"If you do collaborate with me, I don't mind giving you a pledge for three person's worth of deposits. I will loan you a total of three million points, for the students who are at a considerable risk of expulsion. In the unlikely event that you are to be penalized, you may use those points to save those students. I would think this is quite a helpful proposal to you, Ichinose-san, since you wish to avoid letting anyone get expelled more strongly than anyone from any other class," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi, fearing that her offer would be rejected, held out her hand.

"Would you mind giving me enough for five people? That way, I would feel totally reassured, I think," asked Ichinose.

"My, my, quite greedy, aren't we? Although I had been planning to distribute a similar number of points in the near future, I will offer you a special loan," said Sakayanagi.

Class A had been continuously receiving the highest number of Private Points out of any class for over an entire year. As a result, the amount of funding that each of their students had accumulated was far beyond what any of the other classes had.

"Okay, I suppose we have a deal then. But to be honest, I would have chosen to work with you even if you hadn't mentioned the financial help, Sakayanagi-san. Our ultimate goal is to get to Class A, of course. But as you said, I've been demoted to Class C, and we really have our backs against the wall now. If we were to be demoted to Class D, I'm sure that the class's motivation would drop significantly. I don't want that to happen," said Ichinose, offering her hand to Sakayanagi, for a handshake.

"So, regarding your proposal that Class 2-C and Class 2-A fight this battle together... I accept," she added.

Now that the two of them had shook hands on it, both classes had mutually entered an alliance.

"And now I'll be able to fight without worry. I apologize for how sudden this might be, but I do have one request," said Sakayanagi.

"I'm guessing that it's about how to maximize our chances of winning, that it'll be necessary to start things off by handing over the 'One More' card to Class A's main fighting force... Right?" replied Ichinose.

Now that Ichinose was their ally, she had already started to think about the best path forward for their battle, as an allied force. By using the "One More" card, of which there was only one of in their grade level, you could form a group of up to seven people. This was also one of the reasons why Sakayanagi had decided to fight together with Ichinose.

"I sincerely appreciate that you understood what I meant so quickly," said Sakayanagi.

"But even still, Ryuuen-kun and Horikita-san are both formidable opponents," said Ichinose.

Sakayanagi also was absolutely not going to underestimate those two, by any means. It wasn't going to be an easy fight, considering the lingering shadow of Ayanokouji looming behind Horikita. However, Sakayanagi had chosen to fight together with Ichinose because she was sure that she would definitely win.

"First place is ours to take. Thus, I do not intend to skimp on the efforts necessary for that goal," said Sakayanagi.

With their forces consolidated, Sakayanagi was going to challenge Ryuuen and Horikita's respective classes, as well as both the first- and third-years.

Chapter 5: Battle of the First-Years and Third-Years

IT HAD BEEN ALMOST three months since the new students first started here at the Advanced Nurturing High School, and they had begun to understand the state of things at this institution. The first-year students were also right in the midst of forming groups for big upcoming special exam. However, it wasn't long after the school gave the students permission to start forming groups that things already started to not go so smoothly. The students in Class 1-D, led by Housen Kazuomi, stubbornly refused to join any groups and rejected offers to trade cards. If a student from another class came to them wanting them to be in a group, the Class D students demanded points in exchange, or otherwise they wouldn't join.

Because of that, the new students were put into a situation where they couldn't freely form groups. Although representatives from each of the other three classes had been hoping that Housen would have changed his mind sometime in June, even today, on the first of July, the situation still hadn't changed. There were classes within their grade level who tried to ignore Class D, but Yagami Takuya from Class 1-B put a stop to them.

While it was easy for the other students to ignore Class D and to create groups just from their own three classes, competition with the other grade levels was an important part of this special exam. Yagami had voiced the need that, in the event that issue was to be prioritized, they would absolutely need to handpick the best of the best from each and every class to make optimal groups. At about the exact same time, with the support of students who shared Yagami's views, the three other classes had agreed to take a wait-and-see approach until July.

However, Housen's continued deliberate ignoring of the situation meant that those previous talks wound up becoming meaningless. And today, now that the deadline had arrived, the representatives of the four classes from their grade were supposed to gather to resolve the situation. Yagami had proposed that the

gathering be done in a simple manner so as not to intentionally raise the level of confidentiality of the meeting. It was agreed that the leader of the class or someone close to the leader would attend. But as the time came after class ended that day, there was no response from Class D, the class that was at the center of all these issues.

In a hallway lined with rather unsurprising, nondescript first-year classrooms, the first person to show up to the meeting was Yagami from Class 1-B. That was because he thought it necessary that he show up before anyone else as the original advocate of the proposal. Not long afterward, Utomiya Riku from Class 1-C had shown up as well.

"Seems like it's still just you here, Yagami."

"Oh, hey Utomiya-kun. I was kind of expecting it would've been you participating in this talk," replied Yagami.

"Although it's not really like me to be a leader or anything, I came because no one else wanted to. While the kids in my class kinda like to go ahead and say whatever they want, they seem to not like these kinds of headache-inducing things," said Utomiya.

"I think it's because they know that you're such a dependable person that they asked you to come. I saw the updated OAA values this month. It says that your Societal Contribution score got bumped up to a B, didn't it?" said Yagami, with a bright and chipper smile.

Utomiya, despite the fact he was being complimented, responded by wrinkling his brow. The person he was talking with, Yagami, had a C in Physical Ability, but an A in Academic Ability. In addition to that, his Adaptability and Societal Contribution scores had gone up to A thanks to his repeated contributions to Class B. In terms of overall ability, he was certainly a cut above. More importantly though, Class C wasn't exactly in a situation that they could be happy about.

"We've lost somebody. To be honest, I think it's a pretty big loss," said Utomiya.

"I didn't think that Hatano-kun would've gotten expelled either. It is really unfortunate," said Yagami.

"...Yeah."

Hatano was a male student from Class 1-C. He was a valuable student too, with an A in Academic Ability. However, he had been dealt a fatal blow as a result of him being involved in actions that, once discovered, resulted in a penalty of immediate expulsion. The somewhat relaxed first-year students were once again reminded of this school's harshness. Though at this point, it had already been a month since Hatano had been expelled.

Utomiya, his classmate, didn't even have the time to regret his loss, unfortunately. Now that he had lost one of his best students, he needed to get definite results on the upcoming special exam.

"It seemed like you and Hatano were pretty close," said Utomiya.

"He said he wanted to join the student council together. He wanted to make the school a more fun place to be," replied Yagami.

Utomiya nodded lightly and then directed his gaze towards the Class 1-D classroom.

"Do you think that Housen's gonna come?" asked Utomiya, wondering about the very person about which this discussion was taking place over.

"I guess I'd say it's about a fifty-fifty chance," replied Yagami.

"Fifty-fifty? Wow, you sure put a lot of faith in Housen, huh. I'm betting he won't show," said Utomiya.

"If he doesn't show up to this meeting, then the matter is settled. We'll go ahead and form groups with students from our three classes. If that happens, then Class D and Class D alone, which has been trying to push for getting a lot of points out of us, will be left out in the cold. Then any chance they have to win will disappear," said Yagami.

"If he thinks that he can make us fork over our Private Points, then he really has a massive ego. He objected to the idea of trying to smoothly form groups with people from all classes together. Since the second- and third-years are our enemies here,

we really ought to work together. Yet Housen still refused anyway," said Utomiya.

Even though they were all in the same grade level, Housen wanted to compete in areas where they didn't even have to.

"It seems that way, at least on the surface. But I can't imagine that's what Housen-kun actually planning, deep down."

"I can understand that it's a bargaining tactic on his part. But it's one that's not going to pay off for him."

"If he really intends on playing that game though, then I have to wonder if that might actually be a blessing in disguise for us. Because that means that Housen-kun isn't that much of a threat to us then," said Yagami.

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

Yagami explained that he had arranged this meeting to gauge what Housen was thinking. As the two of them were in the midst of their debate, a third person showed up.

"Oh, hey! Riku, Takuya. I figured it'd be you two!" shouted Takahashi Osamu, from Class 1-A, greeting them in a loud voice and waving as he came closer.

Though he had a low Academic Ability ranking, just a C+, he was particularly good at getting to know people no matter who they were. He was often called up to participate in discussions. He had many friends in other classes and other grade levels too.

"Osamu-kun, did you come because you were forced into handling things for your class again?" asked Takuya.

"Well, the leader of our class is the kind of person who hates dealing with this sort of hassle, y'know? So that's where I come in," replied Takahashi.

"Well, this discussion is going to move a lot more smoothly now that you're here, Osamu," added Utomiya.

Just like in Utomiya's case, the leader of the class didn't have to come to this discussion. On the contrary, it would have been more appreciated by the other classes if the students who came for these talks were the ones who excelled in conversation.

"All that's left is Kazuomi, huh?" said Takahashi.

There was only about three minutes left until the appointed meeting time. If he didn't show up, the three other speakers would proceed with their meeting without hesitation.

"Don't you all think it'd be better if we teamed up right at this stage? Because honestly, I really want to isolate Class D so we can crush them as soon as possible," said Utomiya.

"We've been told that the exam on the uninhabited island is going to assess more than our academic abilities though. If you're looking at academic ability alone, then Class D is at the bottom of the rankings, but in terms of physical ability, they're a close second. It's possible that they could play a key role in group-building," said Takuya.

"Look, I get what you're tryin' to say here Riku. My class is feeling pretty darn frustrated with the situation too. But don't you think it's a little too early to just give up on Class D? I mean, we can't say for sure that there aren't going to be more exams like this in the future where all the classes in our grade have gotta work together, right?" said Takahashi.

While Utomiya had advocated for ostracizing Class D, Yagami had continued to maintain that they needed to support Class D. Takahashi, meanwhile, didn't really take a firm stance on either side, remaining in the middle.

"If we just need to work together to tackle this exam, then we'll be fine if it's just us our three classes. I'll admit that yes, there certainly are some capable people in Class D that we could use, but they're not worth enough to the point where I want to make a request to Housen and try to get in his good graces. Besides, it's just about time for our meeting to start. I'd like our three classes to start talking about reaching an agreement between ourselves," said Utomiya.

Just then, almost as if he had anticipated how their conversation was going to go, the person in question appeared, with a relaxed attitude.

"Fraid that things aren't gonna work out that way, Riku," said Housen.

"It seems like you came after all then, eh, Housen-kun?" replied Yagami, greeting Housen with a smile on his face.

On the other hand, Housen approached the three of them while bearing his white teeth in an unnerving manner, like he usually did. Utomiya shot a quick glance over at Housen, and then averted his eyes, looking out the window.

"Hey Kazuomi, who showed up at a great time!" exclaimed Takahashi in a friendly manner, without fear of Housen.

Takahashi's feeling was that he wanted everyone to get along. That's all that he wanted.

"Don't say my name like we're all buddy-buddy. I'll kill you," snapped Housen.

Housen, after trying to intimidate Takahashi, turned his eyes back to Yagami and Utomiya.

"So, decided to pay up?" he asked.

"Don't make lame jokes. We're not paying you a single point," replied Utomiya.

"Now, now, let's calm down, okay? We can't hold a discussion if you're fixing for a fight right from the get-go," said Yagami.

"All right, now that everyone's here, I guess we can get this thing started. For the groups, we—"

"Don't just start yammerin' outta nowhere," snapped Housen, shoving Takahashi by his shoulder, causing him to fall down hard on his bottom.

Utomiya, displeased by Housen's actions, shot him an intense glare.

"Housen. Don't bring your violent attitude here."

"Oh? What, you plannin' on gettin' in my way?" replied Housen.

"If necessary, yeah," said Utomiya.

"Hmph, ain't that interestin'. If you feel like you can bring it, then go ahead and try," said Housen.

When Housen raised his left hand in the air, Takahashi scrambled back to his feet.

"Wait, wait, hold on! Look, I just slipped and fell, that's all, man. Come on, calm down, Riku," shouted Takahashi, in a panic.

"See, that's all it was, yeah?" said Housen.

"Unfortunately for you, I'm not as nice as Takahashi," replied Utomiya.

"In that case, why don't ya show me what ya got?"

Just when Housen made a fist, Utomiya reached out and grabbed his arm.

"Oh...?"



Housen smiled happily upon feeling the strength of Utomiya's grip being applied to his arm. The look in Utomiya's eyes showed that what he was doing wasn't just for show. He had the determination to fight right then and there if necessary. Housen had thought it'd be fun to have a fistfight right there, but then he reconsidered it. Housen certainly craved fighting against the other grade levels more than anyone else, although he did things in a unique way.

"Well, seems like I'm gonna have fun playin' with you. I'll save the fun for later, though," said Housen.

"You think violence is a game, do you?" replied Utomiya.

"Sure it is," answered Housen.

"How stupid. But if that's what you want, then I'll give it to you right now. You don't have to wait until next time. But only on the condition that you never lay a hand on any of my classmates ever again."

During this situation where things seemed like they could go off at any moment, both sides glared at each other, unyieldingly.

"Hey, hey, whaddya mean by that, huh?" said Housen.

"It means that I'm guessing you were the one who got Hatano expelled. He wasn't the kind of student who would have broken school rules so easily," said Utomiya.

"Come on, that little small fry just got all scared of getting' expelled, and he blew himself up. That's all it was, right?" said Housen.

"I clearly remember the look on Hatano's face after he got expelled. He got screwed over by somebody."

"And yer sayin' that's me?" said Housen.

"Who else could it be but you, jerk?" snapped Utomiya.

Although Housen had backed off a little earlier, sparks started flying once again.

"Hey, come on, calm down, both of you. Riku, if you just start throwing down right here, you'll just be doing exactly what Kazuomi wants, man," said Takahashi.

"Takahashi-kun is exactly right. The important thing right now is focusing our efforts on the upcoming uninhabited island survival exam," added Yagami.

"Oh, right, right, we can make groups with peeps from other classes. That upcoming special exam," said Housen, speaking as though the thought hadn't occurred to him at all until just now.

"So what? You refused to work with the other classes. This is none of your business then, isn't it?" said Utomiya.

"Hey now, if you really insist, and I mean like, really insist, I'll work with ya. See?" said Housen.

"Enough jokes. I wouldn't team up with you even if you were the last person standing," replied Utomiya.

"Talk about ice cold," said Housen.

Utomiya slowly released his grip on Housen's arm. Yagami, who had been watching the situation unfold, cut in right then, determining this moment to be the right time.

"We're wasting time. Shall we get started?" said Yagami.

"Wait, who said I'm joinin' your little conversation here? I ain't startin' anything," said Housen.

"Then why did you even come here? Just to kill time?" said Utomiya.

"And if I said yeah?" replied Housen.

"I wouldn't believe you. You're not that stupid," mocked Utomiya.

Even though he was speaking with Housen, Yagami smiled unabashedly.

"This whole uninhabited island survival thing certainly sounds like a far-fetched idea, but the second- and third-year students have already experienced it before. We first-years have to take this test while at a significant disadvantage," explained Yagami.

"But we're also gonna get a handicap in our favor too though, right?" said Takahashi.

In the face of the optimistic Takahashi's comment, Yagami continued to explain his stance in a calm and gentle manner.

"The second- and third-year students have an advance in both academic ability and physical ability because they're older. That fact remains unchanged. If we can't work together, the upperclassmen might eat us alive. You see?" said Yagami.

That was exactly why Yagami was stressing that cooperation amongst their four classes was essential.

"Spare me your weak sauce nonsense, Yagami. Second-year or third-year, I'm confident I can crush 'em," said Housen.

"Yes, there are some students who are more exceptionally talented than others, of course. But there's no hiding the fact that in terms of overall ability, our grade level is inferior. Not everyone is as blessed as you are, Housen-kun," said Yagami.

Yagami's constant gentleness and the fact that he demonstrated he highly valued Housen's abilities were what kept the conversation from falling apart.

"Which is why I think it's necessary that we need to band together, and form one optimal group with students from our grade level. One strong group made up of four people. We need to bring together a group of students who can we definitely say, similar to what Housen-kun himself had said earlier, won't be defeated even if they take on second- or third-year students," said Yagami.

"Meaning that we're not going to be competing with each other over Class Points in this special exam?" said Utomiya.

"The rules make it difficult to cooperate within your grade level, which is why the second- and third-year students who have less time left here are having a harder time accepting the lost opportunity for Class Points that comes with this particular special exam. But we still over two whole years left here. That's why we should so deliberately forego the Class Points this time around," said Yagami.

The difference in Class Points between Class A and Class D in their grade level was still only 300 at most. While Yagami had

suggested that there was no need for them to panic, Utomiya seemed to have different thoughts on the matter and wrinkled his brow in response.

"The benefits from cooperating with the other classes are too slight, though. Just throwing away Class Points would be a waste," said Utomiya.

"If we get eaten alive by the upperclassmen though, losing Class Points isn't the only thing we'll have to worry about," said Yagami.

"But it means no one is going to pull ahead in our grade level, though," argued Utomiya, stressing that if problems arise like Yagami suggested after their battle, then that was simply inevitable.

"Oh, hey, hold on a second. I'm kind of curious about one thing you said earlier, Takuya. Why just one team? The groups who place in the top three will all get Class Points, right? Also, if we consider the fact that we can form up into bigger groups during the actual island part of the exam, then wouldn't it be better for us to make lots of strong groups?" said Takahashi.

"You are absolutely right. However, if we try to make a lot of strong groups from the get-go, we're going to have to think about the balance of each group. We're going against the older students. They aren't going to be easy opponents for us to beat. In that case, it's important that we focus on making our strongest possible four-person group, to reliably ensure that we can take first place. Besides, it sounds like it will be difficult to freely form into larger groups during the main exam part, and even if the upperclassmen really do their best to work together, they can still only form three-person groups, representing three classes," responded Takahashi quickly, in an effort to quell Takahashi's doubts.

After Takahashi heard Yagami's response, he understood what he was getting at.

"So, if we get first place, the rest doesn't matter. Even in the worst-case scenario and we throw everything else away," said Takahashi.

"I do think that yes, we could make a strong enough group if we were to ignore Housen-kun and just work with our own three classes. However, then we'd be essentially playing by the same rules as the other grade levels. The reason I'd like all four classes to work together is not just so that we can hand pick the best possible people. It's also because I think it will help unify our will to fight together, as one, across our entire grade. We first-year students were the only ones given the option to create groups of up to four people. It would be a waste for us to throw away that valuable handicap we were given," said Yagami.

If Class D alone were left out of the equation, it would naturally lead to a situation where they would try to hinder everyone else in their attempts to get first place. And if that happened, it was clear that Class D would do anything and everything in order to prevent the other classes from winning. Yagami was saying that if the four classes can cooperate fully, they should shoot for that ideal structure. Then, Yagami turned to Housen once more.

"I understand that you and you alone can hold your own in a fight against the older students. So, I hope that you'll lend us a hand," said Yagami, appealing to Housen that they needed all four classes.

Utomiya though, eyed Housen suspiciously. He didn't think that the person who had refused to even discuss the matter for more than two weeks would agree to such a thing.

"All right. I'll work with ya," said Housen.

However, Housen had readily accepted Yagami's proposal.

"...What are you plotting, Housen?" asked Utomiya.

"Whaddya mean, what am I plottin'? You said you wanted my help. And how can I not listen to such an adorable little request?" replied Housen.

"All right then, let's hear your conditions," said Yagami.

After considering how quickly Housen changed his stance on the matter, Yagami quickly urged him to speak as not to waste any time.

"Two spots in the main big group gotta be reserved for Class D students. That is an ironclad requirement," said Housen.

"What?" balked Utomiya, naturally disgusted by Housen's proposal, which had the possibility of benefitting only his own class.

"But what happens if we can't form the kind of big groups we want on the island? What then?" said Yagami.

"I already told you. My conditions are that Class D students are included in the main group. No buts," said Housen.

"I see. If we can't bring two Class D students into the group on the island, then we'll clear it with just the initial four students," said Yagami.

"Sides, if we got the four best o' the best in a group to begin with, it shouldn't really matter, right? Ain't gonna mess with our chances of winnin'."

"That's enough of your crap, Housen," said Utomiya.

"I ain't bullshittin'. If ya don't like it, then you can screw off."

"Look here, jerk..."

Utomiya was about to get up in Housen's face because of the absurd demands he was making, but Yagami quickly slid in between them, separating them from each other.

"Please calm down, Utomiya-kun. I'm okay with his condition," said Yagami.

"You're just going to hand them the chance to get all the benefits on a silver platter?" asked Utomiya.

"Our priority right now is for our grade level to come together as a unified front. We absolutely cannot lose to the other grades," said Yagami.

"If we just let Housen get what he wants right now by acting this way, he's gonna do it again," said Utomiya.

"If we abandon Housen-kun's class right here and now, will anything be any different?" asked Yagami.

"Well, I..."

"What matters is that our grade wins the upcoming exam. Anything else isn't that big a deal," said Yagami.

"I gotta say, I agree with him on this one, Riku. I understand how you feel, but first we have to work together as a grade," said Takahashi.

Utomiya clicked his tongue defiantly but gave in thanks to Yagami and Takahashi's efforts to persuade him.

"Fine then. No other demands on top of that, though. You get that, Housen?" said Utomiya.

Housen didn't respond to Utomiya's statement though. He simply turned his back to him as if to say that this was the end of the conversation.

"There's one last thing that I wanted to mention that I think that our grade needs to be together on. I think that the item cards should be carefully re-distributed throughout our entire grade level to avoid any in-fighting, and so that we can use them to their maximum effectiveness. It's also important to make sure that the students lacking in ability and in the groups that are more likely to sink towards the bottom of the ranking have the Half Off card. I assume that you will agree to that as well, Housen-kun?" asked Yagami.

"Do whatever you want," replied Housen.

Housen then immediately left without any signs of reluctance. While the three others watched him go, Takahashi leaned over to speak to Yagami.

"Hey, by the way Takumi, who are you plannin' on pickin' from Class B?" he asked.

"Suffice to say, I think that the four of us who came to this meeting here today would be the best people for making our strongest group. That includes Housen-kun, of course. Do you think I'm wrong about that?" said Yagami.

Yagami looked at Takahashi, Utomiya, and then at Housen as he walked away, with his gentle but piercing gaze.

"Even if we admit that Housen is capable, it's wrong to bring him into the fold. He's—" said Utomiya, before getting cut off.

"Well, we can take our time and carefully decide who will be in the group later. Don't you feel like it's enough that we manage to find a unified direction for the time being?" said Yagami.

"...All right," said Utomiya.

"If we work together, we can get first place. Let's shoot for that, for right now," said Yagami.

Although Utomiya was reluctant, he still found himself convinced and agreed to what Yagami had suggested. Afterward, they each went their separate ways.

5.1

AFTER CLASS THE NEXT DAY, at the café in Keyaki Mall.

"I hate that kind of watch. The way the second hand on the clock moves is so irritating, like tick-tock, tick-tock," said Amasawa, expressing her dislike for the wristwatch that Housen had on his left arm as he sat directly across from her.

"Ugh, shut the hell up. Do you even have any clue how much this thing is worth?" he snapped.

"Worth? Is that like a premium one or something? I don't have time to learn about stuff I hate," said Amasawa.

"Pft, this is why chicks're so stupid," said Housen with a smile, briefly stroking his watch.

"Hey, look here you... Well, whatever, forget it. So, what did you want?" asked Amasawa.

"I called you here to talk 'bout the upcoming island exam thing. Team up with me, Amasawa," said Housen.

"Oh, you want my help again, huh? And on the island too, hm. You thinking about something naughty?" said Amasawa.

"What?" replied Housen.

Even though Housen furrowed his brow and glared at Amasawa, she responded by flashing him a devilish grin, without an ounce of fear. Then, after slowly lowering her crossed legs, Amasawa quietly spread them wide.

"You wanna see my panties? You can peek from under the table if you want. Okay?" said Amasawa.

If he crawled under the table, he could see right between her spread legs. In the face of this temptation though, Housen leaned forward, placing his right elbow on the table.

"You seriously think I won't raise my hand against a girl?" said Housen.

"Oh no, I do think you would, absolutely. Don't worry. I figure you're the type who would have no problem beating on a girl without a second thought," said Amasawa.

"In that case, stop spoutin' stupid crap. It's a waste of time," said Housen.

"Oh, a waste of time, hm? Well, all right then, let's hear it. Your plan. Why are you inviting me?" asked Amasawa.

"Cause you got the kinda guts not to hesitate when it comes to gettin' Ayanokouji expelled," said Housen.

"Well, sure? I mean, there are lots of people who know about the bounty and aren't doing anything about it, or they're willing to take a shot but only half-heartedly. I figure that if there's two million at stake, you would do everything in your power to crush it. Isn't that normal?" said Amasawa, without showing any signs of shame or guilt whatsoever. "So, what am I gonna get in return for helping you? I'm not cheap, you know."

Just then, after Amasawa had asked Housen what she could get for this, a stern voice came from behind her.

"We will all be equal. I believe I said as much before."

That voice belonged to none other than Nanase, who had arrived at this gathering slightly late.

"Equal? Wow, you've got such a cute face, but your words sure aren't that sweet. You just came right out and said it. So, does Housen-kun appreciate the fact that you're not timid at all?" said Amasawa.

The three of them were now seated around the table.

"All right. So, Housen-kun was thinking of having us three together in a group. Who's the fourth person though?" said Amasawa.

"Don't need a fourth. The winner o' this island exam thing ain't gonna be anyone from the second-years or third-years. It's gonna be us three," said Housen.

"Wow, aren't you the confident one? But it does seem like there are lots of senior students who're tougher than the first-

years, don't you think?" said Amasawa.

"Doesn't matter. I'm gonna crush 'em all," said Housen.

"Well, supposing even if you're number one in terms of ability, Housen-kun... Didn't we first-years talk about cooperating? You know, all four classes together? If we're talking about the heavy hitters in Class D, then I'm pretty sure that you two would be the top picks for that, right?" Amasawa.

"I'm the one in charge of Class D. That's for me to decide. You get what I mean?" said Housen.

"Yeah, you mean that you're going to unashamedly send in a couple of small fries from Class D to represent us as our main forces, for the group. You're gonna be making enemies in all directions," teased Amasawa.

"That all depends on what you consider the criteria for our 'main forces' to be. If we send in students who have high academic or physical ability at the very least, then there won't be that much risk. Besides, if we place Housen-kun in that supposed strongest group, there will be problems," said Nanase.

"Yeah, sure seems like he doesn't exactly play well with others, that's for sure. In that sense, it's safer that we leave him out of that group. Anyway, back to the topic at hand, how much are you gonna give me?" said Amasawa.

"There aren't any points for us to give you. As I had just said earlier, we will be equals in this partnership. Of course, we will give you an equal share of the Private Points that Class D receives," replied Nanase, implicating adding, "Is that not enough to satisfy you?"

"But it's not like our level of contribution is necessarily equal though, is it? After all, I'm confident that I can contribute more than anyone else, on the uninhabited island or wherever. Seems like this exam is gonna take an awful lot of stamina. Nanase-chan, you're a little cutie. Can you keep up with me?" said Amasawa.

"Shall we test that?" replied Nanase, responding to Amasawa's provocations with one of her own.

Amasawa turned her gaze onto Housen for a moment, but then without warning, Amasawa extended her arm, reaching for Nanase's face. She was intending to catch Nanase off guard and surprise her with a slap to the face to rattle her. However, Nanase didn't show any hesitation either and quickly grabbed hold of Amasawa's arm as she extended it towards her.

"You're pretty bold, aren't you? Thinking you can test me right here," snapped Nanase, in a harsh tone.

"Oh wow. You can hold your own pretty good, huh? I just love strong girls," said Amasawa.

"You're not exactly normal either," said Nanase.

"Hm, maybe? Wanna test things a little more?" said Amasawa.

While one of them was smiling, the other was stone-faced. It was as if they were spending that time assessing each other's strength.

"You, me, and Nanase are gonna make a group of three. Got it?" said Housen.

"Well, I get that Nanase-chan can hold her own more or less, but I still can't think that we're really on equal terms, y'know."

"Why? Is that because the two of us are from Class D?" asked Nanase.

"I don't care about that. I mean, sure, it seems like the Private Points will be evenly split between everyone, sure. It's just... Well, since you're asking me to help you, I think need something extra for it," said Amasawa, putting her left hand into a fist, and then making the gesture of asking for a tip by pinching her thumb and index finger together and then rubbing them.

"I mean, it's only natural you'd wanna sell yourself for a high price if someone comes along and wants to pay you for your services, right?" added Amasawa.

"You sure got a hell of an ego. Man, you chicks, both you and Nanase, have more guts than Yagami and Takahashi," said Housen.

"Oh, don't you know? Girls these days are stronger than boys," said Amasawa.

"All right then, fine. I'll hear you out. What do you want, aside from the group rewards?" asked Housen.

"Getting first place, of course. But that's not the only important thing here," said Amasawa.

Then, Amasawa stopped making the tip gesture with her left hand, and brought her hand up to her neck with her thumb raised and pressed against her neck. Then she slowly slid her thumb from the right side of her neck to her left, in an execution gesture.

"I get everything. All the points from getting Ayanokouji-senpai expelled. That's my condition for helping you," said Amasawa.

"Pfft. Now you're really makin' some unreasonable demands. Those are terms I can't just sit back and agree to so easily," said Housen.

"Oh, so are you gonna turn me down then? But what are you going to do without me? If you don't have any allies you can trust aside from Nanase-chan, you're going to have a pretty tough time in this special exam, aren't you?" said Amasawa.

Just like Amasawa had suggested earlier, Housen had already been making enemies on all sides. Moreover, since the four classes were planning to work together, if Housen went ahead and just formed his own group aside from them, there was no way other students would be willing to give him a hand. At least no one besides an odd duck like Amasawa, that is.

"And besides, if I team up with Housen-kun, I'll be even more isolated in Class A than I already am. Isn't it only natural that I'd ask for appropriate compensation in exchange before I could say yes to you?" said Amasawa.

Housen and Amasawa exchanged long, hard looks.

"It's true that if you hand over the entire bounty to me for getting him expelled, that means you won't be getting a single point yourself. But you'll get all the credit for being the one who

got Ayanokouji-senpai expelled, Housen-kun. Isn't that good enough?" said Amasawa.

"There's no need to accept her conditions. If you think about our future, if Class A were to get an extra twenty million points, then—"

"Shut up, Nanase," said Housen, cutting Nanase off before she could finish giving her advice, as he continued to stare intently into Amasawa's eyes.

"I'll give you the bounty," said Housen.

"Thanks. You know, I think the fact you're not a stingy tightwad is actually pretty lovely," said Amasawa, getting up from her seat in a smooth motion.

"Looking forward to the exam!" she added.

Now that negotiations had been concluded, Amasawa had decided there wasn't any reason to stick around much longer and she left without batting an eye.

"Are you really okay with this?" asked Nanase.

"It's fine," replied Housen.

"I understand. It is your decision to make. But are you sure it's okay to trust Amasawa-san? I think she's the type of person who would betray her partners without losing any sleep over it," said Nanase.

"Trust? Don't just assume I'm trusting her. I don't trust her or you," said Housen.

"Then why did you decided to make a group with her?" asked Nanase.

"Cause she's different than the rest of the trash out there. There are parts of her I can't figure out. Just like with you," said Housen.

"I see. I suppose you might be right about that. But even so, twenty million points is an absurd condition," said Nanase.

"It was just a verbal agreement. I don't give a damn about it. As long as the fact remains clear that I'm the one who got Ayanokouji expelled, then I'll be gettin' those points, of course.

Doesn't matter to me if she comes cryin' about it later," said Housen.

Housen was saying that he never had any intention of honoring his promise from the beginning.

"You really are a terrible person," said Nanase.

"Don't matter if it's Ayanokouji, Ryuuuen, or anybody else. Anybody comes barin' their fangs at me, I'll crush 'em. I'm gettin' fed up, bein' all caught up in the crazy stupid rules at this school," said Housen, looking like he was having so much fun that he could hardly contain his laughter.

5.2

SUMMER VACATION was approaching. It was now July 6. With the exception of Akito, who was on headed over to his club activities, everyone in our group was gathered around my seat near the entrance to the classroom. That was because we had promised to meet up at Keisei's room later. As soon as we had left the classroom though, I was approached by Kushida, who called out to me.

"Ayanokouji-kun, may I have a moment?" asked Kushida.

"What's up?" I asked.

This was a bit unusual though, as I had been approached by Kushida less and less frequently as of late. Even though I sent her points once a month as per our agreement, all we did was make an exchange. We didn't engage in conversation. And since the number of Private Points each person in class received would normally be the same, there wasn't any need for students to thoroughly check every person's account for anything.

"To tell you the truth, a first-year student says that they want to meet with you, Ayanokouji-kun... Would right now be a bad time?" asked Kushida.

Kushida gave an apologetic glance to the Haruka and the others in the group, and then continued speaking.

"I think that it'll probably take about an hour or so. They asked me to help set up a meeting between you," she added.

"What's up, Kiyopon? Maybe some first-year girl is gonna tell you she's got the hots for you or something?" teased Haruka, her joke causing Airi to panic.

"H-huh whaaat?! R-really?!" wailed Airi.

"If it is true, then I feel like we can't allow him to go," concluded Haruka.

She was the one who arbitrarily suggested it was about a girl, and now she was arbitrarily telling me that she was not giving

me permission.

"...Is that true?" I asked, deciding that I ought to check with Kushida if it actually was the case, just to be on the safe side.

"Huh? U-uh, well... It was a boy who said that he wanted to meet with you... Sorry," said Kushida, apologizing to me with a somewhat uncomfortable look on her face.

Well, she really didn't need to apologize to me for that at all though. Even though I didn't think it was something like what Haruka suggested in the first place anyway, I was relieved to her Kushida tell me that.

"Well, it's fine for you to go, don'cha think? I mean, I think it's a good thing to have a little tête-à-tête with the new kids, right?" said Haruka.

"Yeah, I agree. Our circle of friends isn't particularly good at relationships with people, so it wouldn't be a bad idea for Kiyotaka to get to know some more first-years," replied Keisei.

Putting aside whatever this student's intentions were, Haruka and Keisei were saying it would be a good thing to at least have some face time, if only a little. Airi felt relieved that it wasn't anything romantic and appeared happy and willing to send me off. In that case, I supposed there wasn't any reason for me to refuse the offer.

"Okay. What am I supposed to do?" I asked.

"Oh, thank you! Um, well, I'll go ahead and tell him that you said it was okay, Ayanokouji-kun," replied Kushida.

Kushida then took out her phone and started dialing someone's number.

"Welp, we'll be heading out then already. We'll meet up with you later," said Haruka.

And with that brief exchange, the other members of the Ayanokouji Group went on back to the dormitory ahead of me.

"Sorry about that," said Kushida.

I'm guessing that the call must not have connected yet, because Kushida had apologized to me, with the phone still up

against her ear.

"It's no big deal. Nobody in my group is going to complain about something like this anyway," I replied.

Shortly afterward, the first-year boy seemed to have answered the call, and it connected.

"Oh, hello? Yes, Ayanokouji-kun says he'll meet up with you now. Okay. Yeah, okay. Oh, really? Well, we'll just wait here, then," said Kushida.

Kushida had finished her call in less than ten seconds.

"It seems like he's already headed this way. Let's just wait here so that we don't miss him then, okay?" said Kushida.

Apparently, this new student who wanted to meet with me had already set his signs on the second-year classrooms.

"It seems like you're already on pretty good terms with the new students, Kushida," I told her.

"Huh? Oh, well, it is already July, right? I think that's already plenty of time..." she replied.

"...Yeah, I suppose so," I replied.

It had already been more than three months since the new students had arrived at this school. As I gazed out the hallway window, I saw the sun shining high in the sky, with its shining, scorching hot rays hitting the ground down below. It was just about time for the first great chorus of the year of the cicadas to begin. So, I supposed that from my perspective as someone who has trouble communicating with others, it's "only" been three months, but for Kushida, that was more than enough time to connect with people, huh?

"Ayanokouji-kun, have you made any friends out of the new students?" asked Kushida.

She had said that in such a way that it sounded like it was only natural that I should or would have, but no, that wasn't the case.

"I still haven't met anyone I could call a friend, no," I replied.

"I-I see. Well... There's no need to rush. There's still lots of time," said Kushida.

Kushida had offered me kind, considerate words, but her assurance seemed somewhat hollow. There were certainly several first-year students that I've started talking to, sure. However, we hadn't developed any kind of relationship where we'd be contacting each other privately. My conversation with Kushida came to a sudden stop once the mood got awkward. Just when I was wondering about what I should talk to Kushida about next as we stood here in the hallway, the first-year student in question showed up.

"Kushida-senpai."

The student who appeared after just turning the corner was none other than Yagami Takuya, who had attended the same junior high as both Horikita and Kushida. Seeing Yagami's appearance as a chance for her to dispel the awkwardness hanging in the air, Kushida flashed a smile.

"Yagami-kun is the boy who said that he wanted to meet with you, Ayanokouji-kun," said Kushida.

"Hello, it's nice to meet you, Ayanokouji-senpai. Thank you for making the time to meet with me today," said Yagami.

Because he was a first-year student who was reaching out to me via Kushida, I had a certain idea of what he was like in mind.

"If I remember right... You're in Class 1-B, right?" I replied.

"Yes, that's exactly right. My name is Yagami Takuya."

As one of the bystanders who saw what happened during that fiasco before with the new students, I remember that I saw Yagami there, but I didn't end up speaking with him at all. This was the first time we had actually had a conversation, right now, before the start of summer. It was said that he had emerged as the leader of Class 1-B, but I had to wonder how far his influence has reached. He was affable, friendly, and had a cute look. That, combined with his prominent level of academic ability, made it seem like he was quite popular.

"Well, I suppose it might not be appropriate for us to have our conversation standing around here, but how would you feel about heading to my room? I actually have just gotten my hands on some rather rare black tea leaves that I had ordered. It takes a while to brew, but it is quite delicious," said Yagami, adding that if I would like some, he would love for me to partake.

I didn't normally drink black tea, so I was a little curious. But if we did that, then we might not be able to get this meeting completely wrapped up within the hour.

"Oh, sorry Yagami-kun. To tell you the truth, Ayanokouji-kun is supposed to be meeting up with some friends later. I think it would be better if the meeting could be kept under an hour, if possible..." said Kushida.

Kushida had guessed that Yagami's proposal would take some time, so she went ahead and gracefully rejected his offer on my behalf.

"I see. That's all right. Well then, how about we have our talk in the café at Keyaki Mall?" he suggested.

Although he seemed a bit disappointed, Yagami readily went along with it, having understood my situation.

"Well, let's be going then. Shall we, Ayanokouji-kun?" said Kushida.

I nodded in response, deciding to head over to Keyaki Mall together with Kushida and Yagami.

"Oh yes, that reminds me. The special exam on the uninhabited island is about to begin, right? Kushida-senpai, Ayanokouji-senpai, you had experienced a similar exam last year, right?" asked Yagami.

"Yes. It was a tough time," said Kushida.

"Could you possibly tell me what rules there were in that exam? And about what had happened then? We first-year students don't have the benefit of that experience, so we'd like to least gather some information," said Yagami.

"Well, I don't mind sharing that with you, but...I'm not too sure if it'll be useful. It does seem like the rules this year are

completely different from what they were last year," said Kushida.

"Yes, I understand. I've also heard that the exam that you had taken was different from the island exam that the third-year students had before as well," said Yagami.

"Oh yes, now that you mention it, the third-year students did have an uninhabited island exam too, didn't they?" said Kushida.

"From the sounds of it, they had also taken it in their first year, like you. It seems that before, this uninhabited island special exam had only been conducted once during a student's educational career at this school... Is this year an exception? Or has the rule changed starting this year?" asked Yagami.

Apparently, Yagami had a lot more information than we did.

"Do you find it strange? That I have information about the third-year students?" asked Yagami.

Yagami had directed his comment at me. I had been quietly listening up until that point.

"It's because I joined the student council. In doing so, I was able to ask President Nagumo, and he gave me new insights into the uninhabited island survival exam that had been held the year before last. At the time, students were divided into groups of four within their classes, and a total of twelve groups had competed with each other, apparently," said Yagami.



The rules for their uninhabited island survival exam were different from the rules that we had in ours before. It was basically safe to assume that, with few exceptions, no special exams would be the same as ones that came before.

"How did you spend your time on the island before? I was thinking that I might be able to get some clues from that," said Yagami.

Even if Kushida and I kept quiet about it and deliberately didn't tell Yagami, it was obvious that someone else was going to tell him anyway. There probably wasn't any need to pointlessly try and hide it from him. And besides, there was no way that Kushida wasn't going to answer, anyway. Then, just as expected, Kushida started to politely explain what happened during last year's island exam. I continued to listen in silence as I followed behind the two of them.

5.3

BY THE TIME that Kushida had finished telling Yagami about the island survival exam that we had before, the Keyaki Mall café was now just around the corner. We had expected that it would've been easy for us to have gotten seats at the café, but an unexpected situation had arisen.

"It's quite crowded, isn't it?" remarked Kushida.

The café was completely booked up. There were even students already waiting near the entrance, hoping for seats to open up.

"What should we do? Do you want to try looking at the second floor for a place to chat?" asked Kushida.

"Please just wait a moment," said Yagami.

He took out his phone with his left hand and started fiddling with it.

"I just checked with my friend. It seems like the café on the second floor is crowded too. Since we have to wait in either case, and there only are two parties in front of us, why not just sit tight here?" he suggested.

Apparently, his friend was already at the other café, and Yagami had just contacted him via text. He had made a quick decision to avoid wasting time. At the same time that we had told Yagami that we agreed with his decision, he noticed a student approaching from behind. Maybe it was because he figured that if we dawdled too much in putting our reservation down that another group would get in front of us, but he grabbed a pen with his free hand while his other was still clutching his phone and wrote down both the number of people in our group and his last name on the board at the café entrance, with rather nice penmanship. It was quite noticeable when compared to the scrawls of the other students who had written down their reservations above ours.

"Wow Yagami-kun, you have such nice handwriting!" exclaimed Kushida.

It was only natural for Kushida to compliment him like that, after seeing his penmanship. Yagami smiled, seemingly pleased about it. Then, the three of us sat down on chairs that were placed outside near the café, to wait our turn.

"Well, my grandfather taught me that even if I'm not capable in my studies, that I should at least write neatly," said Yagami.

"Your grandpa?" asked Kushida.

"Yes. My grandfather is a calligraphy instructor, you see," he replied.

"That's amazing. My handwriting isn't particularly neat," replied Kushida, humbly.

Kushida was being modest. As far as I could remember from the few times that I had seen her writing, I wouldn't say that it was bad at all. Though her handwriting wasn't as sophisticated as Yagami's, I remembered that she had neat penmanship and used rounded, girlish characters. Even so, this student Yagami didn't seem to be boastful about his own abilities. Even though he said something about not being capable academically earlier, his academic ability ranking in OAA was currently rated A, which was exceptionally high. He was an honors student without a hint of nastiness about him. That impression made me think that he was practically Yousuke's double. After a while, a table for four became available, so we put in our orders and took our seats.

"To tell you the truth... Well, you might be thinking that it's rather late for me to be mentioning this, but there's something I wanted to tell you, Ayanokouji-senpai. You already know about the special exam that had been given only to an extremely limited number of first-year students, right?" said Yagami.

Kushida listened to what Yagami was saying with a puzzled look on her face, probably because she hadn't received any explanation about this prior. This special exam that Yagami was talking about, which was limited to very few people, was where the school would pay out twenty million points to anyone who manages to get me expelled, of course. Considering the way that Yagami had said that though, it seemed like it wasn't just a rumor he heard about. He seemed to know about it as a real thing.

However, just to be sure, I decided to wait and see what he was going to say next. Without confirming nor denying what Yagami had said, I instead waited for him to continue speaking. In response to that, Yagami nodded.

"I had heard about it myself back in April. However, since I wasn't interested in setting someone up to fall like that to receive a reward, I didn't want to participate at all," said Yagami.

It was true that Yagami hadn't done anything to me at all. If he had been interested in getting the bounty, then it wouldn't have been surprising if we exchanged glances once or twice. However, Yagami never seemed to have even looked in my direction until recently.

"Why are you talking to me about this now?" I asked.

"I had recently heard that Housen-kun made a pre-emptive strike which ended in failure. And that his attempt was the cause of the wound on your left hand, Ayanokouji-senpai. I don't find the idea of him doing something inhumane unbelievable at all, but it seems like what he actually ended up doing went far beyond what I could even imagine," said Yagami.

"Well, I'm not going to deny that," I replied.

Kushida's gaze flickered back and forth between Yagami and me as she listened to our incomprehensible conversation, trying to make sense of what she was hearing. At the rate things were going, Yagami was likely going to spell everything out loud anyway.

"There is also...one more reason why I decided to talk to you, senpai," said Yagami.

However, Yagami didn't get into telling me about that one other reason right away.

"I had intended to simply stay on the sidelines as a bystander, for the sake of protecting the first-year students. However, if I leave things as they are, then Ayanokouji-senpai will... Well, I had determined that, depending on how this situation played out, there was a possibility that the damage could even extend to your classmates, Kushida-senpai. That's why I had asked

Kushida-senpai to set up this meeting so that I could tell you everything that I know," said Yagami.

Kushida, who had been listening to the conversation, raised her left hand apologetically, hoping to find out what was going on.

"Um, I'm sorry, but I really don't understand what you're talking about..." said Kushida, sheepishly.

"Would it be all right if I continued?" asked Yagami, turning to me.

"I don't have any right to stop you," I replied.

It seemed that Yagami had Kushida sit with us during this meeting because he was worried about her. Even if I told Yagami no, that it wouldn't be okay for him to talk about this here, if he ended up talking with Kushida later about it, without my knowledge, it wouldn't make a difference.

"In that case, I'll explain everything, starting from the beginning, so that you can understand the full story. It started with a call from the Student Council President Nagumo. We were instructed to choose one or two representatives from each class and to gather in the student council office in secret. In truth, it wasn't long after we had started school that we had been called in," said Yagami.

The key words "student council" stuck out in Yagami's story.

"The first-year students who had gathered there included Takahashi Osamu-kun and Ishigami Kyou-kun from Class A, me from Class B, Utomiya Riku-kun from Class C, and finally, Housen Kazuomi-kun and Nanase Tsubasa-san from Class D. A total of six people participated," said Yagami.

If that was true, then what he said was valuable information. It wasn't mere coincidence that those two people from Class 1-C came up and talked to me then. However, what concerned me most of all was that Amasawa's name wasn't on the list.

"The special exam that we were given was to get the second-year student Ayanokouji-senpai expelled," said Yagami.

"Huh?! Getting Ayanokouji-kun expelled?!" exclaimed Kushida, surprised, but still speaking in a quiet voice.

Yagami nodded and then continued speaking. As far as I could tell, Kushida wasn't acting suspicious or in any way that indicated she knew about this beforehand. She didn't seem to know anything.

"We were told to get it done by the start of the second semester at the latest, by any means necessary. We were also warned to not let anyone aside from the six of us find out about the contents of this special exam. Since Utomiya-kun and I were representing our classes alone though, we were each allowed to choose one classmate from our respective classes to talk to, to make things fair, but I still hadn't talked to anyone. There is still a possibility that Utomiya-kun may have talked to someone, though," said Yagami.

Meaning that at this point in time, six or seven of the first-year students were aware of this particular special exam.

"It was Nagumo-senpai, the student council president, who told the six of us that he would pay out twenty million points to the student who got Ayanokouji-senpai expelled," added Yagami.

"Th-that's an incredible number of points... H-how could the school approve something like that?" exclaimed Kushida.

Well, I supposed that anyone would have been shocked to have heard about this exam. The question of how much I could actually trust Yagami was something that was going to bother me for a while yet, but for the time being, it didn't seem like he's lying. On the other hand, if he was lying and those lies were exposed later, then the relationship that Yagami and I would turn sour. If the second-year D class were disadvantaged in some way, Kushida would probably be harmed as well.

"It's perfectly understandable why you'd be so surprised to hear this, Kushida-senpai. We didn't know much about this school ourselves back in April, but now we know much better. We understand that this special exam is certainly highly unusual. It was only because I had been able to make that determination that I had asked you to help me arrange this meeting," said Yagami.

After he had gotten through that much of his explanation, Yagami brought his cup close to his mouth, looking like he was

taking a moment to pause and catch his breath. Now that Kushida had come to learn about the connection between the twenty million points and getting me expelled, Kushida asked Yagami a question.

"Isn't it kind of strange though, that the student council president would hold his own special exam...?" she asked.

"Yes, I suppose so. Well, I think it's better to say that it's a matter of how I expressed the idea that is causing the confusion here. Although this has been called a 'special exam' for simplicity's sake, when you get down to it, I think it might be easier to think of this as a sort of challenge issued by Student Council President Nagumo to the first-year students," said Yagami.

There was a chance that Nagumo was involved in this matter. Horikita had the job of exploring that possibility. However, just when I thought that Nagumo himself wouldn't reveal his involvement so easily, the truth came out from an unexpected party, Yagami.

"Wh-why Ayanokouji-kun, though? Are there any other students that are being targeted like he is?" asked Kushida.

"Just Ayanokouji-senpai, as far as I have heard. As for the question of why him, I don't think there's any significant reason for it. President Nagumo said that he chose randomly from the second-year students. Which means that he simply drew one person out of 157 names," said Yagami.

I supposed that Yagami wouldn't have a way of understanding the full story as he didn't know about Nagumo's background. He didn't seem to even doubt the idea that I had been randomly selected. Of course, it wasn't like there was a zero percent chance that Nagumo had gone through the trouble of setting up some kind of lottery system and I had just been chosen by completely chance, but given the circumstances, I didn't think that was likely.

I had to wonder if Nagumo would go through the trouble of preparing twenty million points to deal with me. From what I had seen of him through now, I couldn't imagine that he was the type of guy to go that far. Well, no, to be more precise, I'm sure that he

would do anything if he decided he'd do it, but I wasn't sure that his opinion of me was high enough to warrant it.

"Assuming that this is a special exam initiated by the student council president personally, how could he have gotten the twenty million points?" I asked, prodding Yagami a little to find out what hidden possibilities could still be in store.

"Yes, that's a good question. I'm sorry to say this, but couldn't this all be a lie or a joke? I can't believe that he would put up twenty million points for such a puzzling exam," said Kushida, incredulous.

I had expected her to react that way. Twenty million points was just far too large a sum. If the student council president suddenly told you that he was going to pay out such a high amount, anyone would normally be suspicious.

"It certainly is a hefty sum, for sure. I can see now how difficult it would be to accumulate that many Private Points. But at that time, we first-year students had only just started here, and with him being a third-year student, student council president, and someone from Class A, we naturally trusted him more than any regular student. More importantly though, I suppose we naively thought that of course he would have that many points," said Yagami.

Although the amount of points the students got this year was lower than what we started with last year, the new students still all received 80,000 points upon entering the school. And that amount was deposited into their accounts every month. The dormitory was clean and well-equipped, and the Keyaki Mall was almost exclusively for the students' use. There was a wide variety of stores. For students coming here, it was like being tossed into a dream world. We had experienced firsthand the sensation of losing our idea of what money was worth ourselves, after first coming here last year.

"And the truth of the matter is, I had confirmed with my own eyes that he does have the twenty million points," said Yagami.

It wasn't strange at all that a man like Nagumo would have amassed such a vast sum.

"But didn't you find the idea of participating in a special that wasn't sanctioned by the school to be a little, well, uncomfortable?" asked Kushida.

"Putting aside the unpleasant nature of the assignment itself, no one really felt uncomfortable about the whole thing. I think that all the students aside from me were very open to it. They said that it was a legitimate special exam," said Yagami.

"I've never heard of the student council president issuing a special exam, though," said Kushida.

"Well, it wasn't because he trusted President Nagumo that we accepted the idea of the exam, though," said Yagami.

"Huh...?" replied Kushida.

"When the student council president told us about the exam, the Acting Director was present, as a witness," said Yagami.

And so, Tsukishiro, the person who had suspected was most likely to have been involved in this matter, had now come into play. The fact that Tsukishiro and Nagumo were working together and behind the twenty million points being put up had now been confirmed.

"In a situation like that, it would be entirely reasonable to accept what was said as a special exam without question, don't you think?" said Yagami.

"Yes, if the Acting Director was there... Yes, you're absolutely right," said Kushida.

A special exam to get a student expelled. Some students would find that idea outrageous and suspect something was up after hearing something like that. However, the fact that the Acting Director was present had drowned out those suspicions.

"That is all the information I have on the matter," said Yagami.

"Although I'm grateful that you told me all of this, you might have brought some danger on yourself by telling me," I told him.

This was immensely helpful advice for me, but there wasn't any benefit for Yagami.

"Will you be all right, Yagami-kun? If the fact you told us about this happened to get out, then..." said Kushida, trailing off.

"I'll be all right, Kushida-senpai. I didn't hear anything about any sort of penalty for telling other people about it," said Yagami, flashing a smile, ignoring the concerns.

"Besides, I'm already prepared for the hate that I'll be getting from the other first-years. We were destined to clash with each other sooner or later anyway," he added.

It seemed like he was fully prepared to meet the challenge, from the sound of it. Yagami Takuya of Class 1-B was most likely, fundamentally speaking, the type of person who adopted a nonaggressive defense policy. However, he might also make a pre-emptive strike out based on the principle of self-defense if the situation called for it. However, the extent to which Yagami was able to see the situation was unclear.

In a corner of the café, among the many students there, a female student occasionally glanced over in my direction repeatedly. She was seated directly behind Yagami, so he probably hadn't noticed her there. It was Tsubaki Sakurako, from Class 1-C. Not too long after we started our conversation, she showed up at the café and positioned herself perfectly amongst the crowd, observing us from her seat. She had her cell phone in her hand and appeared to be talking to someone.

Was she after me...? Or perhaps her intention was to monitor Yagami, who had been casually chatting with me, at length? In any case, Tsubaki now knew that Yagami and I had been in contact. Whether this was coincidence or an inevitability, this was not a desirable situation for Yagami. In the relatively small confines of this campus, it was difficult to avoid being watched, no matter what you did. Even if a student couldn't track a person on their own, they could cover a large area if their entire class were working together. This was also proof that the first-year students were engaged in their own battles.

"Please be careful, Ayanokouji-senpai. It's quite possible that there are other students who, like me, broke the rules by telling their friends about this special exam," said Yagami.

"Okay, with that in mind, who do you think I should watch out for then, Yagami?" I asked.

"Let's see. I suppose that if you really think about it, Housen-kun from Class 1-D is definitely someone you should be wary of. An opponent who completely disregards the rules when he comes after you can be quite troubling," said Yagami.

So, it sounded like Housen was perceived to be a dangerous person, even among the first-year students after all.

"However, if I had to name just one person to watch out for, then—"

Yagami was just about to say someone's name, but he seemed hesitant to finish his sentence.

"No, I think I'll stop here, actually," said Yagami.

"Huh? Why? I'm kind of curious," said Kushida.

Yagami let out a slight chuckle, and then responded.

"I feel like this isn't something I should talk about with you or the other students in your grade. If I mention the name of the name of the person that I'm wary of, then you'll naturally take notice of that person, right? I think that it is important, but I don't think it's fair. I am sorry that I had said that about Housen-kun earlier though," said Yagami.

It was true that Kushida and I would be wary if we were told that someone in one of the classes was a danger. We could also warn our class about whoever it was and prepare.

"Also, I'm not entirely sure yet still. I only have something of a hunch that this person is dangerous," admitted Yagami.

Yagami seemed to think that even rivals should fight fairly.

"I'll look into the matter during the next special exam, for the time being. If I find that this person really is a danger, then I will tell you about it then, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Yagami, promising to warn me after he confirmed the facts with his own two eyes.

"Please take care, Yagami-kun," said Kushida.

"Yes, I will. Oh, and also... I don't mind if it's after the uninhabited island exam is over, but I would like to make some

time to meet with you again, Kushida-senpai, just the two of us. There is something that I have to talk to you about," said Yagami.

"O-okay. Sure. What about, though...?" said Kushida.

Kushida had pretended like she didn't know what was going on by responding like that, but even someone like me, who was a bit slow on the uptake when it came to these kinds of things guessed that there was something. The way that Yagami looked at Kushida was different from how a student would normally look at an older student.

"In any case, the information you gave was very helpful, Yagami. I appreciate it," I told him.

"It's all right. I felt like it was ridiculous for you to be the only one at a disadvantage, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Yagami.

"I'd like to say thank you too, Yagami-kun. Really, you've been a major help," said Kushida.

"Just hearing you say that is reward enough for me. If Ayanokouji-senpai were to be expelled, it would inevitably cause your class to suffer a great deal of damage. And I really do want you to graduate from Class A too, Kushida-senpai," said Yagami.

There weren't many first-year students that I had spent a long time talking to like this. Out of all of them, Yagami seemed to be an exceptionally ordinary honors student, and nothing more. I had always been on my guard as I had interacted with various students, thinking that someone might be the White Room agent, but so far, he seemed to be the least unnatural first-year student with which I had interacted.

He hadn't really done anything in particular to me so far. Far from it. He has been quite generous in giving me helpful information. Of course, that didn't mean he was innocent. I wasn't going to rule him out, but if Yagami was the White Room agent, then I felt like he was an opponent that I really didn't want to deal with. I did have my doubts that someone raised in that facility could become so natural in such a brief period of time. Anyway, for the time being, I'd just make the most of the information that Yagami had graciously given to me.

"It looks like there are even more people here now. I've finished my piece, so if it's all right with you, I'll be going on ahead now. Please excuse me," said Yagami.

"Do you have something else going on?" asked Kushida.

"Oh no, I just want to avoid letting the other kids from my grade see me," said Yagami.

Though it was too late now, it was still the right idea. I thanked him once again, and then Yagami made his exit. After he left, I stayed behind with Kushida.

"Seems like you've got yourself a good kouhai there, Kushida," I remarked.

"Yeah. He's almost too good for me, really... But this really isn't the sort of development I was hoping for," said Kushida, tracing the rim of her cup with her index finger.

I didn't say anything aloud, but I already knew what Kushida was thinking about without really having to give it any thought. If Yagami had attended the same junior high that she went to, there was a possibility that he had known about her past.

"Yagami-kun knows," said Kushida.

Kushida simply came out and told me the answer to the question that I was curious about.

"Is that okay? For you to just come out and tell me that, I mean," I replied.

"Even if he didn't know, it wouldn't make a difference," said Kushida.

"Meaning—" I replied, before getting cut off.

"It means that I'll have to make him disappear as soon as possible," said Kushida.

When Kushida muttered those words, looking at me as she spoke, I saw that there was a kind of intense determination in her eyes. Yagami clearly seemed to adore Kushida, but despite that, she still viewed him as an enemy? It seemed like Kushida would never, ever look favorably upon anyone who knew about her past.

"It'll be harder to eliminate an underclassman compared to Horikita or me," I told her.

"I suppose that all depends on how you go about it," replied Kushida.

Judging from the way she said that, it sounded as though she already had a plan in mind.

"It's the people who think that they're so good, those who are so boastful of their excellence, who are the ones who get done in so easily. You and Horikita-san are no exception, Ayanokouji-kun," said Kushida.

"I thought we had agreed to a truce?" I replied.

"For now," said Kushida.

I hadn't really been planning to let my guard down to begin with, but Kushida seemed like she was especially motivated.

"At the moment I've been on something of a losing streak right though, so I'm going to just sit quietly. For now," said Kushida, pushing her chair back, showing me that she was ready to leave.

"See you later, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Yeah."

Since there was no reason for me to stop her, I simply watched Kushida go. What I had just learned now was that Kushida was working on some kind of strategy from behind the scenes.

5.4

AFTER PARTING WAYS with Yagami and Kushida, I headed over to the convenience store since I thought that I'd bring a little something with me for Keisei and the others when we met up. I also wanted to give the person who had been following me a at a safe distance a chance to make contact. I decided to buy some random snacks and several drinks.

"Um..." said a voice.

It was long and drawn-out. Just as I was about to pay for my items, Tsubaki from Class 1-C approached me from behind. I saw that she was holding some kind of lollipop in her hand, probably meant as some slapdash way of appearing like she had simply come into the store to buy something.

"Oh, Tsubaki. You need something from me?" I asked, without mentioning the fact that she was at the café.

"I want to talk to you about something. Could you wait outside for me?" she asked.

Tsubaki, looking somewhat listless, went ahead and paid for her candy. It was truly that we couldn't exactly have a conversation right at the register, so I decided to quietly wait outside the store. I had waited for a while, but there wasn't any sign of her coming out. When I turned around though, I saw that Tsubaki was simply looking at me while holding onto her phone and talking with someone. Wow, that was a pretty bold thing for her to do, making someone wait for her like that.

"Sorry I made you wait," said Tsubaki.

Tsubaki peeled the candy wrapper off with her delicate fingers as she started walking. She was headed in the direction of the dorms.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" I asked.

"There was something I wanted to tell you, Ayanokouji-senpai, the next time I saw you," said Tsubaki.

Okay, so she had been thinking there was something she wanted to tell me. What, though? I thought she would've stared getting into it right away, but she just kept licking her lollipop, not saying anything. Rather than being interested in me, it seemed like she was just paying attention to what was in front of her.

"Is it about Utomiya?" I asked.

When I said the name of the student I could think of just then, Tsubaki stopped licking her candy.

"Seems like I was right," I added.

"He said that he'd be right over," said Tsubaki.

So, the person she had been speaking to on the phone back in the café was her classmate Utomiya after all, huh? A brief time after Tsubaki had called him, Utomiya came walking this way. Utomiya gave a gentle nod as he met up with us.

"Sorry for calling you out to talk like this," said Utomiya.

"What in the world is this about?" I asked.

Was this about Yagami? Or was this perhaps about the special exam I've heard about?

"It's about Housen Kazuomi," said Utomiya.

What came out of his mouth though was the name of a student that I hadn't been expecting.

"Ayanokouji-senpai, you had partnered up with Housen during the special exam in April, right?" said Utomiya.

Back then, Tsubaki had been looking for a second-year student to partner up with. Utomiya had approached me to ask if I could partner up with her, but I had turned them down.

"I never imagined that your prior engagement was Housen," said Utomiya.

"Is it that surprising?" I asked.

"I'm sure that you're already well aware that Class D doesn't cooperate with others that easily. Even in this uninhabited island survival exam we have now, they've been entirely uncooperative, even up until the last minute," said Utomiya.

Housen should already know that there's no advantage in being isolated. Housen seemed like he was going to keep acting bullheadedly without backing down.

"And?" I asked.

"We want to catch him off guard and hit him with a surprise attack in this exam," said Utomiya.

His previously polite tone had become more aggressive, and his lips tightened.

"However, we don't understand what the exam is going to be about. And the rules aren't very clear either," I replied.

"Well... Yes, it's certainly true that there's no guarantee that we can lay any traps for the other groups or anything. But as long as the fact we're competing with one another is a definite, I'm sure that something along those lines is going to be involved," said Utomiya.

That interpretation of the situation was most definitely correct. The idea that groups would be fighting against other groups was a given.

"Housen doesn't have that many Private Points right now. Meaning, if he were to be eliminated during this exam, even considering the lighter penalties that first-year students get, Housen won't be able to pay up," said Utomiya.

In which case, Housen Kazuomi would unavoidably be expelled from Class 1-D.

"Are you saying that you want to get him expelled?" I asked.

"You bet your... I mean, yes, I do," said Utomiya.

Although he kept dropping his more polite tone and his word choices got more casual throughout our conversation, he answered without hesitation.

"Can I start by asking why?" I asked.

"A boy from Class 1-C got expelled. His name was Hatano. I'm guessing that Housen had something to do with it," said Utomiya.

I supposed if he was willing to throw out a name, then that meant he had collected a fair number of clues.

"So, this is payback then?" I asked.

"I'd be lying if I said that I didn't hold a grudge, of course. But the important thing is to make sure that no one else gets inadvertently expelled," said Utomiya.

"Yeah. Thanks to that, we lost a hundred Class Points," mumbled Tsubaki dryly, popping her candy back into her mouth.

"All right, I get the reason why, but what does this have to do with me?" I asked.

"Housen, fundamentally speaking, does not work together with anyone outside of his group. However, he worked with you, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Utomiya.

So, he thought that by reaching out and contacting me, he might find some kind of weakness of Housen's that he could exploit. Judging from Utomiya's attitude, it seemed like he really did want to defeat Housen. Tsubaki didn't seem to feel the same way, but I supposed that she was willing to cooperate with Utomiya. Otherwise, she wouldn't have functioned as a go-between to connect me with Utomiya.

"Please help me," said Utomiya.

"I can't really just say yes to that when I don't know what exactly we're going to be evaluated on in this exam," I replied.

"In that case, would you please at least consider the offer and keep it in mind? If you do help us to eliminate Housen at an early stage of the test and manage to get him expelled, then... When that happens, we will pay you reward you handsomely," said Utomiya.

He seemed to be offering to buy my services, but there more than a few things about this that I found difficult to swallow.

"Didn't you consider the possibility that maybe I'm on Housen's side? We might even have a decent relationship, considering that we were partners before. Didn't you think that there could have been a risk in telling me what you just did?" I asked.

In any case, he was divulging way too much information, without trying to protect himself at all.

"Well, that's—" said Utomiya, before suddenly stopping.

Utomiya then directed his attention over to Tsubaki for the first time during the course of our conversation. I followed suit, looking over in her direction as well. Her lollipop was starting to get smaller, and Tsubaki looked somewhat forlorn. Perhaps she hadn't realized that she had attracted the attention of both of us, but she just stared at her candy. Not too long afterward though, she opened her mouth to speak.

"Didn't you get the injury on your left hand during your altercation with Housen-kun though?" she remarked, proceeding to lick her candy again with the tip of her tongue.

"What makes you think that?" I asked.

"Because we were after the twenty-million-point reward, too," she replied, openly admitting to it without seeming to feel any guilt over it.

"I see. So, you were taking part in that special exam too then? I'm guessing that means when you approached me before, you were pretending to look for a partner?" I asked.

Even though Yagami had already given me information about their involvement, I pretended that I didn't know they had taken part. On the other hand, though, Tsubaki didn't mention anything at all about the fact that I had been in contact with Yagami.

"Yep, exactly," she answered.

"But even if I had partnered up with Tsubaki back then, there wasn't anything you could have done to have forced me to be expelled, right?" I asked.

While it was true that they could have gotten me expelled if Tsubaki had given up on the exam herself, that would've meant she would've been expelled, too.

"Probably can't answer that," said Tsubaki.

Up until this point, I had thought that out of the two of them, Utomiya had been the brains of the operation. However,

judging from how things looked now, I could see something that suggested that wasn't the case.

"I do apologize for that. However, we're no longer participating in that exam," said Utomiya.

"Why?" I asked.

"Even if we were able to get you expelled, Ayanokouji-senpai, word about it would spread throughout the school in the blink of an eye. And it would obviously make us and Class 2-D enemies then. It's only natural that your classmates would resent us for having pushed you out of the school," said Utomiya.

He was essentially saying that he had realized that fact now, precisely because his own ally was expelled due to Housen's actions.

"Okay then, in that case, wouldn't it be the same thing if you got Housen expelled?" I asked.

"I don't believe so. Housen's own class is afraid of him. In fact, I believe that many of his own classmates would rather see him gone," said Utomiya.

If you weren't worried about people holding a grudge against you, you could do whatever you wanted without hesitation, I supposed.

"Anyway, please keep my offer in mind. All we want is to defeat Housen," said Utomiya.

After he had reiterated that part specifically, Utomiya and Tsubaki left, heading towards the first-year students' dormitory. These students from Class 1-C didn't let me on to what they were thinking, neither this time they had reached out to me nor the last time. Even so, the question of their relevance to the White Room agent was still unclear. For the time being, I would stay on my guard, and keep in mind what they had told me about Housen.

5.5

HORIKITA HAD JOINED the student council, but even after officially becoming a member, I wasn't getting any new information. Personal opinions about Nagumo aside, it seemed like the student council operated smoothly. Things got set in motion over the weekend, when we were about to finish with task of forming groups after the first week. I had gotten a call from Vice President Kiriyma. That was how this got started.

Kiriyma had originally supported the previous student council president, Horikita Manabu, who had graduated last year. He had intended to stop Nagumo from running amok. But in the end, time had passed without the situation taking a turn for the better. Perhaps Kiriyma had given up too. At least that's what I had thought, but then he came up and said he wanted to meet with me personally, setting up an appointment.

Still, what in the world was he thinking, calling me out to talk in broad daylight after class on a weekday? If he wanted to keep this meeting a secret from Nagumo, he could have chosen to meet late at night or early in the morning. That wouldn't have been out of the ordinary. If he had been planning to act with caution, then he should have done that. I didn't bother to point that out to him though. I just agreed to his request.

After class, I went over to Keyaki Mall to meet up with Kiriyma.

"So, you came," said Kiriyma.

"What on Earth does the Vice President want with me?" I asked.

"Don't be in such a hurry to wrap this up. I'm going to ask you to stick around for a little while today," said Kiriyma, urging me to walk with him.

I proceeded to walk alongside him.

"The large-scale uninhabited island survival special exam is going to start at the end of this month. Are you prepared for it?"

he asked.

I was expecting him to talk about the student council, but what he brought up instead was the special exam.

"I just intend to do what I can. What about you, Vice President Kiriyma?" I asked.

"I've formed a group of three people, representing the three classes other than A," he replied.

In other words, he was trying to avoid a tough battle to shorten the gap between Class A and the rest. In the case of the third-year students, the gap in Class Points between Class A and the rest was even greater than what it was like in our grade. If the lower-level classes wanted to hold onto the possibility of turning the tables on Class A, it was necessary for them to snag the top spots in this exam with groups made up of their own respective classes.

"I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that if we, that is to say, third-year Class B, were going to make a comeback, we would absolutely need to take first place in this exam with a group made up students from our own class and only our own class. And that the only way we'll be able to make a win possible is if we continue to win the special exams that follow by an overwhelming margin. But that's just far too unrealistic," said Kiriyma.

I supposed that if miracles could happen so easily, then he wouldn't have been put into this predicament in this first place.

"I'm hoping to use this particular special exam to stage a personal battle with Nagumo," said Kiriyma.

"A personal battle?" I repeated.

"It has been quite a while since we had lost our battle with Nagumo and were demoted down to Class B. And now he's the student council president and has control of not just our entire grade, but of the entire school. It's safe to say that things have already been settled as a class," said Kiriyma.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. I think so, too," I replied.

The majority of the third-year students were following Nagumo now simply because they had given up on trying to get to

Class A.

"But speaking personally, I don't think that I'm inferior to Nagumo," said Kiriya.

The third-year Class B student known as Kiriya did have high scores in OAA. He had scores of B+ or better all around, and no apparent deficiencies. It was no wonder that he'd be so confident in himself. However, Nagumo Miyabi was even better in terms of overall ability. You could say that Nagumo's cocksure attitude was actually commensurate with his abilities.

But it was also true that OAA wasn't everything. There were some students who didn't demonstrate their full potential, and there were other students who had unique talents, like quick-wittedness or insight, which are difficult to express as numerical values and thus are not reflected in OAA. If Kiriya personally believed that he can beat Nagumo though, then he must have some chance of success.

"You can form groups of up to a maximum of six people, regardless of class. And in order to win, you need an eye for talented people that you need on your team, as well as the ability to actually bring them onto your team—In that respect, I don't think I'll lose to Nagumo," said Kiriya.

This was a special exam that had two distinct aspects. While you could also compete with other grade levels, you could also use this test as a way to fight people within your own grade. It seemed that this island survival exam was one of the few remaining chances that Kiriya had left.

"I understand where you're going with all this, but this really isn't something that you specifically needed to report to me about, is it?" I asked.

I couldn't imagine that there was any benefit for him in telling me all of this.

"I don't want you to get in the way," he replied.

"I'm not interested in your fight with the Student Council President," I answered.

"I understand that. What I'm trying to say is, I don't want any outsiders to do something that would hamper me."

"Outsiders?"

"I'm talking about Horikita Suzune. The person who just joined the student council," said Kiriyama.

"I see. It seems like you're seeing her as a hindrance, but just for your information, I sent her to join the student council based on the wishes of her older brother, the former Student Council President," I answered.

Maybe that no longer mattered in Kiriyama's mind anymore. Still, I decided to point that outright though, just to make sure.

"It's meaningless now. He only has a few months remaining as President, anyway. If there's anything that I can do from this point onward, it's not trying to remove him from his position, it's just to trying to settle the score, as individuals," said Kiriyama.

"Well, if that's what you want, Vice President Kiriyama, then why not just go ahead and do it?" I asked.

It wasn't odd at all for him to want to settle things properly, as individuals. The only question here was what this all had to do with me.

"The reason why you had Horikita-senpai's little sister to join the council was to keep an eye on Nagumo, right?" he asked.

"I'd be lying if I said that wasn't part of it at all, but the main reason for it was something else entirely. Just as Horikita herself said in front of President Nagumo before, it's so she could follow the same path that her older brother took," I replied.

"In that case, she's not going to try and get in Nagumo's way?" he asked.

"As long as Horikita doesn't think that Nagumo is an obstacle, no," I replied.

"That's not good enough. I want her to abandon any and all thoughts of trying to deal with Nagumo. Anything more will only lead to unnecessary conflict," said Kiriyama.

So, he was basically taking back what he said to me before and asking that things go back to how they were. Originally, I couldn't have cared less. But now, I just had a desire to see what Nagumo was going to do up close. If Horikita determined that what Nagumo was doing was wrong, she would most likely stand up to him. But it was a bit odd that Kiriyma was telling me not to let her do that, saying that it would be meaningless.

I listened to his warning and thought I'd give him a vague response just to keep things moving.

"I'll keep what you said in mind, Vice President Kiriyma," I replied.

Perhaps Kiriyma didn't like hearing such a non-committal answer because there were signs of disapproval in his eyes.

"I meant that as a polite, indirect way of saying, 'Don't do anything,'" said Kiriyma.

"I thought I was responding in a roundabout way too, saying that I understood what you meant," I replied.

"In that case, you're swearing to me right here and now that you are not going to do anything. Can I interpret what you said as such?" he asked.

"You can interpret what I said however you like, but I'm not saying anything," I answered.

As this pointless back-and-forth continued, the typically calm, collected Kiriyma now started to raise his tone a bit in anger.

"Nagumo had known, more or less, that I had been working with Horikita-senpai. But because I've been Nagumo's yes-man and doing everything he asks, he's just been keeping a low profile, quietly watching. Even something as simple as Horikita-senpai's little sister joining the council could be troublesome. And if she were to do something unnecessary—"

"Then it would put you in danger, Vice President Kiriyma?" I asked, finishing his sentence for him.

"...Yes, that's right."

So, that was the reason he had specifically called me up and giving me this stern warning. On the face of it, what he was doing out of concern for us. But in reality, it seemed to be coming more from a place of self-preservation. Of course, I wasn't saying that was a bad thing. I had no intention of voicing any complaints about the relationship between Nagumo and Kiriya, a relationship in which a winner and a loser had already been decided.

"Do you want that chance for anyone to graduate from Class A? What Nagumo had proposed?" I asked.

"I..." he stammered.

The former student council president, Horikita Manabu, held onto a policy based on the premise that students would win as an entire class. Well, no, that was actually the school's policy as a whole, until just this year. Going with that policy though makes it impossible to win against the third-year Class A, led by Nagumo. In truth, it was basically as though it had already been decided that Kiriya would be graduating from Class B.

However, if he followed Nagumo and won based on his own personal strengths, then this situation might change. If Kiriya was an exceptionally talented individual, then there was a possibility that he could rise to Class A. He said that he wanted to have a personal battle with Nagumo on the island, but in the end, he just wants to get to the top so that he can collect Private Points. He was just using this whole thing as a pretext so that Horikita and I wouldn't get in his way. That was all. In fact, he probably wasn't planning to do anything like throwing down the gauntlet at Nagumo's feet and issuing him a challenge.

"Is it so strange...to want to graduate from a Class?" he asked.

There was nothing strange about it. Kiriya continued speaking. I supposed he was saying this for the sake of protecting his own pride.

"What is the point of even coming to this school if you're going to graduate from a class other than A? I don't want to end up like those who had the talent but gave up the fight. I don't

want to go down that road. And I absolutely do not want to go down with the rest of the incompetent losers and freaks in Class B," said Kiriyma.

I wondered if Manabu would have been disappointed if he heard what Kiriyma was saying right now. Or would Manabu simply say that he had already known that Kiriyma had this weak side all along, from the beginning?

"At any rate, I think you understand what I'm trying to get at," said Kiriyma.

"Yes, I do, very well. I also understand why only you were present aside from Nagumo, Vice President, when Horikita had joined the student council, while the other student council members were introduced to her later," I replied.

He had been worried that I or Horikita might have said something unnecessary.

"You can say anything you—"

"Kiriyma."

While we were in the midst of our conversation, a voice called to Vice President Kiriyma from nearby. Although Kiriyma's name was called specifically, he didn't seem to react to it right away.

"Kiriyma. Don't you hear me?" said the voice, slightly louder than before.

"Ugh, speak of the devil..." muttered Kiriyma in a faint voice before turning to who had been calling him, somewhat begrudgingly.

What I looked myself, I saw that there was a female third-year student sitting down on the bench. She seemed to be relaxing, sitting with back against the bench, legs crossed, and arms outstretched. I compared the face of the person I saw there against the records in OAA, to see what her name and abilities were. So, looks like this was...Kiryuuin, from third-year Class B.

"What do you want?" asked Kiriyma.

They were supposed to be classmates, but Kiriyama's disgruntled look on his face wasn't changing when he turned towards her. These two didn't seem to be very compatible, from the looks of things.

"Fu fu. Well, it just looks like you're together with an interesting kouhai, so I thought I'd say hello," said Kiryuuin, directing her gaze over at me.

"Your name's Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, right? I've heard that you've become a bit of a celebrity after you got a perfect score on that tough math test," she added.

Before I could respond to her though, Kiriyama butted in, speaking in a raised tone.

"This has nothing to do with you, Kiryuuin," snapped Kiriyama.

He started to walk away, seemingly trying to put some distance between us and Kiryuuin.

"What are you doing, Ayanokouji? Let's go," he said, calling out to me when he noticed that I wasn't moving.

"You know, you're not going to get anything from spending time with a guy like him," said Kiryuuin.

It was like I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. With the rock and a hard place being two third-year students. Which side was the correct one to listen to? Well, to be completely honest, I didn't want to listen to either of them...

"It's far more meaningful for him to spend time with me rather than you," said Kiriyama.

"That's for Ayanokouji to decide, isn't it? Kiriyama, won't you please just hurry up and get out of here?" she replied with a scornful chuckle, as she still sat comfortably.

"Why don't you and I have a more meaningful conversation? Just the two of us," she added, turning to me.

"...Gr," huffed Kiriyama, through clenched teeth.

Kiryama seemed to dislike the fact that she was interrupting our conversation more so than the fact that she was teasing him.

"You can ignore that girl," said Kiriymama, issuing me a warning, his tone aggressive.

"She's a third-year student, though. Just like you, Vice President Kiriymama. So, I can't do that."

"...That's Kiryuuin. She's in Class B, same as me."

"I saw in the OAA app. She's a highly rated student, isn't she?"

"In terms of grades, yes. But Kiryuuin doesn't have anyone backing her up, like Nagumo does. She doesn't even have a single real friend."

Kiriymama was basically saying that there was nothing to worry about if we were to ignore her then.

"Hey now, don't compliment me so much. You're going to make me blush."

Even though he certainly wasn't complimenting her at all, Kiryuuin wore an audacious smile.

"If we were to compare her to somebody from your grade level, I'd say she's like Kouenji. Whatever you say, whatever you do, it's just a waste of time to try and engage with her," said Kiriymama.

Well, that was a name that I never expected to be heard as a point of comparison for someone. Kouenji had a peculiar personality, the likes of which you could say was one-in-a-million, but here was someone else just like him. Anyway, she did certainly seem to have a unique personality too. My curiosity had been piqued, but at the same time, I felt like it would be better for me to not get involved.

I did notice, however, that Kiryuuin's grades of academic ability and physical ability were both A+. She was the only student in our entire school, male or female, who had an A+ in both of those categories. Her societal contribution score wasn't necessarily that low at a C+. Her sole flaw was her adaptability score, which was rated D. If you simply looked at the scores, then you could say she was the best in our school.

"What's up? Aren't you coming?" she asked.

"Are you talking to me?" I replied.

"If you don't come with me, I'll just go with you instead. But are you okay with that, Kiriyama?" asked Kiryuuin.

"...This is exactly why I'm cursed to be stuck in Class B, because of people like you," said Kiriyama in a low voice.

"With exceptional classmates like her though, aren't you able to resist President Nagumo?" I asked.

"I just told you that she's exactly like Kouenji, didn't I? As a human being, she's a lost cause. She has not contributed to the class in the past three years in any way, other than focusing on her own performance. She's always only ever acted alone. She's like some foreign contamination in our class who just selfishly butts in when she wants to," said Kiriyama.

It was certainly true that looking solely at OAA, she had maintained an outstanding record. But I had never once heard her name from a third-party before. If she were someone that Nagumo or the recently graduated Horikita Manabu had been keeping an eye on, it wouldn't have been surprising if I had heard about her from them.

"Aw, thank you for the compliments, Kiriyama," said Kiryuuin, whispering directly into Kiriyama's ear.

"Ack?!"

Now that she had gotten up from the bench and was standing, I saw that she was unexpectedly tall. I think she was over 170 centimeters tall. Her extreme athleticism was also evident from her graceful, well-built body. I couldn't believe that there was a third-year student who gave off this sort of impression. It reminded me of something that Kiriyama had said in our conversation earlier. Something about how he was not wanting to go down with the rest of Class B, which was full of incompetent losers and freaks. I supposed that Kiryuuin was one of those freaks that he had referred to earlier.

"If you've got something to say, come out and say it," snapped Kiriyama.

"I intend to, of course. But you're in the way, Kiriyama," said Kiryuuin.

"...Fine, do whatever you want. I'm leaving," he replied in a huff.

It seemed like he had no intention of being around Kiryuuin, so Kiriyama decided to make his exit.

"Don't forget what I was just telling you, Ayanokouji. Depending on how this plays out, I might become your enemy too," said Kiriyama.

I received some friendly words of advice from the Vice President. Normally, I would have been leaving at this point myself, but this other person, Kiryuuin, was also from third-year Class B.

"Let's not stand while we have our little chat. Why not sit down?" said Kiryuuin, urging me to take a seat on the bench.

"Sure..." I replied.

I was hoping that I could be let go from here as soon as possible.

"So, what did you want to talk to me about?" I asked.

"Anything. If I can find out what kind of person you are, then that's plenty" said Kiryuuin.

"Find out what kind of person I am? Vice President Kiriyama said that you didn't really contribute to your class though, Kiryuuin-senpai. Doesn't that mean that you're not interested in what your classmates are like?" I asked.

"Being interested and cooperating are completely separate things, aren't they? There are some interesting people among my classmates, and sometimes I want to have a friendly conversation with someone, like what we're doing right now," said Kiryuuin.

I see. That's certainly true, I supposed.

"I'm not interested in the system here at this school of trying to reach Class A. It seems like the biggest selling point of it all is that if you graduate from Class A, you can go on to higher education anywhere you like or get a job anywhere, but I'm convinced that I can already do that with my own abilities

anyway. I chose to go to this school on a simple whim," said Kiryuuin.

Judging from what she was saying, she certainly did give off a similar impression to Kouenji. She had absolute, overwhelming confidence in herself. And she did receive an A+ in academic ability and physical ability, which supported that confidence.

"Would you have not chosen to come here, if you had known beforehand that this school's curriculum is designed around the assumption that you'd cooperate with other students?" I asked.

"No, I wouldn't say that. I like this school. In fact, I've never once felt dissatisfied about anything here, even once. The point system is also very pleasant," said Kiryuuin.

Kouenji seemed to be enjoying himself fully too, so I'm guessing he must also like this school, as well. Students who could manage to do anything on their own after graduation didn't need to cling to Class A.

"It seems like you don't mind being disliked by other people," I told her.

"Other people's evaluations don't mean anything to me," she answered, boldly and confidently, followed by a strange smile.

"I had wanted to ask you some questions, but it seems like you're the one asking me all the questions," she added.

Kiryuuin, as if she were switching from being on the defensive to going on the offensive, immediately went ahead and prompted me to speak.

"I think it's about time you tell me about yourself," said Kiryuuin.

"Why me, though? There are lots of academically gifted students here," I replied.

"A hunch. My intuition is telling me that this student who was passing by is no ordinary person," said Kiryuuin.

So, she was asking because of her instincts, with no real basis for anything whatsoever. I had already thought she and

Kouenji might be similar, but now they seemed like the same exact person.

"Are you planning to get first place on the uninhabited island survival exam?" she asked.

"There aren't any students who don't want to be first, are there? Except for people like you, Kiryuuin-senpai, I suppose," I answered.

"Putting aside first place, I am one of the people shooting for one of the top spots. If I get a high score, I can get Private Points. I'm the type of person who spends whatever she has on hand, so I'm always short on money," said Kiryuuin.

So, Class Points and Protection Points were secondary to her. In the end, it seemed like Kiryuuin was only participating in this exam to get Private Points.

"Nagumo and Kiriayama and the others are naturally hoping to get first. And I'm sure there are some quite competent underclassmen lined up as well, right? This upcoming special exam will be a battle to determine who gets first place in the school," said Kiryuuin.

"It certainly might be, yes," I replied.

The abilities needed in this exam weren't limited strictly to academic ability or physical ability. If this was a battle of overall ability, then you could say that was exactly what you needed.

"Whether or not my interest in you fades will depend on what you do on the island," said Kiryuuin.

"If I had to say anything in response to that, it's that I'd rather that you lose interest in me, senpai," I answered.

"I see. You say some intriguing things. I'm looking forward to fighting you, Ayanokouji," said Kiryuuin.

And with that, Kiriayama waved me away like she was trying to shoo away some small animal, signaling that I should leave.

"If you'll please excuse me," I stated, before walking away.

Although I had a meeting with a rather bizarre third-year student just now, one thing was for certain. If I wanted to get one

of the top spots in this upcoming exam, I was going to have to defeat Kiryuuin as well. And it looked as though she'd be just as troublesome as Nagumo and Kiriyma, or perhaps even more so.

5.6

EVEN AFTER Ayanokouji had left, Kiryuuin continued to stay put. Her daily routine was to simply relax and enjoy the day at her leisure, according to her own whims. In her line of sight, she saw a familiar head of blonde hair swaying about. Next to the owner of that blonde hair was Student Council Vice President Kiriymama, who had walked off just moments ago.

"Well, well, well! It looks the faithful dog has returned, and he's brought his master with him," said Kiryuuin.

"What...?" huffed Kiriymama.

"Well, if what I've said there is making you angry, it seems that it's because you had interpreted it a certain way, Kiriymama. I don't remember stating exactly who the faithful dog and master are between the two of you right here. I'm just saying this as a third-party, someone who doesn't know your situation. Why do I say this? Because you're the one who walked away earlier Kiriymama, and thus, you're the only one who fits the description of a faithful dog," she replied, as Kiriymama approached her with Nagumo standing beside him.

"What an irritating chick..." mumbled Kiriymama.

"That's a rather unpleasant thing to say, Kiriymama. It certainly doesn't sound like something a serious vice president should say," replied Kiryuuin.

"Nagumo, engaging with her is a waste of time. You already know this quite well," said Kiriymama.

"Yeah, I'm of the same opinion. Can the both of you please get out of my sight, immediately? This is just a waste of my precious time," said Kiryuuin.

"Who do you think you are? First of all, you—"

Nagumo cut in, gently tapping Kiriymama on the shoulder to cut him off.

"Kiryuuin, please don't wound my precious colleague like that," said Nagumo.

Nagumo then forced Kiriyma to back off and he stood in front of Kiryuuin.

"Oh, a precious colleague, hm? I didn't feel any kind of emotion from you when you said that, though," said Kiryuuin.

"That's just your imagination," said Nagumo.

"Now then, I wonder what business the student council president has with me? I had thought we wouldn't ever be speaking with one another again," said Kiryuuin.

"I don't want to stay around you for too long, if at all possible," said Nagumo, aggressively taking a seat on the bench right next to Kiryuuin.

"You're beautiful, but you're utterly lacking in charm. I'm only interested in women with charm, after all," added Nagumo, expressing that as the reason he didn't want to stick around.

"I do have charm. It's just that I haven't found the right gentleman that can draw it out," said Kiryuuin.

"If there's a man out there who can bring out your charm, I'd like to see him," said Nagumo.

"Me too. However, your tastes aside, why is it that I am not popular, hm?" asked Kiryuuin.

"It's because a woman who is too capable and too talented is difficult to handle. Unfortunately, I can't bring myself to like that kind of woman either," said Nagumo.

"I see. Well, in that case, I suppose that I'll never pass your standards. If the reason I haven't gotten a boyfriend yet at my age is because I'm just too good, then yes, I guess that does make sense," said Kiryuuin.

After enjoying a bit of meaningless conversation with Kiryuuin, Nagumo cut to the chase.

"I heard something from Kiriyma. I would have never imagined that you, who didn't show any admiration for neither

Horikita-senpai nor myself, would have been interested in in Ayanokouji. I was shocked when I heard about this," said Nagumo.

"And that's why you've come all the way over to talk to me? You must have a lot of free time on your hands, President," said Kiryuuin.

"I've finished my administrative work. I have some extra time right now," said Nagumo.

"It would appear that you've misunderstood something here. I'm not entirely indifferent to people, Nagumo. I make it a point to talk to people who rouse my interest at least once. You and Horikita Manabu had caught my interest before," said Kiryuuin, gently stroking Nagumo's bangs.

"It seems like you never slack off when it comes to taking excellent care of your hair. I can tell that you take better care of it than I, a woman, do mine. It's no wonder you're popular, President. Say, has your love life been fruitful over these past three years?" said Kiryuuin.

"You've never been with a man before. How would you know anything about love?" countered Nagumo.

"While it's certainly true that I don't have any experience in that arena, it's nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, some could say that it actually makes me more valuable, don't you agree?" said Kiryuuin.

"Seems like you still have absurd ideas, as always," replied Nagumo.

Kiryuin and Nagumo once again veered off into a bizarre tangent, but Nagumo proceeded to steer the conversation back towards the topic at hand.

"So, what did you think of Ayanokouji? Is he someone deserving of holding your attention?" asked Nagumo.

"I just paid him some lip service because he's a cute underclassman. But that was all," said Kiryuuin.

"That was all? Does that mean that you don't feel impressed with him?" asked Nagumo.

"I'm putting that question on hold for the time being. We did have a brief face-to-face conversation, but I didn't get a grasp on his true abilities. Though you could say that in itself is a type of skill, I suppose. Anyway, he is more entertaining to me than you, President, who I've lost interest in," said Kiryuuin.

"You're the only person in our grade level who can talk to me with that much sass," said Nagumo.

Nagumo then drew in close, with his mouth near Kiryuuin's ear, and lowered his voice to a whisper.

"If you think that you're better than me, I'm more than happy to correct that vain idea you seem to have in your head. Understand?" he threatened quietly.

Nagumo issued her a challenge, effectively issuing a challenge for the upcoming special exam on the island.

"When you lose, what you lose is incalculable, President. It seems like you're misunderstanding something here. But it's not as though I'm underestimating you. I don't have the outstanding leadership skills that you and Horikita Manabu possess, nor do I have any talent for making friends. In fact, I've never even had anyone that I could truly call a friend. Right?" said Kiryuuin.

Nagumo moved his face away from Kiryuuin's ear, seeming somewhat bored.

"However, in other matters, it's different," said Kiryuuin.

Although Nagumo had started to pull back from Kiryuuin, their faces were less than forty centimeters apart. Nagumo shot Kiryuuin a sharp glare.

"Are you saying that I'm inferior to you in some respects?" he asked.

"Well now, can you state with absolute certainty that there are no areas in which you are inferior?" countered Kiryuuin.

"I have given you several chances to test that, and you have done nothing. And the result is that you've ended up in B," said Nagumo.

Up until this point, Nagumo had competed against Kiriyama and Kiryuuin's class via the numerous special exams. But never once did Kiryuuin actually take part and cooperate with her class. And as a result, her class was demoted from A to B.

"It's certainly true that if you only look at those results, I have been thoroughly crushed," said Kiryuuin.

Kiryama continued to glare at Kiryuuin, who was pleasantly enjoying the conversation, but Kiriyama didn't interrupt at all.

"Well, I know that you're not the kind of person who really cares about A or B though," said Nagumo.

Nagumo then got up from the bench, signaling that this was the end of their conversation.

"Sorry for bothering you, Kiryuuin. Enjoy the remainder of your time here at this school," said Nagumo, preparing himself to leave.

"I had said earlier that I was going to put the question of whether or not Ayanokouji was someone I'm impressed with on hold. I do think he's an interesting student," said Kiryuuin.

"What?" asked Nagumo.

"That was the answer you were hoping to hear from me about Ayanokouji, wasn't it?" asked Kiryuuin.

One of the reasons why Nagumo had come over to talk with Kiryuuin was because he wanted to find out what she thought about Ayanokouji.

"Interesting? I would think that this personality is far from interesting. Don't you think?" said Nagumo.

Kiryuuin smiled, as if she were saying, "See, you've taken the bait, after all."

"Well, you know how the proverb goes, 'a skilled hawk hides its talons.' Isn't that right? I had heard he had gotten a perfect score on a rather difficult mathematics test," said Kiryuuin.

"Sure, there are people out there who hide their talents because they don't want to stand out. I've beaten all of them though. And I don't think that they were all that interesting," said

Nagumo, then directing his gaze over at Kiriyama, who had been waiting for him while standing some distance away.

"If I had to say anything, it's his vibe, I suppose. He has a different vibe than you and Horikita Manabu," said Kiryuuin.

"Well, that's rather abstract," said Nagumo.

"Well then, why don't you test him and see?" asked Kiryuuin.

"Of course, I intend to. Maybe I'll get to see what he's capable of during the uninhabited island survival exam," said Nagumo.

"You seem like you've been bored ever since Horikita Manabu graduated. Will this underclassman be a good playmate for you? If you're serious about this challenge, you'll most definitely get first place in the island text, Nagumo," said Kiryuuin.

"Obviously, I'm going to take first. Or perhaps Kiriyama will, since he's been dying to compete with me. But we're going to need one more group if we're going to take all three top spots in the exam, aren't we? You are going to take on that role, Kiryuuin. I will provide you with some useful companions, if necessary," said Nagumo.

And then, Nagumo touched on the main reason he had reached out to Kiryuuin today. Kiryuuin smiled, as if to say that she understood what he was asking.

"I see. So, you met up with me because you're seeking my help," said Kiryuuin.

"You might think that I'd let the younger students at least take third place, but I'm not that nice," said Nagumo.

"You have countless pawns at your disposal that you can move about the board, don't you? You don't need to rely on me," said Kiryuuin.

"Meaning that you're not willing to do this?" asked Nagumo.

"Somewhere in the top fifty percent is fine for now. Sorry for wasting your time," said Kiryuuin.

Nagumo, as if he had already known that she was going to answer like that, had turned his head to look off far into the

distance.

"You really are that kind of person, I suppose. I thought I'd try talking to you, as someone from my grade, but it seems like it was a waste of my time," said Nagumo, his statement suggesting that he was going to leave now.

He walked over to where Kiriyama stood.

"Since you came all the way here to talk to me, I'll give you one piece of advice," said Kiryuuin.

"You're going to give me advice? Sorry, but I don't need that from someone beneath me," said Nagumo.

"By that logic, you wouldn't be able to get advice from anyone," said Kiryuuin.

Nagumo, with his back turned to Kiryuuin, let out a scornful chuckle. Kiryuuin continued speaking.

"Well then, just thinking of what I'm about to say as me speaking to myself. You should be looking ahead, not paying attention to the younger students. If you focus on the younger students behind you, you'll going to be in for a lot of pain," said Kiryuuin.

"What a boring monologue," said Nagumo.

Nagumo seemed to have decided that standing around any longer would've been a waste, so he left.

Chapter 6: Invitation

THE PRELIMINARY BATTLE for the uninhabited island special exam was heating up all over the place more and more, day by day. There were now only a few days left in this preliminary period. The group-building process, which would be over in about a week's time, had reached its climax, with more than 90 percent of the school's students now part of groups made up of two or more people, therefore putting them into cooperative relationships where they were effectively sharing their lot with another. Students who had invited me to join them, like Ishizaki and Matsushita, eventually gave up on trying to recruit me as time went on.

That was perfectly natural though, because the longer they delayed in forming their own group, the more danger they would be putting themselves in. I wondered what the remaining students, now less than 10 percent of the student body, would decide to do by next Friday. Just as I was thinking about that, I received an e-mail. It was just after nine thirty in the morning on Saturday now. The sender of the message was none other than Ishizaki, from Class 2-B.

While I had thought to myself how I had been getting contacted by him a lot lately, I noticed that the content of his message seemed different than usual. It seemed like he wanted me to come to the café because Ryuuen was calling for me. The absence of the words "if possible" in his message seemed to suggest that this was a mandatory meeting, from the looks of it.

I could refuse of course, but then I supposed that Ishizaki would get the blame. I had plans to meet up with the Ayanokouji Group today, but fortunately enough, our meeting time was set for one in the afternoon. So doing something now shouldn't create a conflict. After I had finished getting ready and left for Keyaki Mall, fifteen minutes had already passed. Considering that it had only taken me fifteen minutes to get ready, I figured that I should be able to make it time to meet with them.

The group-building process was now in its final stages, which meant that Ryuuuen, who had been silent up until this point, was about to make his move. At this current point in time, Ryuuuen had still not yet formed a group with anyone. It wasn't as though there was no chance that he might try and recruit me, but in truth, I saw that as highly unlikely. While I kept that line of thinking in mind, I was curious to see what exactly he was going to talk to me about, aside from that.

While I was on my way over to Keyaki Mall, I ran into Kanzaki, who seemed to be on his way back from the convenience store. I saw two 2-liter bottles peeking out of a plastic bag that he was holding.

"You're heading over to the mall at this hour?" asked Kanzaki.

"There's not going to be any time to take it easy once the island exam starts, after all," I replied.

I had a little time, so I came to a stop so that we could chat.

"It seems like your class is making a lot of progress in forming groups, but you're still solo, huh?" he asked.

"Well, unlike the other students, I don't have a lot of friends," I answered.

I had thought I'd try and play things off with a joke, but Kanzaki remained stone-faced.

"I'm guessing that you are Horikita are essentially the reserve players meant to substitute in to help the students who are struggling in Class D, right? After all, exceptional people can get results no matter what group they're in," said Kanzaki.

I supposed that's the only way that Kanzaki could see it, since he had a much higher opinion of me now and had been wary of me for a while now.

"I'm guessing that you're taking on a similar role yourself then, Kanzaki, since you're still alone yourself for the time being," I replied.

Kanzaki, like me, hadn't yet teamed up with anyone, and was still acting on his own in his class.

"Ayanokouji, Ichinose seems to place a lot of trust in you. Is it really okay for us to trust you?" he asked.

"If I say that you can trust me, would you?" I asked in return.

"I could consider it, at the very least," he replied.

As the air around the plastic bottles in his bag cooled, water droplets appeared on the outside of the bottles from condensation. This midsummer heat, which easily exceeded 30 degrees Celsius, was bearing down on us without mercy.

"Even though our alliance has been called off, I don't consider Ichinose an enemy," I replied, telling Kanzaki the truth.

"That statement can mean different things depending on how you interpret it. Do you think of Class C as your enemy?" he asked.

I had thought that I could deftly fool him, but it seemed like Kanzaki's wariness was several steps sharper than I had imagined.

"Kanzaki, what is it you want me to say?" I asked in return.

He seemed different from usual now. The vibe I was getting from him now seemed to suggest that he was in a hurry to do something. If I anticipated where he was coming from and what it was that he was trying to get out of me, then I could see what he was aiming for a little bit more.

"Are you trying to get some kind of statement out of me, and planning to make Ichinose hear it?" I asked.

"...You're a lot sharper than Ichinose thinks... Well, no, you're a sharper guy than both of us think. Far more. Since the first time we met, I had this strange feeling that there was something about you I couldn't put my finger on. But now I can finally see it. You're the one behind Class D's rapid success," said Kanzaki.

"Who can say?" I replied.

"In that case, I'm going to come out and say it. I want to ask you for your help. Ichinose trusts you quite a lot. Which is exactly why I want you to tell her that as she is now, she's not good enough," said Kanzaki.

When he took a step closer to me, closing the distance between us, a drop of water dripped out of the plastic bag and onto the ground.

"And you think Ichinose will change the way she thinks if I do that?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied.

"Sorry, but I can't help with that. I would like to see how Ichinose handles things."

"Meaning that you want to see us, your enemies, fall into ruin?" said Kanzaki.

"Well, I guess it's not wrong for you to read into what I said that deeply, but..." I replied, trailing off.

I thought for a moment. No one knew at this point in time what fate awaited Ichinose, of course. However, when she did finally plummet to the bottom, then...

I hesitated for a moment, wondering whether I should tell Kanzaki what I was thinking, but quickly decided against it. The situation wouldn't improve even if I did something unnecessary here, which I hadn't taken into account. In fact, it would probably only lead to the introduction of an unnecessary foreign contaminant.

"Fundamentally speaking, each person has to do things for the sake of their own class. Isn't that right?" I told him.

"...Yes, I suppose so. Asking you for help might have been an unfair move on my part," said Kanzaki, seeming as though he was reflecting on what he had asked earlier.

I nodded my head in response.

"I had intended to come up with an answer on my own. But I thought that if I could avoid putting that into action, and if there was an easier option available, I could have taken that easy way out instead," said Kanzaki, before walking back to the dormitory.

I'm sure that he was panicking because he didn't actually have any leeway in his class anymore, but they did also say that a cornered rat will bite a cat. I'm sure that Kanzaki could also stand

in our way as a formidable opponent in the upcoming special exam.

6.1

I ARRIVED AT THE CAFÉ in the mall a little ahead of the time we were supposed to meet. While I was finishing up paying for my drink, I saw two guys I'd normally never expect to see together seated by one another. One of them was Ryuuen, the very same person who had asked me to come here today. And the other was...

"You mentioned one more person would be coming. So you were referring to Ayanokouji then?" said Katsuragi Kouhei, from Class 2-A.

He directed his gaze toward me with a rigid expression on his face. I wouldn't say that Ryuuen and Katsuragi were necessarily like oil and water, but the two of them were by no means on good terms with one another.

"What kind of meeting is this supposed to be, anyway?" I asked.

"What, you plannin' on standin' while we talk? Take a seat," said Ryuuen, with an odd smirk on his face.

I did as Ryuuen had instructed, sitting down in an empty chair. There was a unique atmosphere in the air here, the likes of which I had never experienced before.

"I knew there was something different about you, compared to the average student, but it seems you have even more hidden talents than I imagined, Ayanokouji. To think you would get a perfect score on the mathematics test," marveled Katsuragi, who I hadn't spoken to since we started our second year, immediately bringing up my math score.

"Ku ku. Come now, Katsuragi, don't admire him too much. That's all ancient history," said Ryuuen.

"Ancient history? You sure seem relaxed even though there's an unexpectedly powerful enemy in your midst. Are you that exhilarated by defeating Ichinose and being promoted to Class B?" said Katsuragi.

"Save it. Ichinose is self-destructing all on her own. She ain't even close to bein' on my radar," said Ryuuuen.

Sure enough, this entirely unexpected pairing was already causing the mood to sour. Things were looking tense.

"...And? I'd like to know why you called me here," said Katsuragi.

That confirmed Ryuuuen was indeed the instigator of this meeting, so I waited along with Katsuragi for him to speak.

"What're ya rushin' me for? Go on, relax a little," said Ryuuuen.

"There's no way I can relax. If people see me with you, that alone will cause me trouble," said Katsuragi.

He was concerned about being seen by people around us, so it wasn't strange that he was urging Ryuuuen to get to the point. Even though it was the morning of a day with no classes, there were sure to be more than a few students watching. If students from our grade level saw us, they wouldn't be able to hide their shock.

"What is Class A after in the next special exam?" asked Ryuuuen.

"What are they after? The same thing that everyone is, surely," said Katsuragi.

"Are you gonna try and grab all the Class Points yourself? Or somethin' else? That's the question. From what I can tell from OAA, you've mostly been formin' groups with Class C. But looks like Kitou's on his own. Plus, Ichinose, Shibata, and Sakayanagi bein' together just smells fishy to me, no matter how ya look at it. You guys workin' together?" asked Ryuuuen.

I had been curious about that too. Aside from the group of three that Ryuuuen had mentioned specifically, Hashimoto and Kamuro from Class A had formed a group with one of Class C's best and brightest students, Ninomiya. Then, on top of that, there was the fact that the "One More" card, which Amikura had originally, was now in the hands of Hashimoto from Class A. I couldn't imagine that was all mere coincidence.

"You're free to interpret the situation however you wish, but I cannot confirm anything," said Katsuragi.

"I ain't looking for any of this diplomatic back-and-forth crap. Gimme some honest answers," said Ryuuen.

"In that case, I'll give you an answer that's easy for you to understand. I do not intend to tell you a single thing," said Katsuragi, clearly and decisively.

Even though Katsuragi and Sakayanagi had opposed each other, he naturally demonstrated that there was no way he was going to share confidential information about his class with Ryuuen, an enemy.

"It is only during the day on which the test begins that you will know how Sakayanagi intends to fight this battle. No one will know anything of her strategy until she says something herself. If you really must know, then you just have to ask her directly," he added.

"Oh, so you don't know simply because she doesn't trust ya, huh?" said Ryuuen.

"That might be the case," said Katsuragi.

As Ryuuen himself had said, information didn't necessarily trickle down to Katsuragi. He had mentioned earlier that Katsuragi and Sakayanagi were at opposing ends, but actually, it was more that Katsuragi was the sole person in Class A who wasn't part of Sakayanagi's faction. That fact was so well-known that I didn't even need to bother asking to check.

In any case, this whole conversation so far had been nothing more than the opening act.

"How the mighty have fallen, eh, Katsuragi? This time last year, you were a worthy playmate. But now you're just a shadow of your former self. You're the same as the rest of the garbage. Guess that's just the end of the road for somebody whose faction lost out, huh?" said Ryuuen.

"If I recall, you got worked over by Ishizaki once yourself," Katsuragi fired back.

"Come on, don't ya wanna crawl your way back up now too? I mean, that dude who was holding you back, Totsuka, is gone now, right?" prodded Ryuuen.

Suddenly, Katsuragi slammed his right fist down on the table. Yahiko had idolized Katsuragi. When Ryuuen mentioned his name, Katsuragi, who had remained calm up until this point, let his anger show through.

"If your goal was to make me angry, then you've succeeded, Ryuuen. Satisfied?" asked Katsuragi.

"What? Aw, still can't get those widdle feewings out of your system? I'm kinda relieved," said Ryuuen.

He clapped his hands together three times, giving Katsuragi a mocking round of applause. He then continued.

"Don't ya think it'd be an interestin' turn of events if we could get Sakayanagi expelled in the next special exam?"

"...What?" asked Katsuragi.

"If she's gone, then Class A's gonna be without a leader, obviously. If that happens, you can get to bein' in charge," said Ryuuen.

"I don't know what it is you're plotting, but that's impossible. Supposing even if you managed to defeat her on the island somehow, she has ample Private Points, enough to save herself. And on top of that, if the situation called for it, she could use her Protection Point anyway," argued Katsuragi.

Getting Sakayanagi expelled would be an extremely arduous task, considering she had funds and a Protection Point.

"Yeah, it's true that if we're gonna get her kicked out of school, we're gonna need to hit her at least twice. Well, I'm just kiddin' about the island exam thing, anyway. That was a joke. Survivin' on the island's gonna be about clawing your way up on your own power, not knockin' down your enemies," said Ryuuen.



I could he was starting to get closer to the main reason he'd set up this meeting, little by little.

"The rewards for first through third place would give me enough points to get within striking distance of Class A, but the rules are a bit tricky. So I thought I'd do a little something to take care of that beforehand," said Ryuuuen.

"And that's why you called Ayanokouji and I here?" asked Katsuragi.

"You got it," said Ryuuuen.

Whatever this strategy was, Katsuragi wasn't going to easily agree to go along with it. Though I was sure he had strong feelings about Sakayanagi, making an enemy of her would essentially mean defying Class A, which he was still a part of. Maybe it would have been a different story if this were happening at the start when Katsuragi and Sakayanagi were vying for supremacy in their class, but doing something of the sort at this juncture would only hurt him.

"Even so, I'm pretty curious 'bout why Ichinose teamed up with her. Did Sakayanagi manage to win her over with her smooth talk? Or was teamin' up with an incompetent loser like Ichinose the only thing Sakayanagi could even think of? Whaddya think?" asked Ryuuuen.

"I have no way of knowing, and it's none of my business. And besides, if Sakayanagi heard what you just said, I'm sure she'd throw it right back in your face. There aren't exactly that many people willing to work with you, after all. You're a problem child," said Katsuragi, responding in a manner that didn't show antagonism towards Sakayanagi, but was rather like an ally of hers.

"Well, in that case, I'd say that everyone here is a 'problem child,'" said Ryuuuen.

All three of us were simply acting alone right now. None of us had grouped up with anyone. However, why would Ryuuuen deliberately try to aggravate Katsuragi? No matter how much Ryuuuen tried to stoke his feelings of hostility toward Sakayanagi, it

was obvious from the way things were going that Katsuragi wasn't going to betray her that easily. Or perhaps... Was Ryuuen doing this to confirm once and for all that Katsuragi wouldn't sell Sakayanagi out? Just to be sure?

"All right, Katsuragi. Y'know, the way you're so pointlessly honest and upright, it ain't bad," said Ryuuen.

"You won't get anything from trying to agitate me, Ryuuen," said Katsuragi.

At this point, Ryuuen must have finally decided to get down to business, for he adjusted himself in his seat, sinking back into his chair.

"One of the most important things in this upcoming special exam is that we don't get any of our Class Points snatched away by anybody else. I ain't exactly hopin' to let the first-years or third-years line their pockets with our points. That'd suck. So, to make sure that doesn't happen, I figure I need to have at least some allies, right? Like a minimum number of 'em. Because you wouldn't have enough power to win it all alone, with just what you got in your own class," said Ryuuen.

He had contacted us to make a proposal at a time when everyone was almost finished with forming groups.

"If I got roped into a group with some small-timers from my class, well, let's just say I'd rather fight it out on my own. Be better that way. But if I could pull in some talent from outside my class, then that's a different story," said Ryuuen.

He flashed an unsettling smile and stared at Katsuragi.

"I can't believe what I'm hearing. Are you actually saying that you want me to work with you?" asked Katsuragi.

"Not just you. The guy zonin' out over there while listenin' to our conversation, too. Ayanokouji," said Ryuuen.

His gaze now fell in my direction.

"...Me too?" I asked.

"I wouldn't call ya out here for no reason, would I?" snapped Ryuuen.

I'd thought it unlikely something like this would happen. I had honestly never expected he'd be asking me to work with him.

"I refuse. Even though Class A would be getting a portion of the rewards as well, I have no intention of working with someone like you," said Katsuragi.

"Well, now that's quite a hasty decision. You ain't gonna hear everythin' I have to say?" said Ryuuuen.

"There's no need. But... Why did you ask Ayanokouji to come? I'd like to hear the reason for that," said Katsuragi.

"Whaddya mean, why?" asked Ryuuuen.

"It was surprising that he got a perfect score in the mathematics section of the test on the special exam we were given at the end of April. It is certainly true that he possesses remarkable ability, I recognize that. However, can you really say that he's necessary for you to win?" asked Katsuragi.

Although Katsuragi had immediately refused to cooperate with Ryuuuen, he did seem to harbor some doubts about his strategy. It seemed he remained unconvinced about its efficacy, considering that he had formulated something with me in mind.

"What, you're thinkin' that I came up with some kinda half-baked plan or somethin'?" asked Ryuuuen.

"Yes, I do. By bringing Ayanokouji into this, that means that you split the Class Point rewards three ways. If you're going to invite me—someone from Class A—anyway, you could say it would be a wiser course of action for you to include Kitou in the group. If it is absolutely necessary for you to include people from three different classes, Kanzaki from Class C is still on his own. I would say that he takes priority over Ayanokouji, at the very least," said Katsuragi.

He proposed suitable candidates for Ryuuuen to consider, almost as though he were an advisor.

"I guess someone who doesn't know wouldn't understand. Figures. But I'm positive I made the right choice. Ain't that right, Ayanokouji?" said Ryuuuen.

"I don't know what you mean." I shrugged my shoulders to express that I didn't understand the reason why I had been invited here, echoing Katsuragi's sentiment.

"Dude, come on. Your acting sucks. Knock it off already. You're the one who beat me down and shut me up before, after all," said Ryuuen, without any care for what was convenient for me in this situation.

Although what he'd just said could have been taken as a joke, Katsuragi wasn't going to stop with such a simple conclusion.

"He shut you up? ...Is that really true?" he asked, turning to me and then back to Ryuuen, looking to confirm what the truth of the matter was.

"Yeah man, I got my ass beat pretty bad. Even decided to quit school altogether back then, thanks to that," said Ryuuen.

Now that Katsuragi had heard that much, he was probably starting to connect the dots in his mind, linking this to other things he knew about. If he connected what he just heard to the fact that Ryuuen had disappeared from the stage for a time, then it would be easy for him to imagine that it was true.

"Admit it, Ayanokouji. Even if you keep tryin' to hide it from Katsuragi, I'm just gonna keep on talkin' about it anyway," said Ryuuen.

It was almost as though he were trying to threaten me by spilling all this unnecessary information right now.

"If I admit to it, do you think I'll cooperate with you?" I asked.

"Well, I guess it wouldn't be that easy. Like with Katsuragi over here," said Ryuuen.

Katsuragi, after listening to Ryuuen and I go back and forth, let out a sigh.

"I'm still not convinced by what you've just said. I can't believe that Ayanokouji defeated you. Besides, I already said that if you have three classes work together, even if you get first place, that still means we'll only be getting a hundred Class Points each."

You won't be able to close the gap between you and your current target, Class A, at all," said Katsuragi.

Katsuragi had strong doubts about the significance of this particular group's existence.

"Oh yeah, dude, I totally forgot about that. Man, you are definitely qualified to be an adviser," said Ryuuen with a grin, shifting his gaze back towards Katsuragi.

Even in this situation, Ryuuen wasn't letting up. He continued to act like a fool and messed around.

"I see... Well, I was wondering why you would put forward such an inefficient proposal, suggesting three classes team up, and make such an outlandish claim about you being defeated by Ayanokouji. But it seems you never intended to have a serious discussion in the first place," said Katsuragi.

He rose from his seat, clearly intending to leave now that he'd realized Ryuuen had been fooling around during this entire conversation.

"A serious discussion, eh? Come on, you knew that it was going to be this way from the beginning. But you still came. What, did they ask you to spy on me for Class A or somethin'?" asked Ryuuen.

Katsuragi had responded to Ryuuen's invitation, which he could have ignored. Surely, there must have been a reason why he did that.

"You're a dead man, and you're lookin' for a chance to come back to life. Ain't that right?" said Ryuuen.

Totsuka Yahiko, someone who was very loyal to Katsuragi, had been expelled thanks to Sakayanagi. Ryuuen was trying to confirm whether or not Katsuragi had truly forgiven her for what happened.

"Whether I am or I'm not, that has absolutely nothing to do with you," said Katsuragi.

"In any case, you did come all the way here. Listen to everythin' I've got to say," said Ryuuen.

"No matter what you say, I am not going to work with you in any way, shape, or form. It is true that I'm in a somewhat contentious relationship with Sakayanagi, but I do not wish to cause any trouble for my classmates. There is no way I could do something like that," said Katsuragi.

Ryuuuen started applauding him once again, amused at what he had heard. It looked like he wasn't doing it to mock him, but rather like he had been waiting for Katsuragi to say something like that.

"You don't want to cause trouble for your class, eh? Did you forget about the fact that since the island exam last year, you Class A folks have been rather industriously sendin' over large sums of points my way every month, as part of our contract?" said Ryuuuen.

Katsuragi, still standing, directed his gaze back towards Ryuuuen.

"It's a fair contract. We received 200 points from your class. Class A is merely paying back our loan, nothing more. Everything I have done has been to help Class A establish a commanding lead. It was useful, to that end," said Katsuragi.

"Yeah, sure, that's true. If you're only lookin' at the numbers, that is. But aren't the folks in your class takin' some psychological damage every month? I'm sure they're askin' themselves, 'Why do we have to share our Private Points?' Right?" said Ryuuuen.

People are surprisingly greedy creatures. Even when things went exactly in accordance with how we'd planned they would, we would start to feel dissatisfied. Month after month, Ryuuuen continued to bleed them dry, squeezing a number of points equal to 20,000 yen per person from their class. Even though there was one person gone from Class A now, that still meant a total of, essentially, 780,000 yen for the entire class.

That meant that an equivalent of nine point thirty-six million yen per year was going straight into Ryuuuen's pockets. If that amount had been going to someone Class A was friendly with, that would've been better. But I imagined it didn't feel good at all to be financially supporting an enemy leader who stood in opposition to Class A. In addition, the person who signed the contract was not

Sakayanagi, the leader of the class, but Katsuragi, who had retreated into the shadows.

"Guessin' you must be feelin' pretty uncomfortable. Having that debt loomin' over ya, and not bein' able to get your revenge," said Ryuuen.

"So... So what of it?" Katsuragi shouted back, once again rising to anger.

He shot Ryuuen a look like he was about to throttle him. Ryuuen looked into Katsuragi's eyes, and after seeming like he had become sure of something, he spoke up once more.

"Come to Class B, Katsuragi."

Ryuuen made a rather bold invitation. Katsuragi must have paused to think, because he suddenly stopped for a moment, seeming as though he'd nearly forgotten how angry he felt.

"What a farce. You think I'm going to go to Class B?" said Katsuragi.

"I'll give you the cash you need, of course," said Ryuuen.

"Even if you have the number of points needed for such a thing, why on earth should I go to Class B? Do you think I would willingly throw away my status of being in Class A?" said Katsuragi.

"I'm gonna overthrow Sakayanagi in the not-too-distant future. When I do, her class is gonna fall. Meaning that bein' in the current Class A is gonna be worthless. Right?" said Ryuuen.

If Sakayanagi, the leader of the class, were gone, then it was certainly true that it'd be more difficult for her class to keep fighting on the front lines.

"How many points do you have on you?" asked Ryuuen.

"...About one point eight million," said Katsuragi.

"Hot damn, that's quite a lot of points you've got there. Well, even if you're dead and decomposing, I guess you are still from Class A, huh?" said Ryuuen.

Even still, what Katsuragi had on hand was still a far cry from twenty million. Even with the money that he had deposited into his account every month by the school, and the money that he was

getting from Class A, Ryuuen's account could only be growing by a small amount— just 800,000 per month. If Katsuragi were to ask Ryuuen if he had, say, ten million points on him, I'm sure that would put this discussion in a precarious state.

Ryuuen, knowing that he would most likely get rebuffed otherwise, took out a sheet of paper and placed it on the table.

"You remember seein' this? It's the contract you signed last year," said Ryuuen.

"...Yes, I do."

"After negotiatin' with Sakayanagi, I've decided to release ya from the contract for five million," said Ryuuen.

Although that was a substantial number of points, if you simply calculated the amount he would be paid until graduation with the contract in place, that would come out to around ten million points. On top of that, the psychological burden of having to continuously hand points over to Ryuuen would be no more. No matter how you considered it, Sakayanagi's proposal benefited Ryuuen.

Of course, if Sakayanagi saw that Ryuuen was willing to call off the contract for a large number of Private Points all at once, she could probably predict what Ryuuen was going to do with those points. Considering what this upcoming test was about, those points would be essential to forming the best groups or for buying up the most powerful cards. However, even though Sakayanagi knew the risks, you might say she had just agreed to a proposal that would give Ryuuen an overwhelming edge.

Still, if I were in Sakayanagi's position, I would have agreed to Ryuuen's proposal too.

"Did you not tell her that you'd be using these points to take me out of Class A?" asked Katsuragi.

"Do you really think that she would've accepted my offer if I had told her?" said Ryuuen.

"...Well, considering who Sakayanagi is, she most likely would, yes," said Katsuragi.

He recognized that there was no way that Sakayanagi would reject a proposal that could only benefit her.

"You're never gonna see a chance like this come knockin' again, Katsuragi," said Ryuuен.

This was the story of how the contract that had bound Katsuragi had been rendered null and void, and how that money was in turn used to buy Katsuragi. Meaning, in other words, that Ryuuен had paid a considerable sum of money, twenty million, to buy the person named Katsuragi Kouhei. This also meant that Katsuragi would be allowed to confront Sakayanagi openly now.

"Why... Why would you go this far for someone like me?" asked Katsuragi.

"Ku ku. Wow, you've got a pretty low opinion of yourself, eh, Katsuragi? Well, it's definitely not a small price tag on you, that's for sure," said Ryuuен.

In the end, all Ryuuен wanted to do was defeat Class A. Supposing even if he were to defeat Sakayanagi and get her expelled, if Katsuragi remained in Class A, that wouldn't be a favorable turn of events for Ryuuен. If Katsuragi, someone who strongly prioritized defense, resumed command as leader of the class, then there was no getting around the fact that Class A would transform into a near-impenetrable fortress.

However, if Katsuragi were taken out of the picture first, and then Sakayanagi was defeated afterward, Class A would collapse all at once. That was probably why Ryuuен was willing to spare no expense to make sure that happened. Ryuuен must have also fully appreciated Katsuragi's prominent level of ability as an individual. His overall ability was quite high in OAA, and if Katsuragi were to join Class B right now, he'd be the best in their class.

"There's the five million for nullifyin' the contract, plus what you have on hand. The remainder of the points we need to bring ya over has already been collected from the rest of the class. I've forced our folks into poverty to bring ya over to our side," said Ryuuен.

If thirty-nine people saved up their points, just between May and July alone, they would accumulate nearly six point five million

Private Points. After that, all you would need to do is gather the remainder, which would be less than 200,000 per person. Of course, Class B's funds would be temporarily depleted, but it wasn't a high price to pay at all if you could manage to snatch away one of the top-ranked students.

Ryuuuen took out another slip of paper: a contract that he had prepared ahead of time. On that paper were lines detailing an arrangement that Ryuuuen would use the money provided for Katsuragi to be transferred over to Class B.

"Hurry up and sign it. There are several conditions for using the twenty million to have someone transfer classes, y'know. Nobody can force a particular person to change classes or anythin'. The person has to declare that they're changin' classes voluntarily and using their own funds," said Ryuuuen.

The contract was meant to prevent Katsuragi from just taking the points and running after he was given the large sum, or from using it for other purposes. Well, if Katsuragi did take the points and spent that large sum on whatever he wanted, I'm sure that the school would suspect him of fraud. In other words, the purpose of this contract was not to prevent Katsuragi from doing something dishonest. It was a contract meant to prevent him from changing his mind.

"You seem serious about this," said Katsuragi.

"Hey, good news for you, eh, Katsuragi? It's precisely because you've been on your own until today that I was willin' to invite you," said Ryuuuen.

Ryuuuen was saying that Katsuragi had grouped up with someone, then they wouldn't be having this conversation.

"Just accept this as your fate," said Ryuuuen.

After standing for a while in complete silence, Katsuragi sat back down in his chair, almost as though he had resigned himself to this turn of events. Ryuuuen had splendidly managed to draw out Katsuragi's desire for revenge, which he had kept hidden deep down, and successfully managed to bring Katsuragi over to his team. Now, Katsuragi had been brought under Ryuuuen's banner. One thing for sure was that this was most definitely a big plus for

Ryuuen's class. The gap between his class and Class A was definitely closing. Katsuragi slowly signed the contract.

"I don't mind that you're bringing me into your class, but what is you want, exactly? You don't mind if I give you my honest opinion on matters?" said Katsuragi.

"Do whatever you want. I'm sure your hardheaded opinions could be useful once in a while, I guess," said Ryuuen, after he had received the signed contract back from Katsuragi.

And so, a precedent was set. An individual had moved from one class to another, something which had never happened in this school before. And what's more, this person wasn't transferring into Class A; they were going to Class B. You could say that the fact that these two things overlapped in this case was the result of coincidence. Ryuuen had the kind of strength where he could gather up the required number of Private Points simply by commanding his classmates, since he had total control over them. Then there was the fact that the person he was inviting, Katsuragi, had been isolated in Class A, was feeling dissatisfied with the current leader, and was harboring a desire for revenge.

If there was any cause for concern for them, it would be the fact that that everyone in Class B would need to fight for dear life in the upcoming island exam. Only a limited few Class B students could afford to pay the penalty.

"By the way, Ayanokouji, what are you doin'?" asked Ryuuen suspiciously, watching me pour some water into the remaining one-fifth of my coffee that was still in my cup.

"Huh?" I asked in return. "Oh, well, I was just wondering what the coffee would taste like if I diluted it by about three or four times the amount."

After I honestly answered his question, Ryuuen and Katsuragi looked even more perplexed than before.

"...You're a strange one, Ayanokouji," said Katsuragi.

A slightly harsh comment. He sounded somewhat creeped out.

"So what are you planning to do with Ayanokouji then? You asked him to take part in this discussion too, after all. If you include a student from Class D in the group, that means we'll be splitting the reward two ways," said Katsuragi.

"No one said anythin' 'bout inviting him into a group," said Ryuuuen.

"In that case, what are you hoping to get from him?" asked Katsuragi.

"The Trials and Tribulations card he got," said Ryuuuen, mentioning the name of the card that I had received. He turned to me. "Sell it to me."

I had been wondering what he needed my help with. So that was what this was about.

"Considering that you just paid a lot of points to bring Katsuragi into your class, I'm guessing your funds must be pretty low right now. Can you get enough points to pay for it?" I asked.

"I can manage to pull together 'bout 500,000 or so. That should be enough, right?" said Ryuuuen.

This certainly seemed like my only chance to get rid of the Trials and Tribulations card. It wasn't the most profitable transaction by any stretch, but at the very least, I could manage to get some points for Kei.

"I have one condition. Have the student in your class with the Half Off card trade it for the Free Ride card that one of the students in my class has. If you accept that condition, then I'm willing to sell it to you," I answered.

Even if Kei couldn't manage to get into a group of six people on the island, and even if she were hit with a penalty, she should be able to save herself and pay out the one million points if she used the Half Off card. Being able to ensure her safety was a critical point.

"Ku ku, all right, it's settled then. Half Off card, eh? Well, that's just perfect. Ain't it, Katsuragi?" said Ryuuuen.

"I won't have many points on hand, anyway. There's no point in me hanging on to the Half Off card myself," said Katsuragi.

From the sound of things, Katsuragi had been given the Half Off card. If Ryuuuen got first place while holding onto the Trials and Tribulations card, he could get 450 Class Points all in one go. The 1,000 Class Point mark was in sight for Class B.

6.2

IT WAS NOW July sixteenth. The time that we had been given to create groups was soon going to run out. While I was getting ready for the day that morning, I received a phone call. It was from Ishizaki.

"Yo, Ayanokouji. Morning, dude," said Ishizaki.

"It's pretty unusual for me to call get an actual phone call from you," I replied.

"Hey, uh, you know how we're almost outta time to make groups? I wanted to chat with you a bit about that," said Ishizaki.

"Is it about Nishino? It seems like she still hasn't partnered up with anyone since yesterday," I answered.

I hadn't checked in the OAA app this morning yet though, so I supposed it was possible that the situation might have changed.

"Oh, we couldn't find anybody to partner up with her in our own class in the end. So, we finally went to Ichinose for help. So, we've got Tsube from Class C paired up with Nishino," said Ishizaki.

Tsube Hitomi from Class 2-C, eh? She was an exceptionally capable student with ratings of B or better in both academic and physical ability. She'd be a good asset.

"Glad to hear it," I replied.

"Yeah dude. Now almost everybody is in a group, with at least two or more people, but, uh..." said Ishizaki trailing off.

There was a student from Class B who still hadn't joined a group.

"I'm guessing this is about Ibuki," I said in reply.

"Yeah. She's still on her own. I was wonderin', do you got anybody who'd partner up with her?" said Ishizaki.

"It is risky to try and tackle this exam by yourself. I can understand that you feel like you need to do something about this," I told him.

I could tell from how Ishizaki sounded over the phone that he had tried and failed to convince her to partner up with someone, multiple times.

"Hold on a second. I might have an idea," I added.

"Seriously? Anyway, sorry for buggin' ya about this so early, dude," said Ishizaki.

I told Ishizaki that I'd call him back later and I hung up. Then I decided to get in touch with someone that I thought might partner up with Ibuki. Fortunately, that person hadn't left the dormitory yet, so we decided to meet up in the lobby. After I had taken the elevator down and got to the lobby, I noticed that Horikita arrived shortly afterward, getting off the next one that came down. Horikita was one of the few students who hadn't shown any sign of trying to team up with anyone yet. She was the person I had arranged to meet.

"What are you planning on doing about your group?" I asked.

"It's too late for anything now. I'm not going to do anything. I don't have any intention of trying to make one now. Given that the maximum number of people who can be in a group is six, it's not a bad idea to try and go it alone," said Horikita.

"I understand that you're doing this so that you can play things by ear and adapt to any situation that might come up, but in the unlikely event that you get sick or hurt, you'll be disqualified. You'll get expelled since you can't pay the hefty penalty fine," I told her.

I knew that I really didn't need to come out and warn her about all of that, but still...

"I think that it's necessary to be prepared to take on that level of risk. Isn't that the same reason you're not currently grouped up with anyone either?" said Horikita.

"Even so, the risks I'm taking on are different than yours," I told her.

"What's the difference?" she asked.

"You fell ill during the island exam last year," I told her.

"I can't believe you're bringing up something that happened a year ago. Everyone gets sick sometimes," argued Horikita.

"That's true. But you were sick in bed with a fever for a while in the winter too. That's twice in a year," I replied.

"Okay, but even though you just so happened to never miss any days last year, how can you know for sure you won't get sick?" she argued.

"When it comes to the issue of taking care of myself, I'm confident I can handle myself better than you," I told her.

When I presented the fact that I had perfect attendance, Horikita could only agree.

"All right. Yes, it's true that when it comes to self-management, you are better than me. I admit it. But even if that's something you're arguing is a cause for concern, I—"

Horikita looked me in the eye and calmed down her tone, which had gotten somewhat heated.

"If you understand, then that's good. I had no intention of objecting to your plan from the start anyway," I said, cutting her off.

You had to make sure that you were taking care of yourself. As long as she was well aware of that, then that was fine.

"But still, there's no changing the fact that it is dangerous to act alone," I added.

"I know," she replied.

"There are only three people in our class who haven't joined a group yet: you, me, and Kouenji. Everyone else is in a group of at least two people. If possible, you should form a group of two to give yourself some insurance," I told her.

"As you said, the only other people in our class aside from me are you and Kouenji. Which means that there's no way I can form a group," she argued.

"Only if you're trying to partner with us, people from your class," I answered.

"Are there any girls left who haven't formed a group?" she asked.

"There's one I can think of," I answered.

"And who is that?" asked Horikita in return.

"Ibuki, from Class 2-B. Have you not been looking at OAA?" I asked.

"Come to think of it, the last time I checked, she was still alone, I suppose," said Horikita.

"Ishizaki called me. He sounded pretty worried about the fact that Ibuki hasn't paired up with anyone. How about working together with her for this special exam, Horikita?" I asked.

"Me and Ibuki-san?" she asked.

"With a group of two girls, you can merge with another group later. How about at least hearing what Ibuki has to say?" I asked.

"Well, it's true that having some form of insurance would be better, I suppose... All right. Let's go hear her out then," said Horikita.

Maybe it was because Horikita felt like she couldn't completely disregard the offer out of hand, but she agreed to at least meet with Ibuki. I contacted Ishizaki and asked him to make some time for us during lunch today.

6.3

DURING OUR LUNCH BREAK, I brought Horikita over to where we were supposed to meet with Ishizaki.

"Yo, Ayanokouji! Over here!" he shouted, practically jumping up and down as he waved after spotting me from afar.

Standing next to him was Ibuki, arms crossed, and looking very displeased as she glared at us.

"Did she agree to this?" said Horikita.

"From the look on her face, I'm not so sure," I answered.

Ibuki seemed like she was in a bad mood even though we were supposed to be talking about possibly getting her a group. I guess I should assume that Ishizaki had brought her here without giving her a detailed explanation of what was going on.

"Hurry up dude, come over!" shouted Ishizaki, hopping up and down excitedly.

"You seem to be rather close friends with him," said Horikita, sounding a little put off by Ishizaki's attitude.

"He's a good guy," I replied.

"Even so, I don't want to get too close to him," said Horikita.

Ishizaki was similar to Sudou in the sense that they were hotheaded, passionate guys, but Ishizaki was also different in his own way.

"What in the hell is going on? Why are Ayanokouji and Horikita here?" snapped Ibuki.

So, Ishizaki hadn't told her anything after all, huh? Horikita and I exchanged glances. It felt like letting Ishizaki handle the talking here might lead to problems.

"Actually, there's something we wanted to discuss, so we asked Ishizaki to get in touch with you, Ibuki," I said, starting to explain our situation, since I figured that we didn't really have any other choice.

"And?" she replied.

"Are you planning on taking on this upcoming special exam by yourself?" I asked.

"That's my choice," said Ibuki flatly, as if she were saying that there was no point in talking about this.

"I told ya a buncha times already though, it's better to have a group," said Ishizaki.

"I don't need a group," snapped Ibuki.

"Well, 'kay, you say that you don't need a group, but the truth is there ain't anybody who wants to partner up with you," said Ishizaki.

Ishizaki threw in some unnecessary comments. Was he trying to help? Or just throw a wrench into things? I shot him a look, trying to tell him with my eyes to keep quiet.

"Huh? What's up, Ayanokouji?" he asked.

But...Ishizaki apparently didn't get the message because he responded by asking me a question instead.

"Nothing. By the way, Horikita's in the same boat. She hasn't found a group either, Ibuki," I said, turning back to Ibuki.

"So?" she huffed.

"If you don't make a group for the upcoming exam, you'll be at a pretty big disadvantage. Even if you don't make a group of three, if you at least form a group of two people, in the worst-case scenario that one of you gets eliminated, the other person can still keep going," I told her.

That should be enough to make her understand what I was trying to get at.

"And we don't have much time left to make groups," I added.

"So what? Are you saying you want me to partner up with Horikita?" she asked.

"Well, yeah, that's the gist of it," I answered.

"Huh? Who do you think you are, asking me to partner up with her!?" she snapped.

"Well, your physical abilities are nothing to scoff off... But aside from that, there's a laundry list of issues," said Horikita.

"Hey! Where do you get off, thinking you can say whatever you want to me too?!" said Ibuki.

Ibuki rudely barreled straight towards us, closing the distance between us. She then turned to glare at Ishizaki, who had been standing behind her with a vacant, happy-go-lucky look on his face.

"And you! You want me and Horikita to be in a group so you tried to put this together? You asked them for help?" said Ibuki.

"Well, I didn't know it'd be with Horikita or nothin', but ain't this a good thing? Getting' a group, I mean," said Ishizaki.

"I absolutely hate that guy, but I hate Horikita even more," huffed Ibuki.

I'm guessing "that guy" was meant to refer to me. Ibuki was rather politely pointing her finger right at me.

"Wow, Ayanokouji-kun. She seems to hate you quite a lot," said Horikita.

"And I didn't even know it, huh. But it seems like she hates you even more than me," I answered.

"What an honor," said Horikita.

The fact that Horikita and I were whispering to one another must have upset her, because she didn't even try to hide how aggravated she was.

"I don't know if Horikita asked you to do this, or whatever the reason was, but I am never pairing up with her!" shouted Ibuki, refusing the notion outright.

It seemed she *really* didn't like Horikita at all.

"Oh my, but I don't remember ever saying that I wanted to team up with you myself, did I?" Horikita, seeing Ibuki's behavior, said something to try and provoke her.

"Huh? What is that supposed to mean?" asked Ibuki.

"It would appear you've misunderstood something here. You're on your own because no one wants to be with you. You're the leftovers. I'm alone because I want to fight on my own. We're both acting solo, but our situations are different," said Horikita, sounding somewhat exasperated.

What Horikita just said seemed to have lit a fire under Ibuki though.

"Hey, I'm on my own because I want to be! Anyway, if you say that you're handling this exam solo too, then that's just perfect. Let's make this a contest, Horikita!" she shouted, with a sharp glare, shifting her attention from me to Horikita.



"Can I ask you just one question? Why do you want to compete with me so badly? I mean, sure, we had our moments of rivalry on the island last year and during the sports festival, but that was nothing special," said Horikita.

"You're the only one who sees it that way," said Ibuki.

As far as I knew, Ibuki had come out of their fight on the island last year the winner. Then Horikita had won when they competed in the 180-meter race in the sports festival. They each had one win and one loss. However, you couldn't really say either of them had been at their absolute best in both instances. During the island test, Horikita was forced to fight while running a high fever. Then, during the sports festival, Ibuki was so fixated on Horikita that it undoubtedly caused her to mess up when she ran. That meant that if you were to ask me which of them was better, I couldn't decide at this point in time.

Ibuki, whom I had beaten along with Ryuuuen on the rooftop that last year, had even gone on to challenge me personally to try and settle the score. In short, she had the kind of personality where she wouldn't be satisfied unless she was absolutely certain who was better—her or Horikita. Considering all of that, I supposed there was no way she would partner with Horikita.

"It seems like this is just a waste of time," said Horikita.

"Wait right there. Do you accept my challenge or not?" said Ibuki.

"It's not like I'm choosing to go it alone at the start because I want to selfishly make some kind of heroic solo effort. When the special exam begins, I will respond to the situation as things develop and join up with another group. That's what I've chosen to do," said Horikita.

If they had established that they would be going one-on-one throughout the exam, then this might be a viable opportunity for them to have a contest. But if Horikita teamed up with people later, it wouldn't be a fair fight.

"Lame!" shouted Ibuki.

"Whether something is lame or not won't determine how I'll handle a special exam," said Horikita matter-of-factly, responding to Ibuki's provocations by telling her that this was a waste of effort. "If you're so determined to go it alone, then how about this? Try not to lose against me, even if you and I are in a group together. If you can manage to beat me in that situation, I'll give you at least some credit."

"...Not good enough," snapped Ibuki.

There was no way the two of them were going to form a group. Negotiations had broken down. However, I was sure deliberately provoking her all through the conversation like that would strengthen Ibuki's motivations.

I offered Ishizaki a small apology and then decided to head back to the classroom with Horikita.

"You knew from the beginning that there was no way Ibuki was going to accept that last offer you made, right? You're too kind," I told her.

"My intention was to provoke her so she'd do something reckless and get disqualified," answered Horikita.

It wasn't an honest answer. But, I thought, it did sound very much like her.

Chapter 7: **The Calm Before the Storm**

THE CLOSING CEREMONY for the first semester arrived much sooner than I had expected. So much so that it was kind of staggering. We had to move onto the next goal as soon as possible. Just like last year, we would leave school and head toward the port. There, we would board a large cruise ship and depart for an uninhabited, unknown island somewhere at sea. Finally, with no time to relax, tomorrow morning would mark the beginning of the special exam.

The students, who were supposed to gather in their classrooms to hear a brief explanation, arrived at school as usual that day. They waited for their homeroom instructors to show up. A short checklist was displayed on the monitors in each classroom to help students make sure that they hadn't forgotten anything.

We were allowed to bring up to one week's worth of changes of underwear, as it would be essential for proper hygiene. Cell phones seemed to be categorized as essential items, but it looked like they would be confiscated at the start of the island exam. I supposed that even if we were allowed to bring our phones onto the island, they'd be nothing more than paperweights without an available signal. They'd probably only be used for paying off penalties or for buying things while on the ship.

While we waited for the bell that signaled the start of class, Keisei came over to my seat, going over the checklist to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. He had a grim look on his face.

"To be honest, I'm really not good at this whole uninhabited island exam thing. This special exam might as well be asking me to catch a cloud," said Keisei.

"Well, that's understandable, though. This test is so far outside of what we do normally every day."

"It sounds like it's going to be especially tough for the girls. I suppose I shouldn't really complain," said Keisei.

This exam had some challenges that were unique to the girls, so you could say that this exam was stacked against them. Of course, the school seemed to have taken their situation into consideration as much as possible, but there was no changing the fact that it was going to be hard.

"Although we're going to be competing while in separate groups, I still plan to back people up however I can," said Keisei.

Even though this was a special exam that he wasn't personally comfortable with, Keisei expressed a determination to do everything he could to protect his friends.

"Yeah. I'm sure we can try to work together, in some shape or form. I'll lend a hand when the time comes," I replied, promising to help as much as I could.

"But are you really okay with tackling this by yourself? If you get sick or hurt, you'll be disqualified. In the unlikely event you get penalized and have to pay six million... It'll be all over," said Keisei.

"Well, if nothing else, my perfect attendance record up until this point is one of the few things I'm proud of."

"You're starting to sound a little bit sarcastic lately, you know that?" said Keisei with a laugh as he went back to his seat.

Not long afterward, we heard the bell that signaled the start of a new battle. All thirty-nine students in Class 2-D took their seats. After she entered the classroom, Chabashira's expression naturally turned stern, and there was a heavy, oppressive air in the room.

"Today's the start of summer vacation, but it looks like you're all feeling depressed. Well, I suppose that's understandable, though," said Chabashira, turning on both her tablet and starting her presentation on the monitor. "Well then, we'll get started on the final check. Also, if you're not feeling well now, please report to me."

We were going to check our belongings and our physical conditions. The schedule and a list of the necessary items for this exam were once again displayed on the monitor. Fortunately, no one in our class was feeling ill, so things progressed smoothly.

Even Kouenji, who had, as expected, chosen to go it alone rather than form a group, was quietly behaving himself at this stage.

"It seems there are no problems. That's great," said Chabashira.

A few minutes after we finished going through the checklist of things we needed to confirm before our departure, the monitor was shut off. Then, in order to get the attention of the class, she lightly smacked the podium once with the palm of her hand.

"This is not the first time that you have taken a special exam. You have been here at this school for over a year now, and you have managed to fight your way through many hardships. But this particular special exam isn't going to be easy to pass," said Chabashira.

She was giving us advice, but it also sounded like a warning of sorts. It was the kind of advice a teacher could give her class... A class that was by no means complacent.

"This is going to be tougher than any exam that you have taken so far. That is the inescapable reality of the situation," said Chabashira.

She looked at each student carefully, almost as if she were trying to etch each individual face into her mind.

"I have just one request for all of you. If possible, please do not allow a single one of you to disappear. Please return to this classroom once more," she added.

She was saying she hoped this wasn't going to be a one-way trip for any of us, so to speak.

"We'll gather outside on the field in about ten minutes for roll call. Please use the restroom now, if necessary," said Chabashira.

Since we didn't have that much time to spare, the students hurriedly left the classroom. When Akito and the others gathered around my seat near the classroom entrance, I got up from my seat with my luggage in hand. At almost the exact same time, Kouenji stood up as well, and called out to one of the students who wasn't standing out in the hallway.

"May I have a minute? Horikita Girl," said Kouenji.

It was a rare sight. What Kouenji did had attracted not just my attention, but the gazes of other students in the classroom as well.

"It's unusual for you to come and talk to me of your own volition." Apparently, Horikita seemed to feel the same way.

"There is a small matter which I wish to discuss with you regarding the special exam that is about to begin," said Kouenji.

"Oh my, so does this mean that you're finally willing to help us? Do something proactive?" she asked.

"Let's just say that you're half right," replied Kouenji.

Horikita eyed Kouenji somewhat suspiciously after hearing this rather unexpected response. She understood quite well that Kouenji wasn't the kind of person who'd aid others that easily.

"What are you after? Can I ask that you tell me what the other half is about then?" asked Horikita.

"You want the Class Points that will be awarded to the groups that place in the top three positions so badly that you can practically taste it. That is the case, no?" asked Kouenji.

"Of course. Depending on how many points we can acquire, there could be significant changes to the class rankings," said Horikita.

"In that case, please allow me to make a modest proposal. If I perform well during this uninhabited island survival test, I want you to promise me total freedom until graduation," said Kouenji.

Kouenji's unbelievable proposal caused the entire class to fall completely silent for a moment. Even though his help came with conditions, he was expressing a willingness to truly participate in the special exam.

"Promise you total freedom...? What a dramatic proposal. Are you saying that you want me to grant you permission to just keep doing whatever you please?" said Horikita.

"Exactly. Not only will I require your permission, of course, but I will also ask that you work diligently, and I mean with your

undivided attention, to negate any malady or abuse that may come my way. Hm?" said Kouenji.

To give an example, this was basically what happened during the class vote that took place last year. This more or less meant that if another special exam came our way in the future where we had to select unnecessary students in class and have them expelled, Kouenji would be protected unconditionally.

"This isn't something I can simply agree to. I'm sure our fellow classmates would think the same if they heard your request," said Horikita.

If you were part of the class, then helping out, at least at the bare-minimum level, could be considered a kind of obligation. There was no way you could just casually grant someone permission to dispense with that.

"Consider this an advance payment until graduation," said Kouenji.

Kouenji was proposing that, if he contributed to our efforts in the upcoming special exam, we let him do whatever he wanted from that point onward.

"It seems even you're feeling threatened. Your classmates will not tolerate your typical antics forever. If another special exam like the class vote were to be held in the future, you'd be directly put in the line of fire," said Horikita.

Even an eccentric like Kouenji would be in trouble if he were put in such a difficult position, depending on what the exam was like.

"It would really be best if you didn't make such ridiculous proposals, but instead just followed everyone else's lead," said Horikita, naturally turning him down.

Even if she refused him here, though, Kouenji probably wasn't going to be helping us out in any future special exams anyway. If he did, it would only be when he himself had been forced into a tight situation. Given that, we did have the option of at least getting him to be motivated during the island exam, but...

"I'm sorry Kouenji, but I value your talents. I just don't think it's worth it to have you give us a 'so-so' performance in this special exam only to have you sit on the sidelines during exams to come," said Horikita.

After weighing her options, that was the decision that Horikita had come to.

"I see. I suppose our negotiations have broken down then," said Kouenji.

"...No. I am open to accepting your proposal, albeit with the addition of certain conditions from my side," said Horikita.

For a moment, it had seemed like she had outright refused his offer, but apparently Horikita had other ideas.

"I won't accept something as vague as a 'good performance.' The group that takes first place in this exam will be rewarded handsomely. If you can manage to get first place all by yourself, that might be good enough reason to convince me to count your efforts as an advance payment until graduation," said Horikita.

If Kouenji won, since he wasn't partnered up with anyone, he would earn 300 Class Points. In terms of how much he could contribute to our class prior to graduation, you could say that was more than enough. But at this current point in time, there were over a hundred rival groups and taking first place would be no easy feat, even for Kouenji.

"Fu fu fu fu fu. I see, I see. Certainly yes, it seems like you'd be quite satisfied if I were to claim first place on my own," said Kouenji, laughing loudly after hearing about a deal that sounded delightful to him. "Very well! Let us proceed with our arrangement then, with those terms. Shall we?"

"Hold on. That's not all."

Kouenji had showed that he was willing to accept what sounded like an absurd proposal, but without a moment's delay, Horikita responded that she wasn't finished yet.

"I haven't fully laid out all of my terms yet. You're forcing us to work with a boastful braggart like you, so if this exam ends

without you taking first place, it'll be trouble for the rest of us," said Horikita.

"Meaning?" asked Kouenji.

"Meaning that if you do not get first place, you must promise to cooperate with the class in the future, whether for upcoming special exams or anything else. And promise you'll produce good results," said Horikita.

In that moment, I could hear Keisei's breathing as he stood there, staring at the two of them. That was nothing short of a brilliant condition. In the unlikely event that Kouenji did get first place, that would be great. And even if he didn't place first, the condition Horikita had put in place meant Kouenji would have to contribute to future special exams. Class D had nothing to lose from this arrangement. Now, the only question was whether Kouenji would accept this added condition...

"It sounds as though you're giving me a strongly-worded order, Horikita Girl," said Kouenji.

"If you agree to the conditions that I've just given, then I will accept your proposal," said Horikita.

"In that case, I'd say that these negotiations have proved fruitful, Horikita Girl. We have a deal. Do not forget my own conditions, now," said Kouenji.

Even though Horikita had added on conditions of her own, Kouenji didn't refuse the deal.

"You're seriously planning on getting first place by yourself?" asked Horikita.

"Absolutely. Nothing is impossible for me," said Kouenji.

Horikita had demanded something outrageous, but she couldn't hide her shock at the confidence that Kouenji was displaying.

"Now then, I believe this conversation is finished. I shall be on my way," said Kouenji.

Satisfied with the successfully conclusion of his negotiations with Horikita, he left the classroom. No one could say a word to

him, or do anything other than just watch him leave.

"I have absolutely no idea how seriously he's actually going to take this..." said Keisei.

"Yeah, it's hard to tell," I replied.

"But this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance. We got him to commit to something himself," said Keisei.

I wasn't sure I believed Kouenji was being honest about his pledge, but it was certainly true that this was an unprecedented development. Kouenji would need a certain degree of support for him to live his life freely and according to his own whims at this school. If he continued to just do as he pleased, he would inevitably plummet down the ranks of classmates who deserved to be protected. Even if he didn't speak up this time, he would need to enact countermeasures at some point.

However, if Horikita, the leader of Class D, acknowledged this plan, then that was a different story.

"Even in the unlikely event that he does break into the top spots, it would be even better if we managed to place above him. That would be fantastic," said Horikita, turning to me. "If we managed to get first place and Kouenji-kun got second or third... If we could accomplish that, the benefits to our class would be substantial. We could make up for all of the setbacks we've suffered."

If you performed some simple calculations, we could get between 400 and 500 Class Points. If we managed to do that, our total would be around 700 or 800 Class Points, which would promote us to Class B in one shot. And on top of that, as a bonus, Kouenji would have to produce satisfactory results in upcoming exams. Hm.

"I still feel uneasy about this, though. When it comes to Kouenji, it just feels like you can't completely fathom him," I answered.

Whether you were talking about academic or physical ability, if the question was whether or not he was demonstrating his full

potential, then the answer was no, he probably wasn't. It was certainly true that he possessed extraordinary talent.

"You're right. But whether he'll get first place so easily is another matter," said Horikita.

The competition was fierce. The representatives from the other classes, Sakayanagi, Ichinose, and Ryuuen, were also seriously shooting for first place. And that wasn't all, of course. Just based on what I knew now, there were some up-and-coming groups among the first-years, like Housen and Amasawa. And there were formidable third-year students too, like Nagumo, Kiriyma, and Kiryuuin.

And although I hadn't actually said anything out loud about it so far, I was planning on shooting for the top myself. Who was going to be sitting in first place two weeks from now? And who would be leaving the school?

Our long summer was about to begin.

7.1

IT'S ALREADY THE latter half of July. It has been getting quite hot lately, hasn't it?" muttered Tsukishiro as he looked down at the large buses arriving at the school, one after another.

"Yes, it certainly has been," replied a first-year student, without a hint of emotion.

Tsukishiro continued speaking without turning to look at the student. "No more time spent on analysis, please. There is nothing to be gained by delaying action any further."

"Are you...telling me to expel Ayanokouji Kiyotaka now?" asked the student.

"Is that too much for you to manage?" asked Tsukishiro.

"I have established that he'll be an easy opponent. Well, actually, I knew that all along," said the student.

"I will help you as much as I possibly can. That being said, I cannot provide you with more support than this," said Tsukishiro.

Upon hearing that, the student thought that Tsukishiro was aggressively pushing for this plan to move forward.

"Are you saying that you have been pushed to act recklessly yourself?" asked the student.

"Yes. I had to jump through some impossible hoops to scrape together the budget needed for this special exam. More importantly, I had to force the rest of the school administration into submission when they objected to the exam's strict rules," said Tsukishiro.

"Will it be difficult for you to continue in your position as Acting Director then?" asked the student.

"Quite. The fraud allegations made against Director Sakayanagi are about to be cleared up, and it is obvious I'm going to be relieved of my duties. That's precisely why I've prepared a massive display of fireworks for the very end. I hope you will use

whatever means necessary to remove Ayanokouji Kiyotaka from this school. Is that clear?" said Tsukishiro.

"...Yes. There will be no more hesitation."

"I am glad to hear that. In that case, please...be as violent as you wish during this special exam. Go on a rampage. Once everything has been taken care of, you will return to your old life. Let us both return to the places that we are supposed to be, hm?" said Tsukishiro.

A girl's left hand—her dominant one—clenched tight, naturally swelling with strength. Tsukishiro, seeing that out of the corner of his eye, smiled gently and broadly.

"I am expecting great things out of you...Nanase Tsubasa-san."



Postscript

HELLO, DEAR READERS. First, please allow me to sincerely apologize for the delayed release of this volume. As a result of a combination of my daughter's preschool being closed due to current circumstances in the world, my wife not being in the best of health for an extended period of time, and the birth of our second child, I had to prioritize supporting my family over writing for a time. Thanks to everyone's efforts, my family has now grown and things have begun to settle down somewhat, so I have started to devote more time to writing again.

Also, it's precisely because we're in the midst of such challenging times right now that I've realized once again that I must not forget that there are people who really look forward to these works as a source of entertainment. I hope to make up for the delay in the release of this volume at some point in the future. For the time being, I humbly ask that you please be patient.

Okay, so anyway...yeah. Syougo Kinugasa here. Are you doing all right, everyone? I am a total mess right now.

Seriously, because of everything I've been through, I am utterly exhausted. I've got a lot of stuff I've got to vent about. Usually when I have a lot of free time on my hands, I feel like I get totally disheartened and discouraged about writing, but this time, I experienced the total opposite. "LET ME WRITE!!!" I was shouting that from the depths of my heart. When you don't have the time to do so, you truly realize just how grateful you are to be able to work.

Well, there are a lot of depressing events going on in the world right now, but I think there are some small things that have happened that weren't all bad. Since people haven't been going out and have been encouraged to stay at home, many restaurants have started selling bento boxes to go. This has given me a chance to experience flavors from restaurants that I normally used to just pass right by. When businesses are back to running

like normal, there are definitely a few restaurants that I'm going to visit.

Anyhow, this particular volume, which is the second volume of the year two arc, is on sale now. It acts as a prelude to the story in volumes three and beyond. It was basically my idea to try to write about one special exam per each book, but I can't really say that's the case this time around. Students from each grade level are fighting hard to achieve victory. That alone makes the story much longer.

This volume, more than any before it, really has that "To be continued" feeling. So, in that sense, I think I'd really like to get the next volume out as soon as possible. I think I'd like to get... two more books out before the end of the year. Can I do it? Or not...? Anyway, please pay attention to that kind of stuff sometimes too. You can't get your hopes up too high though, okay? ☆



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