

NOVEL

1

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CLASSROOM
OF THE ELITE 2

YEAR



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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

NOVEL 1

HOUSEN KAZUOMI

First-year, Class D.
He's as wild and
violent as he looks.

*"Yeah, yeah!
Man, am I
glad I came
all the way to
this school."*



SHIBA KATSUNORI

The homeroom teacher
in charge of Class
1-D, which is full of
nothing but oddballs
and troublemakers.

*"If you do
understand,
then hurry up
and disperse.
No fighting in
the hallways."*



*"I will
never
yield to
violence."*

NANASE TSUBASA

A new first-year
student. She is an
extremely sociable girl
with a polite demeanor,
though she's in Class D.



*"Hey! If you're looking
for a gifted partner, I'm
right here, y'know?"*



"And your name is?"

*"I'm Ichika Amasawa. From Class 1-A.
I'm the same as you, Horikita-senpai.
I've got an A in academic ability."*

She looks like a girl who only cares about popularity but is actually quite a smart student.

*"If you want to shoot for the top,
I'll work with you. Okay?"*

NANASE TSUBASA



1



WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

NOVEL 1

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku



Seven Seas Entertainment

YOUKOSO JITSURYOKUSIJI YOUSYUGI NO
KYOUSHITSU E 2NENSEIHEN VOL.1

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2 ①

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Chapter 1: Operating Behind the Scenes

LE'TS GO BACK IN TIME about two months, to a certain day in February. In a meeting room in a certain facility somewhere in Tokyo, a man who looked to be in his forties read information off a screen as he explained something. A child was quietly listening to him speak.

This child was fifteen years old. They would soon be entering high school—and they were no mere child.

This child had been raised in a top-secret facility known as the White Room and received a rather special education.

"That is all the detailed data we have on Ayanokouji Kiyotaka and the other one hundred and fifty-six students in the second year. Have you committed all of that to memory?" asked Tsukishiro.

The screen in the room displayed all the data on its students that the school had collected over the past year. Data that included names, birth dates, and what schools they had previously attended, of course, but also, parents and siblings, their grades from early childhood, even their friendships. This was a top-secret meeting. The kind of information being shared here was the kind that even homeroom instructors wouldn't normally be able to access.

"I'm sure you're already well aware of this, but the important thing here is to get Ayanokouji-kun kicked out of school and then bring him back to the White Room before the end of April. We cannot afford to delay our plans any longer. However, please be smart about how you execute this operation. You must never make anything public. If the government does happen to hear about our actions, then, his—sensei's—name could be dragged through the mud," added Tsukishiro.

After hearing this explanation, the student from the White Room slowly raised their hand. "In other words, don't do anything

to attract unnecessary attention?"

"Precisely. Which is exactly why only someone like you, who can pose as a student to infiltrate the school, can do this. I will provide you with as much support as possible, but Sakayanagi will likely be much more cautious from this point forward. You won't be able to do anything careless," said Tsukishiro.

The student seemed to have gotten a grasp on the situation, but their expression also seemed to contain a hint of frustration. Tsukishiro did not miss that.

"The look on your face is telling me that you're not exactly happy about this," said Tsukishiro.

After briefly glancing at Ayanokouji's picture on the screen behind him, he turned his gaze back to meet the child's.

"I take it you know that he—that Ayanokouji-kun—is touted as our facility's magnum opus, our masterpiece? Not only was I sent, but they're even sending someone from the White Room. Meaning they interrupted the experiments being conducted in the White Room, which had finally resumed operations. I have to say, it truly seems like an excessive and rather generous response. I suppose that to someone who has been raised in the same facility, there might be nothing more humiliating," said Tsukishiro, strongly emphasizing that last point as he continued his explanation.

He was trying to get the student to show what they were capable of by fanning the flames of their student competitive spirit. *Ayanokouji Kiyotaka is our masterpiece*. Whenever the students heard those words, some emotion lurking deep within their hearts came bubbling up to the surface.

Tsukishiro had conducted himself flawlessly. But the one thing he had misread was what that emotion was. Something those who were raised in the White Room had drilled into them so thoroughly that they grew to hate it.

"Become someone who can surpass Ayanokouji Kiyotaka."

A feeling of intense hatred, which an unrelated third party who hadn't been raised in that facility could not understand.

Sometimes, that feeling would swell to the point where it could no longer be contained, and it would spark an outburst.

"The stage has been set. All I want you to do now is demonstrate the full extent of your ability. Based on the data I've looked at, I see no issues. If you have *this* level of ability, then it shouldn't take much effort at all for you to get him expelled, now, should it?"

After Tsukishiro was done giving his explanation, as well as a rather perverse form of provocation, he powered the screen off. The room was engulfed in darkness for a moment but was filled with light once more shortly afterward, as the ceiling lights came on.

"Now, then. If there are no questions, let's stop for the day. Time is quite precious, after all," said Tsukishiro.

The child, after hearing that, turned their back to Tsukishiro and moved to leave the room as though nothing had happened. He felt slightly bothered by their calm and collected behavior. His instincts were telling him that he had misspoken earlier when he was giving his explanation. However, he couldn't take back any of the words that he had already said.

"One more thing. There's something I forgot to check," said Tsukishiro, calling out the child from behind, stopping them from leaving the room. "You're not hiding anything from me, are you?"

He was well aware that even though they were on the same side, the organization wasn't a monolith. If their ideas didn't align to start with, things wouldn't work out so well. That was what he was trying to confirm.

The student, without even looking back, just gave a small nod and quietly continued walking away.

After the student had left the room, Tsukishiro turned the lights down once more and brought the screen back up. Shown on the screen was all the data about Ayanokouji Kiyotaka that had been recorded in the White Room.

"I don't like to use a word like this so casually, but... He really is a monster," said Tsukishiro.

Needless to say, he had an elevated level of academic ability. And on top of that, his physical abilities were so incredible that he could put adults to shame. With his achievements and record, even if he were put up against a professional fighter in a no-holds barred fight, it would be over in an instant—with Ayanokouji's victory.

"A battle between two White Room students... If they had a fair, direct competition, I wonder what the results would be?"

Of course, Tsukishiro had already devised a plan to ensure that he would win. But even so, there were no absolute guarantees.

"Hunt or be hunted, huh? This is a game between children, but it seems like it could get interesting."

Tsukishiro, an adult, wasn't panicking. All he did was carry out the task he had been given, methodically, without hurrying.

Chapter 2: True Ability

IT HAPPENED ONE YEAR, well into the twenty-first century. While the rest of the world faced a variety of issues, Japan was, similarly, at a turning point itself. A declining birthrate and an aging population, environmental issues, decreasing political power... Japanese society was in decline. To really get at the root of these issues and fix them from the ground up, the government began to put a great deal of effort into cultivating capable people.

This high school was created as part of that governmental initiative. A center for learning that brought together students from all over the country. A school that nurtured young people so they would be ready to go out into the world.

The Advanced Nurturing High School.

One of the school's most distinctive characteristics was that its administrators did not ask applicants to submit the grades they had received all the way up through junior high. Its students, who were selected based on the school's own unique set of criteria, had a wide variety of distinct characteristics themselves, both boys and girls. There were those who were capable when it came to studying but lacked communication skills. There were those who excelled in sports but struggled with academics. Some students, meanwhile, seemed to have not a single redeeming feature at all.

And yet, the school lumped all these students together so that they might be granted an education. It was a system that seemed entirely unthinkable for a normal high school. These students, with their wide variety of unique personalities and quirks, were made to go about their daily lives in groups and to compete against each other, class against class. The purpose of this was to give them the necessary foundation to do battle with a competitive society, and to survive by cooperating with others.

And the fate that befell those students deemed unfit by the school was expulsion. No mercy. You couldn't survive at this school if you were only good at studying or only good at sports. Each grade level was divided up into four classes: A through D. At the time of enrollment, there were roughly forty students assigned to each given class, making for a total of one hundred and sixty students.

Allow me to go into more detail about what makes this school so wildly different from others. Let's start with the basics. Students are prohibited from contacting anyone outside the school during the entirety of their three years here, until they graduate. At the same time, students are forced to live in the dormitories and prohibited from going outside campus.

That being said, the school boasts an impressively vast campus equipped with a wide array of facilities for the students' use. So it's not like living on campus poses any issues. At Keyaki Mall, a large commercial facility meant for the exclusive use of students and school personnel, you can find almost anything and everything you could possibly need. There's a café, an electronics retailer, a barber, a karaoke place, and more. In the unlikely event that something isn't available for sale there, students can purchase it via the internet.

Furthermore, the money that students need to make purchases as they go about their daily lives is given to them in the form of something called "Private Points." These points can be used in place of real money, with an easy-to-understand conversion. One point equals one yen.

However, it isn't as though these Private Points are handed out freely. They don't grow on trees. Each month, students receive a number of Private Points equal to one hundred times the number of corresponding Class Points their class possesses. In other words, to save up the requisite Private Points to go about their daily lives, it is important for students to first secure Class Points. There are several ways to go about increasing your number of Class Points, but the standard method of doing so is to complete a certain assignment given by the school—something referred to as a "special exam."

Basically, the four classes compete against one another in these special exams, with the class placing first earning points, and the class coming in at the bottom losing points. If a class had one thousand points, that meant that the students of that class would get a monthly stipend of one hundred thousand yen's worth of Private Points. Conversely, if a class continued to lose and their Class Points tragically dwindled all the way down to zero, students in that class would receive a total of zero Private Points every month.

The wholly inextricable relationship between Class Points and Private Points was most likely contrived by school officials in order to make students with differing ways of thinking come together. Having a decent number of Class Points meant you were guaranteed to live a decently comfortable life as a student.

However, that isn't the only appeal of the Advanced Nurturing High School. The school's greatest selling point is what comes for those students who graduate from Class A.

The students who successfully manage to make it through and graduate from Class A are able to go on to any place of higher education or workplace of their choosing. Even in extreme cases, like a university that boasts about how extremely difficult it is to be accepted there, or a massive, prestigious company, a student would be guaranteed to get in. A free pass.

That being said, it wasn't as though students could afford to be overly optimistic. It was clear that if a student didn't have the real ability to pass that barrier to entry on their own, they would eventually get screened out and eliminated. Even so, there was no doubt this was an extremely attractive perk.

Well, I suppose I've explained the gist of how things work with the Advanced Nurturing High School.

I... Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, am currently enrolled in this rather remarkable school as a student. And I will soon be entering my second year here. As of April 1, I will be a student of Class D, which has a total of two hundred and seventy-five Class Points, meaning I would be receiving nearly thirty thousand yen's worth of Private Points every month.

Sakayanagi is currently in first place. Class A, which she leads, has an overwhelming one thousand one hundred and nineteen points. Following behind them is Class B, led by Ichinose, with five hundred and forty-two points. And slightly behind them is Class C, led by Ryuuuen, with five hundred and forty points.

When you compared our class to the others, the difference seems stark. But even so, you could say we'd narrowed the distance between us. The amount that we could further close it over this coming year would spell the difference between victory and defeat.

Chapter 3: A New Stage

AFTER SPRING BREAK, which somehow seemed both long and short at the same time, had ended, the opening ceremony was finally here. On that day, we moved from the first-year classroom that we had grown so familiar with and into a new classroom for second-year students. At first glance, the chairs and desks all looked the same. But at the same time, they felt different, somehow.

The first thing that we saw awaiting us when we arrived at the classroom was a message written on the blackboard.

"Sit in the same seats you were assigned in your first year and wait."

Up until last year, what students referred to as a blackboard was, well, something that teachers used chalk to write on. However, the blackboard in front of us wasn't really a blackboard at all. A large monitor had replaced the blackboard, hanging on the wall. Judging from the fact that it shone like it was brand new, I was guessing monitors had only just been brought in this year.

The students who arrived at the classroom after me also seemed quite surprised when they saw the new blackboard. I decided to take my seat as instructed, heading toward the spot in the far back of the room, near the window. Later in the day, the opening ceremony would be held in the gymnasium. After that, the homeroom instructors would spend about two hours going over the schedule and the requirements for this year, and then we would be dismissed later in the morning.

Since spring break had only just ended, some students still seemed to be in a bit of a daze. Friends who hadn't seen each other for a while were talking animatedly about things like what they were up to during the break. While I was randomly surfing the internet on my phone looking for information, someone called out to me.

"Hey."

It was my classmate, Miyake Akito. He was one of the people in the small group of friends that I had gotten close with.

"I was a little worried 'bout you, since you didn't come to hang out with the group all that much during the break," said Akito.

That was certainly true. I hadn't really interacted at all with the group during spring break. Or rather, I suppose, I should say I'd been negligent because I had been so busy dealing with various other issues.

"I mean, there's no rule that says that we *have* to meet up or anythin' of course, but Haruka was pretty worried. And Airi especially was concerned about you, it seemed like." Akito was basically advising me to be mindful of the feelings of the girls in our group.

"Sorry. I'll plan to hang out with you guys occasionally," I replied.

"That'd be good. I was feelin' a little lonely without you around myself," said Akito.

I did feel a little bit uneasy, hearing that from a friend. But it wasn't a bad feeling. Akito gave me a light wave, as if to tell me he wasn't planning on hanging around my seat for long, and then returned to his own desk.

I really felt like I had made some good friends. I mean, he even went out of his way to give me some friendly advice.

After he had left, I didn't feel like fiddling around with my phone anymore, so I decided to listen in on what the other people in class were saying. The topic of conversation had shifted from what people did over spring break to the new students. Tomorrow was the entrance ceremony, when new first-year students would arrive.

Last year, we Class D students had gotten carried away by the good treatment we received from the school at first and been tripped up as a result. But that was understandable. We were given one thousand Class Points immediately upon enrollment, the

equivalent of one hundred thousand yen. Students were incredibly excited by the large amount of money that they thought they'd be receiving every month, and many went on buying sprees, getting all kinds of things they wanted. Furthermore, tardiness and absences were common, and many students had private conversations or took naps in class.

The serious students, on the other hand, were focused only on themselves, not on paying attention to what was going on around them. I was sure there were many reasons for their lack of attention to the others, but the school's apparent neglect of the problem children was probably the biggest one. After all, if the teachers weren't giving them any warnings, then the students surely didn't need to do so. Or so they thought.

But I supposed you could say that was just the first "special exam" this school had for us. The school was testing us, to see if we could realize that the education we were receiving here was different from the compulsory education we received in elementary school and junior high. And Class D had gotten the lowest possible evaluation in that special exam. Quite spectacularly so.

In the following month, May, our Class Points had dropped to zero. Meaning the number of points we received in our accounts that month suddenly plummeted to a happy zero as well. After that, Class D faced a series of trials and tribulations throughout the year. But after our class had hit rock bottom, our scattered, disparate classmates slowly started to mature, and the class became more unified. At one point, we even managed to make it up to Class C. But unfortunately, because of what happened at the year-end final exam, we were demoted back down to Class D.

However, our class had managed to regain two hundred and seventy-five Class Points by the end of the year. While there was still a huge gap between us and Class A, the most important aspect of our attempt to reach for the top was just how many Class Points we could gain over this next year, our second at this school.

"Good morning!" said a rather energetic girl, her voice carrying across the room.

The girls in the classroom reacted as soon as those words were said. They gathered around the speaker, who was the leader of the girls in our class, Karuizawa Kei. The number of girls around her kept increasing. Before I knew it, they'd resumed the same conversations they'd just been having

Also, it was just the other day that I had started dating Kei, our class's queen bee. The only person who knew that fact right now, aside from me, was Kei herself.

As I reminisced, while listening to the conversations around me, a surprised shout—no, more of a shriek—reverberated throughout the classroom. When I looked up to see what was happening, I immediately realized what the shock and awe was all about. You could say it was an exceedingly natural reaction to have upon seeing what the girl who had just quietly arrived at school looked like.

The girl, despite attracting the attention of everyone around her, didn't react at all to everyone's surprise. Instead, she went to take her seat, right next to mine. Her formerly long, beautiful black hair was gone. It was now rather short, not even shoulder length.

She had reconciled with her older brother, Horikita Manabu, and decided to say goodbye to her past self, cutting her hair to reflect that decision. It was precisely because I knew that that I wasn't surprised right now, but I supposed that if this were my first time seeing her like this, I would probably have reacted similarly to those around me.

"S-Suzune...? You, your hair... What happened to your hair?!" shouted Sudou Ken, flustered. He abandoned the conversation he'd been having with his friend and ran over toward Horikita. Sudou was one of our classmates, and he was also in love with Horikita.

One other person, a girl, seemed perplexed by Horikita's transformation and approached her in a similar fashion. "Horikita-san, you've...had a complete makeover. I'm so surprised!" she said.

Kushida Kikyou. Another of our classmates, and someone who had attended the same junior high as Horikita.

"Is it really so strange that I cut my hair?" Horikita shot glances not only at Sudou, but at the many other students who were staring at her.



"W-well, no, it's not like, strange or anythin', it's just surprisin' is all... It's like, with this hairstyle, you've got a completely different look and all... Well, um, it's not like I'm saying it *doesn't* work for you or anything! I think you look good with short hair, too. D-don't you think so too, Kushida?" said Sudou.

While the sudden change in her appearance certainly had quite the impact, from Sudou's point of view, things like the length of her hair were trivial. If anything, he welcomed his crush's new look with open arms, showing that he was quite happy about it. However, Kushida couldn't really hide her discomfort when Sudou suddenly put her on the spot, asking for her to agree.

"Yeah, I suppose. Yeah. I think it looks good on her. But... Did something happen?" She must not have wanted to explain what she thought in detail, because she shifted the topic of conversation to asking about the reason Horikita had cut her hair.

"Wait, whaddya mean, did something happen? Like what?" asked Sudou, jumping at Kushida's question before Horikita could respond herself.

"Well, for example... maybe she had her heart broken, or something," said Kushida.

"B-B-B-Broken?!" stammered Sudou.

"If I had to say anything, it's an expression of my determination," replied Horikita, without skipping a beat, as if trying to banish the words *heart* and *broken* from the air.

"O-okay, I see. Yeah, there's no way you'd have your heart broken or something, right?" said Sudou.

Despite saying that, he seemed like he was breaking out in a cold sweat.

"Now that we're second-year students, I'm going to fight to make sure Class D rises to the top. And I want to do what I can to make that happen," said Horikita.

"I see, okay. Well, in that case... Maybe I'll try the opposite, grow my hair out," said Kushida.

She made it sound cutesy, but the words somehow also conveyed how she really felt, deep down. She was upset that her hair was the same length as the person she hated. I didn't think anyone would assume she was being serious about growing her hair out long, but she might actually do just that. I couldn't help but imagine the raging emotions hidden inside what she'd just said.

"If you're satisfied, could you both return to your own seats?" snapped Horikita.

She clearly didn't want people to stand around and gawk at her this much, whether her hair was long or short. Though Horikita's new look had certainly had a significant impact on the people around her, she seemed to be rather unhappy with the attention it was getting her. She looked like she was in a bad mood now, but fortunately enough, the bell rang soon afterward, bringing the chatter to an abrupt end.

3.1

SEVERAL DAYS HAD PASSED already since the opening ceremony ended. The weekend came and went, and it was now Monday. A peaceful life here at school. A regular routine that repeated itself over and over. The most momentous change at the start of this new year was that the blackboards were now digital and all our textbooks had been replaced with tablets. Last week, we'd looked down at our hands, which held the new tablet devices that had just been handed out to us.

The fact that the textbooks we were using had all been replaced by tablets illustrated just how remarkable the spread of e-books was. Each student was given their own tablet, and newly installed high-speed charging devices were in the back of the classrooms. We were also provided with portable battery packs as well, in the unlikely event that our tablets died in the middle of class. We were forbidden to bring the tablets themselves back to the dorms, but we were allowed to transfer any data we needed over the school's network, to access it from our rooms.

The annoyingly high number of textbooks we needed to lug around were now all stored neatly inside this twelve-inch tablet, as data. Not only did this mean we could freely work with graphics and photos, but the tablets were also an effective response to globalization, allowing us to openly communicate back and forth with people from other countries, such as in English class. Considering that this school was overseen by the government, it seemed they were lagging somewhat behind in implementing these changes.

However, it remained unclear for now whether or not these changes were necessarily the correct decision. I supposed we'd understand their impact better after seeing how these children grew, and how they integrated into society in the future.

The scope of our studies as second-year students would be more difficult than in our first year, of course. I didn't know exactly how this school compared to other high schools in that regard, but

it was safe to assume it was above average, at the very least. I wondered how much students like Sudou and Ike would be able to keep up with their studies on their own. If we wanted to make sure not a single student got expelled, it might be more essential than ever for us to support each other.

At any rate, while the biggest change came in the form of the digitization of our study materials, there were a number of other things to note. If I had to mention one, it would be the ability to change seats, by way of using your Private Points to secure the spot that you want.

I moved from my old spot near the window toward a seat on the opposite side of the classroom, in the back by the hallway. Apparently, the seats near the hallway were generally unpopular because of all the people coming and going, but it didn't really bother me all that much. Also, while I'd been occasionally passing new students more and more often of late, I obviously still hadn't actually *talked* to any of them yet, not being involved in any club activities. As a result, nothing about my personal situation had really changed.

I supposed that wasn't so strange, considering that when I was a first-year, the first time I actually had a proper conversation with a senior student was for a special exam, since that student had access to old test materials. At any rate, the first few days of the new school year had been quiet.

"Is everyone present?" asked our homeroom instructor Chabashira, striding into the classroom at almost the exact moment the bell rang.

As our morning homeroom began, she stood at the teacher's podium with a serious expression on her face. That, coupled with the fact that we didn't have any classes for first and second period today, made me predict something was going to happen. Apparently, this brief moment of peace was about to come to an end.

"Sensei, is there a special exam?" asked Ike, before our homeroom instructor made her announcement.

It sounded like he was asking out of a sense of eager restlessness, rather than because he was messing around. And Chabashira understood that, which was why she didn't seem to object to him asking. In the past, every time a special exam was announced, most of the students understandably felt anxious. But now those special exams were unavoidable obstacles we had to overcome on our path to the top. And our class was getting ready to face those challenges.

"I'm sure you're worried about that, but before we get into that discussion, there's something I'd like for you to do. Something that will be particularly important to how you lead your lives here at this school in the future," said Chabashira.

She took out her cell phone, continuing to speak while showing it to us.

"Please take out your phones and place them on your desk, everyone. If anyone has forgotten their phone, I ask that you go and retrieve it immediately... But it seems as though no one has forgotten their phone," said Chabashira.

Cell phones were essential everyday items. You might even say they were the most important objects of all, being something you kept on you at all times.

Before long, Chabashira had verified that thirty-nine phones had been placed out on the desks. She resumed speaking once more.

"First, I'd like you all to go to the school's official website and install a new application. It should be available for download at this time. Though the official name for the app is 'Overall Ability,' it will just show up as 'OAA' on your phone after you've installed it," explained Chabashira.

A live-action demonstration video with text captions popped up on the blackboard screen and started to play. I supposed this was one of the conveniences now afforded to us, thanks to the digitization of our classroom. After following along with what Chabashira told us and what the instructions on the screen showed, I installed the app on my phone. It created an icon that

had both the acronym “OAA” on it as well as what looked like an illustration of the school.

“After you’ve finished installing the app, please put down your phones. Please raise your hand if there’s something you’re having trouble understanding.”

The process was quite simple. Everyone was used to handling a phone, so no one struggled with this, and things proceeded smoothly.

“You Class D students aren’t the only ones being asked to install this app. Right now, everyone in school, across every grade level, is being asked to do so. This app is truly remarkable. It will certainly benefit the students of the Advanced Nurturing High School in a multitude of ways in the days to come. But ‘seeing is believing,’ as they say, so please boot up the app,” said Chabashira.

I tapped the icon and launched the app. When I did so, my phone’s camera automatically came on.

“By scanning your student ID with your camera, the initial setup will be completed automatically,” explained Chabashira.

Following her instructions, I held my student ID card out in front of the camera. It scanned the information on it, like my profile photo and student ID number, then continued the login process.

“Now, you should all have successfully created your own individual accounts. Moving forward, you won’t need to log in anymore. But because your account is tied to your phone, we do ask that you take extra care not to lose it.”

After finishing the login process, several different options were displayed.

“This app holds personal data for the entire school. For example, if you select Second-Year Class D, your names will be displayed, in standard order. Try it out,” said Chabashira.

Sure enough, profile pictures and full names for all thirty-nine students were displayed, in order.

"You are free to look at any profile, but it would probably be a good idea for you to tap on your own name first," said Chabashira.

I tapped on my name, just as she had suggested. I had expected that I'd see only basic information like my date of birth, but that didn't seem to be the case. What was displayed were items and number values that I haven't ever seen before.

2 – D Ayanokouji Kiyotaka

First Year Results

Academic Ability: C (51)

Physical Ability: C+ (60)

Adaptability: D+ (37)

Societal Contribution: C+ (60)

Overall Ability: C (51)

"S-Sensei, uh, my results look like they've kind of turned into, like, stats in a video game or something!" shouted Ike.

"That's right. These are your own individual performance scores, calculated by the school based on your achievements through the end of your first year here. You aren't the only class who is able to access this information. It's possible for students to view performance scores for students in other classes as well. In fact, any student in any grade level can do so. This system was adopted because it was deemed to be important for the future of your education," said Chabashira.

In other words, the app's purpose was to provide an overview of everyone's individual performance scores, represented as numerical data. It also seemed like it could be used to send public messages to all students.

There was a question mark in the upper-right part of the screen, along with the word "Description." When I pressed it, detailed information about each item was displayed.

Academic Ability: Calculated mainly based on scores on written exams, etc., given throughout the year

Physical Ability: Calculated based on evaluations from physical education classes, activity in clubs, and evaluations from special exams, etc.

Adaptability: Calculated based on your ability to adapt to society around you. This includes things such as how many friends you have, your position in your social circle and your communication skills, whether you can think on your feet, etc.

Societal Contribution: Calculated based on a variety of factors, such as your attitude in class, including any lateness or absences on your record, whether you've exhibited any problematic behavior, contributions made to the school via membership on the student council, etc.

Overall Ability: Student's overall abilities are derived from the four values above. However, the effect that the Social Contribution score has on this calculation is reduced by half.

*Note: Method for calculating overall ability

(Academic Ability + Physical Ability + Adaptability + Social Contribution x 0.5) ÷ 350 x 100 (Rounded up to the nearest whole number)

I see. Based on the criteria, it made sense that my adaptability score would be lower than the others. And when it came to the number of friends I had and my communication skills, well, I wasn't exactly flourishing there. If the other scores were evaluated based on what they typically saw from me, those numbers seemed reasonable, too. There were also fields for my scores for my second- and third-year evaluations in addition to my first year, but those were currently blank.

"Right now, only the scores for your first year are displayed. But now that you've begun your second year, your new evaluations will be given to you as they are assessed by the school, the scores being updated as time goes on. Scores will be updated at the

beginning of the month, just like with Class Points. For example, Sudou, your current academic ability score is E. However, if you happened to get a perfect score on the next written exam, you would be given an A+ on your second-year evaluations page," said Chabashira.

Which meant our second-year evaluations would be separate from the first-year evaluations. Our scores for this year would be evaluated based *only* on the events of this year. This also meant our scores over the course of the year were constantly being recorded. Even if Sudou got a perfect score in a written exam in April and got an A+ for his academic ability score, if he got a zero on the next written exam after that, he'd end up with a C rating.

That was how things would be over the course of the year. And then, our final average scores would be calculated at the end of the year. One of the things worth noting about this app was that we weren't just able to check scores for our own class, but could look up the other classes, too. Up until this point, I couldn't know anything about students I'd never interacted with unless I directly went out and gathered that information. But now, with only a glance, I could see names, faces, and what kind of scores someone had, regardless of what grade level they were in.

Incidentally, the data for the new first-year students seemed to be based on information from their third year of junior high and from their entrance exams. So, academic ability, physical ability, and societal contribution rankings aside, it was possible their current adaptability scores might not be all that accurate.

A handy tool for checking grades... Well, no. There was no way that was all there was to it. It was obvious this was going to play some kind of key role.

"I'm sure that the students who got rather unsatisfactory results aren't thrilled about the idea of having their records retained like this. However, those students simply need to come to terms with the fact that they were the ones who spent their first year that way," explained Chabashira.

Basically, the closer your precious academic and physical ability scores were to E, the more disgraced you would be.

"However, your first-year scores are nothing more than a past record. They will have no effect whatsoever on how you are assessed in the future, as second-year students. Which means it's especially important that those of you who got disappointing results in your first year take this opportunity to reevaluate your priorities. By visualizing your scores this way, we're hoping you'll be encouraged to grow into your best selves," she added.

I supposed that if our individual scores were going to be continuously recorded in an app that anyone could see from this point onward, many students would want to make an effort to make themselves look better. I was sure that would be effective to a certain degree when it came to prompting students to get their grades up, as Chabashira had said, but...

"Sensei, why is the evaluation metric for societal contribution a little bit different from the other three items, though?" asked Hirata Yousuke.

The effect of our societal contribution score on our overall ability score was half as much as the others. Hirata had his concerns about that, which was why he asked that question.

"Academic ability, physical ability, and adaptability. The school considers those three categories to be extremely important. Societal contribution, on the other hand, is a little different," said Chabashira. "It is fundamentally based on 'morals' and 'manners.' It's an assessment of how you conduct yourselves as students, examined from every possible angle. Things like how influential your voice is in a group, or how often you're correct. Things like how you talk to and behave in front of your teachers, and whether you have any tardy arrivals or absences on your record. Whether or not you comply with various rules. Because these are basic skills and common courtesies you should naturally be striving toward anyway, their impact on your overall ability score is reduced."

So unlike the other three categories, which you couldn't dramatically improve overnight, we could greatly improve our societal contribution scores if we changed our attitudes from this day onward. That was the difference.

"This app is impartial. It doesn't matter if you're in a higher or lower-level class. Everyone is assessed similarly. Right now, if a

student has a high overall ability evaluation, it's safe to assume that person has successfully achieved something worthy of praise."

The list was arranged in order by name, but there was a 'sort' feature, too. So I didn't need to look at each student one by one to know who had the highest overall ability scores in Class 2-D. After trying out the sort function, I saw Yousuke had the top score.

2-D Hirata Yousuke

First Year Results

Academic Ability: B+ (76)

Physical Ability: B+ (79)

Adaptability: B (75)

Societal Contribution: A- (85)

Overall Ability: B+ (78)

You could understand Yousuke's excellence with just one glance at his scores. These scores were nothing to scoff at. He was above average in every area. If he hadn't openly exposed the weakness in his heart towards the end of our first year, his scores might have even been a little higher.

On the other hand, after choosing to sort students in descending order of overall ability, I saw Ike held the number one spot. His overall ability score was 37. He was actually tied with Sakura Airi, who also had an overall ability score of 37.

Sudou, who was considered by many to be the most likely candidate for the lowest score, actually appeared to have scored better than several students.

2-D Sudou Ken

First Year Results

Academic Ability: E+ (20)

Physical Ability: A+ (96)

Adaptability: D+ (40)

Societal Contribution: E+ (19)

Overall Ability: C (47)

His academic ability and societal contribution scores were quite low, thanks in part to his unruly behavior in the first year. However, his high physical ability assessment was enough to compensate for that, letting him avoid being the worst-ranked student. I did a little digging in the app and found he was the only student in our grade level that had gotten an A+ assessment in the physical ability category.

Sudou's academic ability had improved since he had started school here, and he'd also been demonstrating mental and emotional growth. It seemed likely his scores would greatly improve from this year onward.

"Also, though this has nothing directly to do with Class D, a certain exception has been made for someone in your grade level. Sakayanagi Arisu, from Class 2-A, will have her physical ability score set at the same value as the student with the lowest score in the grade level," explained Chabashira.

Sakayanagi Arisu had a physical disability that required her to use a cane to walk around normally. Meaning, even if she wanted to exercise, it wasn't something she could really do. I supposed it wasn't like they could entirely omit her physical ability score and still calculate her overall score, so it was a reasonable decision to place her at the bottom of the rankings.

At any rate, this tool for visualizing abilities might be considered essential to implementing the true meritocracy Nagumo had been advocating for.

"I'm sure this app will serve as a valuable tool, not just in getting you to change the way you see your grades, but also by getting you to interact with your fellow students, since you'll be able to familiarize yourself with their names and faces regardless of grade level. However... Well, in my opinion, that's not all. This is

just my personal speculation, but... I'm thinking students who fail to keep their overall ability score above a certain level may be hit with a *certain penalty*, or something to that effect," said Chabashira.

"Penalty... Wait, you couldn't mean expulsion, do you...?"

"That is a possibility. But, as I just said, that's just my personal speculation. It may not be true. Still, I think it's fair to assume that the closer your overall ability score is to E, the greater the risks you face," said Chabashira.

At this current point in time, Ike and Airi had the worst scores in class, with an overall ability score close to E. If they spent this year like they had the last one, they'd be in imminent danger.

"I'm sure some of you might have issues with how the school has evaluated you vs. how you have evaluated yourself. However, this is just the school's *current* evaluation of you. If you're unhappy about it, then show them what you've got. Do your best this year to convince the school to change their minds about you. Remember, the school isn't all-knowing and omnipotent or anything," said Chabashira.

"B-But how are we supposed to show them, sensei?!" wailed Ike, raising his hand in a panic after having confirmed that he was indeed ranked at the bottom.

"Well, here's one way. There is admittedly a difference in accuracy when it comes to evaluating the physical abilities of a student who does participate in club activities vs. a student who does not. If you're feeling confident in yourself, try joining a club," said Chabashira.

She was saying that students who directly demonstrated what they could do to the school were more likely to be given more favorable treatment. However, students were still evaluated on a case-by-case basis. If one of them tried to show off too much, or too carelessly, it could lead to problems.

"It's almost like we're each fighting individual battles," muttered Horikita, under her breath.

Chabashira didn't miss what Horikita said. It seemed like the introduction of this app completely negated the kind of battles we'd been fighting so far—together, as a class. I was sure Horikita wasn't the only one who felt that way.

"Well, that's both incorrect and correct. This system, which is to be introduced starting this year, was proposed by the current student council president, Nagumo Miyabi. School administrators approved and adopted it," said Chabashira.

So Nagumo's dream of creating a system where individuals were assessed on their own merits had been realized. I was guessing the reason he didn't make that many moves last year was because it took quite a bit of time and effort to get this app off the ground.

"But the fundamental concept remains unchanged. The school is expecting you to work together as a class, just as you've done so far. Please don't forget that point, and continue to do your best, day after day," said Chabashira.

After we finished installing the app and Chabashira finished giving us her explanation, our first period was to an end. Now that we had recess, students began to stare at their phones, noses glued to their screens. I was sure they wanted to see their own scores, as well as the scores of their classmates and students from the other classes.

"Well, I really don't like that they're treatin' me like I have less common sense than Kouenji, of all people!" shouted Sudou after looking intently through the app, glaring at Kouenji as he did.

After I heard him say that, I decided to check for myself, while still keeping my ears open (though he was speaking so loudly that I could overhear pretty easily anyway).

2-D Kouenji Rokusuke

First Year Results

Academic Ability: B (71)

Physical Ability: B+ (78)

Adaptability: D- (24)

Societal Contribution: D- (25)

Overall Ability: C (53)

Given the fact that Kouenji had demonstrated a fair amount of proficiency regularly during class and on tests, he had scored highly in both academic ability and physical ability.

"What? Come on, dude, it's like, whatever, right? 'Sides, you're *wayyyy* better than he is when it comes to physical ability, man," Ike grumbled, his jealousy clear in his voice, since he didn't excel in any particular area.

"That's prolly only 'cause Kouenji doesn't take anything seriously. Though I hate to admit it," said Sudou.

Just as Sudou had suggested, Kouenji's physical abilities were exceptionally high. Off the charts even. He had potential equal to or greater than Sudou's, but he wasn't involved with any clubs and his participation in things like physical education class was wildly irregular, since it depended largely on his mood. If he wasn't personally interested in something, he would skip it without a moment's hesitation, or might even suddenly abandon it. It also wasn't all that uncommon for him to just not lift a finger in the first place.

In contrast, Sudou always took things seriously, no matter the task. The results he achieved in that arena had put him at the top of the class. It was no wonder there was a huge gap in their assessments, even though they had similar physical ability.

The part that Sudou got tripped up on was societal contribution. In other words, the category that was all about manners and morals. In that regard, Kouenji, who was being singled out by Sudou right now, was just as much a problem child as Sudou. It seemed Sudou was really unhappy with the fact that he'd scored lower than Kouenji, even though it was only by a small margin.

It wasn't like I *didn't* understand why he might want to complain, but... I was guessing the reason Kouenji had scored

higher than Sudou in societal contribution was because he hadn't had as many opportunities to act to the detriment of the class or the school in general. It was no surprise that Sudou, given his suspension and violent outbursts and such, had scored lower.

Even though Kouenji had heard everything Sudou was saying, he acted as though it had nothing to do with him. He hadn't even bothered looking at the OAA app more than what was strictly necessary, while everyone else seemed totally engrossed by it.

I supposed that after spending more than a year here at this school, the thing that had changed the least was probably Kouenji.

Anyway, we could now visualize what our grades were like for our first year. This move by the school—the introduction of this app—presented both advantages and disadvantages. For example, the existence of an overall ability category now provided a provisional ranking for the students in class. If a rather inconvenient special exam took place now, it wouldn't be necessary to answer the question of who should step forward as a candidate for possible expulsion. The students with low overall ability scores would be the ones we'd focus on.

Ike—and Airi, since she was tied with him at dead last in the rankings—had to be very anxious right now. Like they were on pins and needles.

3.2

SECOND PERIOD BEGAN, the topic of the OAA app still lingering in the back of our minds. We were probably about to get to the other topic at hand. Receiving a full explanation about *that other thing*. Or so the students were thinking—and that prediction was quickly proved correct.

"And now, I'll provide an overview of the next special exam," said Chabashira, immediately launching into the topic as if she were starting a normal lesson. "This is your first special exam as second-year students, and it's going to involve some unprecedented new ventures, the likes of which have never been seen before. Such as the introduction of this app."

Was that Tsukishiro's influence? Or was it Nagumo's? At any rate, it seemed the school system was also undergoing some major changes.

"The crucial thing for you to know is that this will be a written test in which you second-year students will be partnered up with the new arrivals, the first-year students," said Chabashira.

"Partnered up with... first-year students...?"

Up until this point, we'd hardly done anything that cut across the boundaries between grade levels. There were some exceptions, like the school camp, but that had still been part of the normal framework of inter-class competition. Had those walls been taken down with the introduction of OAA, then?

"In this special exam, you'll be mainly assessed on your written test-taking skills and your communications skills," said Chabashira.

Our academic and communication skills. At first glance, the two things didn't seem to go together.

"The importance of this written text really needs no further explanation. But until now, the school has never had such in-depth interactions between students of different grade levels, except for things like the sports festival and the school camp. Which is

precisely why the school has determined that its students' communication skills were not as well-developed as they could be," said Chabashira.

"B-But, we're still competing against other classes in our grade, right? I dunno, it's just like, something about this feels off," said Ike, who looked a little unhappy about the fact that the first-year students were going to be heavily involved.

"I understand how you feel, but try thinking about it objectively. When you first go out into the world and join society at large, the people you encounter won't just be new, fresh-faced graduates like you. Some might be in their second year in the workforce. You'll even be competing with veterans who've been out in the world for twenty or thirty years. People much older or younger than you could come to be your rivals," said Chabashira.

"That's... Well, yeah, I guess I can picture that."

"While other parts of the world are embracing meritocracy, many Japanese companies continue to be bound by systems of seniority and permanent lifetime employment. If you think it feels strange to interact with students older or younger than you, you should really change your perspective. To put it in terms that might be easier for you to understand, there's a concept called 'skipping grades' that's a widespread practice in places like the United States, England, and Germany. It's not unusual for small children to study together with high school or even college students. Can you imagine and accept the idea of elementary school students here in this classroom, learning with you, in the same fashion?"

My classmates let their imaginations run wild, just as Chabashira had prompted them to do. And I was sure they still couldn't understand it. It must have felt impossible or strange to them, and it was certainly true that skipping grades was rarely done in Japan. In fact, while there were certain conditions that had to be met in order for someone to skip grades, I was sure many people didn't even know that it was possible to do so.

The idea of skipping grades didn't really fit with the current status-quo in Japan, where learning was treated as something that you did in an equal or egalitarian manner, along a set, linear path. And so, the system wasn't entirely accepted here. Personally, I had

no resistance to the idea. There was no such linear learning style in the White Room.

However, I was also certain what Chabashira was saying right now wasn't everything. Imitating what other countries were doing wasn't sufficient; Japan needed to have an educational system that fit Japan's social climate. Chabashira probably knew this, too, but I was guessing she had no choice but to explain things to us in accordance with the orders she had received from higher up.

"There will probably be cases in the future where you'll be competing against first-year and third-year students. But this time, you'll be cooperating with one another. Please keep that in mind," said Chabashira.

Was that why we were having this special exam that required both written test-taking skills and communication skills? Some students were cocking their heads to the side in apparent confusion, perhaps because they were unable to imagine what the rules would be like.

"The best way to understand how this will work is for you to think back to one of your special exams from last year. It's probably easier for you to wrap your heads around this test if you think of it as an improved, modified version of the Paper Shuffle exam, where you had to find a partner from among your classmates," said Chabashira.

The Paper Shuffle had been a special exam where we had to form pairs with a classmate and then handle taking a test together. Essentially, we wouldn't be partnering with someone from our own class this time, but rather with first-year students, from the sounds of it. Even though that seemed like the only difference, it was a huge one.

"You are free to decide which of the first-years you want to partner up with, from any class. The partner selection period is about two weeks, starting today and lasting until the end of the month. You'll have time both to carefully select your partners and devote yourselves to your studies," said Chabashira.

With how this special exam worked, it was no wonder we were being made to install the OAA app at this stage. The first-year students obviously wouldn't be familiar with the names and faces of their seniors, and the second-year students wouldn't be familiar with the names and faces of first-years. In the Paper Shuffle, where we'd picked partners from among our classmates, we were able to do so freely, with nuance and coordination, precisely because we were choosing from among people we knew well. This made it easy for a student who was poor at academics to make it through with someone else's support.

This exam, however, was different. It operated on the premise that *both* students would be looking for an excellent partner. Moreover, instead of partnering up with students in our grade level, we'd be partnering with first-years, who we had no relationship with. The first-years and second-years were each working with their own unique set of circumstances, too. We each had our own things to deal with.

More importantly, it took a considerable amount of time to build a relationship of trust from nothing. If we wanted to build such a relationship *without* this app, then two weeks would most certainly not be enough. With the OAA app, however, we could take some shortcuts by being able to recognize names and faces based on what we saw in the app. Moreover, since we could get a rough sense of everyone's current academic ability, it would be easy for us to use it as reference when looking for partners.

"On the day of the written test, you will be tested on five subjects. Each subject is worth one hundred points, for a total of five hundred points. And the most important rule is... Well, this time, there are two areas in which you'll be competing. As a class and as individuals," said Chabashira.

She held her finger up to the blackboard, bringing up the display for the results of the special exam.

Class Rewards For Each Grade Level

The winning class will be determined based on each class's average score, which will be derived from the scores of all

members of the class and the scores of all their partners. The Class Point rewards are fifty points, thirty points, ten points, and zero points, in descending order of average score.

Individual Rewards

Winners are determined based on the combined scores of each pair of partners. The top five pairs will receive 100,000 Private Points each as a special reward. Pairs who score in the top thirtieth percentile will each receive 10,000 points. In the event that a pair has a total score of 500 points or less, the second-year student will be expelled, and the first-year student will not receive any Private Points for a period of three months, regardless of how many Class Points their class has.

In addition, any student determined to have manipulated their scores, such as by purposefully answering questions incorrectly, will be expelled, regardless of their grade level. Similarly, in the event that a third party is found to have forced another student to lower their score, that third party will be expelled.

“I’m sure you already have an inkling of this, but in this exam, students with excellent academic ability will be highly sought after,” said Chabashira.

If we didn’t have the OAA app, we wouldn’t have been able to see those kinds of details. But with the release of this app, students’ abilities were now on full display for everyone to see. The worse a students’ academic ability score, the harder it would be for that student to find a partner. It was clear that the students who had concerns about their grades were likely to be left behind.

Smart students would, naturally, try to team up with smart partners and aim for the top rewards. Students who struggled with their grades would similarly seek smart partners in order to survive. If two poor students, of which there were many, ended up teaming up, they might very well score under the five-hundred-point mark. If that happened, the second-year student would face the harsh reality of expulsion.

Second-year students understood how this school worked and had developed more than a few friendships within their classes. They would probably try to help their classmates, even if it meant giving up on the higher-level rewards. The first-year students, however, would naturally struggle to unite their classes for now. As a result, they wouldn't give all that much thought to the fact that a student they didn't know very well, whom they weren't really friends with, would have to go three months without getting any Private Points. It wouldn't seem like all that big a deal to them.

It would be just like that time a year ago, when almost everyone in our class was thinking about abandoning Sudou... No, actually, it would be even worse than that.

"Partnerships are established based on mutual acceptance from both participants, and they are finalized via registration in the OAA app. It will be possible for you to select a partner from this moment onward, but keep in mind that once your partner has given their consent and the match has been confirmed, you will not be allowed to dissolve the partnership afterward for any reason," explained Chabashira.

That made it all the harder to choose quickly, unless the other person's academic ability was especially high. A hasty decision could lead to regret down the line.

The monitor refreshed, then displayed information related to partnerships.

Methods and Rules for Determining a Partner

Students are allowed to send a partner request per day to the person they wish to partner with, using the OAA app. If the partner request is not accepted by the other party, your ability to send a fresh request will be reset at 24:00.

If the other party does accept your partner request, the partnership will be confirmed, and you will not be allowed to cancel the partnership afterward.

*Note: The only exception to this rule is certain extenuating circumstances, such as if the other student has been expelled or is seriously ill.

Once a partnership has been confirmed, the OAA app will be updated at 8:00 a.m. on the following day, and both students will not be able to accept any new partner requests.

*Note: The names of who students have partnered up with will not be shown in the app.

With these rules in place, you couldn't just send out a large number of partner requests at random. And even if you did send a request to a specific person, that request might end up going to waste, because that person might already have partnered with someone else that day and you wouldn't know until the app updated at 8:00 a.m the following day.

I didn't know if a student would really accept a partner request from someone they didn't know too well, though. Most likely, these rules were put in place as a measure to make it impossible to know who had teamed up with who. It would make it too easy to estimate the strength of each class if the details of the partnerships were shown right from the start, I supposed.

"Sensei! But it's like, there's no way there'll be a single kouhai who'll want to partner up with me, though! Are you seriously saying that a complete moron like me has to somehow make this work with just my communication skills?!" wailed Ike.

His lamentation was entirely justified. The chances of someone needing a student with poor grades, like him, were quite low until that someone ran out of options for other students they wanted to team up with.

That is, if you were doing things the *proper* way, of course.

"Don't worry. The school has taken certain things into account to ensure no one gets left behind, no matter how many students fail to find partners. In the event that you are unable to pair with someone before the special exam is held, pairings will be

selected randomly at eight in the morning on the day of the test," explained Chabashira.

Ike held a hand up to his chest after hearing what could be interpreted as a measure intended to provide us with relief. But that moment of relief was short-lived.

"That being said, students who fail to find a partner will not be treated the same as students who did find partners. Therefore, any pair created via the method I just described—the one where you run out of time and have someone chosen at random for you—will be subject to a penalty of five percent of your total score," said Chabashira.

The entire class let out wails of agony after hearing about the five-percent penalty. While the system they had in place meant you could still take the exam, you'd still suffer a painful setback.

"Sensei, three students have been expelled so far from our grade. Won't that mean there will be three extra first-year students?" asked Yousuke.

Upon hearing such a trivial question, Chabashira answered him in an indifferent tone.

"The three extra students will be compensated in the form of having their points doubled. However, they will also be subjected to the same five percent penalty for not finding a partner I mentioned previously, so I'm sure not many of them will be happy about the thought of being left alone."

So each of those three people would be taking the exam alone, filling both roles of their respective pair themselves. I supposed it would be fine if three first-year students with excellent academic skills were alone, then.

However, I couldn't afford to only worry about Ike and Sudou during this exam. Because this special exam was most certainly going to be exceptionally difficult for me.

The reason it was going to be so difficult was the part where you'd get expelled if your total score was five hundred points or below. To put it another way, that meant my partner, who would be quite important to me clearing the special exam, had to get at

least one point. Even if I got a perfect score in all five subjects, if my partner scored a zero, then expulsion would be unavoidable.

Under normal circumstances, this would be a dangerous and extremely pointed rule. Since first-year students faced no risk of expulsion themselves, they could purposefully botch the test or get a low score to force their second-year partner to be expelled... But the school had devised another rule to stop that kind of thing from happening.

"In addition, any student determined to have manipulated their scores, such as by purposefully answering questions incorrectly, will be expelled, regardless of their grade level. Similarly, in the event that a third party has been found to have forced another student to lower their score, that third party will be expelled."

You could say that part was both incredibly important and indispensable to this special exam's legitimacy. It was a measure put in place to prevent malicious behavior, like someone trying to extort Private Points out of another student by threatening to purposefully throw the exam. With this rule in place, you couldn't blatantly cut corners on the test. Also, the average students would be safer.

However, while these rules would normally be enough to put my worries to rest, they were not adequate to make this test a sure thing this time. That was because...for a student from the White Room, it was a different story.

The student from the White Room was operating on the premise that they were going to get expelled eventually, anyway. That rule wasn't going to stop them. If that student successfully managed to pair up with me, they probably wouldn't hesitate to purposefully score a zero on the test. *Meaning, if I happen to choose the student from the White Room as my partner, that's it, I'm out.*

Once the special exam began, there was a one-in-one-hundred-and-sixty chance or higher that I'll get expelled. Now, if there was a rule that stated something like, *"In the event a student's partner is expelled due to some form of dishonest behavior, the other student in the partnership will be treated as*

having gotten a passing grade, without further penalty," that would be good. However, as far as I could tell, no such guarantees were present. The fact that no one had bothered to bring that point up was a result of the self-serving assumption that no student would purposefully go out of their way to do something that would result in their own expulsion.

Well, no. It wasn't just that. In the unlikely event that a student *did* do such a thing, the school would probably take immediate action to deal with it. I was sure they'd probably decree that expelling a student who'd simply been the victim of someone else's cheating would be too harsh.

But I was also sure that if *I*, and *only I*, were the one in such a situation, that man would enforce the punishment. He'd say it was my fault for pairing up with a student who didn't take the exam seriously.

He'd purposefully put a small loophole in the rules to let him react to things as he needed in the moment. The image of Tsukishiro flickered in the back of my mind. These were most definitely rules that *he* had produced. There was no way he would miss the opportunity presented by this special exam. If I hemmed and hawed and lagged behind the other students in choosing a partner, it would mean people *other* than the new White Room student would be partnering up, increasing my chances of ending up with the White Room agent.

It would be nice if I could act quickly to pair up with a student whom I didn't think was from the White Room, but my academic ability, as rated by OAA, was C. I wasn't exactly in a position to pick and choose partners as I pleased. But even if I tried to pick a first-year with a poor score in that department, they probably wouldn't allow me to pair up with them, unable to shake their uneasiness at me being ranked C in terms of academic ability.

In that case, I would probably have to find a partner who was also around C-rank in academic ability and wouldn't mind pairing up with me. But it was possible that my opponent was already lying in wait, anticipating me doing so, ready to ambush me.

As soon as I heard the rules explained, I was certain this test was going to be a bigger challenge than any I'd faced before.

"Sensei, about how difficult is this exam going to be?" asked Horikita, raising her hand and posing a critical question.

"To be perfectly frank, there are going to be many extremely tough questions on this exam. You could say it will, without a doubt, be one of the most difficult exams that you've ever taken. But...that's only if you're aiming to get a high score, though. This test is designed in such a way that even a student with an academic ability ranking of around E can get at least one hundred and fifty points without any prior preparation. If you study for a few days, you'll probably get around two hundred points. And, well, this is only a rough approximation, but..."

Chabashira directed our attention to the screen, which displayed a list of estimated scores split up by academic ability ranking.

Academic Ability E: 150 – 200 Points

Academic Ability D: 200 – 250 Points

Academic Ability C: 250 – 300 Points

Academic Ability B: Around 350 Points

Academic Ability A: Around 400 Points

"If you prepare for this test properly, you should score somewhere around the numbers shown here. But don't forget that if you get overconfident and neglect your studies, you might obviously end up scoring lower," said Chabashira, before quickly adding that we shouldn't get too confident about the numbers we saw displayed on the screen. "Also, as I'm sure you can see if you look at the part where a student with A-ranked academic ability gets around four hundred points, it's unlikely for a student to get over ninety points in every subject, let alone perfect score on this exam."

That was probably a direct reflection of what she'd said earlier about this being the most difficult exam we'd faced so far. In any case, if two students with an academic ability near E-rank were paired up, they would most definitely be in danger of being expelled.

"Well, then, I've finished providing an overview of the special exam to be held in April. Please buckle down and prepare yourself for the challenge," said Chabashira.

She went on to verbally explain the scope of the test questions. Apparently, according to her, we should be all right as long as we thoroughly went over the material that we had learned in our first year.

3.3

ONCE THAT WAS OVER and we entered the break between classes, many students inevitably huddled around Yousuke. Upon seeing that, Horikita also immediately got up from her seat and went over to join them. I decided I'd listen in on their conversation for the time being.

"Wh-wh-wh-what do I do, Hirata?! My academic ability ranking is E! I'm totally up the creek without a paddle, man!" Ike wailed, clutching his head, begging Yousuke for help.

Yousuke scanned his eyes over the entire class as he thought of a way to calm Ike down. "Okay, first, just calm down. Then let's try and come up with a plan of action."

"Yes. There's no need to panic," added Horikita.

"B-but, dude!!" wailed Ike.

"This definitely isn't an easy exam, that's for sure. In order to ensure that you get a score of five hundred and one points or higher, a student with an academic ability rank of E needs to be paired up with a first-year student of B rank or better. To put it another way, if you're paired with a student of B rank or better, you should be able to fairly safely pass this exam."

Horikita explained that what Ike needed to do to get through this test wasn't all that complicated, perhaps to calm him down.

"Besides, we've already worked together and overcome similar tests in the year we've been here. If we stay as united as we have until now and make sure to fully prepare, it's not impossible for you to get over two hundred and fifty, or even three hundred points," she added.

"Yes. It's exactly like Horikita-san says. If we all work together, I'm sure we can all pass this exam without a hitch," added Yousuke.

The combination of what Horikita and Yousuke were saying gradually made everyone else around them start to calm down, little by little.

"The important thing is to not pick a partner lightly. The only instance where you'd be able to make a split-second decision would be if a first-year student with an academic ability ranking of B or better is willing to partner with you," said Yousuke.

It was certainly true that once a student decided on a partner, they couldn't undo it. You had to be absolutely certain that you were picking a partner who could put you both over the five-hundred-point threshold.

"As for those of you who have academic ability rankings of B+ or higher, I'd like for you to not rush to any conclusions. It might be important to keep a certain number of good students available if we're going to save everyone. At any rate, regardless of whether you're academically capable or not, please make sure to consult with either Hirata-kun or myself if anything does come up," said Horikita.

She'd said only the bare minimum she needed to right now, asking for everyone not to panic and make any rash decisions. The honors students like Keisei and Mii-chan nodded along without hesitation, showing that they would cooperate. I supposed Horikita could have taken on the responsibility of negotiating partnerships for everyone in class, but that would be difficult to carry out the process smoothly. Since there were rivals competing for partnerships, this would also be a fight against time.

"I think I'll try negotiating with some of the kids in soccer, for the time being. There are some first-years in there who are good students, and I think we might be able to get some partnerships set up," Yousuke replied after listening intently to what Horikita just said, directing his comment at her.

Throwing more people at the problem was also a satisfactory solution.

"If you're okay with that, then yes, please do. Your help would be invaluable," said Horikita.

An activity related to club activity wasn't really in her field of expertise. Yousuke smiled warmly, nodding.

"Also, I think we should hold a meeting for the students who have an academic ability ranking of C- or lower, just in case," he

said.

"That sounds like the right call to me. Let's work together to try and find partners for everyone," said Horikita.

Just being able to explain the plan of attack to everyone in class right away, like this, would probably make all the difference. That way, they could address all areas of weakness, and everyone in class would have some peace of mind, knowing they weren't being abandoned.

"Horikita-san, just one more thing—"

"There are some students who have an academic ability ranking of C or better who aren't particularly good at holding dialog. I intend to follow up with those who would struggle to form a partnership for reasons other than their academic scores," said Horikita.

They were quick-witted enough to understand each other without even needing to go into detail. They were perfectly in sync, with the only the bare minimum amount of discussion required.

"Thank you. That would be great," replied Yousuke.

Horikita and Yousuke continued making plans without any hiccups, continuing to sort out the situation in a way they both agreed with. Though they had clashed once before, they were working together almost unbelievably well right now, not just because Horikita was becoming a more amicable person, but also because of Yousuke's flexible way of thinking.

"By the way, Sudou-kun. How are things with the basketball club? I'm sure some first-year students must have joined, right?" said Horikita, seeking Sudou's opinion, since he was rather enthusiastic about his club activities.

However, when she asked him that question, he averted his eyes, seeming somewhat embarrassed.

"Y-yeah, but..." said Sudou.

"But?" asked Horikita.

"Well, it's only been a few days since we've started club stuff, but well, we've been takin' a pretty, y'know, Spartan approach. Or like... Well, you know," said Sudou.

"You mean you've been hard on them, then?" said Horikita.

"Well, yeah, I guess you could put it that way. I mean, basketball is pretty hardcore," said Sudou.

I supposed the point he was making was that he might already be in a position where people disliked him. Of course, that was precisely because he took basketball so seriously. The first-years would be very divided on whether they liked or disliked a senior who was strict when it came to practice.

"I understand. Just concentrate on your studies for the time being, and try not to think about the special exam." Horikita decided to give Sudou a stern warning, since it might backfire on him if he went ahead and did something careless.

"O-okay," said Sudou.

3.4

OUR LUNCH BREAK came next. After I had finished eating, Horikita called me out into the hallway.

"This isn't something we should discuss in the classroom. If we talk here, we'll know if anyone comes by," said Horikita.

"Okay, so? This is about the upcoming special exam, isn't it?" I asked.

"Yes, it is. We've been told by Chabashira-sensei that the coming special exam will be quite challenging. It will certainly be an ordeal for students with less academic ability, but for you and me, it will be the ideal setting for our competition," said Horikita.

She must have wanted to address personal matters first, because she opened right with that. Horikita and I had promised each other something over spring break. Namely, that we would compete to see who could get the highest score on a written exam, in one particular subject. If I won, Horikita would join the student council. If Horikita won, I would, freely and without reservation, employ the skills that I had been hiding over the past year for the sake of the class.

We had been advised that it would be difficult for even a student with A-rank academic abilities to score ninety points or higher in one subject on the test. If the difficulty level was that high, it was unlikely we'd both end up getting perfect scores and thus have a tie.

"I trust you have no issues with that?" said Horikita, confirming that I had no objections about settling the matter in the upcoming written test.

"Of course not." Since there was nothing for me to gain by pointlessly delaying things further, I agreed with her request like it was a matter of course.

"Glad to hear it. Well, I suppose we can move onto the next topic of discussion right away, then."

Horikita, satisfied that I had reaffirmed the promise we had made, pulled out her phone. She then launched the OAA app we had just installed that morning.

"I looked up the number of honors students in the first-year classes who have an academic ability ranking of B or better. There were seventeen in Class A, thirteen in Class B, thirteen in Class C, and eleven in Class D," said Horikita.

A total of fifty-four, then. You could say that was a pretty reasonable percentage of students.

"In our class, there are only four students who are ranked E for academic ability. If you include students ranked D, that's a total of twelve people. So, we're in a position where we have more than enough manpower in the first-year classes to cover those students," said Horikita.

"The question, then, is how many of those honors students we can draw over to us in Class D, I suppose."

Even though there were fifty-four students, it was inevitable there would be a mad scramble to snatch them up. If we dropped the ball, it was possible they'd all be stolen out from under us.

"Yes. The class that is able to secure many of those fifty-four students will naturally be in an advantageous position, while the class that partners with a large number of D+ or lower-ranked students will simply be at a disadvantage," said Horikita.

That app that was just introduced to us came equipped with some very extremely useful features. The class that used those features well would be most likely to win.

"Sakayanagi-san, Ryuuuen-san, and even Ichinose-san... I'm sure all of the classes will be making their move starting today," said Horikita.

Of the leaders, Class A's Sakayanagi would most likely launch her attack right away. All she had to do was take advantage of the fact that she was in the class with the fewest students who were worried about their level of academic ability, and work hard to bring as many of the smartest first-year students over to their side as possible. Even from the perspective of a first-year student, the

stability of Class A was something that could immediately be understood just by looking at the OAA app. If they worked with Class A, they could easily rake in the top-tier rewards.

We, on the other hand, didn't have that luxury.

"First and foremost, we should be prioritizing helping our classmates who are ranked E and D in academic ability to find partners of higher rank," I replied.

Horikita nodded lightly in agreement.

"I wouldn't call it complete or anything, but I've produced a list of people to prioritize finding partners for. I think Sudou-kun should be the one we take care of first."

"Hold on a minute. It's true that Sudou's academic ability ranking is E, but do you think that's really what we need to do?" I asked.

Sudou's grades when he first started school here were exceptionally bad, and he'd received an E-ranking as a result. However, in the latter half of the first year, we saw his academic performance slowly begin to improve little by little. Meaning it wouldn't be surprising at all if he were actually a little bit better now than he used to be.

"Yes, I suppose you've got a point... It's true that he's matured quite a bit, compared to how he was before. Even during spring break, Sudou-kun spent a lot of time wrapped up in his studies, trying to improve areas that he was lagging in before," said Horikita.

"Were you having study sessions with him?" I asked.

"Absolutely not. I don't have the kind of time to hang around him every day. He's learned how to study by himself, to a certain extent. I just drop in and check his progress once every few days, and then head back," said Horikita.

"Huh..."

I thought he was putting in an effort because Horikita was with him. Honestly, that was some really impressive dedication on Sudou's part.

"To be honest, I think Sudou-kun's ranking has probably gone up a little bit... I feel like even when compared to other students, he's gone up to D or D+," said Horikita.

Of course, that was nothing more than a simple and optimistic estimate. But speaking as someone who knew what Sudou was like a year ago, he had definitely matured quite a bit.

"If I remember correctly, the old Sudou used to panic a lot when we heard about special exams, and he'd get really upset. He's calmed down a lot," I told her.

Then again, he did kick up a fuss about stuff like scoring worse than Kouenji in the societal contribution category.

"So, even though by your reckoning he's a D or better, you still think he's a higher priority than Ike?" I added.

"His personality and appearance both played a big part in my decision. What he said about the rather heavy-handed attitude he's been taking with the new students in his club also caught my attention," said Horikita.

It sounded like she had arrived at her decision not because she was playing favorites with Sudou, but because she had properly analyzed the situation.

"Let's suppose you're a first-year student who doesn't know anything... Who do you think would be easier to team up with, Sudou-kun or Ike-kun? Assuming that they have the same exact grades, on the surface," said Horikita.

"Well, I guess I'd have to say Ike," I replied.

Sudou's gigantic height, imposing physique, red hair, and stern tone certainly made a frightening first impression. If I had to pair up with someone who had the same academic ranking as him, I would want to pick Ike, thinking he might be easier to deal with.

"Forget about finding someone with a high level of academic skill—simply finding any partner at all for him might be a challenge," said Horikita.

Which was precisely why she had placed him at the top of her list of students to help, I supposed.

"I understand. If at all possible, I'd like to pair him up with a first-year student who has an academic ability ranking of B- or better," I replied.

"Yes. If we do that, I think he can definitely make it through. I'd like to move quickly. Can you help me?" asked Horikita.

"Help? I can't really think of any way that I can help, though."

"You can just stick by me and tell me what you think. I just want someone that I can trust by my side," said Horikita.

"Meaning, you trust me?"

"Of those of our classmates who can move around freely, I trust you," she replied.

Based on how she phrased that, I wasn't exactly sure if that meant she trusted me a lot or a little...

"Or are you perhaps worried that you won't be able to beat me if you take even a single minute away from your studies?" she asked.

That attempt at provocation was actually rather counterproductive. She was just giving me the perfect excuse to get out of helping her by claiming I needed to study in my room because I was apparently nervous

"Yeah, I'm very worried—"

Just when I was about to graciously take advantage of the excuse I'd been given, my phone started to vibrate. There was a public message from the leader of Class 2-B, Ichinose Honami, posted in the OAA app for everyone to read.

"We just got permission to hold a meet-and-greet for first- and second-years in the gym today from 4 to 5 p.m. If you've got time to spare, please stop by!"

The message was a godsend for the students who were struggling to figure out how to get in touch with the first-years.

"Just as I'd expect from Ichinose-san. Well done. It's just like her to think of everyone, not just her own group," said Horikita.

While it was unclear exactly how many people would be attending this meet-and-greet, I could imagine a fair number of people would be there. It was highly likely that partnerships might be formed right then and there. But rather than joy, I could see a hint of something like frustration on Horikita's face. She might have been thinking of a similar strategy.

"What's the matter? The special exam's only just started, right?"

"Yes, yes, you're right. I suppose that our first order of business has been decided," said Horikita.

I guessed she meant we were going to be attending the meet-and-greet after class today. And, before I knew it, I guessed it had been decided that I was helping her. Well, I supposed it wasn't that big a deal if all I was doing was tagging along, but...

Horikita shot me a look, as if she knew what I was thinking and was testing me.

"All right. I'll go," I told her.

"Oh, my. Are you really going to lend me a hand, then? I thought you'd been avoiding me lately, but... Well, you're being *quite* cooperative, aren't you?" said Horikita.

Wow, that was impressive. The person who was aware of the fact I was avoiding her just openly calling me out about it like that.

"I was just thinking of keeping a close eye on you to see what kind of strategy you come up with," I replied.

"I see. I might have been a bit hasty in using the word 'cooperative' then."

Even so, Horikita seemed like she was satisfied with my answer. That answer was just a pretext, though. This was a test where I had to put on an act if I was going to survive. There were some things that would be easier for me to deal with if I were working together with Horikita.

"In that case, you can think of what I'm about to say next as me just talking to myself. While it's true that getting Sudou-kun and Ike-kun over the threshold to pass this exam is a major prerequisite, this special exam is based on the idea of competing

to snatch up the best students. So naturally, we need to pay close attention to what Ryuu-en-kun and Sakayanagi-san are doing... Meaning, we need to be mindful of their strategies," said Horikita.

Although what she'd just said was completely obvious, the old Horikita wouldn't have thought this far ahead already. She would probably have only concentrated on making sure Sudou and the other students made it through, and neglected to keep track of the enemy's strategy. However, this time around, she was being extremely cautious right from the start.

"Of course, I don't know exactly what those two are going to do at this current point in time. But I think Private Points will be a key part of it," said Horikita.

Meaning cash. Horikita was saying that at this school, the power of Private Points spoke for itself. As of right now, there was no connection whatsoever between the first-years and the second-years. Which meant that the best way to wrap up any negotiation quickly was to use Private Points.

"I don't know exactly how much financial muscle Class A and Class C have at their disposal, but if we're competing to recruit students, I'm sure buying people out or bribery will be their go-to strategies," said Horikita.

"Yeah. Points will be the easiest thing for the new students to understand."

It was easy to imagine people paying out a number of points corresponding to how well students could perform academically. However, if all sides carelessly threw wads of cash around to fight this battle, then our stores of Private Points would be depleted in no time. That was especially true for Class D, since we'd been in a financially stagnant situation for the past year. We didn't even need to run an actual comparison to know that our sum of points—or rather, our financial power—fell far short of what the other classes had.

"Under normal circumstances, we should also invest some money to secure a certain number of students," I added.

The only thing that could compete with money was, essentially, money itself. Playing the money game was necessary

to see who could offer more. However, the fact that Horikita seemed somewhat frustrated about the message Ichinose had posted earlier must have meant...

"First, let's do some reconnaissance at the meet-and-greet. If an opportunity presents itself, we might move quickly, but otherwise, I don't intend to rush. That's fine with me," said Horikita.

Perhaps she hadn't firmly settled on a plan of action yet, because she didn't go into more detail about her plans.

"By the way, Ayanokouji-kun. Am I correct in assuming that you can find a partner on your own?" she asked.

"Would you find me one if I asked you?" I replied.

"Speaking objectively, your academic ability is C. So basically, it should be fine no matter who you partner up with. It should be easy enough for me to manage while I'm already dealing with other things, though," said Horikita.

"Well, if I run into any trouble, I'll come to you."

I could rule out any first-year students who decided to partner with Horikita or Yousuke as White Room agents. It wasn't out of the question for me to try asking them at the last minute, before the pairing was finalized, if I could switch in to replace them. However, if my opponent knew everything ahead of time, they would probably take into the account the possibility of me making that choice when I was in trouble. Since all I could do was try to predict their actions and then to outmaneuver them, it was difficult for me to say I had a one-hundred percent chance of evading them with that method.

More importantly, I was sure the first-year student wouldn't exactly be thrilled about being forced to swap partners after they had already decided to partner up with Horikita or Yousuke. They wouldn't agree to that easily.

"You'd best not take too long, though. It's not like there's nothing for you to be worried about. A five-percent penalty for running out of time isn't a small price to pay," said Horikita.

"Yeah, that's true," I replied.

While I wasn't exactly planning to take my time, I was worried about the person from the White Room. I was sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that whoever it was had already blended in amongst the first-years.

Chapter 4: These New First-Years are Nothing But Troublemakers

THERE WERE DOZENS of first- and second-year students gathered in the gym. Most of the people there weren't second-years, but first-years. I supposed that many students saw this meet-and-greet as an important opportunity.

Since I didn't know who the first-years were at a glance right now anyway, I decided to start by finding out which second-year students were participating in this event.

The leader of Class A, Sakayanagi, was nowhere to be seen. And while I didn't know if I could exactly call him a stand-in for her, I did see Hashimoto Masayoshi. Sakayanagi had a disability affecting her legs, so her range of movement was limited, making her slow. Hashimoto played an important part in covering her to make up for that.

As far as I could tell, he was the only person from Class A here. Furthermore, it didn't seem like he was making an attempt to talk to anyone in particular. He was probably scouting around to see who got in touch with whom at this meet-and-greet.

As the organizer for this event, about half of the people from Class B were in attendance, both guys and girls, Ichinose included. Kanzaki was there too, by Ichinose's side, supporting her. However, I didn't get the impression that the students in attendance from Class B were those that were either very good students or those who were concerned about their academic prowess. It seemed Class B had simply chosen to send the more sociable members of their class.

On the other hand, after briefly looking around, I saw no sign of anyone from Class C around. It was almost as if they considered this meet-and-greet to be totally optional, right from the very beginning. Through this one event alone, you could somehow see the motives of each of the second-year classes.

However, it wasn't the second-year students who were important to Horikita today. She was focused on the first-years—the people we hardly knew at all. I was sure that the first-year students, who had only just started here, had no clue as to what was going on yet. Many of them were probably struggling to wrap their heads around the situation with second-year students suddenly asking to pair up with them. They shrank back from everyone else at the event, clinging to their classmates—which is to say, the students that they were already close with.

Upon seeing that, Ichinose tried her best to expand their circle by making self-introductions and casual chit-chat, without really mentioning the special exam. Of course, it wasn't like people were about to immediately open up or anything. Knowing this, she didn't rush things, but instead approached people slowly, looking at them with a gentle smile on her face. Then their hardened hearts, which seemed to have been frozen like ice, began to thaw.

After only a few minutes of observation at this meet-and-greet, I had a general idea of how things were going to go from here.

"Rather than prioritizing the special exam, she's going about building relationships based on mutual trust, first. That is certainly a very Ichinose-san-like way of doing things. An admirable tactic, and one not everyone can pull off," said Horikita, giving her first impression of the meet-and-greet.

It was unknown just how much Class B was going to make use of this strategy, but it was especially important, nonetheless. What Ichinose was doing could only benefit both the first- and second-year students. Horikita called Ichinose "admirable" for putting such a plan into action. Looking at Horikita's side profile, I could guess at the strategy she must have been thinking of herself.

"Are you thinking of a similar strategy yourself?" I asked.

"...Yes. A strategy based on using Private Points is too much for Class D to handle. That's why I thought it would be important for us to build relationships based on trust with the first-years. However, we're no match for Ichinose-san in that regard at all. Or rather, I should say, that kind of strategy is her specialty," said Horikita.

If you wanted someone to accept you as their partner, you needed to offer them something. That something could be a lot of different things, like points, trust, friendship, or a debt of gratitude.

"Ichinose Honami-san from Class 2-B is already quite well-known among many of the first-years. They know her name and face. I'm sure anxious students will flock to her, and she'll live up to their expectations," added Horikita.

"Yeah, I think so too," I replied.

They weren't going to bother coming up to us, Class 2-D, people they didn't know at all.

"But even if we can't duplicate her admirable methods, there are things we *can* do," said Horikita.

Apparently, Horikita had gotten some kind of idea from this event. The crux of that idea probably had something to do with how she was constantly looking at the first-years with the OAA app open. She gave no sign of wanting to leave yet, continuing to observe the first-years.

I wasn't the only one standing beside her, watching, either. A large figure moved by us.

"But, y'know, all of 'em look like total wimps. Every last one of 'em," gruffed Sudou, standing beside Horikita, sharing what he thought about the first-years.

Sudou had originally planned to head straight for his club activities right after class today. But because Ichinose's request to hold this meet-and-greet event was accepted, and it was thus suddenly decided that the gym would be in use until five o'clock, he offered to accompany Horikita here. Horikita had flatly turned him down, telling him it wasn't necessary for him to come, but I guess it must have been fine in the end, since he was going to the gym anyway.

"Don't glare at them for no reason. There's nothing to gain by scaring them," said Horikita.

"I ain't really glarin' or anything. This is just the way my face looks. Anyway, is it really okay for us to hang back and chill like this? Won't the brainy kids get snatched up by Ichinose? What's

the harm in just talkin' to 'em?" said Sudou impatiently, suggesting to Horikita that they ought to go and talk to the students sooner rather than later.

Even if a student from our grade level that wasn't in Class B went to make a move on one of the first-years, Ichinose wouldn't get upset about it. If anything, I was sure she'd welcome that happily.

"What are you gonna do?" I asked Horikita, since I'd been wondering about that myself.

"Do you really think we can outdo Class 2-B in a place like this, when it comes to socializing?" asked Horikita.

Right now, Ichinose seemed to be emphasizing providing relief for the first-years over trying to make sure her own class would win. From the looks of things, not a single one of the students from Class B had left yet, and they seemed to be trying to get to know the first-years better, to deepen their friendships. I bet the first-years had noticed their enthusiasm, too.

"Yeah, I can't really imagine that we could," I replied.

If Yousuke or Kushida were here, we could've stood a chance at schmoozing. Maybe. But Horikita, Sudou, and I most definitely lacked the ability to hold our own, socially. I was sure Horikita was well aware of that fact when she came here.

Just as the discussion was about to begin in earnest, Horikita took action.

"...Let's go," she said.

Instead of participating in the meet-and-greet, we were retreating. Which meant Horikita had had no intention of trying to bring any of the first-years over to our side at this event all along.

"You sure that's okay, Suzune?" asked Sudou.

"More than half of the students who were invited didn't come to this meet-and-greet. Those are the students I'm going to negotiate with," said Horikita.

In other words, she was going to target the first-year students who hadn't bothered to listen to Ichinose's offer. At the

same time, however, the fact that those students ignored Ichinose's offer proved it would be difficult to win them over. They might think they could find a partner by themselves, based on their own abilities, without accepting a helping hand. Or perhaps they lacked the courage to come out to this meet-and-greet. They might even already have a strategy in mind. Whatever the case might be, we could assume many of them probably would be a little eccentric, and hard to deal with.

"For the time being, let's hear your basis for going that route," I said.

"Two reasons. As far as I can tell, from what I saw just moments earlier, an unexpectedly high percentage of the students who came to the meet-and-greet were people concerned about their academic prowess. What we are looking for right now, rather urgently I might add, are students who have at least a B minus or better in academic ability. Meaning, the students who have enough confidence to do battle without coming to the meet-and-greet," said Horikita.

I see. If that was the case, I supposed it made a certain amount of sense for us to have left the meet-and-greet.

"Our top priority shouldn't be to pair two A-rank students with one another. It's about coaxing students with enough academic ability to cover for the weaker students in our class to come to our side, to make sure that absolutely no one gets expelled," said Horikita.

However, even if Class 2-B did save a lot of the first-years, there would naturally be a lot of them left over. Moreover, Ichinose was probably going to prioritize saving the less capable students over helping the highly capable ones. It was possible that we could have picked up some of the leftover students from the meet-and-greet—ones who were better students, to an extent.

I assumed her second reason had something to do with that.

"Besides, there was a little bit of a bias in the students who attended the meet-and-greet, regardless of academic ability," said Horikita.

"Bias?"

"The fact that none of the students from Class 1-D attended at all," said Horikita.

None of them had attended? I see. That certainly was a rather interesting bias.

"It seems like you understand, too," Horikita said.

"Understand what? What does the fact that none of the kids from Class 1-D showed up mean?" asked Sudou, cutting in.

He cocked his head to the side, not understanding what the significance of their absence was.

"There are forty people in one class. Among those forty are students with poor grades and students who aren't particularly good at communication. And yet, not a single person from Class 1-D participated. The fact that no one had attended is obviously a reflection of the will of the class," said Horikita.

It was clear that someone was controlling the entire class, and had instructed them not to participate in the meet-and-greet. You could certainly say that was unusual, considering that it hadn't even been a few days since the semester started.

"So, you're sayin' there's already a leader in their class, and that person's kept 'em from going to this meet-and-greet...?" said Sudou.

"If there's a person we can negotiate with who speaks for the entire class, then it's no longer necessary for us to try and bargain with people individually," said Horikita.

In other words, her strategy was for the students in each of our classes, 1-D and 2-D, to cover one another.

"Okay, that's all well and good. But if we do that, we're not gonna stand a chance at winnin' this thing, are we?" Sudou asked.

It wasn't a bad idea at all, to keep anyone from getting expelled. But it would probably make it impossible for us to beat the other classes in overall scores.

"You're right. In that sense, I'm not planning to wage war with the other classes this time around," said Horikita.

"I ain't exactly in a position to really say much of anythin' about that, but are you sure that's what you want?" said Sudou.

"Yes. Without a doubt," stated Horikita, clearly and definitively.

Although her approach was certainly different, the general idea behind her strategy was similar to Ichinose's, from the sound of it. The thinking was that you'd be giving up your chance at a valuable opportunity to get Class Points, a special exam.

Class A's Hashimoto was already leaving the gym, perhaps because he was done snooping around Ichinose's meet-and-greet event. Horikita followed Hashimoto, proceeding to the gym exit. Sudou and I followed her. But just before I left, I briefly looked back at Ichinose.

Ichinose, not noticing my presence, was talking to a first-year student with a smile on her face. I was sure she wouldn't hesitate to extend a helping hand, regardless of that student's academic ability score. Even if it was D or E.

She was fighting to prevent anyone in her class from getting expelled, abandoning the idea of achieving victory in this special exam. It was about the same as what Horikita was trying to do, albeit in a different way. Or *was it?* Was the essence of their strategies really the same?

"Yo."

Just as we left the gym, Hashimoto called out to us, as if he had been waiting for us.

"Man, she's the same as ever, isn't she? Ichinose, I mean," he said.

"It seems she's prioritizing saving her classmates and the first-years, yes," said Horikita.

"Yeah, for sure. Definitely doesn't seem like Ichinose's a threat at the moment. Doesn't she get what a disadvantage it'll be for her to take in a bunch of morons? Man, it's like she's throwin' the game," said Hashimoto exasperatedly.

There was no way he could have realized Horikita was going for pretty much the same thing, probably because he couldn't even

imagine the thought of Horikita giving up on trying to win.

"Maybe it's because she already knew that about the first-years that she was able to set up a meeting like this in the first place?" said Horikita.

"Ah, yeah, I getcha. That's true," said Hashimoto.

"You Class A people... Sakayanagi-san understood without even needing to see the meet-and-greet. The reason she didn't participate was because she already anticipated what kind of students were going to show up here," said Horikita.

"Well, maybe," said Hashimoto.

Even so, she had probably sent Hashimoto in alone as a scout.

"So, how are you planning to get the honors students over to your side?" asked Horikita.

"That's all up to the princess. I'm just following her orders."

With that reply, Hashimoto started to walk away, perhaps because he was satisfied with the brief exchange we just had.

"Don't trust a word that jerkoff Hashimoto says, Suzune."

"You don't need to tell me that. Wait, are you familiar with Hashimoto-kun?" asked Horikita.

"Nope, not at all," said Sudou proudly, arrogantly.

"...I see. Well, Class A has a big advantage simply by being Class A. I suppose it's only natural that they'll have some people flocking to them, to a certain extent," said Horikita.

Having enrolled here, the new students were eventually going to realize that Class A reigned supreme. Even if they didn't know that fact right now, word would get around quickly.

"Anyway, let's hurry. Class D students should still be hanging around at school at this hour," said Horikita, heading towards the first-year classrooms.

We were going to see what things were like for Class 1-D. Apparently, she was seizing the opportunity presented to us while everyone else was focused on the meet-and-greet.

4.1

WE MADE OUR WAY to the floor where the first-year students were—the floor we'd been regularly going to until just last month. There didn't seem to be many students around, considering that quite a few had gone over to the gym. We looked around and saw several students, from Class A through Class C. Even though we didn't actually call out to them, when they spotted us and recognized us as upperclassmen, they looked away, as if it were awkward or uncomfortable.

I supposed there was no way we'd be welcomed with open arms all that easily, after suddenly setting foot on the first-years' floor. There were a few students who didn't seem to mind us, but most of them didn't exactly like the uncomfortable awkwardness of having us there. That would probably be the case tomorrow, and every day thereafter, too.

I was sure that some students, trying to find a partner as soon as possible, would approach first-years at all times of the day, both mornings and afternoons. But that was a dangerous gamble that might end up backfiring. Even so, there were students chatting and laughing happily in the first-year classrooms into which we peeked. Maybe they felt like there was no need to panic about this special exam. Or perhaps they didn't see it as that big a deal yet.

"Well, it seems like a lot of the students who had stayed behind aren't too worried, after all," said Horikita.

"Well, that's nice. And here I'm freakin' out and all," gruffed Sudou.

The first-year students would only have their Private Point payouts suspended for three months if they scored five hundred points or less on the exam. That was still definitely a huge loss, of course, but since the initial deposit into their accounts should have been made right after the entrance ceremony, they probably felt no sense of impending danger.

Just as we were finishing our inspection of Class 1-C, Horikita heard a familiar voice call out to her.

"Ku ku. You got here pretty late, Suzune."

The owner of that voice was none other than Ryuuen Kakeru, from Class 2-C, staring at us fearlessly. Just up ahead, we could see the classroom for Class 1-D. It looked like Ryuuen had just stepped out of that room.

"Are you here scouting out first-year students too, Ryuuen-kun? I don't recall seeing you at the meet-and-greet," said Horikita.

"It was just a buncha moronic half-wits who got together at the gym, right? I didn't even need to go see it to know *that*," said Ryuuen.

He had come here looking for students who didn't go to the meet-and-greet, just like Horikita had been planning to do. Judging from the way he was talking, it was clear he was after the top-level first-year students. There had been only about a slight twenty- or thirty-minute difference in our timing, but...

With that much time, it was possible that he had already successfully scouted a number of students. We would be able to check whether each student had settled on a partner at eight o'clock the next morning.

"Relax. Still haven't settled on anybody yet," said Ryuuen.

Not that the other two people with me today would believe him so easily, though. That is, until the app actually refreshed, and it showed what partnerships had been finalized or not for Class 2-C.

"You look like you don't believe me," sneered Ryuuen.

"Well, I'm taking everything you say with a grain of salt, at the very least," replied Horikita.

"Huh, okay. Looks like you've gotten pretty *wary* of me, huh?"

"Oh? I can't recall ever once *not* being wary of you before though. Hm?"

"Kukuku! Well, yeah, guess you've got a point there," said Ryuuen.

Sudou glared at Ryuuuen, perhaps not liking the mocking way he spoke to Horikita. A normal person would have shrunk back in fear from that glare alone, but such a direct attack wouldn't work on Ryuuuen.

"Looks like you've hired yourself a bodyguard. But you chose a dumb one, lady," sneered Ryuuuen.

"What'd you say?" huffed Sudou.

He looked ready to fly off the handle, but Horikita kept him in line with a gentle wave of her hand.

"Oh, do you need brains to be a bodyguard? Talk about the pot calling the kettle black, hm?" said Horikita.

She didn't avert her eyes from Ryuuuen as she delivered that comeback, still holding her hand out to keep Sudou back.

"Are you planning on scaring the first-years? I'm afraid that taking that kind of attitude with them is going to backfire on you," said Horikita.

They would certainly shrink back if they saw Ryuuuen strutting about like he was the cock of the walk.

"I figured if I threatened 'em a little, they'd immediately agree to cooperate," said Ryuuuen.

Horikita had been going tit-for-tat with Ryuuuen so far, dishing back what Ryuuuen was giving her. But Ryuuuen did the opposite this time, actually affirming what she had just suggested.

"...You're kidding, right? Do you really think that's an acceptable way of doing things?" asked Horikita.

"Acceptable or not, who friggin' cares. What's the problem if someone feels a little threatened? We were told that we couldn't force someone to get a lower score or anythin', but there wasn't anythin' about not using threats to find a partner in the rules," said Ryuuuen.

"That's because it should go without saying that it's not okay, without it needing to be outlined in the rules. If there is a problem, you'll be in trouble," said Horikita.

"Then show me where the problem is. I ain't gonna do somethin' dumb enough that it'd get traced back to me, anyway," said Ryuuuen.

He was as bullish and cocksure as ever. Not only was he saying it was extremely likely that he'd make good on his threats, but he also stated, quite definitively, that the truth of the matter would never get out. Whether what he was saying was truth or falsehood, Horikita, too, must have realized once again that Ryuuuen would always opt to rule with the iron hand of a military dictator.

"Well, in that case, do whatever you like. But if any evidence should present itself, I will raise the issue, without question. Or mercy," said Horikita.

Her warning was probably meant to serve as a deterrent, but it didn't seem to resonate with Ryuuuen.

"So? You think *you* can win anybody over to your class?" sneered Ryuuuen.

Horikita must have determined that there was no need for her to answer, because she kept her mouth shut.

"You figured somethin' out when you were snoopin' around the meet-and-greet, huh? And then you hurried on over here to see who was left. That it?" said Ryuuuen.

"The same as you then, perhaps?"

"*Ku ku.* Yeah, maybe."

Ryuuuen continued speaking to Horikita after saying that, as if all he wanted was to keep things interesting.

"In that case, I'll tell ya somethin' good, since we're on the same wavelength. This year's batch of fresh meat are all *real* calm, even though they only just started here. Which means there's a real good chance that someone from the school is telling these new kids how things work, to a certain extent," said Ryuuuen.

If that was true, it was quite an unexpected bit of intel. Back in April, we'd no idea what was going on, and everyone just messed around as much as they wanted as a result. Of course, the students from Class A and Class B were more composed, but that

could probably be attributed to the significant difference between our backgrounds.

Also, what Ryuuen was talking about wasn't just a specific class. He was referring to the *entire grade level*. Maybe this was a measure that had been taken because they had to partner up with second-year students right at the start of school? Or did the school have other intentions, perhaps?

"Isn't it possible that this year's batch of new students are just especially quick-witted, and we were just exceptionally slow?" replied Horikita.

"There's signs that some of 'em are already coming together, as a class, right at this stage. That's way too early."

Even if they'd immediately started trying to come together as a class when the special exam was announced, they wouldn't have succeeded already. Ryuuen was saying they wouldn't have come together like this, now, unless they started the process at an early stage. Right after they entered the school.

"...What kind of cowardly trick are you trying to pull by telling me this?" asked Horikita.

"Nothin', no trick. You can't just pulverize your opponents in this special exam. Nothin' like that. But if you're gonna win overall, you're probably gonna have to pull several strings," said Ryuuen.

It wasn't going to be easy to get students from the other classes expelled in this special exam. The sense of anonymity in it, of wondering who was going to be partnered with who, was fairly significant. It was going to be quite difficult to ascertain exactly who people were partnered with on the app, unless people were going around making partnerships known publicly or you were very good at gathering information. Even if you were able to get classmates who didn't do so well academically to partner with students from rival classes, or even if you were to specifically designate someone for that purpose, it would be almost impossible to get that student to purposefully cut corners on the test.

If you got a low score—one out of keeping with the level of academic ability you were supposed to have—it would clearly be intentional, and then you'd get expelled regardless of what grade

level you were in. In the end, the difference between victory and defeat came down to two things: the abilities of the students in your own class, and the abilities of the first-year students. In terms of strategy, what you could do was win as many academically skilled first-years over to your class as possible.

It wasn't going to be easy for Class C to come out on top in this exam, considering their low levels of overall ability. There was no way they could hope to compete with Class A financially, and the academic skills of the two classes were on entirely different levels. No matter how much money they threw at the first-years to try and poach them, the results weren't going to be pretty. In that case, they should abandon the idea of trying to win first place overall and aim instead for the individual competition, with rewards given to the top thirty percent.

Of course, Horikita didn't make any mention of that. Because it would be a problem for us if Class A and Class C weren't trying to duke it out with each other for overall points. Rather than let Class A easily snatch the top spot, I was hoping A and C would fight it out on a grand scale, so they'd wear each other down, if only a little.

"Try your best to keep up," chided Ryuuen.

"I suppose I could say the same to you. Your concerns are completely unnecessary," said Horikita.

"Ku ku. Well, my bad."

Then Ryuuen immediately left, vacating the first-year students' floor. He had been here too short a time to have finished what needed doing.

"The first-years might resist us much more strongly than I thought they would," said Horikita.

If they were aware of the fact that they were basically locked in a desperate struggle to the death with the other classes at this school, then yes, I supposed it was only natural they'd be hesitant to negotiate with us.

"In that case, shouldn't we try and negotiate with 'em at least a little, as soon as we can?" said Sudou.

"Yes... Of course we should. But..."

Horikita directed her gaze towards the end of the hall. She was looking at where the classroom for Class 1-D was.

"Let's get goin'," said Sudou.

"I don't think it's going to be that simple," said Horikita.

Apparently, Horikita had noticed it too while she was talking with Ryuuuen. The entire time they talked, from when Ryuuuen strolled out of the classroom to when he left, not a single student had been seen leaving the classroom. And we didn't hear a single sound as we approached the room, either.

When we eventually reached the door to the classroom and opened it, our suspicions were confirmed.

"D-dude, what the hell's goin' on?!" yelled Sudou in a panic, as he scanned the inside of the classroom from end to end.

"Negotiating with Class 1-D might be much, much more difficult than I expected," said Horikita.

The classroom was completely empty. There wasn't a single person in sight. The forty students, who hadn't shown up to the meet-and-greet either, seemed to have suddenly disappeared without a trace.

"This class might be more trouble than I had thought," she added.

However, it wasn't like we could just sit here and wallow in our anxiety. We needed to take action before the other classes really started making their moves in earnest. The competition was starting tomorrow. Horikita's battle was going to begin the moment that she contacted Class 1-D. As for me, I was going to head back to my dorm and memorize all the names and faces of the new students in the OAA app. Horikita had her battle to fight, and I had mine.

And as it turned out, on the day the special exam was announced, a total of twenty-two partnerships had been finalized.

4.2

THE SITUATION TOOK A SUDDEN, unexpected turn near the end of our lunch break on the next day. Something happened after we had finished eating our lunches, while we sat in our classroom, casually waiting for our afternoon classes to begin.

"H-hey! Dudes! Some first-years are headed this way!" shouted one of my classmates, Miyamoto.

This special exam depended on first- and second-year students working together. You'd think this wouldn't be such a surprising development, but apparently, that wasn't the case.

"Wow, they must be awfully brave to come up to the upperclassmen's floor," said Yousuke, while I mulled things over in my head. "I mean, if we decided to head up to the third-year's floor, we'd have to be very careful not to make a fuss."

"Yeah, that's true..."

It would be a different story if you had a lot of close friendships with your senpai, but for this year's batch of new students, that wasn't the case. Many of them must have felt like they were venturing into enemy territory. I supposed that in that sense, some of them showing up like this might actually be an event that merited surprise.

Yousuke said he was going to go check it out, so I followed him, heading out into the hallway. Horikita and Sudou followed right after us.

The first thing that caught my eye was a guy with a particularly large build. There were several reasons why he stood out, one of which was that he seemed to be around Sudou's height. But, more than that, it was the strong impression he made as he walked confidently down the center of the hall on our floor. The other second-year students in the hall avoided him, walking at the edges of the hallway. Which seemed like the opposite of what you'd normally expect.

Following a little way behind this student was a girl. Horikita, realizing that they weren't simply here looking for partners, stepped out in front of the male student to block his path. Sudou stuck close to her.

When Horikita and Sudou came face-to-face with these new students, the first-year student made eye contact with me for some reason, even though I was watching from some distance away. Shortly afterward, he looked away from me and shifted his gaze to Horikita. I pulled up the data I had learned from the OAA yesterday in my memory. It seemed Horikita was about to make rather unexpected contact with *that* class.

"Who's this chick?" asked the guy.

"Please wait a moment... I've found it," said the girl.

After fiddling with her phone for a short while, she showed him her screen.

"Class 2-D. Horikita Suzune. Academic ability A-, huh?" said the guy, gruffly.

The girl spoke in a rather polite tone of voice, unlike the guy, which made them seem like quite the odd combination. They then directed their gazes over at Sudou, who was standing beside Horikita. And just like before, the girl showed the guy her phone screen.

"Sudou Ken... Heh." After looking at Sudou's data, the guy let out a mocking snort.

"Hello, my name is Nanase, from Class 1-D. He's from the same class. This is—"

"Housen," he said, interrupting her.

They both gave us their last names. Just for reference, the large guy's full name was Housen Kazuomi and the girl's was Nanase Tsubasa. They were both genuine Class 1-D students, just as they had said they were. Students from the very same that we'd tried to meet with yesterday, but couldn't.



Although their sudden arrival here was rather unexpected, it was both a lucky break and a stroke of ill fortune for Horikita. That was because we couldn't exactly start negotiating with Class 1-D out in the open, while under the watchful eyes of the other classes.

"For a couple of new students, you've done something quite brave. I admire your pluck," said Horikita.

"Huh? What, you admire our *pluck*? Don't act so high and mighty, woman," snapped Housen.

"She ain't bein' high and mighty, dude. Don't get all full of yourself, kid," shouted Sudou.

Housen had snapped at Horikita, causing Sudou to snap back at him in turn. Even though they were about the same height, Housen had a slightly bigger build, making Sudou look a bit smaller in comparison.

"Dude, your score's an E+. Guess you're just as much of a moron as you look," said Housen.

"What was that?!" shouted Sudou.

"Well, whatever, this is fine. Looks like this place is crawling with Class D rejects anyway. Works for me."

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

"As I said, you Class D punks are all just a bunch of rejects, leftovers. You can't even form pairs unless we pick you. So I figured, hey, I'll lend you incompetent, braindead morons a hand. You get what I'm sayin'?" said Housen.

It was almost as if he was testing Horikita.

"Meaning you want us to team up with you. And you're making your request with a rather condescending attitude," she replied.

"Uh, yeah? I mean, you're the ones who should be beggin' us to team up with you. Hell, I even dragged myself all the way out here," Housen snapped back at Horikita, basically implying we weren't in remotely the same position. "Come on. Go ahead and beg. Say, 'Please, please team up with us,' and start bowin'."

Horikita, still holding Sudou back to keep him from losing his temper, argued back at him, her words growing in intensity despite the difference in size between her and Housen. "You seem to be misunderstanding something. Our positions are equal."

"Equal? Your idiot friend over there oughta be the only one spewing bullshit like that," said Housen.

"You're in Class D, just like us. There's no difference between us," said Horikita.

"You don't get it. There are *plenty* of things we can do to you if we feel like it. Get it? I mean, you don't want trouble, right? Then you should know your place and start beggin'!"

Apparently, this Housen person had already noticed that the first-years had a secret weapon they could use to their advantage.

"And just what are these things you could do to us?" asked Horikita. She likely already knew the answer, but deliberately asked anyway, to make Housen come out and say it.

"Come on, you know, dontcha? What I'm sayin' is that we can get bad test scores, on purpose," said Housen.

When Horikita heard him say that, she bit her lip with some force.

"Huh?! Enough already, you little first-year punk! You mess up the test, and you'll get kicked outta school!" shouted Sudou.

"Stop. Don't be so quick to lose your cool, Sudou-kun. That's a bad habit of yours," said Horikita.

"But..."

I could understand why Sudou would want to vent his anger after hearing Housen talk to Horikita like that. However, what Housen was saying wasn't a lie.

"Yeah, it's true that if you mess up on the test on purpose, you get expelled. But the penalty for not bein' able to find a partner before time's up is different. That only applies to you guys, right?" said Housen.

The rules stated that if you ran out of time before you found a partner, one would be randomly assigned to you. On top of that,

if you ran out of time, it would result in a 5 percent penalty taken off your overall score. And the second-year students, who could face expulsion, would take more damage from that penalty.

"I-is that really true?!" shouted Sudou, incredulous.

He shot Horikita a pleading look, seeking confirmation on whether what Housen said was true. The only answer she could possibly give him was 'yes.'

"Wouldn't you be putting a noose around your own neck by doing that, though? Do you really intend on taking a loss immediately after you've started school?" asked Horikita.

If you got hit with a penalty, your chances of getting five hundred and one points or more on the test would naturally plummet.

"Well, compared to you guys, can't say we'd get hurt all that bad. Ain't that right?" sneered Housen. He looked to the girl standing behind him, Nanase, for confirmation.

"Yes, that's correct. We wouldn't have any Private Points deposited into our account for three months, but that would still only be a maximum of two hundred forty thousand points. I don't think it would be a fatal setback," replied Nanase.

"Get the picture now, Horikita-senpai?"

Housen regarded Horikita as though he were superior to her, even though she was his senior. Sudou, seeing him treat her that way, must have lost his patience. He stood in front of Horikita now, exuding intimidation, though he still wasn't throwing any punches.

"You wanna go?" said Housen, without any hesitation whatsoever.

"Don't get too full of yourself, punk," huffed Sudou.

"Don't lose your cool, Sudou-kun. You do understand how things work at this school, don't you?" said Horikita.

It wasn't unreasonable for the new students not to know this, but the hallways were supervised quite closely by school officials. The surveillance cameras were constantly monitoring us,

so if there was a problem, the school officials could go dig up the footage.

"I know..." said Sudou.

After having been repeatedly admonished by Horikita, Sudou backed off, though he looked irritated. It was certainly a problem that he got riled up so easily, but I supposed the fact that all it took was a word from Horikita to keep him in check was a relief.

Just then, as Sudou's attention was focused on Horikita, Housen thrust his large hand forward against Sudou's chest and shoved him.

"Wha-?!"

In the next instant, Sudou lost his balance, falling backward, landing on his hands.

"Ha, only thing big about you is your height, loser. Just a little tap was all it took?" sneered Housen.

What Housen just did was so reckless that even the other second-year students watching the situation couldn't hide their unease. Considering how dramatic the action had been, it wouldn't have been surprising for it to be seen as an act of violence. If you understood how difficult and risky it was to try and do something violent in this school, you couldn't do it.

We'd thought this year's batch of new students were more familiar with how things worked at this school than students from previous years. If the information we had gotten from Ryuuen the other day was true, then I had to say what Housen had just done was quite reckless.

Maybe they actually didn't understand the school as well as we thought they did? No, it didn't seem like that was the case. If so, then...

"Asshole!"

Sudou, having regained his composure and realized what had just been done to him, looked ready to let all his pent-up anger explode at once. But right before that happened, another guy, who had been watching the situation from afar, jumped in.

"Dude, the hell are you doin'?!"

It was Ishizaki Daiichi from Class 2-C. He was quick to lose his temper and could be easily categorized as a delinquent, but he was also a compassionate person. It seemed like he'd run out of patience after seeing Sudou, someone from his grade level, being treated with such cruelty.

"Man, these losers just keep poppin' up outta nowhere, one after another. Like cockroaches," said Housen with a smirk, as if he found the situation amusing.

The girl who had introduced herself earlier as Nanase moved to rein him back in.

"Housen-kun, I thought we came here to have a discussion? If we came here just so you could get violent, then I'll be leaving," said Nanase.

"Violent? All I did was touch the guy, like I was pettin' a cat or somethin'. Well, sorry, my bad, *Sudou*," said Housen, purposefully addressing Sudou without an honorific, as if he were spitting on him.

"Hey, man, you're goin' too far! Knock that crap off!" shouted Ishizaki, reaching out to grab Housen by his collar.

The moment that Housen saw Ishizaki's arm reaching for him, though, the corners of his mouth curved up slightly into a smirk.

"Better think twice, Ishizaki, unless you wanna die," someone warned.

Ishizaki stopped just before he took hold of Housen's collar. The warning had come from none other than Ryuuen, who had also been standing by, watching.

"Wh-why'd you stop me?!" huffed Ishizaki. He seemed visibly confused by the fact that Ryuuen had stopped him.

Ibuki, a classmate of theirs, was also surprised by what Ryuuen had just done. "What do you think you're doing? By stopping him, I mean?" she asked.

Ryuuuen generally welcomed fights. He was the furthest possible thing from a person who hated trouble. He didn't care if there were security cameras around or not; when he wanted to throw down, he did so without hesitation. Which was precisely why it was so surprising to see him stop a fight from happening.

Ryuuuen ordered Ishizaki back and then approached Housen himself.

"So, what, you're supposed to be my opponent now? Dude, you look weak compared to that moron Sudou over there," said Housen mockingly, after getting a look at Ryuuuen.

Ryuuuen certainly wasn't a big and brawny guy. I supposed that was why Housen considered him weak.

"I know you pretty well, yeah. I remember hearin' that this Housen dude was a bit of a celebrity in my hometown. I never imagined he'd look like such a total braindead idiot, though," replied Ryuuuen.

Housen repeatedly hurled insults at Sudou over and over, calling him stupid, so Ryuuuen threw the same insult right back in his face. Something that was honestly quite typical of Ryuuuen. Normally, Ryuuuen was an enemy to every class that wasn't his own, but it was heartening to see him stand up to Housen like this. In fact, Sudou had successfully managed to bottle up his anger thanks to the change in atmosphere.

"Y-you know this dude, Ryuuuen-san?" asked Ishizaki.

"Wait. Ryuuuen, you say?"

When Housen heard Ryuuuen's name, the look on his face changed. And then his wide mouth cracked open into an amused smile.

"Hey now, ain't this somethin'? This has gotta be fate. Honestly, I've heard your name get thrown around so much that it's been pissin' me off, Ryuuuen," said Housen.

"Wow, so you've got the brain cells to actually remember someone's name?" replied Ryuuuen.

Apparently, these two had known about each other for some time now. It seemed like Housen, from Class 1-D, came from

somewhere close to Ryuuен's hometown.

That said, looking at the relationship between Ryuuен and Ishizaki and Ibuki, it seemed safe to say that Ryuuен had made a full comeback. He had temporarily stepped down from his position, but he was beginning to take command of his class once again.

"Gotta say though, for the fabled Ryuuен to look all scrawny and pitiful... Damn, that's a shame," said Housen.

"Meanwhile you look like just as much of a musclebound freak as I imagined," sneered Ryuuен.

"Y'know, I swung around your old hangouts a couple of times because I was plannin' to beat the everlovin' shit out of you. But I guess the reason I never ran into you was because you were terrified of me and hid, huh? What, you've been runnin' away and making your little soldiers do all the work? Is that it?" said Housen.

"*Ku ku*. I'd say it's more like lady luck saved your ass, Housen. If you had met me back then, you certainly wouldn't be acting like such a bigshot right now. I guess you really lucked out, 'cause you can say you haven't lost to me yet," said Ryuuен.

"Actually, I think you just ran with your tail between your legs. If you're tryin' to tell me that's not how it is, then how about we settle things, right here and now?"

Housen formed his giant hand into a fist, looking confident. If he knew who Ryuuен was in junior high, the impression he had of Ryuuен shouldn't be all that different from the impression we had of Ryuuен. Perhaps he didn't see Ryuuен as someone that you want as an enemy?

"Yeah, hard pass. I ain't plannin' on fighting a gorilla like you when there's nothing in it for me," said Ryuuен.

Even though Housen was fixing for a fight, Ryuuен turned his offer down. Of course, that was because there was no way that he could actually fight in a place like this, but... I was sure Ishizaki and Ibuki had thought Ryuuен would accept the offer, even if that meant they had to take the fight elsewhere.

"Wait, is this dude all that dangerous? I mean, sure, he's bigger than Sudou and all, but..." said Ishizaki.

"Who can say?" Ryuuuen seemed to have no intention of giving a straight answer to that question. Then he issued an order to his subordinates, a smirk on his face. "Let's go."

"Are you really okay with letting a first-year disrespect you like this?" asked Ibuki.

She was aware of the fact that it was in Ryuuuen's nature to throw down against anyone, no matter who it was. That was why she couldn't help but ask him that question.

"Heh. We can settle things whenever. What's the rush?" replied Ryuuuen, quietly and calmly.

While it would have been fine had things ended right there, Housen started walking forward, closing the distance between himself and Ryuuuen.

"Is that chick one of your little soldiers too?" asked Housen, after having watched them bicker earlier.

"Yeah, somethin' like that," said Ryuuuen.

"Huh? What are you talking about? Don't go and act like you're the boss of me," snapped Ibuki.

"So you even stoop to using chicks as soldiers, huh, Ryuuuen?" asked Housen.

"Could say the same to you, buddy. You're the one who brought that cute little thing over there, right?" said Ryuuuen.

Just like how Ryuuuen was accompanied by Ibuki, Housen had Nanase standing beside him.

"She ain't mine. Well, whatever, I couldn't care less about that. Let's have some fun, Ryuuuen," said Housen.

"Already told ya. Hard pass."

No matter how many times Housen tried to provoke Ryuuuen into fighting, Ryuuuen wouldn't budge. As if to signal his disinterest, Ryuuuen turned his back on Housen, showing that he'd made his mind up about withdrawing.

"Huh, that so? In that case..."

Housen must have decided Ryuuuen's failure to take the bait was no fun, because he suddenly extended his arm in a smooth, casual movement. He reached out for Ibuki. She tried to brush him off.

However...

Just as she tried to brush him off, he quickly accelerated the force behind the movement, grabbing Ibuki by the neck and raising her up into the air.

"Ngh?!"

Ibuki hurriedly tried to free herself from his grip, as if a distress signal were being transmitted from her brain to the rest of her body in that instant. However, Housen merely flashed an audacious grin, not giving an inch, as if his arms were made of steel.

Ryuuuen turned back around and saw Ibuki being choked out by Housen. She tried to break free of his grip, deftly using her arms and legs, but Housen still didn't budge.

"Hah. Just try and slip outta that. Or, all of you watchin' can jump in and get a piece of me too," said Housen.

Judging by the look on Housen's face, it wasn't that he was fearless—but rather, that he possessed a kind of absolute confidence. However, I was certain this wasn't the kind of situation where I could step into the ring myself. If I made a scene right here and now, the school would naturally get wind of it and inevitably show up to put a stop to the situation.

The only one who wasn't tied down by such concerns—Ryuuuen—was the one who made a move, though he looked rather exasperated about it. Probably moving to save Ibuki rather than strike a blow against Housen, he moved forward, slipping into the space between Ibuki and Housen, near his chest. However, Housen still kept his grip tight on Ibuki's neck. And even in this situation, where his movement was limited, he continued to sidestep Ryuuuen's repeated kicks.

"Asshole!" shouted Ishizaki.

Ishizaki, who had been told to stand down before, now jumped into the fray. A commotion was starting to erupt, the likes of which you could never imagine happening in the hallways here at school.

"Yeah, yeah! Man, am I glad I came all the way to this school," said Housen.

A genuine, no-holds-barred fight might actually start any second now. Amid all this, Nanase, who had been watching the situation from the onset, opened her mouth to speak.

"Please stop, Housen-kun."

Despite the handicap of still having Ibuki in his grasp, Housen looked ready to start brawling with Ryuuken and Ishizaki as they barreled down on him. But he stopped moving after his classmate Nanase called out to him.

"What'd you just say?" he asked.

Rather than heed her warning, he looked irritated by the fact that she had spoken up and butted in.

"The upperclassmen have all been concerned about the fact that there are surveillance cameras around here for a while now. Judging from the situation, I've determined there's nothing to be gained by getting violent here," said Nanase.

"Yeah, I *know*. I know already, I was just messin' around with 'em," said Housen, before adding that he knew all along that we second-years were tied down because of the surveillance cameras.

If that was the case, everything Housen had just done after showing up here really was quite puzzling.

He ignored Nanase's warning, looking as though he was about to resume fighting, so she spoke up once more, in a firmer tone than before.

"If you do understand, then that's all the more reason you should stop. If you're going to try to waste more time here, then I have an idea of my own. I'm considering bringing *that* up and telling everyone here about it," said Nanase.

After Housen heard her mention *that*, whatever abstract idea it was supposed to represent, he stopped moving once again. Then, with a look of total boredom on his face, he let go of Ibuki and dropped her to the floor, where she coughed and hacked.

"Hey, not bad, Nanase. But just know that if you don't live up to my expectations, I won't show you any mercy. Even if you're a girl. Got it?" said Housen.

"When that time comes, I'll take whatever comes my way," said Nanase.

Even though Housen had just threatened her, Nanase didn't sound upset. She seemed so calm that it was like it didn't matter one bit to her that she was currently standing on the second-years' floor.

Even so, this Housen guy was certainly no pushover. There was no shortage of people in my grade level who could boast of their fighting prowess. Among the guys, that included Ryuuuen, Sudou, and Albert. Even though Housen was a first-year, just this brief glimpse of him in action told me he was quite capable himself. He probably wouldn't be the kind of opponent I could subdue all that easily, if I were to face off against him. And because I *had* only gotten a glimpse of him in action, I couldn't predict how things would go if he really went all out. Ryuuuen had probably tried to stop Ishizaki from casually throwing down against Housen because he determined that engaging in a simple fistfight would put them at a disadvantage.

This was one hell of a new student we were dealing with.

"All right, I'll stop. My business is all taken care of. Let's go, Nanase," said Housen.

"That is a wise choice," replied Nanase.

Housen, seemingly satisfied with everything else except for the lack of a fight, shot one last look at Ryuuuen.

"If you get down on your knees for me, I don't mind pairin' up with ya. Whaddya say, Ryuuuen-paisen?"

"Sorry, dude, but I only work with human beings. Can't say I got any plans of teamin' up with a wild gorilla."

"Oh, well, that's too bad," said Housen.

However, this whole ordeal wasn't over yet. Aside from Housen and Nanase, there was one other first-year present who had been observing the entire situation. Perhaps Housen was upset with this other student, because he turned his attention to him at the end.

"Hey, you just gonna hide and watch, punk?" sneered Housen.

"Do you know the proverb 'a wide man keeps away from danger?'" replied the student, fending off Housen's glare with an eloquent response. "Making friendly conversation is fine, but it wouldn't be beneficial for you to cause a ruckus here, Housen-kun. At any rate, I think you ought to withdraw for the time being. Am I wrong?"

At the same time, the boy gave Housen what could be interpreted as friendly advice, an adult showed, too.

"What are you doing, Housen?" he asked.

This lone man, clad in a suit, seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, as if to put a stop to all this tumultuous situation. Many of the second-years who had been standing by and watching the situation unfold had fled, returning to their own classrooms.

"Housen, I understand you're restless. But I'm also quite sure the school rules have been drilled so thoroughly into your head by now that it feels ready to explode," said the adult.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," said Housen.

"If you do understand, then hurry up and disperse. No fighting in the hallways."

"That was hardly even a real fight, though," snorted Housen.

With a scornful chuckle, he thrust his hands into his pockets, and then turned around, making an unexpectedly easy decision to retreat. He then ordered Nanase to retreat as well.

"Well, see you later, Horikita."

Housen purposefully dropped Horikita's name before he left... Well, no. It might be more accurate to say he was addressing the

whole of Class 2-D.

"We apologize for the disturbance," said Nanase, with a bow of her head.

With that apology, the situation seemed to have been more or less successfully contained. But, when Nanase lifted her head back up, she looked me right in the eyes right as she was leaving. It was the same look she'd given me when she first arrived on this floor. A probing look, almost as if she wanted to know something.

However, as soon as I noticed her looking at me, she immediately averted her eyes, and chased after Housen.

"I must apologize to you all. I'm terribly sorry. My students have caused you quite a bit of trouble," the teacher apologized to Horikita as she stood by watching everything that happened.

"No, it's all right..." she replied.

"Since we're here, please allow me to briefly introduce myself. I am Shiba Katsunori and I will be overseeing Class 1-D. I've only just accepted a position here at this school. I look forward to getting to know you all," said the teacher.

After giving us that brief self-introduction, Shiba-sensei left, following at Housen. Then, almost as if they were taking turns, the level-headed boy from earlier came up and bowed his head to us.

"It would seem that my classmate Housen-kun has caused a great deal of trouble for you, our seniors. On behalf of the first-year students, I'd like to offer my humble apologies," said the boy.

Unlike Housen, he seemed to be quite a well-spoken student.

"We first-year students still don't understand these special exams very well. I apologize for the inconvenience this may cause you, but we would humbly appreciate any help. Thank you," said the student.

After he had finished giving us his apologies and general salutations, the student, who was apparently named Yagami, looked as though he was about to leave himself. But then he seemed to notice something—a group of four girls from Class D who'd just returned from lunch. Matsushita, Kushida, Satou, and Mii-chan.

Yagami looked at one member of the group, Kushida, with surprise on his face.

"It seems there's been quite a fuss. What happened, Horikita-san?" Though Kushida was clearly aware of Yagami's presence in turn, she asked Horikita about what was going on, sounding quite curious.

"Nothing that you all need to worry about," said Horikita.

"Oh, really?"

After Horikita told them that it was nothing, Kushida and the other three girls started to head back towards the classroom.

"Um, pardon me, but...you wouldn't happen to be Kushida-senpai, by any chance, would you?" asked Yagami.

"Hm?" replied Kushida, turning around to look at who'd addressed her.

If he knew Kushida's name, could he be an acquaintance of hers? Or so I thought, but...

"Um, you are?" said Kushida.

She gave him a puzzled look. There was no sign that she was familiar with him.

"It's me. Do you not recognize me? Well, I suppose that's only natural that you wouldn't. It's Yagami Takuya," he replied.

Kushida thought on it for a while after hearing his name, but then seemed to suddenly remember. "Yagami... Ah! Wait! You're *that* Yagami-kun?!"

"Yes, I am most certainly that Yagami. It's been quite a long time, hasn't it?"

"Wow, so you came to this school too, Yagami-kun. What an incredible coincidence!"

"I never imagined I'd meet you again here, Kushida-senpai."

"You know each other?" asked Satou, curiously.

Kushida nodded. "Yes. But we hardly ever actually talked before. Anyway, his name is Yagami Takuya-kun. He always

seemed incredibly smart, but since we were in different grades, we never said much more than hello to each other.”

“So, do you know him too?” I asked, whispering in Horikita’s ear to get confirmation.

“Nope, I don’t know him at all,” she replied immediately.

“Well, you don’t seem very good at remembering the faces of your classmates, though.”

“I won’t deny that. I didn’t exactly have time to pay attention to people I wasn’t interested in,” said Horikita.

Apparently, Horikita didn’t recognize...no, it was more like he didn’t register in her mind at all. I supposed if you were the kind of person who treated your classmates that way, there was no way you’d remember students younger than you.

Well, even if Kushida didn’t remember this boy, *he’d* probably never been able to forget her. It just went to show how captivating she was.

“I can’t believe how lucky I am. To be able to go to the same school as the revered Kushida-senpai...” said Yagami.

“Oh, no, that’s a bit much, I’m nothing special...” she replied humbly.

However, if Yagami really had attended the same junior high as Kushida, then a few concerns came to mind.

“Does this Yagami kid know about *you know what?*” I whispered to Horikita.

I was referring to Kushida’s past, of course. In junior high, Kushida had caused her own class to turn on itself and fall apart. As a result, she considered Horikita—who’d attended the same school back then and knew the truth about what happened—a bitter enemy. Kushida wanted to get rid of Horikita, considering it too dangerous for someone to know what she’d done to her class.

If Yagami had attended the same junior high, it wouldn’t be a surprise if he knew about what happened, too, but...

“It wouldn’t be strange if he did. That being said, there’s no guarantee that he does,” said Horikita.

In that case, Yagami being here certainly wasn't very comforting for Kushida. Since there were students in our grade level who'd attended the same schools before, I supposed it wasn't out of the question for students' former juniors to enroll, either.

"I realize this is quite sudden, but I must say I would have neither complaints nor concerns if I were able to team up with someone like you, Kushida-senpai. Would you be willing to partner with me?" asked Yagami.

Even though he and Kushida had only just been reunited, he asked to become partners, extending his hand with a friendly smile on his face. Was this all to show that he knew nothing about her past? Or that even if he did know, it didn't matter?



"Are you really okay with partnering with me, though? I mean, Yagami-kun, perhaps it would be better if you partnered with someone more on your level academically?" said Kushida.

Yagami Takuya had an extremely high academic ability rating of A. Nothing to scoff at. No wonder Kushida was being so humble. Horikita, who had her phone out, looked up his information in the OAA app while she stood next to me, and confirmed that he was high-ranked.

"I don't know my way around here at all. So, I'd like to partner with someone I trust," said Yagami.

The app could give you an idea of a person's academic ability, but not their nature. He must have decided it would be better to team up with an acquaintance who he could be sure would produce solid results.

"Um, well, could you give me some time to think it over...?" Perhaps because she was wary of Yagami, or for some other reason, Kushida put his offer on hold for the time being.

"Of course, that would be perfectly fine. I will hold off on partnering up with anyone else for a while, and await your reply, Kushida-senpai." Yagami agreed to put the offer on hold, indicating he was fine to wait. Considering that his academic ability was A-rank, there was no need for him to rush out and find a partner.

"Damn, that must be nice. If it were me, I would've partnered up without a second thought..." Sudou seemed jealous of Kushida's ability to put an offer on hold. That made sense, considering his ranking was only E+.

"In that case, you should work harder," said Horikita.

"Yeah... I'll definitely improve my scores," he answered.

It wasn't a mean-spirited comment. Sudou was envious because he had a desire to improve himself.

I distanced myself from Horikita and the others for a moment because I saw Haruka beckoning me to come over. The rest of Ayanokouji Group all stood a short distance away: Akito, Keisei, and Airi.

"H-he was super scary, wasn't he?"

The first thing I heard after joining them was Airi's first impression of Housen.

"Sure seems there's a bunch of troublemakers like Sudou-kun and Ryuu-en-kun in this year's batch of new students, huh?"

Haruka sounded somewhat exasperated after having watched the entire commotion play out.

Standing beside her was Akito. He remained motionless, staring fixedly at the spot in the hall where Housen once stood.

"What's the matter, Miyacchi?" asked Haruka.

"A seriously scary dude has come to our school. Let's just say things are probably gonna get rocky from here on out. That dude's... Well, he's so tough that even Sudou or Ryuu-en can't take him on," said Akito.

"Wait, hold up. Don't tell me you know this guy too, Miyachi. Do you?" asked Haruka.

"I never, like, met him in person or anythin'. But Ryuu-en and Housen are both pretty big celebrities back where I'm from," said Akito.

It seemed Akito had lived somewhere close to the junior high schools that Ryuu-en and Housen had attended.

"Anyway, there used to be this gang leader at my school... The short version of the story is that this guy was a really tough-looking badass who was supposed to be really good in a fight. But one day, he just suddenly vanished. It caused a huge uproar. Then, right after he disappeared, I heard he'd wound up in the hospital after getting the crap beaten out of him in a one-on-one fight with some dude named Housen, who was on a rampage. This Housen had apparently just started at our junior high. He was a whole two years younger than the other guy."

"G-gang leader? Dang, that's like somethin' straight out of a manga about bad dudes... That's a little scary," said Haruka.

"The place I used to live in has been pretty infamous for attracting all sorts of riff raff for a long time now," said Akito.

"Oh, wow..." Haruka looked a little bit perplexed to hear this string of unfamiliar words from Akito.

"And just like that, Housen went around all the junior high schools in the area, one after another, tightening his grip on all of 'em," said Akito.

"Ryuu-en-kun's pretty infamous too, isn't he? But it seems like they've never met before," said Haruka.

"I get the feeling that's 'cause they just never happened to run into each other," said Akito.

"By the way, did you used to be a bad dude yourself, Miyachi?" asked Haruka.

"I... I quit doing that kinda stuff. These days I'm tryin' to be a proper student."

"So, you *were* a delinquent."

"...I had a bad temper all the way up into my second-year of junior high. Since then, I've focused everything into archery," said Akito.

"But that means you really used to be a bad kid, though, right?" asked Haruka.

Akito scratched his head in annoyance as Haruka, strangely enough, continued to press the matter.

"So? What's wrong with that?" he shot back.

"No, actually, like...I think it's kinda fine? If anything, I think that means you've got a pretty cool past. Don't ya think?" said Haruka.

"It ain't cool at all," said Akito.

I was guessing the reason he knew so much about fighting was because he used to be that sort of person. You could certainly tell by looking at him that he had nerves of steel and quick reflexes.

"I mean, since you were a former bad kid yourself, couldn't you just give Housen a taste of his own medicine if necessary?" asked Haruka.

"Quit jokin' around. Even if I do fight somebody, I choose my opponents carefully. And I especially wouldn't wanna fight Housen, for sure," said Akito.

Akito was raising the white flag before the fight even happened. He was saying that less as an admission of his own weakness, though, and more due to recognizing Housen's strength. Ibuki also had a certain degree of proficiency when it came to hand-to-hand combat, and she hadn't been able to land a single hit. There was just an overwhelming difference in their physiques. And she wasn't a match for him when it came to speed either.

4.3

AFTER CLASS ENDED, I was approached by Horikita, just like yesterday. As we were about to leave the classroom together, Sudou insisted on accompanying us as well. Horikita tried to refuse him, but just like last time, she seemed to be won over by his eagerness to help until he found a partner of his own. She let him come along on the condition that him taking time to help her wouldn't interfere with his club activities or his studies. It was certainly surprising for Horikita to be so kind, or perhaps I should say accepting.

But I supposed there was a good reason for her allowing him to come. There were about ten days left until the special exam. Considering how exceptionally difficult the written exam was going to be, it was a good idea to secure a time and place where you'd be able to concentrate on your studies, even if just for a little while. But if Sudou was constantly worrying about what Horikita was up to, he wouldn't be able to concentrate.

It was clear to see that Horikita wanted to find a partner for Sudou as soon as possible, so that he could have time to devote himself to his studies. Horikita understood Sudou Ken very well—except for one particularly important thing. Namely, Sudou's feelings for Horikita. She hadn't recognized that there was a reason, deep down, why he just wanted to be by her side.

Of course, I wasn't going to deliberately point out what was an important driving force for Sudou.

Instead of heading toward the first-year classrooms, Horikita decided to head towards Keyaki Mall, perhaps because some first-years had caused quite a bit of trouble after coming up to our floor today during lunch. She was being careful to ensure a comparable incident didn't take place.

Or maybe it was the problem child Housen, from Class 1-D, who had caused Horikita to change her mind. I supposed we'd find out soon enough. As soon as we entered the mall, Sudou stuck the little finger of his left hand in his ear to try and block out some of

the sound, seeming a little irritated by the noise. He then gave his honest thoughts on the new students we saw out and about in front of us.

"Man, I gotta say it's loud in here, dude. Guess that's 'cause of the first-years kickin' up a ruckus and all."

"There certainly are quite a lot of students around," replied Horikita.

They were all over the place, chatting away happily, discussing things like what they wanted to buy or what they wanted to eat.

"And yet we're all seriously lookin' for partners over here," huffed Sudou.

Wasting day after day trying to decide on a partner wasn't good for either the second-years or the first-years. However, there was one particularly huge point of separation between the first- and second-years. That was the difference in our perception of the special exams. Very few of the new students felt a keen sense of urgency, just like the ones we'd seen yesterday after class. This fact was even more apparent when we set foot outside the school building.

"It's no wonder. I mean, it was the same for us, back when we were the new kids," I replied.

"Yeah, that's true..." said Sudou.

With the hefty sum of money deposited into their accounts right after they had enrolled here, the new students were spending day after day in pursuit of idle amusement. Even if they were in Class A, it hardly made a difference. Regardless of how they were using their points, the fact was that they were all enjoying what this school had to offer to the absolute fullest.

The most annoying thing of all, though, was the fact that there was a difference in the penalties we faced and the ones the new students did. We faced expulsion, while all they stood to lose were three months' worth of Private Points.

"Look at 'em, not a care in the world, man," said Sudou.

"I wouldn't be talking if I were you, Sudou-kun. Have you forgotten what you were like a year ago?" said Horikita.

"N-no, I didn't forget or anythin'... I've been doin' a lot of soul searchin'," said Sudou.

Probably because he was the first student in our class to be faced with the real threat of being expelled. The relief measure that we had utilized at the time was no longer available to us, of course. The privilege of being beginners had already been used up.

"For the time being, let's try talking with a group of people," said Horikita, spotting a group of three first-year guys sitting on a bench, chatting and laughing among themselves.

Their names were Kaga, Mikami, and Shiratori. They were all students in Class 1-D and all had an academic ability ranking of B- or better. Before calling out to these students, Horikita had pulled up their information in the app, just to be sure. It seemed she hadn't changed her mind about going after students from Class 1-D, after all.

"Excuse me, do you have a moment?" asked Horikita.

"...What is it?" replied one of the students.

They could probably tell just by glancing at us that they were dealing with upperclassmen. The joyful expressions quietly faded from their faces and were quickly replaced with looks of caution.

"We're looking for partners for the upcoming special exam. Have you found partners yourselves yet?" she asked.

"Oh, uh, no. We still haven't partnered up with anyone yet," said one of the students.

"If you'd like, we'd be happy to talk to you about partnering up," said Horikita.

"Yeah, we'd definitely be okay with that. Right?" said one of the students.

After hearing Horikita's proposal, the three of them nodded in response, almost as if they had discussed matters in advance. We got an unexpectedly good vibe from their response, and it

seemed like they had relaxed their guard a little bit. Sudou looked surprised, like he could hardly believe how positive they were acting.

"However, while I'm very sorry to say this, our top priority right now is to find—"

"Partners who can help out the students with poor grades to prevent them from being expelled, right?" said one of the students, finishing Horikita's sentence.

It seemed that idea had already spread among the new students.

"Yes. If you understand that already, then this discussion will be quick," said Horikita.

"Um, well... so, you'd like... one of us to team up with Sudou-senpai?" asked one of the students.

They'd also checked out our profiles on their phones, which was why they had no hesitation in talking with us.

"Yes. He's one of the students we'd like to find a partner for. There are many others, as well," said Horikita.

"Oh, okay, I see. Let's see, Sudou-senpai has an academic ability ranking of E+, huh... That does sound quite difficult," said the student.

He was being diplomatic, but it was still clear he was pointing out just how low Sudou's academic ability ranking was. Even though what he said was true, Sudou seemed upset. Still, he barely managed to keep it together and not let his dissatisfaction show on his face.

"Shiratori, you should be able to handle it just fine, right?"

The other two students looked to Shiratori, who sat at the far-right end of the bench.

"My academic ability ranking is A, at least for the time being," said Shiratori.

"Yes, so it seems. If you're willing to partner with him, I would certainly not complain," said Horikita.

"In that case... how about this much?" Shiratori held out his hand with all five fingers up, making a proposal in return.

For a moment, Horikita didn't understand what he was suggesting, so she looked back at Sudou and me.

"My oh my. You want to partner up, right? If so, I should think something like this would be obvious. No?" said Shiratori.

When Horikita heard that, she understood what he meant.
"...I suppose you're referring to Private Points."

"Of course. I mean, if someone like myself were to team up with a smart student, I could shoot for the top spot. Since I'll be giving up a chance at getting the top-tier rewards by partnering with a student with a low academic ranking, it's only natural that I ask for something in return," said Shiratori.

"Say what? You want points from us?! And you're askin' for fifty thousand...? Dude, that's way too much," said Sudou.

For someone like Sudou, who was constantly short on funds every day, that was an extraordinary number of points to ask for.

"Senpai, please stop joking around. There's no way I could accept fifty-thousand," said Shiratori.

"Huh?" said Sudou.

"I meant five hundred thousand. If you can give me five hundred thousand, I'll happily partner up with you right here and now," said Shiratori.

"F-five hundred thousand?!" shouted Sudou.

"It would be *quite* difficult for you if a student got expelled from your class, right? We've been doing a bit of research ourselves, you see," said Shiratori.

Apparently, this year's batch of new students were quite different from how we'd been last year. They had already begun to understand how this school worked, and on top of that, they understood their value. Between our grade level and theirs, it was difficult to tell which of us were the seniors and which the juniors. Looking at the situation we were in, it could easily be interpreted the other way around.

"It's certainly natural to want some kind of remuneration if you're being asked to partner with someone with a low academic ability ranking," said Horikita.

"H-hey, Suzune! I ain't got five hundred large though, y'know?" said Sudou.

"I know that. Be quiet for a minute," said Horikita.

The three first-year students wore sarcastic, wry smiles on their faces after hearing Sudou carelessly divulge his financial circumstances.

"It's only natural to want points, yes. However, is chasing after short-term desires really a good idea?" said Horikita.

"Meaning?" asked Shiratori, speaking as a representative of the three students.

"Meaning that if you ingratiate yourselves with us here and now, we might be able to provide help to you down the road, in similar situations," said Horikita, explaining to them that it would be to their advantage later if they were to exchange in some give-and-take with us in a form other than Private Points.

"Well, putting you aside, Horikita-senpai, since you have an A ranking, I can't really imagine having Sudou-senpai or Ayanokouji-senpai there would really be of any help to us. Wouldn't you say?" said Shiratori.

"That's not necessarily true. This school isn't just about academics. There are times when you'll need physical ability, too," said Horikita.

That was especially applicable to Sudou, as he was the only student in our grade level who had an A+ in physical ability. Horikita had been intending to use that as a weapon in her arsenal for this negotiation, but...

"I know that. But still, you're just *Class D* in the end, right? If we were to ingratiate ourselves within anyone, it would be Class A or Class B," said Shiratori calmly, having apparently come to an objective conclusion.

Seeing that, Horikita probably understood. "...I see. So that's how it is."

Considering how smoothly they handled themselves after hearing our offer and the number of points they came back with as a counter-offer, we didn't need to think too hard about what was going on here.

"Wh-what do you mean by that?" asked Sudou.

"Before you arrived, we were approached by senior students from other classes," said Shiratori.

"And they told you not to sell your academic abilities for cheap. Right?" asked Horikita.

"Yes. Please understand that we won't partner with you if you do not offer us suitable compensation in points," said Shiratori.

In the face of Shiratori and his classmates, Horikita kept her composure, and then continued talking.

"It's certainly true that you shouldn't sell yourself cheaply, in that case. However, were you *really* approached by other students from our grade, though?" said Horikita.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Shiratori. He looked irritated, like his pride as an A-ranked student had been wounded.

"You're also in Class D, just like us. I can't imagine students from higher-level classes would have approached you so casually," said Horikita.

Horikita was bluffing. As long as you had an elevated level of academic ability, you'd be useful to have around in this exam, regardless of whether you were in Class D. She was trying to confirm who had talked to them, and how much they had said.

Perhaps because Shiratori's pride had been called into question, he rebutted this in a somewhat abrasive tone.

"It's true, though. We were invited by Hashimoto-senpai from Class 2-A. On top of that, we were approached by students from Class 2-C, who offered us quite a few points to partner up with them. Isn't that right?" said Shiratori, glancing at his friends, who both immediately voiced their agreement.

"We're not the only ones, either. Most of the smart kids have been approached," added Shiratori.

Just as Horikita had calculated, Class 2-A and Class C had gone with the idea of trying to buy students out.

"I see... In that case, I suppose we cannot meet your expectations right now," said Horikita.

"Oh, but as long as you give us points, we will not refuse you. We intend to see how things go for about a week. If you were to offer us five hundred thousand points during that time, we'd be happy to partner with anyone, even Sudou-senpai," said Shiratori.

Five hundred thousand points to prevent someone from getting expelled. A large sum to be sure, but if you looked at it from another angle, you could say it was the price of your safety. However, we couldn't make a snap decision here. Nor did we intend to.

"By the way... How many points did Hashimoto-kun and the others offer you for your cooperation?" asked Horikita.

She was hoping to know the specific number of points that were offered, but Shiratori and his buddies weren't that naïve.

"We promised not to say. All I will say is that for five hundred thousand points, we will help you," said Shiratori.

"I understand. I will take that into consideration. However, we would like to ask you for one favor. Would you be willing to introduce us to some of your fellow students in Class D?" asked Horikita.

"Introduce?" Shiratori repeated.

"We've already prepared to work with your class, to a certain extent. But approaching each person individually and explaining the same thing over and over would take up a lot of time and energy. If possible, we'd like to gather all of you in one place and have a more concrete discussion then," said Horikita.

She had hinted at the idea of forming a partnership, but didn't say specifically what that would look like. The three students exchanged glances, though they all looked uncomfortable about something.

"That's... Well, asking us to do something like that might be a little *difficult*... Right, guys?"

"Yeah. If we go ahead and do something like that without getting permission, Housen-kun will probably get mad at us. Don't you think?"

The name 'Housen' came up in the conversation they were having among themselves.

"I'm sorry senpai, but could you please ask someone else to handle that...?" asked Shiratori.

It seemed Housen was the one who held Class 1-D's leashes, after all. Horikita, sensing that the mood had clearly changed, decided not to pursue the matter further. "Thank you. I will call on you again if the need arises," she said.

"A-all right. We'll be waiting," said Shiratori.

We walked away from the bench and started heading towards the café on the second floor. I secretly peeked back at them as we left, and saw that Shiratori, phone in hand, seemed to be hurriedly calling someone.

"We got some information, but it's hard to say that we made any actual progress. The only thing we know for sure is that if we were to offer them an absolutely absurd five hundred thousand points, they would agree to cooperate with us on the spot," said Horikita.

"They're totally tryin' to take advantage of us and price gouge, makin' those ridiculous demands," huffed Sudou.

"It certainly is a ridiculous amount they're asking for, yes. But it's also true that they have no reason to sell their talents on the cheap," said Horikita.

Even more so if they were ranked A in academic ability. This was certainly a much more direct way of earning points than shooting for the one-hundred-thousand-point reward for getting high marks on the exam.

"So in the end, the only way for me to save myself is by payin' somebody a bunch of Private Points?" asked Sudou.

"It's certainly getting harder and harder to say for sure that there are any students out there who will help you for free."

The notion that points would be the key to forming partnerships had already spread. It would be best if we assumed it wasn't just Shiratori and his friends who believed so, but rather that their entire grade level knew to ask for points in exchange for partnerships.

I was sure we could safely say this was part of Sakayanagi and Ryuuen's strategy, too. Normally, doing things in exchange for points was frowned upon. Such transactions brought with them a sense of shame, and so, they were usually done in secret. But by conducting a large-scale buy out operation, they had essentially made the new students realize that offering their services for free would be losing out.

Even so, there was something that bothered me about the conversation we just had with Shiratori and his classmates earlier. Though they had already been approached by students from other classes, they'd said that they were going to wait a week. Even if they were just waiting that long so they could try and fish for more points, I was concerned by the fact that all three of them had seemed to be in agreement about their course of action from the very beginning.

I would have thought students would have wanted to seek reassurance by finding a partner right away. Was it just that those particular three happened to be bullheaded? Or perhaps...

"Even if we continue to ask around randomly like this, we'll probably keep getting the same answers, won't we?" I told them.

Scoping out Class 1-D was fun and all, but the real problem came after that. What Shiratori and his friends said about Housen getting angry with them if they acted without permission stuck in my mind. Judging from the way Shiratori and his friends talked, I was certain that Housen Kazuomi oversaw their entire class.

"Housen likely gave his classmates some instructions," I added. "He probably told them something like, 'Hey, you can team up with anybody you want, but you can *only* make a snap decision to team up if they offer you five hundred thousand points. If they don't make that offer, put their request to team up on hold, even if they're from Class A,' or something like that."

"But wait, if they do that, won't that mean Class 1-D gets left behind?" asked Sudou.

"I'm saying they're planning on that happening. They intend to be the last ones," I replied.

"Huh? I don't get it," said Sudou.

"It's only we second-year students who are afraid of getting hit with the penalty for not finding a partner. He was probably thinking that he can hold that over our heads and use it to rip us off for as many Private Points as possible toward the end," I told him.

If all the honors students outside of Class 1-D had already been bought up, we'd eventually have no choice but to shell out to get the ones from Class D to cooperate with us, whether we liked it or not. Even if that meant paying a million or two million.

"It's an incredibly rash strategy, made with absolutely no thought about what'll happen in the future," said Horikita.

"Tell me again, how exactly do you plan on fighting this?" I said.

We'd already figured out what Class 1-D was planning to do. So, having taken that into account, I wanted to know what Horikita was thinking. Would she try and force herself in between what Class 2-A and Class C were starting to do right now, with their extreme buy-out strategies? Or would she perhaps adopt a strategy more like what Ichinose was doing, forming relationships built on trust by accepting many lower-ranked students, regardless of what class they were in, and appealing to the honors students for their cooperation?

"I decided to set three goals when we heard the outline for this particular special exam," said Horikita.

"Three goals?" asked Sudou.

He seemed to be interested in what she was about to say, since he was leaning in closer.

"The most important of which is to not let anyone from our class get expelled. That goes without saying," said Horikita.

"Yeah, for sure," replied Sudou, nodding.

"The second is to shoot for third place or better in overall points, in the competition against other classes," said Horikita.

"Wait, third? You mean we're throwin' away our shot of going after first or second right from the get-go?" asked Sudou.

"No one said anything about throwing away our shot of going after those places. I said third place or better," said Horikita.

True enough, saying she was hoping for third place or better technically included first- and second-place. But that didn't seem to be precisely what she meant, and it most likely had something to do with her third goal.

"My third goal is to avoid participating in these money games. I plan to do battle with those three principles in mind," said Horikita.

"Huh...? B-but..." stammered Sudou.

"I understand what you want to say. Namely, that if we're not going to compete using Private Points, then we have no hope of winning this thing. However, even if we try and compete using the points that we have, the reward isn't worth the risk. Even if we do finish in first place overall, we will only gain fifty Class Points. Meaning that over the course of a year, our class would only get a little over two million Private Points," said Horikita.

If we got five thousand points per person per month, (excluding the deposit that we got in April, which had already passed) and multiplied that amount by the remaining eleven months, then we'd end up with two million, one hundred and forty-five thousand Private Points.

"And if we pay five hundred thousand points per person, that means we'd be in the red after paying for five people. We can't possibly be so naïve as to think that we could win this thing just by getting four or so first-years who have an academic ability ranking of A, right?" said Horikita.

Even if we were to carry that into the next two years—that is, until we graduated—it would still only be four million, four hundred and eighty-five thousand Private Points. Which covered a

maximum of eight recruits. Moreover, this was all based on the supposition that not only could we assuredly draw in those students at five hundred thousand at most, but also, that we would be getting first place in the overall rankings by grade level. Considering the risks, it would likely be far more efficient for us to simply wait for an upcoming special exam and use our Private Points then.

"Private Points and Class Points are not equal. I'm well aware that there is more to it than just what we get in return. However, I think that even if we do pump all our points into this test, we'd only have a slim chance of winning, so we shouldn't try and push it. Am I wrong, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Horikita.

"Not at all. Your decision is the right one," I replied.

The difference in overall academic ability between us and Class 2-A had been clear from the start. If we wanted to win overall, I couldn't really imagine we'd gain much of an advantage from bringing in eight students. Of course, Horikita was resourceful. She would probably consider paying out Private Points if there were students who were willing to partner up for fifty or a hundred thousand. It was just that she didn't want this battle to come down to what was in our bank accounts.

"In order to achieve those three goals, I still think we should try to negotiate with Class 1-D, after all," said Horikita.

"Wh-why though? Weren't all the kids in their class told by Housen not to team up with us for anythin' less than five hundred large?" said Sudou.

"As far as the honors students are concerned, yes, that's true. However, there are students in their class who have an academic ability ranking of C or below, too. What do you think would happen if they were neglected?" asked Horikita.

"What would happen...?" repeated Sudou.

"Students who should normally have been fine would also receive penalties, and their position would be thrown into question," I replied.

Horikita nodded at what I said, and then continued from there.

"There's no way those students would willingly give up the Private Points they could get every month. Which means at some point, Housen-kun will have no choice but to abandon his current stance," said Horikita.

Even if all the honors students in 1-D tried selling themselves for five hundred thousand points, the rest of the students in their class couldn't do the same. Putting aside the issue of whether second-year students would get expelled or not, Housen would fall behind in the battle between the first-years.

"If he's looking for a way to win, there will definitely be an opening that we can exploit," said Horikita.

It seemed she was intent on dealing with Class 1-D then, the class that everyone else wanted to avoid.

"That being said, it would be dangerous for all thirty-nine of us to try and engage with Housen-kun's class. We need to minimize the risk as much as possible," said Horikita.

If our negotiations failed, then it would be the students with less academic skill who would be in trouble.

"Considering that the exam period has only just begun, I suppose it's not strange some kids are asking for entirely unreasonable conditions to partner up," said Horikita.

"Well, I hope you're right... I mean, as far as I'm concerned though, I kinda doubt there's anyone out there for me," said Sudou.

"In any case, the only way we'll find gifted partners is to reach out to a lot of people," said Horikita.

As we were waking up the steps to the café on the second floor though, we heard a voice come from behind us.

"Hey! If you're looking for a gifted partner, I'm right here, y'know?"

When we turned around, we saw a lone female student looking over at us, with a big grin on her face, from ear to ear. As

soon as our eyes met, she slowly walked up the steps. Horikita was the first one of us to let her suspicions show on her face.

"Were you eavesdropping on us?" she asked.

"Oh, gosh, no, senpai, I just shouted out because I only happened to hear what you were saying is all. And umm..." The girl spoke without looking over at Sudou or me, keeping her gaze locked onto Horikita. "Senpai, what's your name and academic ability ranking?"

"... My name's Horikita. I'm from Class 2-D. My academic ability score is A-. What of it?" she asked.

"Oh, wow, you're smart!" replied the girl.

"And your name is?"

"I'm Ichika Amasawa. From Class 1-A. I'm the same as you, Horikita-senpai. I've got an A in academic ability."

She looks like a girl who only cares about popularity, but is actually quite a smart student. Just to be sure, Horikita checked her information in the app.

"If you want to shoot for the top, I'll work with you. Okay?"

Amasawa asked that question without even asking anything about our backgrounds. If students with A- and A ratings teamed up together, it certainly wouldn't be impossible for them to get first place. As for Horikita, she had deliberately lowered her score for Sudou's sake in the past, so if you took that fact into consideration, it wouldn't be unfair to say she actually was an A, not an A-.

Though this was unexpected, Horikita could very well end up settling on a partner for herself, not Sudou or anyone else. This might be a coincidence, but a student with an academic ability ranking of A *did* just reach out to her. If Horikita were to say that she instead wanted Amasawa to partner with a student with a lower ranking, Amasawa might choose to walk away.

"I sincerely appreciate the offer, but I'm actually not looking for a partner right now myself. Instead of partnering with me though, could I possibly ask you about partnering with him... With Sudou-kun?" asked Horikita.

Horikita took that risk anyway, introducing the girl to Sudou. Though Sudou was a little perplexed by the situation, he gently bowed his head to Amasawa, giving her a proper greeting.

"Uh, let's see, what's Sudou-senpai's academic ability ranking?" said Amasawa.

"E+. Certainly not a good grade, by any stretch," said Horikita.

'Not good' was putting it mildly. If anything, he was in the running for the lowest ranking in our entire grade.

"I gotcha. So that means you're looking for help, Horikita-senpai. You're trying to find a partner for him so that he won't get kicked out of school." Amasawa, having grasped the situation, looked over at Sudou. "E+, huh. If we teamed up, forget about getting the top spot. We'd probably end up scoring a little under the middle of the road."

"Yes, that's true. There's hardly any advantage for you in it," said Horikita.

I wondered if Amasawa was going to bring up points now, but there was no sign she was going to do that.

"Well, still, if you're askin' for help, I certainly wouldn't mind lending you a hand," said Amasawa.

Things were clearly looking much more favorable for us than how they'd gone with those three boys earlier. Amasawa then looked in my direction.

"What about him? Is he looking for a partner too?" she asked.

"His academic ability ranking is C. He's not exactly a top priority for us. However, if Sudou-kun is a no-go for you, we'd still be very appreciative if you'd team up with Ayanokouji-kun, as a worst-case scenario," said Horikita.

"Wait, no, hold on—" I replied, cutting in.

While this was probably a kind gesture on Horikita's part, I had to put a stop to it. I couldn't just decide upon a partner right now without thinking about it.

"Is there something wrong with her?" asked Horikita.

"No, it's not like that, it's—"

"Oh, hey, wait a sec. I still haven't said which one of them I'll pair up with yet though, y'know?" Amasawa, seeing that the conversation was moving ahead without her actual consent on the matter, spoke up and put a stop to it.

"Do you have any conditions you would need fulfilled for you to partner with either of these two, then?" asked Horikita.

"Conditions, conditions, huh. Yeah, okay. I suppose I am entitled to at least that much, right?" said Amasawa.

Horikita had decided to bring up the topic herself, to see if Amasawa had any conditions for a partnership. She hadn't changed her basic policy of avoiding engaging in a spending competition with the other classes using Private Points, but if Amasawa's price was low enough, there was room for consideration. I just prayed it wasn't too high a price, like what Shiratori and his friends were asking for...

"Well, I really like strong people, y'know," said Amasawa, saying something that had absolutely nothing to do with this exam while wearing a devilish little grin.

"What in the world are you talking about?" Horikita furrowed her brow suspiciously, having expected the topic of discussion to shift from studies to points.

"Well, it's like, I was racking my brain over what I should do for this exam and stuff. I was thinking, should I study super hard, team up with someone around A-rank like Horikita-senpai, and try and shoot for the top? ...Or, like, should I kinda take it easy, just try and get through the exam? And if I'm going to take it easy in the test, I'd wanna team up with someone I like, you know what I mean?" said Amasawa.

I supposed that was certainly preferable to working with someone you didn't like or someone you didn't care about at all.

"I like strong guys," added Amasawa, repeating what she had just said earlier. Horikita's head spun as she tried to understand what Amasawa was saying.

"Meaning... you're asking if Sudou-kun is strong or not, then?" asked Horikita.

"Right. And I'm not talking about, like, being mentally strong or anything. I'm asking about whether he's physically strong. Well, I can tell easily enough that you do sports or stuff just from looking at your physique," said Amasawa, pointing her finger at Sudou, a student who normally should be a non-entity to someone with an A in academic ability.

Sudou was confident of his strength, so while he was somewhat shy about it, he nodded in agreement.

"You wanna partner with me?" asked Amasawa, extending her hand and caressing Sudou's cheek.

"W-well, I mean, if I had an A in academics, then we'd be a lot better off though... Are you really okay with me?" said Sudou.

"If you really are strong, then sure," said Amasawa.

She ran her thin fingertip along Sudou's chest, mesmerizing him with her allure.

"I-I'm strong," he replied.

"Well, I don't *dislike* guys who are full of confidence," said Amasawa.

"What exactly do you mean, if he's really strong?" Horikita, who had taken on the responsibility of getting Sudou situated, expressed her lack of understanding of what Amasawa was talking about.

"It means what it sounds like. I like strong people who are good in a fight. That's why I wanna partner up with someone strong," said Amasawa.

"In that case, I think Sudou-kun can measure up. I can vouch for his physical strength," said Horikita.

"Words aren't enough for me, though. I'll have to confirm it with my own eyes," said Amasawa.

"...With your own eyes?" asked Horikita.

"I mean like, go out, round up a bunch of strong second-years, have 'em fight each other. And then I'll partner up with the

toughest one there," said Amasawa.

"Are you joking? There's no way we could do something like that," said Horikita.

"Why not? Hey, I've been serious this whole time we've been talking, right?"

Sudou, who couldn't believe Amasawa was being serious either, spoke. "Let's go, Suzune. Stayin' here's just a waste of time."

It sounded almost as though he was admonishing himself for falling for Amasawa's charms, even if only for a moment.

"Eh, I don't really care if you just wanna pretend this conversation never happened," said Amasawa.

She was saying that to her, this whole thing was nothing more than a little fun. She certainly didn't have to go out of her way to partner up with an E+ ranked student, if she wanted. Considering the fact that Amasawa's class and abilities were nothing to scoff at, she'd probably have no shortage of people willing to pay to be with her.

Still, this might be fortunate for us, to a certain extent. If we agreed to her request, Sudou would gain the right to partner with a student with A-rank academic ability. And even if he didn't end up getting to partner with her, we lost nothing.

"You're not saying this just to make fun of us, then? You're really serious about this?" asked Horikita in response, a serious look in her eyes.

"Of course I'm serious," said Amasawa.

"I see. In that case, I suppose we'll take this seriously too, and hear you out," said Horikita.

"H-Hey, Suzune?" said Sudou.

"Come on, it's fine! I wanna team up with someone strong, after all," said Amasawa.

"All right. In that case, Sudou-kun, you should accept her offer," said Horikita.

"W-wait, hold up, Suzune. The school ain't just gonna let us have a fight or whatever. Stuff'll get pretty bad if we fight, won't it? I mean like what happened last year, and at lunch, with that little tussle with that Housen dude. Right?" said Sudou.

Last year, Sudou had gotten in a fight with several guys from Ryuuuen's class and it had turned into quite the problem. And just today, there had been a big commotion when Housen came by.

"It's certainly true that fighting isn't exactly praiseworthy. But if both sides consent, there should be no issue. Don't you think so, Ayanokouji-kun?" said Horikita.

I took a moment to consider what Horikita's intentions were in asking me that question. If she was asking me if there was no issue with such a fight, then my answer would obviously be that yes, there *would* be issues. Win or lose, even if both parties agreed to fight and then started swinging, there was essentially no way that school administrators would approve of something that essentially amounted to a duel. However, Horikita had responded to Amasawa in a way that sounded like she was condoning the idea of such a brawl.

"I suppose you're right. If school officials heard talk of a fight, there's no way they'd agree to let it happen. If the students involved all consent to the fight, however, it doesn't seem like it'd be a *huge* issue." I purposefully answered her back in a way that communicated I had no problem with it.

"H-hey, Ayanokouji!" wailed Sudou.

"On top of that, no matter who you picked from our grade level, no one would be able to beat Sudou-kun in a fight," said Horikita.

"Got that right," I replied.

Sudou didn't understand what was going on, but Horikita and I were taking turns passing the baton back and forth to each other in this conversation. The important thing right now wasn't to affirm the idea of actually having a fight. It was to prove that Sudou was the strongest—*without* actually having him fight anyone.

"To be frank, Sudou-kun, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Think about it. Normally, it would be extremely difficult to pair you up with a student with A-rank academic ability. However, Amasawa-san has said that she's willing to partner with you. Understand? On top of that, she's agreeing to partner with you on the condition of you winning a fight. A test of strength. Something you're better at than anyone else. You should take this deal without a second's hesitation," said Horikita.

There was no way a second-year student familiar with the school rules would carelessly agree to engage in a fight like this. On top of that, if their opponent was Sudou, the outcome was as clear as day. In other words...even if we agreed to her terms here and now, the fight might never actually end up taking place. And even in the off chance that someone did take the challenge, Sudou could put them down.

"Ooh, nice! Nice! I'm gettin' kind of excited!" Amasawa, having just enrolled here, naturally knew none of this. There was no way she could understand how different this place was from a normal junior high or high school.

"But, could you promise us one thing, first? If no one shows up to this fight other than Sudou-kun, then you'll agree to partner with him," said Horikita, hoping to confirm an important part of the deal.

If Amasawa didn't agree to that condition, this discussion would go any further.

"Sure. I promise. If no challenger shows up, then he'll win by default," said Amasawa.

After Amasawa gave us her word, Horikita nodded, apparently satisfied.

"All right, Sudou-kun?" she asked, turning to Sudou.

"...Sure. If you don't have a problem with it, Suzune, then I don't mind at all," said Sudou, balling both his hands into fists and then smacking them together in front of him, hard.

As far as Horikita was concerned, Amasawa's proposal was both a product of chance and an invaluable opportunity.

"Okey dokey, I'll post a general message in the app for everyone to see. I'll tell anyone who feels confident about their physical strength to shoot me a direct message before the end of the day if they wanna join in," said Amasawa.

"Heh. No matter who shows up, I'll take 'em." Conveniently enough, Sudou didn't seem to understand what Horikita was thinking. He was probably just getting excited over the idea of fighting somebody hand-to-hand.

"Would it be all right if we select the location? We'd prefer not to unintentionally let things slip to the school," said Horikita.

"Yeah, sure. I think you guys would probably know more about that than me anyway. I'll let you handle that part." Amasawa must have finished composing her message, because she turned to us for a final confirmation before sending it out. "Okay, so once this goes out, we'll have our little test of strength. That okay with you?"

Horikita nodded back in response. Amasawa slowly looked over all three of us. Then she turned her phone's screen off and put it back in her pocket.

"Actually, let's not, after all," said Amasawa.

I had thought maybe she had a sudden change of heart, but that didn't seem to be the case. Judging from the look on her face, we should assume that she had been testing us, trying to feel us out. However, both Horikita and Sudou were flustered by Amasawa's abrupt change.

"What's wrong?" asked Horikita.

"Even if I put out a message asking for people, it doesn't seem like anyone would show up. Based on Sudou-senpai's physique, and the way both Horikita-senpai and Ayanokouji-senpai are acting, I can tell he's top dog in terms of strength in your grade level," said Amasawa.

So she'd come to understand there was no need to go through the trouble of making people fight to compare them. It seemed the little act Horikita and I had put on, as well as Sudou's natural reaction, had been even more effective than we had

expected. If Amasawa had only noticed all this after she posted the message, Horikita probably wouldn't have let her take it back.

In order to not let Amasawa realize that we had been acting before, Horikita expressed her dissatisfaction. "Are you making fun of us?"

"No way, it's nothing like that, really. It's just, like, it's no fun when the outcome's so obvious. I just want to see it with my own eyes and make sure he's the strongest. So please don't get all mad at me, senpai."

Amasawa pressed her forefinger against her lips, lost in thought for a moment.

"I'll still give you a chance though, so come on, forgive me?" she added.

Horikita was trying to stay in control of the conversation, but kept getting knocked off balance by Amasawa's peculiar approach. It seemed she didn't jive so well with people like Amasawa.

"Well, I guess besides strong guys, I like guys who can cook," said Amasawa.

"Cook?" said Horikita.

Amasawa's newest suggestion was once again something completely unrelated to the special exam.

"So, Sudou-senpai, right? Would you make me a home-cooked meal? Something, like, super extra yummy?" said Amasawa.

"A h-home-cooked meal?!" stammered Sudou.

Sudou, who had been brimming with confidence just moments ago, now seemed overcome with shock after hearing her unexpected request.

"I mean, it being tasty is a prerequisite, of course. It's *gotta* be good. But you also have to make something that I specifically request," said Amasawa.

"W-wait, I ain't ever cooked a meal in my life—"

"Is that so? Well, I guess that means I take back giving you a chance, hmm," replied Amasawa, cutting him off.

Horikita jumped into the conversation, not wanting to let this opportunity pass us by. "Can I do it then, in Sudou-kun's place?"

"Nope. I told you before, didn't I? I said I like guys who can cook. 'Sides, if the guy I'm partnering up with can't cook, then there's no point in partnering with them at all," said Amasawa.

Meaning it didn't matter how well Horikita could cook. If you were a girl, Amasawa wasn't interested.

"Well, if Sudou-senpai is no good, why not give up on him and try to find a classmate who can cook? Oh, is that because even if you *did* go out and find someone in a hurry, I still wouldn't be partnering with Sudou-senpai then, hm?" said Amasawa, flashing a devilish grin. "Maybe you should work on turning Sudou-senpai into a master cook. Of course, I gotta wonder if you can really do that in time, huh. I *am* pretty popular, you know. If you don't hurry, I'll probably find a partner."

That wasn't just a hollow threat. She would probably find a partner in the not-too-distant future. There were many exceptionally talented students other than Horikita in our grade level. There was no need for Amasawa to deliberately take on the risk of partnering with the likes of Sudou. If anything, this was nothing more than a playful whim on her part. If she changed her mind even a little, that would be the end of it.

But a classmate who had poor grades *and* was a guy who was good at cooking? No one else came to mind at the moment. In that case, this request from Amasawa might just be a no-go for Class D. Giving up on her and going after other students would probably be a better use of our time.

When Amasawa saw we weren't giving her an answer, she went on to add something else.

"Okay. Well, how about I give you a little special treatment? I did want to partner with a guy who's good at cooking, but... If you can satisfy my taste buds, I'd be willing to team up with a good fighter like Sudou-senpai," said Amasawa.

She was offering us a compromise. Amasawa wanted to partner up with a guy who was a good fighter *or* a good cook. In that case, we could certainly satisfy her.

"I guess it would be like teaming up with a good cook and a good fighter at the same time, huh?" she added.

Amasawa was saying she would be willing to partner up with Sudou as long as another guy could satisfy her. I wondered how Horikita would respond...? But the problem was that I couldn't really think of a student who fit the bill. We also seriously lacked the time necessary to teach someone how to cook.

"Ayanokouji-kun. If I recall, you once boasted to me that you're quite the skilled cook, didn't you?" said Horikita.

What in the world was Horikita thinking, asking me a question like that so openly? I had never once told her anything of the sort, much less boasted about it. While it would have been easy for me to deny her assertion, it seemed necessary for me to play along and make sure our stories matched. The chances of Sudou being able to partner with a student with an A in academic ability weren't exactly high.

"It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that cooking is my one and only area of expertise," I replied.

"Yes, quite. Well then, if you'll permit it, Amasawa-san, how about Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Horikita.

"As long as it's a guy, I don't care who. But is he *really* a good cook, though? I mean, you can go ahead and say whatever you want, talk is cheap, but I'm going to judge you pretty harshly, okay?" said Amasawa.

"That'll be fine, of course. Isn't that right?" said Horikita, turning to me.

"Yeah, I guess so."

As soon as I agreed to it, Amasawa immediately clapped her hands together.

"Okay! How about we get this show on the road and you show me what you can do?"

Things were moving way too quickly. However, what Amasawa had just said seemed like she was both sealing the deal and giving us an ultimatum. She wanted to avoid giving me enough of a grace period that I could go learn how to cook. She

wanted to ascertain whether I really *was* as good as I claimed to be.

Since Horikita needed to make sure Amasawa believed her lie, she couldn't go ahead and say yes to her request. Even if I were to go ahead and cook for Amasawa now, with my current level of skill, it was clear it wouldn't amount to much. And even if Amasawa didn't actually judge me that harshly, I would probably still end up failing to meet her standards.

"While we'd love to, could you possibly give us a little time? Ayanokouji-kun and I are in the process of reaching out to first-year students to find partners for our classmates. Aside from Sudou-kun, there are many other students who need help. If the other classes beat us to the punch, then we'll really be hurting. Even at this very moment, our rivals are scrambling to find partners," said Horikita, explaining our situation to Amasawa, to see if she understood what we were dealing with. "If possible, we'd like to put this on hold until after class on Friday."

She rejected Amasawa's request to have me cook something for her right away. On top of that, she asked if we could postpone things for a couple of days, suggesting we could make some time on the weekend.

"I see, I see. Well, I suppose you're right, it wouldn't be good for little ol' me to take up all your time myself." Then Amasawa offered a new proposal. "I'd be all right doing it later tonight, though. What about that? That wouldn't be a problem, would it?"

"A first-year student going to a second-year student's dorm in the middle of the night—and a boy's room, to boot—would most certainly be improper," said Horikita.

"Oh, I see. But waitin' until the weekend is kinda tough for me. And I'd lose the chance to partner up with any other of my senpai then... Right?"

Just as I'd thought, Horikita's suggestion to wait until the weekend wasn't going to fly. Amasawa came back with a pretty harsh reply this time.

"But since this is kinda, like, fate or something, I'll give you just one day. If you tell me you can't cook something for me tomorrow after class, I guess we'll just have to pretend this whole thing never happened," said Amasawa.

That was probably the very last compromise she was willing to make. She was drawing a hard line. I got the sense that if we got too greedy, Amasawa would immediately pull back. If Horikita didn't slip up in her bargaining, then...

"You're right. I certainly cannot deny that my request would place quite a burden on you. And besides, I'm sure you don't want to carelessly give us time to practice cooking. Right?" said Horikita.

"Oh, gosh, no, I didn't think that far ahead or anything," said Amasawa.

"...All right. Can we seal the deal then, with these terms?" asked Horikita.

We only had one day of preparation time. However, if we didn't stick to those terms, we weren't going to be able to hold onto Amasawa. What Horikita was agreeing to could be interpreted as desperate measures taken under pressure of necessity, but she signaled that she agreed to the amended proposal all the same.

"It's settled, then." Amasawa agreed readily, having no objection to meeting up tomorrow after class like she'd suggested earlier.

"However, that's as long as you don't take back what you said, like you did earlier when we were talking about having a fight," said Horikita.

"Okay. I promise. If I determine that his cooking skills are legit, then I'll team up with Sudou-senpai right then and there." Although it was just a verbal promise, Amasawa nodded and answered honestly.

"Please, I'm beggin' ya, Ayanokouji. Use your cookin' skills to get me a partner, somehow!" wailed Sudou.

Given the situation, I figured I'd play along. But I never imagined things would turn out like this.

"Okay, so, how about we meet up in front of Keyaki Mall at four thirty tomorrow after class? Would that be okay, Ayanokouji-senpai?" asked Amasawa.

"At the mall? Not at the dorms?" I asked in return.

"What I'm gonna ask you to make is a secret! And besides, you're gonna have to buy the ingredients and stuff to make it, right?" said Amasawa.

I see. So she was going to judge me on everything, starting with what I bought.

"Is it okay if I accompany him too?" asked Horikita, probably looking to offer me advice, so that our ruse wouldn't be discovered.

But our opponent wasn't going to let that slide so easily.

"Nope! You could give him advice, by like, signaling with your eyes and stuff. I'm going to be reaaaaally strict with how I judge!" said Amasawa.

Meaning I would somehow have to make it work all on my own tomorrow.

"You'll be fine, right, Ayanokouji-senpai?" asked Amasawa.

"Yeah, no problem."

I figured that I'd give her a straight answer for the time being, but man, this had turned into quite the ordeal.

"Okay, then I'll see you tomorrow. Bye bye!" said Amasawa, before proceeding to go back down the stairs, seemingly satisfied.

"Horikita, I'm sure you already know this, but—"

"Be quiet right now. I'm thinking of a plan," said Horikita, cutting me off.

Even though she told me she'd think of a plan, we only had one day. Just how far could I really go, considering I had only the bare minimum level of cooking skill?

Chapter 5: Ichika's Test

WEDNESDAY ARRIVED, marking the third day of the special exam period. At eight in the morning, the OAA app was refreshed for the second time, and the number of partner options we had inevitably dwindled.

"Thirty-four new partnerships have been decided, huh?"

Combined with the ones decided on Monday, that came to a total of fifty-six partnerships. Considering that there was a maximum of one hundred and fifty-seven possible pairs, that meant that 30 percent of students had already settled into partnerships.

The number of partnerships established yesterday were largely driven by Class 2-B, meaning many of them had something to do with Ichinose. It seemed several first-year students had carefully thought through their options after the meet-and-greet, and then decided to partner up afterward. Basically, I could confirm that many first-year students with a low level of academic ability had partnered with Ichinose and others from her class. Also, considering that some honors students' names were now gone from the list of first-years, and some names of Class 2-C students were also gone, I could infer that Class C had successfully negotiated a few using points or the like.

In my own class, five partnerships had been decided, starting with Kushida. I checked Class 1-B's page and saw that Yagami Takuya also had a partner. He might have paired up with Kushida. But the strange thing was that not a single person from Class 1-D had formed a partnership yet. Looking at the entirety of both of our grade levels, this was unique. If I didn't get out there and really make a move now, I would probably be stuck. There wasn't a single student here who could look at my scores objectively and tell me, 'Hey, let's team up.'

It was only natural that a student, regardless of whether they were academically gifted or not themselves, would want to

team up with someone smart. Unlike the second-year students, who had learned to act for the sake of the class, the first-year students probably weren't going to care that much about anyone else. They were more likely to see even their own classmates as rivals.

At the very least, people would put off looking at me until the high achieving students were taken. That was exactly why Tsukishiro must have told his agent not to let this opportunity slip by. Naturally, any student who came to me looking for a partnership or allowed me to partner with them would arouse my suspicion flag. However, if I remained indecisive forever and didn't settle on a partner, my chances of getting paired up with Tsukishiro's assassin would increase.

I needed to be certain that my partner wasn't Tsukishiro's assassin, but that probably wasn't going to be easy. In truth, I couldn't even imagine what kind of act this person was putting on to pass off as someone else. I could look up everyone's face, name, and scores in the OAA app, but there were no clues to be found there. If all one hundred and sixty first-year students were my enemies, then that would be checkmate for me. No hope of escape.

That was such a ridiculous notion. I didn't think even Tsukishiro could possibly pull all that off, but...

No, that wasn't it. The important thing was for me to figure out a way to survive, even if everyone was my enemy. For now, I needed to pick a safe choice from the remaining one-hundred and four available students. There was no discrimination on the basis of sex for students raised in the White Room, making it impossible to narrow down the list of suspects on that front because they adhered to gender equality as a principle.

So how should I exclude people as possible suspects? One conceivable way would be based on physique. Meals served in the White Room were strictly controlled, down to the finest details. It was basically unthinkable that any child raised in that environment could become obese. Meaning that if I were to pick an obese student as my partner, I could avoid the White Room agent... That was one simple plan that came to mind.

But that wasn't an absolute guarantee. It was entirely possible that the student from the White Room had been preparing to get me expelled for several months now. With that in mind, it wouldn't be impossible for them to plump up or slim down if they wanted to. That would be easy for someone who endured the rigorous curriculum of the White Room to pull off.

But even if I were to put all that aside, I still had some doubts about choosing a student with a sub-standard physique. Granted, it was hard to be sure, because full body pictures weren't displayed in the OAA app. There were only two students who were clearly obese, but I couldn't rule out the possibility that either of them could have been sent by Tsukishiro. That was because I had to assume that the assassin might not just be someone from the White Room, but also someone from the general student population. They might have been offered the chance of going to a better college upon graduation if they got me expelled, for instance.

My next thought was to see if I could narrow down the list based on academic ability. That would also be difficult. If the student came from the White Room, then it wouldn't be a problem at all for them to get a perfect score on the entrance exam. They could easily get an academic ability ranking of A or A+ without even trying.

In other words, they could freely control what scores they got. And I was sure whoever this agent was had heard about the OAA app being implemented. It wouldn't even be surprising if the agent had gotten an academic ability ranking of E and was lying in wait for me. Similarly, it would be impossible for me to narrow it down based on whether they had been sorted into Class A or Class D.

I understood all that, but right now, I had nothing to work with. No way to narrow down the list of suspects, no matter what angle I came at this situation from. There was something I needed to do now. Namely, I needed to look at students with my own two eyes and confirm their authenticity. If I knew for sure that they weren't not my enemy, I could partner with them or ask them to become a collaborator.

I set myself one goal. Starting today, whenever I arrived at class in the morning, during lunch, and after class ended, I would reach out to the first-year students that I saw over the course of the day, in the order I saw them. Then, I would try to gain their cooperation. There was no way Tsukishiro had sent someone I could detect at a glance, so I had no choice but to fight back with the element of chance, which was something he couldn't interfere with.

My academic ability ranking, C, was by no means high. I wouldn't be able to use that as a weapon. But it wasn't like there would be *no* students willing to partner up with me. If I did some digging, I'd probably find some people.

5.1

I WALKED OUT OF THE DORMS and headed to the school building. While on my way, I quickly spotted a couple of first-year girls walking along and chatting with one another. Their names were Kurihara Kasuga and Konishi Tetsuko. They were both in Class A, but unfortunately, also academically gifted students who had solidified partnerships on the first day. It would be impossible for me to ask either of them to be my partner.

Well, I supposed the fact that they'd already decided on their partners wasn't that much of a problem. If anything, it made them the best kind of students to turn into collaborators.

It's just, well, it was kind of difficult for me to actually talk to them...

Even though there was the fact that I'd be approaching them under the pretense of needing to find a partner for this special exam, how exactly would a second-year guy approaching a couple of first-year girls appear to an observer? I couldn't help but wonder. I didn't really have the guts to just start talking to them and go "Good morning!" like Yousuke or anything. It was probably out of the question for me to just stroll up to them and confidently ask them to introduce me to a friend I could pair up with, too.

At any rate, I couldn't afford not to at least try. Giving in right here and now wouldn't exactly be smart. Right. Precisely so. I'd made up my mind.

But what was the best time to make my move? Rather than insert myself into their conversation while they were happily chatting, I thought I should wait until that conversation died down a bit.

While I was observing the two girls, another voice called out to me from behind.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-senpai."

It was Nanase Tsubasa, the girl who was with Housen the other day. She was now the third first-year I'd seen today, and she

was giving me a sunny smile.



"Oh, hey. Morning."

I hadn't expected someone to come up and try to talk to me, so there was a bit of an awkward pause.

"Do you need something from those two girls? Would you like me to talk to them?" said Nanase, suggesting she reach out to them on my behalf.

Nanase was a first-year student, too. If she did call out to those girls, it was highly likely I'd end up talking to all three of them at once. That would be an even greater hassle.

"Nah, it's okay," I replied.

"Oh, really?" said Nanase curiously. She walked by me, just about keeping pace.

Just as I was trying to figure out how to approach those other two girls, I'd unexpectedly started up a conversation with Nanase. I was extremely grateful she'd saved me the hassle of trying to talk to somebody, but...

There was no way a first-year student coming up to talk to me was a coincidence. It was quite possible she'd been waiting for me to come to school, timing her move just right. And that possibility didn't just apply to Nanase, but any and every first-year student who took the initiative to come up and talk to me. Just like Amasawa yesterday, she was a student who'd approached me, rather than the other way around.

"I apologize for Housen-kun's rudeness the other day," said Nanase.

"Nah, no worries. He didn't do anything to me. There's no need to apologize," I told her.

"Still, that doesn't change the fact that he caused trouble for you. Even though I was there to stop Housen-kun from doing things like that, I'm now keenly aware that I'm, well, powerless," said Nanase.

Unlike the wild, aggressive Housen, she was extremely personable and spoke in a polite manner. Her highly preferable attitude, combined with the fact that she had a B in academic

ability, made her a fantastic candidate for a partner. It wouldn't have been surprising if she'd been scouted by people other than me. But here we were, on the third day of the exam period, and she still hadn't partnered with any second-year students.

However, that was probably due to Class 1-D's policy. Aside from her academic ability, she had scores of C+ or greater in physical ability, adaptability, and societal contribution. Very well-balanced scores. At first glance, I couldn't see anything about her that remotely resembled a flaw.

Which was exactly what begged the question of why Nanase Tsubasa was placed in Class D.

Basically, the idea of Class D was that students who were assigned to it tended to have some kind of problem. For example, people like Yousuke and Kushida might appear perfect on the surface, but when you dug deeper, you realized that wasn't the case. Meaning I couldn't deny the possibility that Nanase also had hidden problems of her own. However, there was also no guarantee that this year's batch of Class D students would necessarily follow the same trend.

Personally, I didn't mind if someone had a few problems with their personality or their values. Whether I asked her to be my partner or my collaborator, the only important thing was whether Nanase was on Tsukishiro's side or not. I was concerned about the look she gave me when I met her for the first time the other day, when she was with Housen, but...that look was gone, now. The way she looked at me now seemed normal.

"Have you decided on a partner for the upcoming special exam?" I asked her, deciding to press forward to try and find out more about the person known as Nanase.

"Me? No, I haven't decided yet," she replied.

"So, have people been coming up to you, to ask?"

"Yes, they have. So far, I've been approached by upperclassmen from Class A and Class C," said Nanase.

As expected of someone who had a B in academic ability. It seemed like people had been talking to her.

"Why haven't you agreed to partner up with anybody?" I asked.

I didn't know if it honestly had to do with academic ability, or if it was about points, but decided to press the matter anyway.

"I'm sorry, but I can't answer that," Nanase apologized, bowing her head.

"No, you don't have to answer any questions that you don't want to. There's nothing to apologize for."

It didn't seem likely I'd get any answers about whether this was a personal problem on Nanase's part or a problem with Class 1-D at this stage. In that case, I figured I'd try attacking this situation from a slightly different angle.

"If it's okay with you, how about we have both our classes work together to help find suitable partners? Class D to Class D?" I suggested.

The proposal I made included finding a partner for myself. Horikita also considered Class 1-D the key to this exam, and Housen seemed to harbor some kind of feelings towards Class 2-D. It probably wasn't a bad suggestion.

"Have our classes...cooperate with one another?" said Nanase.

"Yeah. A lot of students are trying to team up with people who are academically gifted for the sake of getting good scores on this test. But if they do that, the students who struggle academically won't get picked, and a lot of them will be left behind. If the students who struggle academically pair up together, those students will be in danger of being expelled. That includes both us second-years and you first-years," I reasoned.

"Yes. I understand that. I'd like to avoid that happening as well, if possible," said Nanase.

"Yeah. In order to make sure that doesn't happen, we need a proper balance. Even though we won't be able to secure one of the top spots, we need to find partners who can make sure no one gets a failing grade."

We were Class D. In terms of public image, we were by far the worst off. Which was exactly why Class 1-D, which had the same position as us in the hierarchy, should be likely to agree to this proposal.

"What do you think?" I added.

"I agree with you. I would like to cooperate with you, Ayanokouji-senpai, if possible. It's just..." said Nanase.

"It's just?" I repeated.

"I don't know how many of my classmates would be willing to lend a hand. And on top of that, some of the students who are more confident in their academic abilities are already in the process of deciding who their partners will be, privately," said Nanase.

Many of the students who could be major players in this exam and really help with our efforts were instead looking for solid partners of their own, aiming to get top scores on the exam. The two girls walking up ahead of me fit that description to a tee. The reason that students hadn't settled on a partner yet was probably because of other issues, like points.

After all, the important thing to know about this test was that the top thirty percent of scorers would be rewarded. So, the act of rescuing students with poor grades meant throwing away your chances at those rewards.

"We don't exactly need everyone to cooperate though. If we coordinate things well, we should be able to make it through this special exam just fine," I said.

Even if some of the students had already set up partnerships, it wouldn't be a major problem.

"That's true. However, it's not as though there are no other problems." Nanase seemed to agree with the core idea of my proposal, but she had a grim look on her face. I didn't need to think hard about the reason why. I could see it.

"You mean... Housen, I think his name was, right? It sure seems like he's a major player in Class D." I pried further into the internal affairs of Class 1-D, bringing up something that I was

almost completely certain about, thanks to the interaction I had with Shiratori the other day.

"Yes. Many of the boys and girls in our class have already started obediently following Housen-kun's orders," said Nanase.

So what was once just speculation had now become certainty. It seemed Housen had already seized control of his class and was trying to keep it in his grasp. Which meant their strategy of blocking partnerships from being easily established might have been put forward by Housen, too. If that was the case, then Housen wasn't just a student with significant strength. He also had the insight, observational skills, and composure to take stock of what was going on around him.

"Are you in a kind of a special position or something, Nanase? I didn't get the feeling that you were all that subservient to Housen."

"That's because I will never yield to violence," said Nanase.

Her words were so forceful that it was hard to believe they came from her mouth, given her appearance. The statement wasn't something she threw out there casually. There was something significant behind it. I thought I sensed something—maybe confidence—reflected in the frank depths of her eyes.

"Senpai, what...do you think about violence?" she asked.

"What do I think?" I repeated.

"I mean, are you pro-violence or anti-violence?" said Nanase.

If she was looking for my thoughts about Housen's way of doing things, then there was only one answer I could give her.

"I suppose if I had to choose between those two answers, then I would say pro," I stated, clearly.

I was expecting some kind of immediate reaction after I said that, but I was met with silence. When I turned my gaze toward Nanase to check her expression, I noticed that the reserved look she had moments ago had disappeared. Now, she had the same eyes as when she looked at me the other day, when she was walking away with Housen.

After a couple seconds of waiting, Nanase finally spoke up.
“If I had to pick one, I’d also choose pro.”

I couldn’t sense any emotion behind the response. What she’d just said could be either the truth or as a lie. Had Housen acknowledged the force of her conviction to not give into violence, and placed her by his side?

No... That wasn’t the only reason. Back then, Housen reacted strongly when Nanase had mentioned “that,” whatever it was.

There was no guarantee whatsoever that Housen was necessarily a stronger person than Nanase. I was curious about that, but this probably wasn’t the right time to ask about it. She didn’t seem like the kind of student who would talk unnecessarily about things that shouldn’t be said. I shouldn’t carelessly do anything that might make her even warier.

Should I pull back for the time being? There would probably be a chance to try again, with Horikita.

“In any case, if Housen’s the one deciding what your class does, this plan might be difficult to pull off.” I started to ponder the idea of contacting other classes while still maintaining a good relationship with Nanase, but...

“Well, um, pardon me, but if you’re all right with it... Would you like me to try to help set up a meeting?” Nanase offered, perhaps because she thought my suggestion about forming a cooperative relationship between our classes was a good plan.

“I really appreciate the offer, but are you sure that’s okay?”

“Yes. But I don’t know how many students will cooperate, so I cannot make any definitive promises. In the worst-case scenario, it might just be me. Is that all right with you?” asked Nanase.

Let’s put aside for a moment the question of what I thought about Nanase. It was important, for the time being, for Horikita and I to have as many opportunities as possible to develop connections with Class 1-D, for the sake of our classmates.

“Of course. I’m sure Horikita will be overjoyed, too.”

“Is Horikita-senpai the leader of Class 2-D?”

"Yeah. She's the one keeping our class together right now."

I decided to tell Horikita it would be a good idea to set up a meeting between both Class Ds, with Nanase's help. I didn't know the best way to go about doing that, though, since talking openly about it in the classroom would definitely get people's attention.

"Oh, uh... I might not be able to give you a response immediately. Is that all right?" said Nanase.

"Yeah, that's fine. I'll try to get things set up on my end as soon as possible."

"Okay."

Nanase and I then exchanged contact information, agreeing to get in touch later.

5.2

AFTER CONFIRMING that Horikita still hadn't arrived at school, I decided to wait near the entranceway. I figured it would draw too much attention if I were to casually start talking to her about this subject in the classroom.

Shortly afterwards, Horikita showed up. She gave me a puzzled look, not even considering that I might be there waiting for her.

"Good morning. Are you waiting for someone?" she asked.

"Yeah, something like that, I guess. She just got here," I replied.

"I see," said Horikita.

She briefly turned and looked over her shoulder. When she noticed there was no one else around whom I seemed to be particularly acquainted with, she turned back to me once more.

"Me?" she asked.

"Yeah. There's something I wanted to run by you really quick."

"I'm guessing it must be something important, if you were standing around waiting for me," said Horikita.

We started walking.

"Important...? Yeah, I suppose so. I think it could be important. As it happens, I had the chance to speak with Nanase Tsubasa, from Class 1-D a little while ago, funnily enough. So I tried proposing a little something to her class," I told her.

"Oh? And what kind of proposal would that be?" said Horikita.

"I thought I'd try bringing up the idea of our classes working together, Class D to Class D."

"Knowing you, that's quite a bold move," said Horikita.

I was sure Horikita had been agonizing over how to form a relationship with Class 1-D, herself. I was prepared for her to get angry with me for going ahead and proposing a partnership without her permission, but...

"Have you checked the status of Class 1-D's current partnership situation?" asked Horikita.

"Yeah. None of them have settled on any partnerships yet. I'm sure Sakayanagi and Ryuuuen are probably putting them on the backburner as potential candidates, too," I replied.

It was only natural that they'd focus their attention on high achievers from the upper-level classes who were willing to cooperate for a reasonable number of points, rather than the students from Class D who were asking for an exorbitant sum.

"I'm sure that's not all, either. It would take a certain amount of work to comply with Housen-kun's aggressive policies. I'm sure that from the perspective of the upper-level classes, dealing with him would just consume a great deal of extra time and effort," said Horikita.

"Maybe."

"Did you make this proposal to Nanase-san after understanding the difficulties that would come with trying to confront Housen-kun? Or did you perhaps reach out to her in the hopes of forming a collaboration in secret, so that Housen-kun wouldn't find out?" asked Horikita.

"What do you think?" I asked.

I deliberately turned the question back around on her, without really giving her an answer myself. If she was no longer planning on teaming up with Class 1-D at this point in time, then I was fine with calling everything off.

"I've re-analyzed our situation in this special exam, in my own way. Would you care to hear me out?" said Horikita.

"I'm not confident I can really give you any pertinent advice, though."

"I'm not expecting any."

Apparently, she just wanted me to hear what she had come up with. It probably had something to do with what I mentioned to her today about Class 1-D.

"First of all, when you look at the first-years as a whole, it's obvious that the most popular students are the ones with exceptional academic ability," said Horikita.

"Yeah. If I remember right, Shiratori said he'd been approached by both Class 2-A and Class C about drafting an agreement with him, using points," I replied.

"But no one among Shiratori-kun and his friends has formed a partnership yet. I think it's fair to assume they were unable to come to a settlement based on points, then. At any rate, the sum they asked us for, five hundred thousand points, was far too steep a price," said Horikita.

When you considered the fact that the reward for placing in the top five was one hundred thousand points, and the reward for placing in the top thirty percent was ten thousand points, even asking for two hundred thousand points was way too much.

"I wonder how many points Hashimoto-kun and the others offered them," said Horikita.

"Who knows? But it's probably safe for us to assume that it was a far cry from five hundred thousand," I told her.

It was impossible to know the answer to that, unless you happened to be the person involved in the negotiations.

"I would guess there probably wasn't that big a difference between the offers Class A and Class C made. If I had to say, Class A's offer might have been a little smaller," said Horikita.

She had probably deduced that by checking the OAA app constantly, up until this morning. Between Class A and Class C, more students in Class C had finalized their partnerships.

"In terms of public image, Class A naturally has the advantage over Class C. Most people would choose Class A, unless there was an enormous difference in the number of points they were offering. With that in mind, we can guess that Class A is hoping to snatch up first-year students by leveraging both points

and the value of their status as Class A, while on the other hand, Class C, is offering more points to offset their inferior public image and win students over," reasoned Horikita.

I nodded, showing that I agreed with her conclusions.

"But I find Ryuuen-kun's thought process a little strange. If you want to win in this exam, then drawing the top-scoring students over to your side is at least the bare minimum you need to do. But that would inevitably mean having to compete against Class A to snatch up talent. And if Class C pits their wallets against Class A, I can't imagine Class C would stand a chance of winning. Trying to shoot for first place in overall scores just seems reckless," said Horikita.

Ryuuen had said that he was going to threaten people. But the truth was that his class didn't stand a chance of winning that kind of competition.

"He should be going after the students Class A isn't interested in, even if that means lowering his standards a little," I replied.

Students who had a B- or even a C+ in academic ability would do well enough. It would be much safer to shoot for second place in overall scores.

"Well, I suppose trying to make sense of what he's thinking is probably pointless, but... Anyway, I'll get back on track now. The remaining class, Class B, is trying to create relationships built on trust with the first-year students, drawing in people without regard to academic ability, to save the weak. First-year Class D aside, we can assume that many students with an academic ability ranking of D or below have been saved by Ichinose-san," said Horikita.

She briefly turned around to make sure that no one was eavesdropping on our conversation. After she made sure no one was listening in, she continued speaking.

"Which means our current objective is to reach out to the mid-tier students in each class. The people who have an academic ability ranking between C+ and B-," said Horikita.

The students in that range probably wouldn't be approached with big offers, and there would probably be quite a few of them still available. Going after those students while Class A and Class C were scrambling to snatch up the top-scoring students was a good move.

"So does that mean you're retracting your plan of forming a partnership with Class 1-D?" I asked.

"No. That plan is still on. In fact, if anything, I should say it's seeming more and more like the optimal choice for us," said Horikita.

"So, you'll abandon trying to get the average students from other classes?"

That could certainly be called a drastic decision. Since we were behind the other classes in our grade level, we needed to establish a lot of partnerships, as soon as possible.

"It's not like we're going to sit around and do nothing, of course. This might be a somewhat malicious way of doing things, but I intend to pretend to play the money game in order to buy us some time. The mid-tier students think they aren't going to get tempting offers of huge sums of points, unlike the high-achievers. In that case, we'll give those students a little taste of what it feels like to be desired. We'll make them think that they can do a little haggling of their own," said Horikita.

"You mean your goal is to make Sakayanagi and Ryuuen have to spend their points not just on acquiring the top-scoring students, but on getting the mid-tier students, too?"

"Well, I'm skeptical about just how effective it'll be, but I figure I can probably draw some of their attention that way. And in the meantime, I intend to cut a path into Class 1-D. Which is exactly why what you're telling me now is just what I wanted to hear. I've been thinking of contacting Nanase-san myself," said Horikita.

"But isn't Housen exactly the person who wants to play the money game?"

"Yes, that's certainly true. But I have to wonder, are points really all he's after? When he came up to the second-year floor, he said, and I quote, 'You can't even form pairs unless we pick you. So, I figured, hey, I'll lend you incompetent, braindead morons a hand.' Which means his goal is our class. Would he have really phrased it that way if he was only after points?"

Horikita asserted that there should be some room for negotiation, aside from using Private Points.

"The fact that he purposefully said, 'See you later,' directly to me just before he left seemed to indicate something, too."

"Yeah, that's certainly true. I think it's safe to say that Housen only has his sights on our class," I replied.

In exchange for giving up on trying to secure the top spots, Horikita had set three core principles: "No one will get expelled," "We're not participating in the money game," "Aim for third place or better in overall scores." It wasn't an easy task, but that was exactly why we were focusing on Class 1-D.

"At any rate, Housen-kun is certainly not going to be easy to deal with through ordinary methods. I have a backup plan." Apparently, Horikita had devised some plans I didn't know about. "I'm currently in talks with some people in Class 1-B about setting up a collaborative partnership."

"Wait, speaking of 1-B... Do you mean you talked with the guy who went to the same junior high you and Kushida went to? Yagami?" I asked.

I thought back to what I saw in the OAA app this morning after it updated. How Kushida and Yagami had confirmed partnerships.

"Kushida-san and Yagami-kun partnered up together yesterday. Unfortunately, I don't remember anything about any of the students younger than me at my old school, but he could be important. He seemed to place a good deal of trust in Kushida-san. And we've already been negotiating with him behind the scenes. Hopefully, if things go well, we can find more collaborators," said Horikita.

Though this was good news, there was something that worried me.

"Are you giving Kushida instructions?" I asked.

Given how much Kushida hated Horikita, I wasn't sure how seriously Kushida would try to help us.

"I'm well aware of how difficult that would be for me, all things considered. Which is why I'm working through Hirata-kun as a go-between," said Horikita.

"I see. I suppose Kushida can't afford to slack off then."

If Kushida's negotiations with Yagami resulted in even just a few students being brought over to our side, it would mean some of our partnership problems would be solved, and we could focus more on studying.

5.3

“**G**OODY MORNING, Horikita-san. Do you have a minute?” asked Yousuke, coming over to Horikita’s seat after first period ended and the break began.

I could see what was happening from my own seat, more or less.

“I went around and talked to a few people yesterday, but it seems I can’t really get anyone to work with us that easily, after all. There were some kids who said they’d consider teaming up with us, but, well...” said Yousuke, trailing off.

Even though he talked to people who played soccer, just like him, it sounded like things hadn’t gone so smoothly. Besides, no matter how good Yousuke was, it would be difficult to get first-year students who had only just joined the club to really open up.

“The first-years asked for points, didn’t they?” asked Horikita.

Yousuke nodded. Horikita continued speaking.

“Well, they have the chance to sell themselves for a high price, so I suppose that’s not surprising.”

Just as we had imagined, the problematic point buyout idea was running rampant all throughout their entire grade level.

“They told me they were approached by Class 2-A, wanting to partner with them. And that Class C came asking to partner with them too, in exchange for points. It wasn’t just the kids I talked to, either. From the sounds of it, almost every single student who got approached by Class A also got an invitation from Class C, too,” said Yousuke.

“I suppose that’s only natural, considering the competition over who gets the smart kids is quite stiff.” Horikita had already predicted this would happen. However, the words that came out of Yousuke’s mouth next were not what she expected.

“But apparently, even some of the kids with C and D ratings have been approached. I heard some stories about how the

invitations came with offers of pretty hefty sums of points, too," said Yousuke.

"Meaning they're not necessarily prioritizing the students who are more capable academically?" said Horikita.

"As far as I can tell, yeah," said Yousuke.

"I see. If you can remember any specific names, could you share those with me?"

"Of course."

Yousuke proceeded to list off names of first-year students who were known for a fact to have received invitations from Class A. Horikita looked up their names in the OAA app, and quickly understood what was going on. The students who were being invited excelled in some other area, even if their academic abilities weren't so great. They were valued for their high physical ability rating, or for their adaptability rating or societal contribution rating.

"I see... Well, actually, I expected as much," said Horikita.

"Maybe they're looking ahead to the future, and not just focusing on short-term results, then," said Yousuke.

This wasn't necessarily the only special exam where we'd be cooperating with the first-year students. If there were more instances where we had to work together, we might need skills other than academics at the time. Save the students who had concerns about their academic prowess, and make use of them later in their field of expertise—I was sure that was what Class A was thinking.

That being said, it was interesting that even Class C, led by Ryuuuen, was doing the same thing. They weren't just going after students with a high level of academic ability. They were following in Sakayanagi's footsteps, right behind her.

"It would be great if we could do the same, but, well..." said Yousuke, trailing off.

"That would be difficult, I know," replied Horikita, finishing his thought.

We were Class D. Sakayanagi was Class A. Even the kids who had only just started attending this school already knew which class had the better reputation. When considering their future, it was only natural that they'd favor the superior class, which could help them out more.

"Thank you. Can you keep looking into things for me?" asked Horikita.

"Sure. If I find anything, I'll be sure to let you know."

Yousuke gave Horikita a bright, cheerful smile and then returned to his seat. Shortly afterward, I got an instant message from Horikita.

"So, there you have it."

It seemed like Horikita had sensed that I was eavesdropping on her conversation with Yousuke.

"Hirata-kun certainly is dependable, isn't he?" she added.

"For sure," I replied.

He and Horikita had gotten into a spat once before, but that was in the past now. Yousuke worked tirelessly for the sake of the class, making him very dependable. His communication skills and high intelligence were assets, of course, but his greatest strength was his high degree of trustworthiness. He had a great track record. If Yousuke was involved, people believed he had things in hand. That was exactly why Horikita was willing to discuss her strategy with him so openly.

"We're at a disadvantage just because we're Class D. It's going to be a tough road ahead," said Horikita.

"Even so, we gotta make do. Good luck."

"You do realize you have a part to play too, right?"

"You mean the thing with Nanase?"

"Yes. I'd like a response as soon as possible. Tell her that we're ready to go whenever she is."

So, she was saying we ought to move quickly and seal the deal. To strike while the iron was hot, as they say. After all, if we

didn't, the other classes would keep taking more and more of the best people out there.

"It'll probably be the day after tomorrow, though. I have to take care of that other problem first," I replied.

"Of course. I know that," said Horikita.

5.4

CLASS ENDED for the day, and we still hadn't gotten a response from Nanase yet. Even if she did respond now and tell me we were on for today, Horikita and I wouldn't be able to do anything. There was a more immediate problem that I urgently needed to take care of—namely, the rather sudden promise we'd made Amasawa the other day, to serve her a home-cooked meal.

If I managed to score a passing grade, then we could get her to partner up with Sudou. An extremely enticing offer. But the hurdle I had to clear was by no means low.

When I arrived at the entrance of Keyaki Mall ten minutes prior to the scheduled time of our meeting, it seemed Amasawa wasn't around yet. So I just stood there, not bothering to check my phone or anything, but just nonchalantly watching the students come and go. Students of all grade levels came into the shopping mall, talking about this or that while they walked around.

The temperature this morning was a little higher than normal, but as evening approached, it gradually got cooler. It seemed the temperature was going to drop a little more at nighttime. Eventually, just when it was about the time we had agreed to meet, Amasawa appeared.

"Perfect, Ayanokouji-senpai," she said as she approached me with a big smile, nodding several times, as if she were satisfied about something.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"You waited at the place you were supposed to, before the girl got there. And you didn't even like, do anything else, either" said Amasawa.

She was unexpectedly sharp. Or rather, I should say she understood my actions quite well, even the trivial ones. When she said I didn't do anything else, she probably meant that I wasn't messing around on my phone or calling anyone while I waited.

Soon, Amasawa would put me to the test. Meaning, I had to serve her a meal. When I considered that fact, I supposed I could have spent the time I stood around waiting for her to look up various kinds of recipes, trying to devise a plan at the last minute.

But, if I had to express it in a way that was easy to understand, that would be like staring intently at your textbook right up until the bell rang on the day of a written test. Of course, looking up information on my phone wouldn't have violated any of the rules Amasawa had set. However, it probably would've made me appear like someone who wasn't confident in his cooking.

The same went for making a call, which would make her think that I was seeking someone's help. Therefore, I deliberately chose to do nothing to make it appear as though I were cool and collected. I had intended to try to implant that impression into Amasawa's subconscious mind, but she had detected what I was doing right off the bat.

"Well then Ayanokouji-senpai, shall we?" said Amasawa, lining up next to me, and quickly taking me into the mall with her.

"To buy ingredients, right?"

"Yep! Well, that too. You gotta buy the stuff for what you'll make for me. Do you have any cash?" asked Amasawa.

"A reasonable amount."

In truth, I really didn't have that much. But I wasn't going to say anything excessive in front of an underclassman.

"Ooh, yay! I won't be shy then, in that case. Um, let's see, I think I've heard from my classmates that they sell all the essentials here and stuff, but... I wonder where they keep the shopping baskets?" said Amasawa.

Rather than heading straight for the supermarket, she headed over toward "Humming," a store that specialized in carrying everything you needed at home. She picked up a blue shopping basket that she found near the entrance to the store. What she said earlier, "that too," stuck in the back of my mind. I knew I was going to cook a meal for her later, but did that mean

there was something else I needed to do besides buy the ingredients?

Amasawa stopped by the kitchenware section of the store. When I first started at this school, I'd come by here a few times to buy the things that I needed. Aside from students, the teachers and other adults who worked in the café and the cafeteria and such also needed these products, so there was a particularly large section of the store dedicated to kitchenware. I remembered not being able to find what I was looking for right away when I first came here.

It seemed like all sorts of new products had hit the market since I'd been here last, which was some time ago. Considering the fact Amasawa had stopped here, I wondered if she was planning to buy some kind of special appliance or utensils. There were countless tools here after all, like peelers, graters, mortars and pestles, etc. Some of those things, of course, I didn't have.

What I found strange was that Amasawa never asked me what tools or utensils I already had. It would've made sense for us to at least discuss what I already had and didn't have. If she were worried about losing time, we would have had plenty of time to talk about it while we walked around, but I held back my desire to check with her, choosing to let Amasawa run the show for now.

Instead, I tried to bring up a topic that had nothing to do with cooking utensils.

"Do you not cook for yourself, Amasawa?" I asked.

"Me? Oh, I don't think I've ever cooked before. I'm not the kinda person who really cooks and stuff. I'd rather be fed than feed someone else," explained Amasawa.

Just then, she stopped in her tracks, apparently having arrived at her intended destination. The process so far had gone incredibly smoothly. Amasawa looked away from me, towards\ the shelves of merchandise. She crossed her arms and pondered something for about half a minute, as if struggling to decide something. Then she must have come to a decision because she muttered, "All right," to herself and nodded.

"Okay, so, first of all, we're gonna need a cutting board, right? Then, like, a kitchen knife? Then we're gonna need a bowl, a whisk, and then also, also, we're gonna need a pot and a ladle," said Amasawa, throwing the items into the basket one after another as she listed them off.

The last item she tossed into the basket was a big spoon. Apparently, it was called a ladle. I had a hunch that something was off.

"Wait, hold on a second. I pretty much have almost all of those things in my room already though," I told her hurriedly.

"Oh, no worries, no worries! I'm just having you buy these things for *me*. For when you cook for me," said Amasawa.

She was just having me get all these for her...? Even the cutting board she picked out was much better quality than the one I had back in my room. It looked like it was made from Japanese cypress and it cost a little over four-thousand points. The rest of the cooking utensils she picked out were high-quality items, too.

It seemed she still had other items to cross off her list, because she moved over to check out the next set of shelves. As soon as she got there, she picked up a fruit knife without a second's hesitation.

"For someone who claims to be a good cook, having a good petty knife is a must, right?" said Amasawa in a somewhat casual tone before tossing the item into her basket.

I was a total amateur who had no idea that fruit knives were called petty knives. Oh, and by the way, the petty knife was also a high-priced item, coming in at nearly three thousand points. Even though there were several cheaper options right there on the shelf next to the item she'd picked up, she didn't pay any attention to them. As far as I could tell, the only differences were whether they included a sheath and whether they were made in Japan.

Once again, the product she'd chosen was quite an extravagant one. Apparently, people skilled in the art of cooking were expected to have mastered handling small kitchen knives like these.

"Hey, uh, just asking, but who is paying for these...?" I asked.

"Oh, come on, you are, of course, Ayanokouji-senpai! Obviously," she replied.

I already knew that. But the total cost of all these items easily exceeded fifteen thousand points. I supposed that meant I might as well just throw away the cheap stuff I was using now. If I thought about the fact that I could use this high-quality cookware when I cooked for myself in the future, maybe it would help me stomach this?

"Oh, and I already told you this just a bit ago, but remember, you're buying these to use them for me, and for me only. So don't go wearing them out with everyday use, okay?" said Amasawa.

"Are you some kind of evil demon?" I asked her, vocalizing my rather unpleasant thoughts.

Unpleasantly enough, it seemed she'd been expecting me to voice my concerns and say something vulgar in the process.

"If you wanna call it off, it's okay. You can quit any time, y'know," she teased provocatively, while clutching the edge of the shopping basket.

She was taking ample advantage of the fact that I was in a vulnerable position and couldn't refuse. Still, if I thought of this as a way to get Sudou partnered with an A-rank student, then fifteen thousand points or so was an incredibly good deal. I just had to think of it that way.

"No, I understand. I accept all of your conditions, so feel free to pick out whatever you want, and I'll buy it," I told her.

"Do you think I'm a bad girl?"

"No, I don't."

Amasawa stared intently into my eyes. Then, she smiled. I couldn't tell if that was because she knew something, or because something was eluding her.

"Then we're all good, senpai," said Amasawa.

And so I had to buy everything, from the pot to the ladle and everything else. And with the horrifying condition that they all be used only and exclusively for Amasawa.

5.5

AFTERWARD, we went to the supermarket to buy the ingredients, which was the main purpose of our coming to the mall in the first place. In the end, the trip cost me about twenty-thousand Private Points. Needless to say, this was the first time I'd ever bought so much stuff. The plastic bags I carried in both hands were so heavy that the handles were digging into my fingers.

No matter how hard I racked my brain, I couldn't narrow down exactly what Amasawa was going to have me make for her. based on these ingredients. She'd had me buy all kinds of things, from vegetables to meat to fruit. However, there were some dishes I could identify as possibilities. For instance, the fact that she had me buy fish sauce and chili peppers gave me some ideas.

It was just that, well...if she intended for me to use all these ingredients, that would be fine. But it was also quite possible that she was mixing in some extra ingredients to fake me out, just to give me a hard time. Considering the things Amasawa said and did today, I couldn't help but suspect that was a possibility. It would probably be close to impossible for me to narrow down exactly what she was going to have me do at this current stage.

"All right, that's everything! Well then, shall we get going back to your room, senpai?" asked Amasawa.

She sounded as enthusiastic as a girl talking about going to hang out with her boyfriend in his room. But there was no way I could feel even a speck of giddiness, myself. After all, if I couldn't make a dish that satisfied her, this arrangement would most likely be broken off. And on top of that, making delicious food for someone was a rather abstract task. If this was a test where she'd already made up her mind to fail me, then it would just end up being a waste of both my points and my time.

However, I had no choice but to quietly accept these developments for now. I'd never imagined Horikita's spur-of-the-moment decision could lead to something so exhausting and bothersome. I didn't discuss things like the cost of ingredients

beforehand with Horikita and Sudou, but considering my expenses, I'd like to bring this up to them later. I supposed I'd just tuck that thought in the back of my mind for the time being.

For now, to help me accept this situation as openly as I possibly could, I decided to go ahead and ask Amasawa a question I'd been wondering about.

"Hey, isn't it kind of strange to want to ask a guy you don't even know to cook you a meal and feed you, though? I mean, wouldn't someone normally feel a strong sense of opposition to that kind of thing?" I asked.

That was just my own personal opinion, of course, but I thought most people would feel very reluctant to do such a thing. I mean, you didn't just look at your food. You actually had to put it in your mouth and swallow it. You'd be concerned about things like taste and hygiene, and therefore, want to know who was making your food, how they were preparing it, and so on. As you got to know a person, a relationship based on trust would form, and those concerns would gradually fade.

"You think? But isn't it kinda like eating out at a restaurant? I mean, you have no idea what goes on in the kitchen at a restaurant, since the one cooking your meal is a stranger, after all," said Amasawa.

Well, it was certainly true that we didn't know exactly how food in the school cafeteria was prepared or anything. But while the restaurant scenario and this situation might seem similar on the surface, they were quite different in reality.

"But even if they're only making you a single rice ball, restaurants strictly adhere to sanitation regulations. That's completely different from having some random stranger cook for you, isn't it?"

"Really? If anything, I feel like I'd rather be in a situation where I could see the person cooking right next to me, though. You can see everything about them then—what they look like, how they move about, how they prepare stuff, everything. You can even tell how careful they are about stuff like hygiene. On the other hand, in some restaurants, you can't see the kitchen at

all, right? I mean, there are some places out there that are super nasty. They're so unsanitary that they've got bugs and stuff," argued Amasawa.

She was saying that if she could actually see the person, she didn't care if he was a stranger.

"Besides, I think I've got a general idea of how things work at this school. In the unlikely event that I end up dropping to zero points, I'd have to pinch pennies to get by, right? But I wouldn't have to worry about all that if I get senpai to cook for me," said Amasawa.

I see. In other words, if I managed to make something tasty for her now, she was planning to have me do it again. This wasn't a one-and-done situation. Her intention was to make sure she had a steady meal plan in case of emergency.

As for me, well, I supposed it would be a good opportunity to improve my cooking skills. But I had to wonder if she'd be willing to pay for the cost of the ingredients.

"So, can you see where I'm coming from?" she asked.

"More or less," I replied.

Amasawa flashed a toothy grin. However, I still had my doubts about whether it was the best thing for her to ask a senior student, and a boy on top of that, to do something like this for her. I would think it would be a lot easier for her, down the road, to make such a request of a classmate or someone of the same sex whom she was good friends with.

Well, I supposed I shouldn't complain, since I was going to benefit from this.

"Anyway, I am like, super particular when it comes to taste, y'know. So, if it's not really good, then the deal's off. Okay?" said Amasawa.

"Yeah, I know. I know just cooking something isn't enough to meet your requirements."

It certainly wasn't a low bar for me to cross, but I just had to do the best that I could. The cooking skills Horikita had taught me in one night would be vital, though I had to wonder how much I'd

really be able to make use of techniques I'd learned in the short amount of time since we accepted Amasawa's proposal yesterday.

Even so, Amasawa probably wasn't an opponent I could deceive all that easily. I could tell from the ingredients she had me buy that she was eager to put my skills to the test.

Shortly afterward, we arrived at the dormitory building. Amasawa placed her palm over her brow, trying to keep the sun out of her eyes as she looked up at the building.

"I'm actually feeling a little nervous, going into the second-year's dorms," said Amasawa.

Even though she said that, she didn't look very nervous. If anything, she looked like she was enjoying herself. Like she was just going out to have fun, like normal.

"Oh, but I guess the building's like, exactly the same as ours," said Amasawa, giving me her impression after taking a long look at the exterior of the building and then around the lobby when we got inside.

"Yeah, I suppose they probably are," I replied, casually agreeing with what she said, though I had never once gone to the dormitory buildings for the other grade levels before.

We got a few looks as we passed some of the students from the other classes. I suppose that was only natural, since I was walking with a first-year girl (not to mention the fact I was carrying tons of groceries). Amasawa casually waved at the senior students as they passed by, but her doing just drew more eyes to us, so I wanted her to stop it. I hurriedly went into my room with Amasawa in tow before any strange rumors got started.

"Thanks for having me! Oh, wow. It's, like, super tidy in here. And real clean, too!" said Amasawa.

"Oh, I just cleaned up in a hurry last night, since I was inviting an underclassman over and all."

I'd done that so she wouldn't smell anything that would make her think I'd practiced cooking in the middle of the night. Now, then... The next steps were extremely important.

After I set my book bag and the bags containing the food and kitchenware on the floor in front of the kitchen, the first thing I did was start to boil water in the electric kettle. Then I walked into the living room area with Amasawa and encouraged her to take a seat. I could have had her sit someplace where she wouldn't have been able to see the kitchen, but I deliberately chose not to do that. It was important I ensure she could see me from the side if she looked over at me.

"I'll put on some coffee. You can go ahead and watch TV if you'd like to," I told her.

"Thanks, senpai," said Amasawa.

I proceeded to make her some coffee with the water I had brought to a boil just a few minutes before. I told her to wait a bit before drinking it. Amasawa picked up the remote control I'd left on the table nearby and started randomly flipping through channels.

While it wasn't an ironclad plan, there was a reason why the sound of the TV was very convenient for me. Subtly guiding her to watch TV and having the remote control placed nearby had been the right decision.

I headed into the kitchen, showing her I intended to get to work as soon as possible. If she casually tried to stand right next to me and monitor what I was doing, I would have had to stop her, but it didn't seem she was going to do that after all.

"Oh, and looking stuff up on your phone is against the rules, 'kay?" warned Amasawa, looking over at me.

"Man, you're strict. I think a lot of people look up stuff on their phones while they cook nowadays, though."

"So you're not feeling confident?" she teased.

"I didn't say that."

"Then good. Because in my mind, a good cook is someone who knows recipes by heart," said Amasawa.

Even though she hadn't explained any of that to me yesterday, I casually went along with it. I'd already predicted it would be something she looked for.

"In that case, I'll put my phone next to my bed," I told her.

I plugged in the charger cable and set my phone down next to my bed. Amasawa nodded, a look of satisfaction on her face, and picked up her cup of coffee.

"I'd like to get this show on the road before it gets too late. So, what am I making?" I asked her.

"All right, I'll tell you! What I'm going to have you cook, senpai, is... tom yum goong!"

"Tom yum goong...?" I replied.

That seemed to explain why she had me buy fish sauce and chili peppers, since those were considered essential in Thai cuisine.

"Can you do it? Pleeeease, senpai?"

The dish that Amasawa had tasked me with making was tom yum goong. I had never made it before in my life, of course. Actually, I'd hardly ever heard about it, let alone tasted it, in the first place. It wasn't a dish ever served to us in the White Room. I had seen on TV that it was popular with women, but that was about the extent of my knowledge.

If I were to try and make it right now, relying only on my existing abilities, I'd probably fail. Not only did I not know the specific ingredients needed to make it, but I also had no idea what steps were actually involved in preparing everything.

So what exactly had I done all of last night then, you ask? Well, nothing rash like trying to memorize the recipes of all sorts of cuisines from every era and country. And I didn't master basic cooking techniques, either. Considering there was the possibility Amasawa might permit me to look at recipes on my phone, it would've been nonsensical for me to spend my time memorizing recipes.

Once it was decided that I was going to be the one cooking for Amasawa, Horikita had set two plans of action into motion. The first part of the plan was to teach me the basics. How to handle fundamental tools in the kitchen, like knives and such. I spent most of my time practicing things like slicing, julienning, dicing,

and chopping. The techniques that would be more obvious, visual indicators of your skill in the kitchen.

Of course, my skills were nowhere near the level of a professional's. I was, at best, at around the skill level of an average person who just so happened to know their way around the kitchen a little. It would be impossible for an ordinary person to master cooking in just half a day, but I was confident in my ability to pick up skills quickly. At the very least, I'd probably gotten to the level of someone who cooked several times a week.

I'd been able to accomplish that precisely because I didn't spend even a second on learning things like recipes or how to cook anything. Of course, that meant there was no way I would know how to make the dish Amasawa had just tasked me with cooking.

Which was where Horikita's second plan of action came in. A way to check the recipe in real time, using a phone. But Amasawa had forbidden me from looking at my phone, and my poor phone was being held hostage right by my bedside. Even if I had a tablet or something at the ready, hidden somewhere, there was a chance Amasawa might spot it. In fact, she occasionally turned her watchful gaze over in my direction from time to time.

Those things were all factored into our calculations. I took something less than two inches long out of my right pocket, which was in Amasawa's blind spot. At first glance, it looked like a normal earplug. I casually inserted it into my right ear, where Amasawa wouldn't be able to see it, then cleared my throat, to give a signal.

Horikita's voice came from the small wireless earphone that I had inserted into my right ear.

"I've heard everything you talked about, loud and clear. I never imagined she'd ask you to make tom yum goong," said Horikita.

The idea was that Horikita, who had free access to her computer in her room and could look up information, could give me instructions on how to cook the dish in real time. Sudou's phone was inside the bag placed down on the floor by my feet. And audio streamed from Sudou's phone to the wireless

earphones. I had been on the phone with Horikita since before I went shopping with Amasawa.

During the time that Amasawa and I were shopping at the mall, Horikita went back to her dorm room and got everything in order. The wireless earphone was something we had bought yesterday. In the unlikely event that Amasawa got up and walked over to see how I was doing, I could casually pretend to scratch my head, remove the wireless earphone and put it back in my pocket. Since I was in a position where Amasawa could easily observe what I was doing, that meant that I could see what she was doing, too.

Thanks to all that, I could make this dish without having to worry about the recipe. We had already worked out several signals to use in situations like if Horikita went through her instructions too quickly, or if I needed her to repeat a step. From this point on, how well Horikita and I communicated over the phone was going to be extremely important. Even if I knew what ingredients and utensils I'd be using, I had no visual references to go off of.

I had to cook a dish called tom yum goong somehow, and left on my own, I would have been at a complete loss. What remained to be seen was just how well Horikita could give me specific instructions over the earphone, and how well I could produce something based on those instructions.

"By the way, there's something I'd like you to check with Amasawa-san first," asked Horikita, who proceeded to tell me her question through the earpiece.

It would be annoying if Amasawa asked me to make additional things for her later, so I did as Horikita instructed and asked her, repeating the question in my own words.

"Amasawa. You don't need a whisk to make tom yum goong, and you don't need to use a Petty knife, either. If you're going to ask me to make you something else besides that, I'd like you to tell me now," I told Amasawa, with a glare.

"Well, I was gonna ask you later, but I was thinking of having you peel some apples for me," replied Amasawa. Apparently, she *had* been intending to place an additional order. "The rest of the

food is stuff for you to enjoy later, senpai. Oh, and as for the utensils that you don't use this time around, you can use them the next time I pay you a visit."

It sounded like the petty knife was actually going to see some use today, though I'd originally doubted whether I'd need it at all. But some of the other things were going to go in storage for a while.

"Double-checking was the right call, then. I taught you how to handle the fruit knife the other day. You can manage, right?" asked Horikita.

I had no idea how well I could apply techniques I'd only learned overnight, but I figured I'd probably manage just fine.

"Let's shoot for about fifteen to thirty minutes of cooking time. Okay?" said Horikita.

Now, then, let's see just how well I can make this.

5.6

ALTHOUGH IT TOOK SLIGHTLY LONGER than expected, I somehow managed to make the tom yum goong, just as I had been instructed. And now the time had come for me to serve the completed dish to Amasawa. I'd never imagined I'd be serving a home-cooked meal I made myself to someone I'd only just met. And a girl, no less.

I placed the tom yum goong on the table and then came back with an apple in hand. I probably needed to show Amasawa that I could handle using a Petty knife, right in front of her.

"I normally use a regular kitchen knife to peel stuff, so I'm not really used to doing it this way. So I might be a little off," I said, putting that out there as something of a disclaimer before I got to work on peeling the apple.

"Wow, awesome! Incredible! You can handle it so well! You definitely pass on knife skills," said Amasawa.

I was nowhere close to a professional, but I supposed it didn't look like this was the first time I had ever picked up a knife in my life, at the very least. I laid out the apple slices that I had finished cutting up.

"By the way, when I think of tom yum goong, I usually think of cilantro. Do you not like it or something?" I asked her.

Cilantro wasn't among the items that she had me buy today.

"Hm, well, yeah. I guess? But I figured that if I had you buy cilantro for me, you would've guessed I was going to have you make tom yum goong," replied Amasawa.

From the sound of it, she had been on her guard the whole time then, and deliberately chosen to skip the cilantro. I supposed that was because she was trying to prevent me from pulling off any tricks, after all. I could understand why she'd tried to avoid giving me opportunities to exploit, but it was still pretty excessive.

"Do you mind if I go ahead and start cleaning up?" I asked her as I brought the cutting board and Petty knife I'd used to cut

up the apple back into the kitchen.

"Uh, yes I do mind! You've gotta plant your butt right here and wait for my verdict," replied Amasawa, directing me to sit down in front of her.

Since I couldn't exactly defy her demands, I gave up on cleaning for the time being, and returned to the living room from the kitchen, as she had instructed me to do.

"All right. Time to dig in!" said Amasawa, slowly bringing a spoonful of piping hot tom yum goong to her mouth.

She didn't seem to have any qualms whatsoever about having someone watch her eat. But I supposed I was like her in that regard, as I didn't mind having people around me, either. At any rate, once she was done eating, Amasawa slowly brought her hands together in a gesture to show that she was quite satisfied.

"Thank you for the meal," she said.

She didn't seem to have eaten like a bird or anything, considering the bowl looked like it had been licked clean. But, well... though I'd tasted the dish myself before I served it, I had no idea whether the flavor was right. I hadn't made any mistakes with the measurements or anything, so I didn't think there were any problems. Even so, if Amasawa said she wasn't satisfied, then this battle would be over. It would end in our defeat.

"So, senpai, your tom yum goong is..."

Amasawa paused for a moment before giving her judgment.

"Yeah, I guess it's so-so. It wasn't particularly tasty or anything, but it was good enough that I don't think I'd mind having it again," said Amasawa.

She didn't touch on the thing I was most immediately concerned about—namely whether I had passed her test.

"Anyway, I'll help you clean up," said Amasawa, picking up the bowl and spoon she had used and heading into the kitchen.

She didn't just clean up her dishes, for some reason. She started to actually help me clean up everything, for real.

"I'll handle it," I told her.

"No, no, I've got it, really! Besides, I forced you into making all this for me, so let me do at least this much. Take a seat and relax, senpai. I'm definitely no cook myself or anything, but I contribute at home by helping my mom with cleaning up, so I'm pretty good at that part of the job," said Amasawa.

"All right, then, I'll take you up on that. Oh, by the way, what's my score? How'd I do?" I asked her.

Amasawa fell silent for a brief moment as she continued to clean. Only the sound of the evening news on the TV could be heard throughout the room.

"Oh, yeah, that's right. I guess I've gotta tell you what your score is. Hm, not sure..." said Amasawa, hesitantly, looking like she was pretending to think it over.

She must not have liked how the ribbon on the right side of her hair was sitting, because she kept adjusting it while she pondered, checking her reflection in her phone, taking the ribbon off and then putting it back on. Not long afterward, she finished adjusting her ribbon, and then proceeded to give me her verdict.

"As I just told you a little while ago, it was so-so. The execution wasn't bad, and the flavor wasn't bad either," said Amasawa.

"So, I just barely passed then. Wow, harsh."

"Well, I *am* very particular when it comes to food, y'know," said Amasawa, looking at me with a big smile on her face. "I guess that means whether I come back here to eat again depends on how hard you work, senpai."

I supposed that meant my cooking skills weren't at the level where it made her want to drop by and have me cook her a meal that often, then. Still, "so-so"... That was harsh. I was a little hesitant to ask her if that meant we failed, but I decided to go ahead and do it.

"So does that mean we failed? You're not going to help with Sudou?" I asked.

"Well, while I can't really say you *passed*, it's true that you can cook. Still, I need to repay you, since you bought all this

expensive stuff for me and you did let me eat for free. So I'll team up with Sudou-senpai, in recognition of your efforts, senpai," said Amasawa.

It didn't seem like she was satisfied, exactly, but I'd apparently just barely managed to meet her standards. Just as I was starting to think things were going to get difficult, I was met with welcome news. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'll be done cleaning up in just a bit, so hold on a bit longer, okay?" said Amasawa.

I couldn't exactly just sit there and stare at her while she was hard at work cleaning up, so I just quietly watched the news playing on the TV while I waited. Amasawa came back out of the kitchen shortly afterward, so she must have felt like she'd done the job to her standards. Then, she started fiddling with her phone, showing me the screen all the while. She submitted a partnership request for Sudou. As long as Sudou responded to her request sometime by the end of day, then their partnership would be a done deal.

"Sudou's busy with club stuff right now, so I'll let him know what's up later. Is that okay?" I told her.

Of course, the truth of the matter was that Sudou couldn't respond right away, since I had his phone.

"Yeah, totally okay. Well, I feel bad for dragging this out so late, so I'll head back to my room now. See you later, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Amasawa.

Everything had proceeded without a hitch. She moved toward the exit to head back to her own room.

"Amasawa. I'm grateful to you for pairing up with Sudou. You're really doing a big favor for Sudou, and Horikita, too," I told her.

"It's all right, no biggie. But you can go ahead and shower me with your appreciation still, okay?" said Amasawa flippantly as she put on her shoes.

"If you don't mind, there is something else I'd like to ask you, since I've got you here."

Just as I was about to come out and ask, though, Amasawa, who'd finished putting her shoes on, turned back to look at me.

"You want to know if I'll be middleman between our classes, you mean?" she said quickly, without missing a beat.

Well, it wasn't like she was in Class A and had an academic ability ranking of A for nothing. She was quite quick-witted.

"Yeah, exactly. There are lots of people in our class who are struggling to find partners, like Sudou. If you could introduce us to even just one student who was willing to help, it'd really be appreciated," I told her.

"Sorry, but I think that's probably a no-go," said Amasawa, clasping her hands together and apologizing.

She promptly turned down my request.

"Ah, but it's not because you or Horikita-senpai did something wrong, okay? I do think I can trust you guys, y'know. But, well, I don't really get along with my classmates all that well. I mean, when we met up yesterday, I was all by my lonesome, remember?" said Amasawa.

"Now that you mention it, yeah. You're right."

Back then, there'd been lots of students going around the mall with their friends. But Amasawa was by herself.

"I guess it's because people say I lack tact or something, or that I tend to be pretty blunt. It's kinda hard to make friends with that kind of personality. Which is why I can't really help you all that much. Sorry, okay?" said Amasawa.

"Nah, the fact that you're partnering up with Sudou for us is more than enough. If you have any issues, let me know. I might be able to do something to help."

"Yeah, okay, thanks! Okay then. See you later! Bye bye!"

While I'd failed to establish a connection with Class 1-A, this was probably enough for the time being.

"Well, I guess that's that," I muttered to myself.

I hung up Sudou's phone, which had still been on a call this whole time, then proceeded to call Horikita using my own phone.

"Good work. It seems things worked out well, somehow," said Horikita, words of gratitude coming out of her mouth almost as soon as I got on the call with her.

"I get the feeling we were saved by Amasawa's kind-hearted judgment."

"Even so, this means that Sudou-kun's problem has been solved. That was an excellent outcome," said Horikita.

It was wrong of us to have used such a dirty trick on Amasawa, but in the end, it had helped. All we had to do now was make sure Sudou picked up his phone and accepted the partnership request before time was up. Considering the time, he'd probably be showing up any minute now.

"Why did you ask Amasawa-san to act as an intermediary between our class and Class 1-A, though? Putting aside the matter of her personality and the number of friends she has, didn't you consider it would be difficult to negotiate with them, since we're Class 2-D?" asked Horikita.

Horikita had never said anything about trying to work with Class 1-A as part of her strategy for this special exam, simply because it was too difficult to build a collaborative partnership with them.

"I just asked that as a formality. The truth of the matter is that we're having trouble finding partners. So it would've been suspicious if I *didn't* say something to that effect," I replied.

If we appeared as though we had no other options, we'd be giving people the impression we were really grasping at straws when we talked to them and asked for their help. If we didn't give people that kind of impression, but instead made them think we *did* have some options, they would suspect we had some other strategies that we were working towards.

"Meaning... you didn't want Amasawa to realize that we were giving up on Class 1-A from the very beginning, and targeting B and D instead?" said Horikita.

Horikita hadn't even considered using Amasawa to win her class over to our side, since she'd already decided to focus on

those two other classes. This whole time, she'd only been hoping to take advantage of the unexpectedly fortunate opportunity that had fallen into our laps and get a partner for Sudou.

"None of us really know anything about what Amasawa is actually like. Which is exactly why what happened today could end up getting out to the rest of the new students, or even to everyone in our grade level. I took that into consideration. I might just be worrying too much, though."

After hearing me say all that, Horikita went silent for a few moments.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It's just...your thought process, it's... How do I put it? It's extremely calculating and clever," said Horikita.

"It's not really all that big a deal."

"No, it very much is a big deal. Sure, it sounds obvious when you spell it out to me like that, but the fact that you thought that far ahead is a different matter entirely. I'm starting to understand why my big brother was paying so much attention to you, I think. But the old you wouldn't have explained everything to me so clearly. What happened?" Horikita seemed to have some concerns about how I was acting, and the possibility that I'd changed.

"I don't really have an ulterior motive or anything. Anyway, the next issue is what to do about the remaining students. I'll let you know when I hear back from Nanase," I replied.

"Y-yes, you're right. I'll be waiting until I hear from you then," said Horikita.

After I got off the phone with Horikita, I decided to check how things looked in the kitchen. It had been thoroughly tidied up. Not only had the dishes been washed, even the sink and such had been carefully cleaned and wiped down. Everything looked as good as it did when I first came to this room a year ago. The cutting board, dishes, kitchen knife, Petty knife, pot, ladle, etc., that I had used had all been neatly put away. Everything looked perfect.

Even though this whole situation had sprung up out of a proposal Horikita had made, this was the first time I'd interacted

so closely with a first-year student. If Amasawa had come from the White Room, it wouldn't have been surprising for her to try and pull something, but I saw no signs of that. I was certainly quite cautious myself, but I had to wonder.

Considering the way she talked and how she acted, it certainly seemed like she was a normal high schooler. The kind of knowledge she had seemed pretty on par, too. If someone had just left the White Room, it would probably be difficult for them to behave like Amasawa.

"More importantly, Amasawa got paired up with Sudou. I suppose that means that eliminates her as a White Room suspect then, huh?" I asked myself.

That would be my conclusion if I had to make a judgment based on the information available to me at present, including what I knew about which other first-year students had already settled on partners. It was probably too soon to come to such conclusions, though, regardless of who I was talking about.

It did seem like partnering with me would put me on the fast track to expulsion, but that being said, it wasn't the only way the White Room agent could go about getting me expelled. It was possible that whoever this person was, they were intentionally passing up this big chance to get me expelled, this special exam, in order to find another opening to exploit. Someone couldn't gain the kind of knowledge a normal high-schooler would have overnight, but it was a different story if they were given more time.

Besides, it wasn't like there was nothing at all that bothered me about Amasawa. There were some things she'd said and done that stuck out to me. It might not be anything I needed to worry about, but it would be best if I could deal with anything and everything that gave me cause for concern.

I wasn't just referring to Amasawa by that, either. I was also referring to Housen and Nanase, who I'd most likely be coming into contact with in the future. Out of the many second-year students around, those two made eye contact with me first, right away. Any student who came into such close contact with me should be regarded as suspicious, regardless of whether or not

we'd actually had a conversation. And from this point onward, I was going to be venturing into dangerous territory by searching for candidates for partners.

Later that night, I received a message from Nanase. It said, "Let's meet tomorrow after class."

5.7

THAT VERY SAME DAY, around when Ayanokouji was cooking a meal for Amasawa, three students from Class 2-A gathered in one place to have a discussion. They were Sakayanagi, Kamuro, and Kitou.

"It happened again. It sounds like the students we reached out to all got invitations from Class C. And on top of that, it sounds like they've been offered ten thousand points just to turn down any offers from our class, no strings attached," said Kamuro, relaying what she was hearing from Hashimoto over the phone. She added her own thoughts. "Wait, ten thousand points just to decide not to partner with us? That's so dumb."

Class 2-C was offering a hundred thousand points in advance just to agree to partner up with them. Then, after getting confirmation of a combined score of five hundred and one points or more on the test, Class C would offer another hundred thousand points on top of that, for a total of two hundred thousand points.

"*Fu fu.* Well, it seems Ryuuken-kun really intends to throw down the gauntlet with me," said Sakayanagi.

"So, what are you going to do? Do you want to fight back using points too?" asked Kamuro.

"Well, if we have a contest of financial power, we'd certainly win. But don't you feel like winning through the same strategy as your opponent lacks a certain artistic quality?" said Sakayanagi.

"A certain artistic quality...? But if we need to be handing out a hundred thousand or even two hundred thousand points, shouldn't we be getting in on this too? I mean, it's clear that the new kids think the benefits of getting points is huge," said Kamuro.

Word had already gone around the school that the new students were in an advantageous position in this exam. A standard had been set where the honors students asked for points in exchange for partnering up with people. After hearing Kamuro's

advice, Sakayanagi simply smiled back at her, but didn't express agreement with what she'd said.

"So, what? Are you fine with losing, then? To Ryuuen?" said Kamuro.

"First of all, there is quite a significant difference in academic ability between Ryuuen-kun's class and our own. If he's going to make up for that difference with the help of the new students, he'll need to draw on quite a few people to do so. And even if he does manage that, it's not as though his victory is assured," said Sakayanagi.

"Yeah, sure, you might be right about that. But that doesn't mean we're definitely going to win either, does it?" replied Kamuro.

"Correct. Even if Ryuuen-kun were to gather students with academic ability rankings in the A range, that would make him just barely capable of competing with us, wouldn't you say? Even if we did nothing at all, I would say that our chances of winning would be a solid fifty percent," said Sakayanagi.

However, put another way, that also meant they had a fifty percent chance of losing. It wasn't like Kamuro was getting heated up because she particularly wanted to win or anything, though. It was because she couldn't possibly believe that Sakayanagi, the girl sitting right in front of her, would just sit there and do nothing.

"What do you imagine might happen if we said we'd pay out the same amount?" asked Sakayanagi.

"What would happen? Well, Ryuuen would pay out even more, yeah?" said Kamuro.

"Exactly. I'm sure he would probably increase what he was offering to two hundred or three hundred thousand points," said Sakayanagi.

"But if we tried to outbid him, we could definitely get the smartest kids on our team," countered Kamuro.

"And the cost of doing so would be a fair number of points. There's really no need for us to deliberately risk losing millions of points. Don't you agree?" said Sakayanagi.

"So, what, are you saying we can snatch up students even if we offer them less? I can't really imagine the new kids are going to have a deep understanding of Class A's reputation, though," snapped Kamuro, though Sakayanagi still showed no signs that she was going to engage in a bidding war at all.

"I can tell quite clearly that Ryuuen-kun is determined to win first place overall. He seems to have completely changed his policy from last year, when he was simply out for money, like when he made that arrangement with Katsuragi-kun," said Sakayanagi.

"He was planning on saving up twenty million points so he could win himself, right?" said Kamuro.

"He's undergone quite a significant change of heart, it seems. He's realized the importance of Class Points. Well, no. I suppose I should say it's more that he's changed gears to make sure his class wins," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi and Ryuuen hadn't had a single face-to-face interaction during this special exam yet. However, it almost seemed as though they were discussing things with one another, bouncing strategies off of each other.

"So... you're fine with this? With not offering to pay up Private Points?" asked Kamuro.

"Oh, my, Masumi-san. I don't recall ever once saying I wasn't going to be using points, hm?"

"Huh? But didn't you just say that competing by using points lacks a certain artistic quality or whatever?"

"I'd like you to pass a message to the new students. Tell Hashimoto that we're prepared to match Ryuuen-kun's offer," said Sakayanagi.

Kamuro pursed her lips at this puzzling order.

"However... even if the first-year students agree to our offer, please do *not* tell them the deal is sealed," added Sakayanagi.

"Huh? Wait, what? I seriously am not understanding what's going on here," replied Kamuro.

"Fu fu fu. Ryuuuen-kun, your strategy is actually quite convenient for me," said Sakayanagi to no one in particular.

"For the love of... I have no clue what's what anymore," sighed Kamuro.

"Ah come on, what's the harm? If the princess says we gotta, then we just gotta do what we've gotta do, right," replied Hashimoto over the phone in an amused tone, having been listening in on the conversation the whole time.

"...I mean, I guess it's fine, whatever," said Kamuro.

Sakayanagi had instructed her followers not to confirm partnerships, even if they found first-years who agreed to accept the set number of points they were offering. Kamuro couldn't wrap her head around what it all meant, but she passed the instructions on to Hashimoto, word for word.

Sakayanagi, looking over at Kamuro almost lovingly, seemed to feel a little sorry for behaving too meanly earlier. She started to explain her reasoning, giving her a few hints.

"Ryuuuen-kun's strategy of engaging in an extravagant deal-making spree isn't necessarily a bad one. By deliberately going around and striking up so many deals with students, he's succeeded in forcing me to engage with him in a bidding war. However, targeting the same students we already contacted, making us directly compete to recruit them, was a clear error on his part. Since Class C is inferior in terms of overall ability, he should be focusing solely on students with a high level of academic ability," said Sakayanagi.

However, Ryuuuen wasn't doing that. He wasn't just trying to reach out to the high achievers, but also to students that Class A was going to need in the future. Students who had skills in areas other than academics.

"Does that mean that he's got a ton of Private Points saved up or something?" asked Kamuro.

"Well, I have to wonder about that. Even if he does have the minimum points required to pull this strategy off saved up, the

number of points he can actually move around might not be all that significant. Understand?" replied Sakayanagi.

"Wait, no, that'd be crazy though. He can only make offer after offer to all these kids because he's got the points, right?"

"But you can make all the offers you like, even if you don't have a single point. He only needs to pretend he has the points on hand."

Kamuro didn't immediately understand what Ryuuuen stood to gain by doing such a thing.

"If it weren't for Ryuuuen-kun, we could have successfully brought quite a number of talented new students over to our side by using our class's reputation alone. However, he has forced us to engage in a bidding war by trying to buy these students out. And what will he do next? He'll try to raise the stakes even higher. Try to make us pay lavish sums, as much as we can possibly spend," said Sakayanagi.

"I see... Huh, so that's it, then."

Even if Class A ended up nabbing the most talented students for themselves, the fact that they would be forced into paying two or even three hundred thousand points would work to Class C's benefit when it came to the competition between the second-year classes.

"But we're at a disadvantage right now, aren't we? I mean, he's been pulling off one success after another," said Kamuro.

"There's no need for us to panic at this stage. Some students have been bought up by Ryuuuen-kun, that's all. We can let him feel like he's winning, feel like he's got a feather in his cap. He's made a few errors in judgment. Namely, he underestimates the power of Class A's reputation. He thinks it can be nullified if we were to stumble. And he's under the misapprehension that he can get any number of collaborators over to his side if he offers them enough money," said Sakayanagi.

"I don't really get it, but everything will work out as long as we do what you've told us, yeah?" said Kamuro.

"Yes. That'll be enough for now," said Sakayanagi.

"I don't really like this. I feel like we're being forced to play along with Ryuu'en's plans. If we keep getting dragged into the messes he creates, I'm not sure what's gonna happen."

"Please do not worry. It won't come to that. We're going to win this game without any problems."

Kamuro let out a sigh, once again finding herself unable to wrap her head around what Sakayanagi was telling her.

"There's no point in trying to rack your brain over it at this point in time, so please don't let yourself get riled up by Ryuu'en-kun. This special exam is nothing more than a prelude. We're both trying to sound each other out right now, while also keeping each other in check," said Sakayanagi.

"I can't wrap my head around any of this. I think I'm about ready to give up," said Kamuro.

"But... If at all possible, I'd prefer this didn't end in Ryuu'en's self-destruction. It's really no fun to finish this so easily," said Sakayanagi.

She looked out the window, praying that the enemy coming after her was worthy of being her opponent.

5.8

ON THAT VERY SAME DAY, just two hours after Sakayanagi and Kamuro had their discussion, Ryuuен sat with Ishizaki and Ibuki in one of the karaoke rooms.

"Seems like the Class 1-B kid we were hopin' to snatch up for two hundred thousand has put our offer on hold, Ryuuен-san," said Ishizaki, reporting his findings to Ryuuен after checking his phone.

"The hell? What, is two hundred large not enough to satisfy 'em or something?" said Ryuuен.

"Well, uh, it seems like Sakayanagi said Class 2-A will offer the same number of points, so..." Ishizaki trailed off.

"They don't wanna lose to us. How can we even win if we keep playing this game? We're at a disadvantage," said Ibuki.

"I think Class A has a bunch of points. So yeah, we probably are at a pretty big disadvantage..." added Ishizaki.

Even after hearing that news, Ryuuен simply fiddled around with his phone. He didn't seem to be panicking at all.

"R-Ryuuен-san?" asked Ishizaki.

"Relax. I already know everythin' they're up to," said Ryuuен.

He shot a glance toward his empty glass, which prompted Ishizaki to hurriedly fill it back up with water.

"Tell these kids we'll pay 'em a hundred thousand up front, plus another two hundred after the exam," said Ryuuен.

"D-dude, seriously?" balked Ishizaki.

A total of three hundred thousand. The number of points being thrown around had grown even greater.

"Most of the newbies probably aren't gonna come to a decision, though. They're gonna be waitin' for Sakayanagi's counteroffer," said Ryuuен.

"Wait, aren't we basically nuking ourselves by doing this?" said Ibuki.

If they became short on funds, then there'd be nothing else they could do.

"Maybe it's hopeless to compete against Sakayanagi after all... Maybe we ought to try goin' for second place..." added Ishizaki.

"I think so, too. Even if we had the same number of points to throw around, we'd lose in terms of our class's reputation," said Ibuki.

After hearing Ishizaki and Ibuki analyze the situation, Ryuuen laughed. "Ha! I'mbettin' that Sakayanagi chick probably has a smug grin on her face right now, thinkin' she's won."

"She's just seen right through what you're doing. Even if you could actually compete with her using Private Points, there's still the difference in our reputation," said Ibuki.

"Meh, Class A's reputation is all show right now, nothin' more. Considering how much those guys depend on their reputation, the amount of trust they'll lose when that reputation falls apart is gonna be unfathomable," said Ryuuen.

"Okay, but even if that's true, what about the points? I mean, I guess if the offers balloon all the way up to three or four hundred thousand, that won't be *too* bad, but there's no way we can pay everyone," countered Ibuki.

"Ain't no need to pay. I ain't planning on giving anything to these punk kids who keep askin' for more and more, like the sky's the limit," said Ryuuen.

"...Huh?"

"I ain't planning on forkin' over any points. I'm sussing out exactly what kinda people these new kids are. You know what they say—money talks. But the people who are willing to cooperate if you put up the cash are the people you can bring over to your side any time. When you really need 'em to help out, just pay 'em, and that's that. The *real* important people are the ones who intuitively understand the things other than points," said Ryuuen.

"I'm sorry, I'm totally not gettin' any of this..." said Ishizaki.

"Sakayanagi probably thinks I'm after first place overall. But I never planned on goin' after such a pitiful number of Class Points from the start. If we're gonna completely crush Class A, we've just gotta wait for the right time. The time when Class Points are *really* gonna fluctuate wildly, way more than now," said Ryuuuen.

"So, does that mean that you did all of this just to find out which of the new kids would roll over for points?" said Ishizaki.

"It was obvious from the start that we could fish for brats with points, if we offered more. But there are already some kids who have partnered up with us. Why do you think they chose to partner up with Class C?" asked Ryuuuen.

"Huh... Yeah, actually, now that you mention it, I gotta wonder. Why?" asked Ishizaki.

The first offer that Ryuuuen had made was for fifty thousand paid up front, plus an additional fifty thousand after the exam. But even though that offer wasn't too high, some students had already accepted it and joined forces with Class C.

"That reminds me. You always did meet one-on-one with people when you were making a partnership agreement legit... Were you threatening them or something?" asked Ibuki.

"Well, yeah, a little. You're right on that count," said Ryuuuen.

So, the students, after being lured in by a generous sum of three or four hundred thousand points, would fold after being interviewed by Ryuuuen. In the end, the agreed-upon price was far less expensive than it appeared to be on the surface.

"I'm screenin' the new kids to see if they can understand that I'm better than Sakayanagi," said Ryuuuen.

He was selecting people who could instinctively identify the winning class without factoring points or reputation into the mix. Those were the people Ryuuuen was really looking for in this special exam.

He was looking far into the future, well past the next year. His goal was to take Sakayanagi and the rest of Class A down.

Chapter 6: **Class D and Class D**

IT WAS NOW THURSDAY, and the weekend was drawing near. After class ended, I went to the library with Horikita in tow. It was where we'd be having our discussion with Class 1-D, who Nanase would be bringing with her today. On our way there, we chatted about the special exam.

"Have you checked out today's update yet?" I asked her.

"Seventeen more partnerships have been finalized. Which brings the total number of partnerships to seventy-three," replied Horikita.

While there wasn't anything about the number of partnerships itself that was particularly noteworthy, there was one substantial difference between this last update and the previous two. Namely, the fact that two students from Class 1-D had decided upon partners. There were now some visible signs of activity in a class which had, for the past three days, seemed motionless.

"I'm a little flustered. I thought Housen-kun was planning to wait and see how things would play out a little longer. I tried talking to some Class 1-D students today during lunch, but they just brushed me off, saying they didn't really know anything about the students who decided on partners," said Horikita.

"It's hard to tell if they really don't know, or if they're just under some kind of gag order."

It wouldn't be too surprising if there was some kind of rule in place, forbidding them from partnering with anyone or even talking about the whole situation unless one of the smart kids in class got offered a lot of points.

"That's true. At any rate, it's great that we'll be meeting with Nanase-san now. I'm sure she might be able to tell us something about this situation," said Horikita.

Horikita had only ever met Nanase once, and they'd never actually ever had a proper conversation. Even so, Nanase, the person who'd stood beside Housen, seemed to be someone with whom we could communicate. Personally, I'd gotten a strong impression that she was an honest person when we talked. She had a very firm, upright character, vaguely reminiscent of Ichinose somehow.

Horikita and I arrived at the library. When we set foot inside, the first person to greet us wasn't Nanase, but rather Shiina Hiyori, from Class 2-C.

"Oh, hello there, fancy seeing you here," said Hiyori.

Apparently, this bookworm had come to the library right away after class today.

"We might be making a little noise today. We're going to talk to some first-year students about the special exam," I told her.

"Oh, is that so? In that case, it might be a good idea for you to use the seats in the far back. I don't think you'll bother the other patrons then, and you should be able to talk a little. Also, you'll quickly notice if someone does try to approach you," said Hiyori.

I decided to take the advice she had so kindly given me.

"Are things coming along okay in Class C?" I asked.

"Yes, they are. It seems there's a lot going on right now."

Since our classes were competing with one another, we couldn't exactly clue each other in on their inner workings. So with that brief exchange of pleasantries, we said goodbye to Hiyori and decided to go take our seats. While I was still kind of curious about what was going on with Hiyori, I went with Horikita toward the seats at the back of the room.

"Putting Nanase-san aside, now that we're getting involved with Class 1-D, it raises the question of whether Housen-kun is going to show up," said Horikita.

"Yeah. I guess that whether he shows up or not is going to make a substantial difference to how this goes."

Since we hadn't given Nanase restrictions, there was no guarantee she wouldn't bring Housen with her. If she did bring him along, we'd just have to go for broke and negotiate for all we were worth, flying by the seat of our pants.

"I hope you don't mind if I ask you something before we start a full-blown discussion. Have you been studying?" asked Horikita.

"Well, a little bit, here and there. Why, what about it?" I asked.

"I was just wondering whether you're getting enough time for your studies, considering I have an advantage in this situation by being able to choose the subject."

"Oh, what's this? Taking pity on your enemy?" I teased.

"As if. I'm not so nice as to willingly give up advantageous conditions. This is a contest I must win," said Horikita.

Even so, she was apparently concerned about whether I was studying properly or not. Which was to say, she was *actually* worried that I'd come up with some excuse that I was too busy dealing with the special exam to study, or something like that.

"You're one to talk, you know. You're spending a lot of your time getting our class organized," I replied.

"I always make sure to devote time to my studies. I have no problems whatsoever," said Horikita.

She seemed to be quite confident that she had managed her time well, with everything she had to do in her daily routine.

"Well, relax. I don't plan on losing," I told her.

"Well, that's all well and good, I suppose..."

She didn't seem to trust me, strangely enough. She didn't seem to think that I was taking this test seriously.

To that point, there *was* one other thing that I wanted to ask her about. Horikita had a lot of roles to fill, in addition to keeping our class organized. She had to spend time on her own studies and on top of that, she tutored others. I had no idea if she could keep going at that pace all the way up until test day.

Just as I was about to ask Horikita about that though, Nanase showed up at the library, alone. She quickly located us, rushed over toward us, and bowed her head. From the looks of things, Housen wasn't going to be showing up to this initial discussion.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," said Nanase, politely.

"Nah, we just got here ourselves," I replied.

Horikita prompted Nanase to sit down in the seat directly across from her and opened the discussion with a brief introductory greeting.

"All right, well... Once again, my name's Horikita Suzune. Thank you for making the time to talk with us today," said Horikita.

"Yeah, and I'm... Err, I mean yes, I am Nanase Tsubasa. I haven't done anything worthy of your thanks, though. If anything, I should be the one thanking you," replied Nanase.

We were all in Class D, so we all started from an exceptionally humble position. Horikita, after listening to Nanase's polite and proper words, decided to immediately get down to business. "I'm sorry for how sudden this might be, but do you mind if I ask you some questions?"

"Not at all, please go ahead," said Nanase.

"First, just to establish a baseline, I'd like to ask what your class's policies are. Two students in your class confirmed partnerships today, while the status of the remaining thirty-eight students in your class remains to be seen. You were one of the two students who confirmed a partnership, aren't you, Nanase-san?" asked Horikita.

While it wasn't clear if it was Housen or someone else, it was clear a member of their class was giving orders here.

"That's correct. I had a feeling you'd ask me about that. I'm assuming you asked Kajiwara-kun that same question today, yes?" replied Nanase.

Kajiwara was the name of another student in Nanase's class. Apparently, she already knew that Horikita had reached out to Class 1-D students during lunch today. If that was the case, I

supposed we ought to assume she also knew that we had reached out to Shiratori and his friends on the first day of the exam period.

"I'm surprised. You seem to have a very good handle on this situation," said Horikita.

"Many students are already acting on Housen-kun's orders," said Nanase matter-of-factly, openly admitting that Housen was the one taking the lead, rather than being evasive about it.

"Is it because of his aggressive attitude? No, I can't imagine that's all there is to it. What methods did he use, exactly?" asked Horikita.

Nanase looked like she was lost in thought for a brief moment. Then she opened her mouth to speak.

"I am terribly sorry, but unfortunately, I can't tell you exactly what kind of methods he used. Housen-kun brought the class together. Whether the way he did that was right or wrong, I do not know. But letting word of it get outside our class would be an act of betrayal," said Nanase.

"I see. You're correct in saying so," said Horikita.

In response to that, Nanase thanked Horikita again and bowed. I supposed that just because we were Nanase's seniors, that didn't necessarily mean she was going to tell us anything. Just like in our conversation the other day, she seemed to have firm thoughts and convictions as a member of her class.

"In that case, I'll get right to the point. Is it safe for us to assume we will be able to work with your class, just like those two students who settled on their partnerships yesterday?" asked Horikita.

"As I'm sure you've already heard from Shiratori-kun, our offer is always open. As long as you offer us a set number of Private Points with your proposal, we will accept whatever partnership requests you make, without hesitation," said Nanase.

So our chat with Shiratori and his friends had reached Housen after all. From that, we could infer a high number of points were paid out to the two students from their class who had gotten partners.

"But what I'm asking you about today is different from establishing a partnership contract based on points," replied Horikita.

"Yes, I know. I've already heard a little about your offer from Ayanokouji-senpai. A collaborative relationship where we would cover for each other—that is to say, mutually work to protect the less academically inclined students in our classes, yes?"

"Yes. If you've come to this discussion understanding all that, there must be some room for negotiation, yes?"

"There is... Or at least, I'd like to think so."

Nanase's face darkened. Then she continued speaking.

"Housen-kun's way of thinking is rooted in ideas of intense individualism. And he enforces that ideology. If things continue at this rate, the less academically capable students will be unable to find partners, and get left behind. If they only got their Private Points withheld for three months, that wouldn't be too bad. But I fear they'll end up being branded as incompetent for their failure to find partners. Well, no... I suppose that might not be too bad, either. What I *really* don't want to happen is for this intense sense of individualism to dominate our class in the future, to the point where we lose any sense of unity," said Nanase.

Horikita listened to everything Nanase had to say, and then mentally calculated what might happen to Class 1-D in the future.

"Right, that is a valid concern," she said. "If no one in the class helps each other out, the trend toward individualism will naturally accelerate. Once there's no one around to assist other students, everyone will feel like they must do things on their own. Once that ideology has sunk in, even if someone does ask for help, no one will step in. Which means that if your class were faced with a test that required you to function as one, you'd lose that battle."

Which was precisely why Nanase took it upon herself to negotiate with Horikita alone. She was trying to avoid that fate.

"You're not afraid of Housen-kun?" asked Horikita.

"No," replied Nanase, firmly, without a second's delay.

She hadn't glanced much at me until this point, but now looked over in my direction. It was the same look she'd given me twice before. I remembered that when I asked her something similar, she responded with "*I will never yield to violence.*"

There were things about her that bothered me, of course, but Nanase might be the only person who could get her class on our side. If this really was nothing more than a chance encounter, I was honestly grateful for it.

"Well then, I'd like to ask you a slightly more in-depth question. How many students in your class are currently struggling to find partners? Please tell us about as many as you can, regardless of academic ability," said Horikita.

The OAA app could tell you which students had yet to finalize partnerships, but not how likely they were to find a partner or not. To learn that, you could only ask someone directly related to that class.

"At this current point in time, I think that there are close to fifteen students who would have difficulty in finding a partner on their own," said Nanase.

"Fifteen... That's more than I thought," said Horikita.

However, many students in our class hadn't found partners, either. If we came up with good combinations of people, there was still room for our classes to work well together.

"Nanase-san. If you'll allow it, we would like to come to a rather significant arrangement with your class," said Horikita.

"A significant arrangement?" she repeated.

"I'm hoping you and I can come up with fifteen partnership pairings and take care of this matter all at once, Nanase-san. It doesn't matter if they have an E or an A in academic ability. There are no conditions. And of course, no points will be involved. An equal partnership based on mutual collaboration, where we both strive to help those who need it," said Horikita.

In other words, give-and-take. The idea was that we would mutually give and take what we needed, without getting points or

feelings involved. Establishing such an agreement would likely greatly reduce the probability of students getting expelled.

But both Horikita and Nanase knew that it wasn't going to be that simple.

"This is all based on the assumption that we can come to an agreement. But there's no guarantee that we can save the students in your class who are near E-rank in academic ability, Horikita-senpai. Most of the students in our class who are struggling to find partners are around C and D level," said Nanase.

Even if the highest-ranked student they had available had a C+, they'd still be at significant risk if they were paired with an E-ranked student from our class. You might say the benefits of such an arrangement were almost nil.

"In that case, I'm going to need to ask you to do your absolute best to make sure things don't turn out that way for us," said Horikita.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. Even so, I don't think we'll be able to come to terms that easily," said Nanase, not denying that there could be issues, but openly admitting to it. "Housen-kun would never approve of helping you for free. Especially not now."

Class 1-A had held onto a great many points ever since they started school last year, and they had ample funds saved. Even though Class C had blown through a considerable number of points in order to save Ryuuen, they still had a stable supply of funds thanks to their contract with Class A. I was sure Ryuuen's classmates probably had a fair number of points saved up, too. Considering the current situation, where 2-C and 2-A were throwing around lots of points in a bidding war, it was not at all surprising that the new students would want to sell themselves to the highest bidder.

So you could say that Housen's way of thinking was correct. But even if he tried to put a high price tag on the kids from his class, the truth of the matter was that they were asking for more than the other classes. The small number of students from his class who had settled on partners spoke to this.

"Even if it would be for the good of his class?" asked Horikita. "There should be no downsides to this for him."

It would be more of a downside if some students were unable to find partners and thus deprived of Private Points they were supposed to have raked in. Though I was sure that went without saying.

"I know what you're trying to say, Horikita-senpai. I understand much of what you're saying very well," said Nanase.

She seemed to be responding quite positively to Horikita's proposal. However...

"But... I don't think Housen-kun will allow it, after all."

There was a slight pause. I had a general idea of what she was thinking about. So I took a guess.

"Well, there's one thing we can be sure of. Housen isn't taking the points for himself," I replied.

"What do you mean?" asked Horikita.

"I thought the reason Housen was only allowing partnerships to form if people paid a high number of points was because he was taking the points for himself. However, if that were really the case, then he'd be more proactive about trying to set up even the lower-ranked students. And in extreme cases, he'd be telling those students to hand over what points they have so he could go find a partner for them." I replied.

"Yes, you're certainly right... Three months' worth of Private Points is nothing to scoff at. It would be much better to pay Housen-kun half your points and be saved, rather than get a failing grade and not get any points at all for all that time," said Horikita.

There was nothing to suggest that Housen was doing anything of the sort, though. Not in what we'd seen their class do so far, nor in our conversation with Nanase.

"Ayanokouji-senpai's deduction is correct. Housen-kun has not received any kind of compensation from our classmates," said Nanase.

He was controlling his class and imposing rules upon them. Presumably, if a student broke those rules, they would be completely ostracized by Housen and his followers. Which was why they didn't dare try and find a partner without permission. They couldn't. And the reason why no one from their class showed up to the meet-and-greet was because they knew it would be pointless.

"Couldn't you use your influence to control even a few of the more academically gifted students?" asked Horikita.

There was no form of quid pro quo of any kind in Horikita's proposal. She was only asking for students from both of our classes to help one another. Unlike the students in our grade level, though, the new students naturally had less emotional attachment to their class and to their friends. It was unreasonable to expect them to have formed strong emotional connections only a couple of weeks after enrollment.

"I tried talking to a few of them, but none of them said they'd even consider it," replied Nanase.

"It sounds like some form of quid pro quo is a requirement after all, then," said Horikita.

"If we only need a couple people, couldn't we work out an arrangement using points?" I asked, turning to Horikita.

If our goal was to fight with our wallets, like Class A and Class C, we'd need a huge amount of funds in order to recruit a significant number of students. But if we focused only on getting a few students, just enough to stop anyone from being expelled, our costs would be reduced accordingly.

"That's true... I suppose that if we really run out of options, we'll have no choice but to go that route. But relationships created using Private Points can only be maintained using Private Points. I want a relationship that goes beyond that," said Horikita, responding to me.

She then turned to look right at Nanase.

"What do you mean by that?" asked Nanase.

"Our grade levels are on different playing fields. First-year students have no risk of being expelled, so you're in a better

position than us. However, that dynamic won't last forever. The day will come when you have to do battle while facing possible expulsion, not too far from now. If you only establish relationships based on points, what do you think will happen when the time comes that you need to pay up and are out of funds?" asked Horikita.

Some students might still make it through, but it wouldn't be surprising if many of them did not.

"Which is precisely why I'd like to establish an equal partnership, not a dynamic based on points. And I want to build trust. The special kind of trust that comes from us being from different grade levels," added Horikita.

She was essentially saying that by doing things this way, establishing this kind of partnership, we would be able to discuss things as equals when students from Nanase's class had problems in the future. In short, a strategy that valued trust, just like what Ichinose was doing. The main difference between us and Ichinose, though, was that we were partnering exclusively with Class 1-D, while she was helping students from every class. Instead of trying to appeal to everyone, Horikita had zeroed in on Class 1-D, wanting to establish a collaboration with them.

We were already on the fourth day of the special exam period. We couldn't afford to waste any more time.

Nanase must have understood how driven Horikita was. Even so, her darkened expression didn't light up.

"I understand very well what you're trying to say. But I don't think that my peers understand the same. Many of the first-years are already frantically working to save up Private Points. They would see partnering with someone for free as a loss, simple as that," said Nanase.

The only way they'd understand would be with time, as they came to know the system this school operated on.

"Right now, there are two major obstacles in the way of us partnering up with your class, based on what you're telling us. We need to convince Housen-kun, and we need to persuade the

honors students who want points. Well, I suppose the latter point could really apply to students from any class, not just yours, but..."

It was certainly true that, at least on the surface, the many obstacles in our path made it seem like it wasn't particularly beneficial to team up with their class. One of those obstacles, in particular—dealing with Housen.

But that wasn't actually true. I wondered if Horikita was aware of this fact.

"Please allow me to discuss things with Housen-kun," proposed Horikita, having decided that it would be impossible for us to proceed any further without Housen.

"Yes, I suppose that's reasonable... If we're going to try to establish an equal partnership, there's no avoiding the fact we'll need to talk to him," said Nanase.

"If it's all right with you, I'm ready to meet with him immediately," said Horikita.

"I understand. I'll try calling him," replied Nanase.

She took out her phone and headed toward the library exit.

"It seems like Housen-kun's control extends even further than I had imagined," said Horikita.

"Seems like it," I replied.

"My idea about teaming up with Class 1-D isn't...wrong, is it?" asked Horikita.

"Looking to the future and trying to build a relationship with them isn't a bad strategy," I told her. "If anything, I'd say it's a prerequisite for what we need to do. Sakayanagi and Ryuuuen are trying to buy the trust of skilled first-years by using their class's reputation or using points. Ichinose lacks for points, but she's also working to build trust by saving those in need of help. You're doing something similar to Ichinose, but you're focused on building a relationship with just one specific class. Right? It's the same thing, but with different methods and in a different form. You're already becoming a leader who can compete with those three."

Horikita nodded after hearing what I had to say. Now, we just had to see how well she could handle negotiations.

As we waited, I saw Nanase beckoning us over towards the exit, bowing to us.

"I wonder if something happened," said Horikita.

"Let's go and find out."

We left the library and joined up with Nanase.

"Please excuse me, senpai. Um, well... Housen-kun is on the line," said Nanase.

She handed her phone over to Horikita. It was currently set on mute. Horikita took it from her and then put it on speakerphone before beginning her conversation with Housen.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," said Horikita.

"Sup. I heard a li'l bit from Nanase."

"If possible, I'd like for us to meet in person so I can explain my proposal to you directly," said Horikita.

"Ain't no need. Don't gotta bother meetin' up," replied Housen, with a laugh.

"So, does that... mean that you're not willing to negotiate?"

"Exactly what it means. Wasn't even any point in talkin' to ya on the phone, but Nanase wasn't havin' any of it."

"Housen-kun, I think that it would be a good idea to consider her offer," said Nanase.

"Shut the hell up. What right do you got to talk to me like that, huh? HUH? I'll kill you."

"I have no intention of letting you kill me. Please meet with Horikita-senpai at least once," said Nanase.

"If you can't cough up enough points, then don't bother contactin' me again."

Nanase tried to continue the conversation, but Housen quickly ended the call. She immediately called him back, but no matter how many times she dialed his number, he didn't answer.

"...I'm so sorry!" shouted Nanase, apologizing to Horikita and me while bowing her head as low as she possibly could.

It wasn't like she'd done anything wrong, though.

"Come on, lift your head. My plans and Housen-kun's are completely different. It was clear things weren't going to work out that easily. I'm incredibly grateful that you went out of your way to assist us so much," said Horikita.

"It really wasn't much..." replied Nanase, bashfully.

"I think that's all for today. Now, we need to think of a way to get Housen-kun to talk to us. But I'd like to try and get this over with by the end of this week," said Horikita.

If this got drawn out any longer, she'd have to start looking beyond just Class 1-D. Nevertheless, I hoped that it wouldn't come to that. It would be quite a painstaking task for us to try and snatch up students from the other three classes, when they've already been thoroughly picked over.

"I'm awfully glad to hear that you still haven't given up, Horikita-senpai. But..." Nanase trailed off, swallowing the words that were about to come out of her mouth. She was probably going to tell us we'd never be able to form a real partnership with Housen, but had decided it would be all over if she actually came out and said that.

"At the very least, we conveyed to Housen-kun what I want to do. That's enough for now."

Even though Horikita was running out of both time and patience, she still spoke encouragingly to her junior. Horikita then suggested we all walk back to the dorms together, but Nanase apparently had somewhere else to be, so she left, after telling us that she'd like to meet us again in the library tomorrow. Maybe she went to go meet up with Housen.

"Let's head back. I've still got a full schedule ahead of me today," said Horikita.

From the sounds of it, she was going to hold a study session with Sudou and some other people after she got back to her room.

"Oh, and I think I'd like to hear more about your partner situation now, if possible. Like if you're going to be finding a partner on your own or if you're planning to let me handle it for you. It might have an impact on things down the line," said Horikita.

If we were going to start negotiations with Housen, I was sure we'd probably need to adjust the specific number of people involved.

"There's someone I think I might be able to work with," I replied.

"Does that mean you actually have a specific person in mind, rather than looking at academic ability rankings? Who?" asked Horikita.

"That's a secret," I answered.

"A secret...? What do you have to hide from me?"

"I've only just scratched the surface of what this person is like, I don't know anything beyond that about them yet."

"Is that really that much of a problem? We all have to fumble around and do our best to help each other, right?" said Horikita.

"Yeah, I guess so. I thought it would become clearer to me today, but... Well, I guess I'll know by the end of the week, at the latest."

"I suppose that's all well and good, but...I don't know how much I can help you even if you come crying to me at the last minute, you know."

"I'll keep that in mind. Oh, more importantly, I forgot to ask you earlier. Are you feeling okay?" I asked her.

"...Are you worried about me?"

"I probably don't need to worry about your energy levels right now, but there are still quite a few days to go before the special exam," I told her.

If she got dizzy and worn out in the final stretch, it could affect how things went on the day of the test. In addition to her daily study sessions, she'd also spent a fair amount of time

preparing for Amasawa's cooking challenge late Tuesday night. It was obvious that fatigue was gradually accumulating.

"It's true that I might get worn out in the final stretch. But I don't have the time to rest right now. I'm not planning on collapsing until after the special exam is over," said Horikita.

Rather than just trying to look tough, she was beginning to show the mentality of someone who knew they were leading their class into battle. Yousuke and Kushida were already helping. They needed no introduction. But even other students with a high level of academic prowess, like Keisei and Mii-chan, had offered to help Horikita right away this time. So she decided to push ahead with her plan, which was based on the premise of working with Class 1-D now and into the future.

If a leader acted without thinking, or delayed making a decision, it could only have a negative impact on the ones they led. In this race against time, the speed at which we could settle things was critical to our class.

6.1

IT WAS A LITTLE CHILLY that night. I stood in the kitchen, cooking something with the vast quantities of untouched groceries I had been forced to buy the other day. This time, of course, I was using recipes and videos as a guide while I cooked. I wanted to try the tom yum goong I'd made for Amasawa for myself. The name of the dish, tom yum goong, was a combination of three Thai words, which meant "to simmer," "to mix," and "shrimp."

"It's got a unique flavor, but it's not bad," I said aloud.

The way the spicy and sour flavors filled my mouth, and the way the aroma shot up my nose, definitely made it seem like a dish that would be a hit with people who were into these flavors and sensations. After I was done cleaning up, I turned on the ventilation fan to get rid of the smell that had filled the room. Even though the sound was drowned by the noise from the fan, I eventually noticed my phone vibrating on my bed. I thought I'd just let it go and I'd call back later, but it just never stopped ringing, so I picked it up.

"You sure took your time answering the phone," said the person on the other line.

It was Kei. This was the first time I had gotten a call from her in several days, since the special exam started. And the first thing that came out of her mouth was a complaint.

"Aren't *you* the one who told me to call you around this time? Get your act together," added Kei.

"Sorry. So, did you look into the thing I had asked you to this morning?"

"I'm only calling you because I did a great job of it. Don't you think you're not being nearly grateful enough to me?"

"I am grateful. So?"

"I don't really feel like you're grateful at all, but... Well, whatever. Anyway, according to the clerk, only one's been sold since April this year. It seems it barely sells at all, compared to

similar things, and they're lucky if they sell or one two a year. Oh, but get this, there was some new kid who tried to buy one," said Kei.

I already knew exactly who the person who'd bought one was. So I was more interested in hearing about the new student who *tried* to buy one.

"When you say they 'tried' to buy it, that means that they didn't actually buy it in the end, right?"

There was no way someone would be functionally incapable of buying that product, unless they did something absurd like spend all of their points right after starting school here. And if you were in the batch of new students that had arrived this particular year, I couldn't imagine you would do something so foolish.

"So, anyway, yeah, I tried asking the clerk about it. Apparently, right as the kid was trying to check out, someone else came up and said they shouldn't buy it, that they should put it back. And the student who tried to buy it was—"

As I listened to Kei give me details about this student, I analyzed the situation in my mind. It was a little... actually, no, it was quite a bit different from what I had originally envisioned. I'd never expected that *they* would be involved in this.

"Do we know who prompted the student to not buy the item?" I asked.

"Nope. The clerk didn't know who it was. They just said they were pretty sure that it was a girl, though," said Kei.

Students presented their I.D. when making purchases, so the clerk would've known the name of the one who tried to buy the item. But they wouldn't have known who stepped in and stopped them.

"Was my info useful?" said Kei.

"Yeah. Actually way more useful than I originally thought it'd be."

"*Heh heh.* Well, I *am* pretty capable, after all. You need to really show me some gratitude for this. But why'd you have me

look into something like this, anyway? I honestly don't get it at all," said Kei.

"Neither do I."

"Huh?"

I had thought having Kei look into this would give me something to help make sense of this person's incomprehensible behavior, but this development went far beyond what I had imagined. In fact, it was so disconnected from what I had imagined that it made me wonder if it was actually completely irrelevant.

"Oh, that reminds me, I heard that you got yourself a partner for the special exam," I told her.

"Oh, yeah. Shimazaki-san from Class 1-B, I think his name was. I feel like Kushida-san really came through and saved the day for me," said Kei.

Now that we'd dealt with the item of business, I figured I'd change the topic.

"I don't think your partner's too bad or anything, but are you making pretty good progress on your studies yourself, Kei?" I asked.

"Oh, well, uh, how do I put this...? I guess I was thinking I could start doing it at the last minute, maybe?"

I knew it. I hadn't heard anything about her going to the study group yet, so I figured as much.

"This exam isn't something you can get through completely on your own, you know. Kei, your grade is a D+. If you don't consider the fact that you're not really in the best position here, you could be in for a world of hurt," I told her.

"I know, I know that. It's just, I dunno, I just don't feel motivated to do anything... And if I do go to study group, you won't be there, Kiyotaka," said Kei.

"What? So, you're saying that you'll study hard if I'm there?" I asked.

"...Yeah, so? I'd work hard in front of my boyfriend," said Kei.

I wasn't sure if that was true or not, but if that's the way it was, there was a quick and easy solution.

"In that case, how about we... Yeah. How about you come to my room around six o'clock tomorrow?" I asked.

Considering the fact that we had a meeting with Nanase after class, that should be plenty of time.

"I can come hang out with you?!" she exclaimed.

"We're not going to hang out, we're going to study," I replied.

"Huh?"

Don't you "huh" me.

"I'll help you study. That should help you get a little motivated, right?" I replied.

First of all, I'd try to get a concrete sense of where Kei's actual abilities were at. Then, if I found she was at a level where additional study sessions were essential, I'd have to strongly encourage her to go.

"You're worried 'cause you'd be sad if your girlfriend got expelled, aren't you?" said Kei rather suddenly and happily, almost like she thought she had the upper hand on me.

I could have answered her in a somewhat mean or teasing way, but Kei would probably be more motivated if I told her I was worried.

"Of course I'm worried. If the girl I just started going out with got expelled, that wouldn't make me happy," I told her.

"I-I see... I mean, I know, right?! Well, in that case, I guess I don't have any choice now, do I? I actually did have tons of things planned, but I'll make a special appearance, just for you," said Kei.

While it wasn't exactly the most honest answer I could've given her, it was a small price to get her to make progress.

"What should I bring with me?" she asked.

"Everything you'll need is already here in my room. As long as you aren't late, there's nothing else we'll need," I told her.

"Okay," said Kei.

"All right, I'm hanging up now."

"W-Wait, hold on! Wait! We only talked about the special exam and studying and stuff though!" wailed Kei.

Apparently, she wanted to talk about something unrelated to those matters.

"Yeah, I suppose you've got a point."

"Jeez, you really are a piece of work," said Kei.

For a while after that, we no longer talked about the exam or about studying. Instead, she continued to shower me with criticism.

6.2

ON FRIDAY, the fifth day of the exam period, eighty-one partnerships had been confirmed. Which meant that a little more than half of all students had found partners, including more and more students from within Class 2-D.

The same held true for those close to me. Yesterday, Kei had gotten herself a partner. And now Airi and Haruka from the Ayanokouji Group had both confirmed their partnerships, too.

The driving force behind those partnerships was Kushida. She worked with her kouhai from junior high school, Yagami, to introduce some of the students in our class to kids from Class 1-B. That was a big deal. However, it didn't solve all our problems. Although Yagami was rising to prominence within his class, he seemed to have no intention of taking on a leadership role, and was only cooperating with Kushida as an individual, at most. It wasn't like he could provide us with enough students to cover everyone in our class who was struggling.

Yagami had only one condition for his cooperation. Namely, that he had to be Kushida's partner. That had apparently come to pass yesterday, as reflected in the OAA update. Having Kushida partner with Yagami basically used up one of our more academically gifted students, but Horikita didn't seem dissatisfied by the exchange, considering the level of support we'd gotten out of it.

There were still quite a few capable people left in our class, including Horikita herself, Yousuke, Keisei, Mii-chan, Matsushita, and others. In any case, just because a student had chosen a partner didn't mean they could rest easy. You had to study hard. That was completely unavoidable. If anything, it could be said the competition only really got started once you found a partner.

Even though I wasn't speaking to anyone all that much, I could sense a feeling of unity in our class, with people working together. This was possible precisely because we were friends who

had been through thick and thin together for a year. And in the midst of all of that...

One of the students stood up and tried to leave. Then Horikita, as if she were waiting for the right moment, walked over and called to him.

"It seems like you still haven't found a partner yet, Kouenji-kun."

"And what of it?" replied Kouenji.

This was an act of intervention on Horikita's part, with the single, solitary person who wasn't contributing to our class's togetherness.

"I just thought I'd talk to you and see how your situation is going, as your classmate. So, how are things?" asked Horikita.

You generally knew what even the students who worked independently were up to, because they would talk to the people around them. But since Kouenji didn't say anything at all, we couldn't tell what was going on with him.

"You're smart. You've never even considered the possibility that you might get expelled, have you?" said Horikita.

"Of course not."

"I suppose not, no. Even if you were partnered with a student with grades like Ike-kun's, you would still score close to four-hundred points quite easily. I think you'd be safe," said Horikita.

Generally speaking, you'd think we might want to position Kouenji as one of our most valuable assets, since he was a smart student. I supposed that was the purpose behind Horikita reaching out to him like this, but still...

"*Fu fu fu*. What I'm saying is that I am not going to do anything in this special exam. The important thing is that whoever my partner will be gets a score of one hundred and fifty points or higher on the test. As long as that minimum-level requirement is satisfied, it will be quite *easy* for me to get a high enough score to pass, you see," replied Kouenji.

According to what Chabashira told us, everyone should be able to at least get one hundred and fifty points on this test. So, unless you teamed up with an assassin from the White Room, it was unlikely you'd have to worry about your partner getting a zero on the test, like I did.

However, you still had to rely on your partner. And no matter how hard you looked, you probably wouldn't find a student who could state with absolute, one-hundred-percent certainty that they would score a certain amount on the test. Students from both grade levels had to work on the assumption that their partners would score at least one hundred and fifty points. It was a ninety-nine-point-nine-percent certainty at best.

In order to make that as close to one hundred percent as possible, the school had implemented a rule stating that students who scored low enough that it appeared to deviate from their expected level of academic ability would be expelled. Because of that fact, Kouenji could afford to be confident. Which meant there was no need for him to go through the trouble of trying to talk to anyone or to build a relationship.

"You mean you're fine no matter who you get partnered with? In that case, why don't you allow me to decide your partner for you? I understand you think you'll be safe regardless of who you're with, but I imagine you'd rather not get hit with a five percent penalty," said Horikita.

It was a rather simple offer. She was offering to handle everything for him. A proposal which could fundamentally only be beneficial to him.

"Yes, certainly, it is as you say. However, I must decline your offer," said Kouenji.

"...Why? Can I ask you to tell me the reason for that?" said Horikita.

"Because I am who I am."

Simply put, he didn't like the idea of being used for Horikita's convenience. No matter the situation, Kouenji was Kouenji. If I was ever in a situation where I needed to use Kouenji in order to

win, I would find myself thinking I should've gone with a different strategy to avoid being put in such a situation in the first place.

"Satisfied?" asked Kouenji.

After hearing what Kouenji had to say back to her, Horikita couldn't keep pushing. Kouenji wasn't the kind of person who would budge at all, even if you tried to force him. It was a waste of effort.

"Yes, for now. But you can't carry on like this forever, you know. When the class needs to come together, we will need your cooperation," said Horikita.

She wasn't talking about this particular special exam. Horikita was looking ahead to what might come in the future. It seemed she wanted to say something now for him to keep in mind.

"Well, I can understand why you'd want to rely on someone as *perfect* as I, but I don't think I can offer you any advice," said Kouenji.

And then he left, as if he couldn't be bothered to listen anymore, headed off to who knew where, like usual.

"Kouenji sure is impossible, huh," I said aloud to Horikita, jumping in and adding my two cents almost without even thinking about it.

"I'm just irritated by the fact that if he took things seriously, our class would be that much stronger," said Horikita.

There was hardly anything as frustrating as having a secret weapon that you couldn't use. It was precisely because she had those feelings of expectation that she felt despair when things ended unsuccessfully.

"If I were in your shoes, I wouldn't have counted on him to start with," I told her.

It would probably be easier to think of Kouenji as a special case from now, and just leave it at that.

"I'm not giving up," said Horikita.

"...I see."

I was afraid she'd only end up wasting her time and going in circles, but I supposed it was a good thing that she was motivated.

6.3

As soon as I set foot in the library that weekend, I could sense the atmosphere was different from the other day. Many students, both first- and second-years, had gathered there. Most of the students had their tablets and notebooks spread out in front of them and were engaged in what looked like a study session. It seemed a lot of students were starting to move forward and take steps they needed to take, rather than let themselves get complacent after having found a partner. I vaguely recalled that we had a study session here in the library too, about a year ago.

"This is a bit of a bother. With this many people around, we might end up attracting unnecessary attention," said Horikita.

"In that case, it'd probably be a good idea for us to try to blend in."

Fortunately for us, the seats we had used at the back of the library yesterday were still available. Since it wouldn't have been surprising if they'd been taken, I fixed my gaze on a certain part of the room. Shortly afterward, I saw Hiyori, waving to me with a gentle smile on her face.

"I thought that you might be coming today, Ayanokouji-kun, so I made a special request that those seats be reserved for you," said Hiyori.

"Was that okay?" I asked.

"Well, I suppose it would've been a different story if the library were full to capacity, but there's no need to worry," said Hiyori.

This was a spacious library, so there was quite a bit of room. That being said, it was still a kind gesture on her part to do that for us.

"Please, go ahead and take all the time you need," said Hiyori.

She must not have intended on staying for awfully long, because Hiyori left immediately after saying that.

"She really is quite kind, isn't she? Do you think she heard our conversation the other day?" asked Horikita.

"Hard to say. Considering how far away we were, I think it would've been hard for her to eavesdrop."

Since the seats had been generously reserved for us, we sat in the same spot we did yesterday. Then we took study materials from our bags, and acted as though we were there to study. However, no matter how long we waited, there was no sign of Nanase.

"Nanase-san is late," said Horikita.

We had promised to meet after class, at four thirty in the afternoon. But it was already past five now. We had sent her multiple messages, but there was no sign she'd read any of them. It might be a good idea for us to go and check on her right about now, but that was tricky, since we didn't know where she was.

"Should we go looking around the first-year classrooms for the time being...?" asked Horikita.

Just as we were about to go and do that, though, Nanase appeared, looking rather flustered. Once she noticed us, she approached, looking out of breath.

"I-I'm sorry. I kept you waiting for so long, and...!" huffed Nanase.

"It's all right. We were just worried that something might have happened," said Horikita.

"I was negotiating with Housen-kun, trying to see if I could bring him along with me one way or another," said Nanase.

"Is that so...? It seems like you were unsuccessful, unfortunately."

There wasn't any sign that anyone else was coming through the library doors.

"Still, he didn't try to stop you from coming here to talk with us today?" asked Horikita.

"He did not. Most likely because he doesn't think that anything could be decided without him," said Nanase.

No matter how much Nanase tried to do on her own, Housen had the final say. I supposed if he had that kind of confidence, there was no need for him to warn her or try to stop her every time she did something.

"Seems like we have no choice but to try and force a meeting with him after all," said Horikita.

"But..."

"I realize we won't be able to resolve matters so easily. But if we don't try and discuss things face-to-face, we'll never reach any kind of agreement," said Horikita.

Today's discussion certainly seemed like the kind of thing that she wouldn't want to rush into without thinking.

"Yes, you're certainly right about that... but, well..." said Nanase, trailing off.

She looked unsure of what she wanted to say, but then came to a decision and started speaking once more.

"Horikita-senpai, you want to establish a collaborative relationship with our class, at any cost. I'm not incorrect in saying so, am I?" said Nanase.

"Not all. You're absolutely correct."

"In that case... Will you please listen to my proposal?"

Nanase seemed to have come up with some ideas of her own, in her own way.

"It's clear that even if you propose to Housen-kun that we establish a fair and equal partnership, he will reject your offer flat-out. I believe that would most likely be the case even if you met with him in person, Horikita-senpai. In that case, how about proceeding to negotiate with me, in secret?" said Nanase.

"Proceeding to negotiate with you, Nanase-san? But it's not like your classmates would go along with our plans without Housen-kun's involvement, would they?" said Horikita.

"You're right. However, that's only because I have yet to step forward as leader," said Nanase, coming right out with a rather unexpected proposal. "I've decided we cannot continue going by

Housen-kun's methods. Though these are desperate measures, I'm hoping I can become the leader of my class before his dangerous ideas spread too far. And to that end, I would like to establish a relationship with your class, Horikita-senpai."

Horikita had never expected Nanase to propose something like this, of course. And neither had I, for that matter. Nanase Tsubasa would become leader of Class 1-D, deposing Housen. If that plan could be realized, Horikita's goal of a collaborative partnership would quickly become a reality.

"We don't really have enough information to determine whether you or Housen-kun would be a more appropriate choice as leader, Nanase-san. However, one thing that I can tell you is that we don't have much time," said Horikita.

The special exam period was already nearing its end. There wasn't enough time to fight over leadership.

"Many of my classmates don't agree with Housen-kun's way of doing things. In fact, after talking things over with them—like how we discussed things yesterday and today—I've successfully managed to get seven students to agree to help," said Nanase.

"And you're sure it's not just students with a low level of academic ability?" asked Horikita.

"Yes. There are about three students with an academic ability ranking of B- or better who are willing to negotiate," said Nanase.

"...I see."

Horikita thought for a moment. Three people certainly wasn't perfect, but if we could get just a few more, it might not be a bad idea for us to try to go ahead and form this partnership, with Nanase as the focal point.

"Won't it spell trouble for us if Housen-kun finds out about this?" asked Horikita.

"There would be quite a bit of trouble, needless to say, yes. Which is why we'll need to keep every part of this arrangement secret all the way up to the day before the special exam, which is the deadline for when partners need to be selected. If partner

applications are submitted at the last minute, he won't notice anything," said Nanase.

"But that might make it difficult for us to win over the more academically-inclined students from your class, won't it?" asked Horikita.

There was no changing the fact that those students would want Private Points.

"We will help compensate you for that. The students in my class who struggle academically will be saved thanks to you and yours, Horikita-senpai, thereby avoiding the three-month penalty. Therefore, we can float you some points. Even if you needed two hundred thousand points to gain the cooperation of the more academically gifted students from our class, we would still be able to help you recoup. Although we wouldn't be able to reach the five-hundred-thousand-point per-person price that Housen-kun would like, I think it would still be within an acceptable range," said Nanase.

So, they'd basically be sorting out this mess themselves, then. We'd originally intended to use our own points to try to entice the honors students from their class, but this way, the less academically gifted students from their class would essentially be using their own points to get their classmates to help out.

"This way, we won't inconvenience you and your class, Horikita-senpai. Of course, Housen-kun will surely be angry once he finds out, but I intend to take full responsibility for everything to ensure the kids who cooperated with me will not be harmed in any way. What do you think?" asked Nanase.

"That's... No matter how much you might say this would be your responsibility as a leader, don't you think that this proposal places far too much on your shoulders?" said Horikita.

"It's quite all right. I don't want to lose this opportunity, and I don't want to lose your trust, Horikita-senpai, after you've offered me a helping hand." Nanase seemed to be saying this was a small price to pay to save her classmates. "Besides, even if my class doesn't recognize me as its leader, I can at least save *your* class in this special exam, Horikita-senpai."

If you were to only consider the immediate benefits, then Nanase's proposal was by no means a bad one. I had to wonder how Horikita would respond.

"Something is very clear to me now. Namely, that I want to form a real partnership with your class," said Horikita.

"In that case, are you saying that you agree with my proposal?" asked Nanase.

"No. I'm afraid I cannot accept it."

"But there's no other way..."

"All your class's problems will be resolved if we get Housen-kun on our side. You don't actually want to be the leader. You just don't like the way Housen-kun does things. Isn't that so? In that case, if Housen-kun is willing to do this without pay, there should be plenty of other students who'll support him, right?" said Horikita.

"Well, yes, I suppose. Certainly," said Nanase.

"Plus, if you and Housen-kun were to oppose one another, it's possible your class would end up fracturing in two rather than being united as one. We cannot allow that to happen. So how about you allow me to help you change his mind?" said Horikita.

Apparently, this conversation with Nanase had helped Horikita to realize something as well—that as long as we got Housen, the rest of our problems would be solved.

"It's a risky gamble. If it fails, it might not be possible for our classes to collaborate again in the future," said Nanase.

"I am prepared for that... Well, no, that's not quite right. I believe that it's entirely possible that we can work with one another. And it's not just me, either. I'm sure Housen-kun is thinking the same thing," said Horikita.

"Even though he spoke to you so rudely over the phone before?" said Nanase.

"I'll just take that as him playing hard to get. At least for now."

Nanase seemed to understand what Horikita was trying to say. She quickly voiced her agreement.

"I see that making time to meet with you today was the correct choice, Horikita-senpai, Ayanokouji-senpai. It would seem my hunch wasn't wrong, after all."

"What do you mean? I rejected your proposal, didn't I?" said Horikita.

"No, you didn't. Actually, you and I have been of the same mind from the very beginning, Horikita-senpai," said Nanase.

"Wait... Do you mean to say that you've been thinking of trying to persuade him, too?" asked Horikita.

"Correct," said Nanase.

Apparently, the idea Nanase had pitched, about her becoming a leader, was completely made up. It was a test. If Horikita had chosen to ignore Class 1-D's future for the short-term profit of our own class, and taken Nanase up on her offer, she probably would've turned around and refused to help us.

"Just as you said yourself earlier, we do not have time, Horikita-senpai. We cannot move forward unless we bring everyone together to negotiate, even if that means we need to be a little forceful. Would you please allow me to handle setting up this meeting? I will be sure to bring Housen-kun to you the day after tomorrow, on Sunday, Horikita-senpai," said Nanase.

It didn't seem like a test this time, considering she was bowing deeply and asking Horikita for help. If this meeting took place on Sunday, it would mean we'd have even less time remaining, as a result.

Horikita turned her gaze towards me, looking for confirmation. Thinking it was all right to take this gamble, I nodded in response. The hesitation in her eyes vanished.

"I believe you. I look forward to seeing you and Housen-kun the day after tomorrow, on Sunday," said Horikita.

"Yes... Absolutely. However, we would like to avoid meeting in a public place. It's quite possible that Housen-kun might act out indiscriminately, depending on how things go," said Nanase.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. In that case, karaoke might be a good place for us to meet. I don't mind meeting at night either, if Housen-kun wishes," said Horikita.

It was certainly true that meeting late at night on a Sunday would substantially lower the risk of being seen by anyone.

"Understood. I'll be sure to let him know," said Nanase.

Just as the conversation got to a point where our plans were taking shape, Horikita's phone rang. She looked at the message she'd received and let out a sigh.

"What's up?" I asked.

"It's time for the study group. It seems like they're short on people, with me not there," said Horikita.

It had already gotten to be five thirty before I even realized it.

"I think that we've wrapped things up here. Can I ask you to handle the rest?" asked Horikita.

"Sure."

Horikita gave Nanase a quick, polite bow, then gathered up her things and headed to the study group with our classmates. Trying to support our entire class required her to run all over the place and do all kinds of things.

"She is quite busy, isn't she? Horikita-senpai, I mean," said Nanase.

"That's what it's like to keep a class together," I told her.

"I hope I can become as impressive as her a year from now..."

"Horikita didn't ask for any details, but just wondering—how do you intend to draw Housen out, anyway?" I asked.

"Well... I'm happy to answer that question, Ayanokouji-senpai, but I'd like you to tell me something about yourself."

"Something about me?"

The sun was starting to set outside, the world glowing a brilliant orange color.

"Horikita-senpai is the class leader. But you're different, aren't you, Ayanokouji-senpai?" asked Nanase.

I see. It seemed Nanase wasn't sure I was the appropriate person to be here right now. If I said I was only here because Horikita forced me to come along with her, it would probably backfire and cause Nanase to clam up.

"Senpai... What kind of person are you?" she asked.

When I didn't answer her questions, Nanase propped her arm on the desk in front of her, showing me her side profile. It looked like some kind of defensive strategy on her part, to prevent anyone but me from reading her facial expression and mouth movements.

"Can you please answer me?" she asked.

"Well, Nanase, it sounds like what you want to ask me isn't what kind of relationship I have with Horikita," I replied.

She was asking something entirely different. She was asking me what kind of human being I am.

"That's right. I believe you're an evil, disgusting human being, Ayanokouji-senpai. That's what I think," said Nanase.

Those were some incredibly dramatic, intense words that she hurled at me. But despite the content of her statement, Nanase looked straight at me without hesitation, and with almost an overabundance of honesty. I honestly had no idea what I'd done to make her look at me like that. Considering all the interaction we'd had so far, she should only have had trivial, surface-level information about me.

Also, despite the issues that arose from my lack of chemistry with people, I didn't recall ever having been called evil before. Nanase Tsubasa might be the person I was looking for. The one sent from the White Room.

There were reasons why I thought that. Even though getting me expelled was the most important directive for the agent, it wasn't like they would carry that task out routinely or robotically. Rather, they'd come into close contact with the person known as Ayanokouji Kiyotaka and observe him. That was what I thought.

They wouldn't just want to get me expelled. They would want to prove that they were definitively better than me.

Well, I supposed that if they didn't do as much, *he* would never approve of them.

If I were on their side and had to get Ayanokouji Kiyotaka expelled, I would probably think that way. However, what she'd just said to me also sounded rather out of character for someone who came from the White Room, like I did.

"When I'm talking with you like this, you look like a normal person to me, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Nanase.

"Does that mean you usually see me as someone who isn't normal?" I asked in return.

"...No. That's not what I'm saying," said Nanase.

She denied it, but I wondered if that was what she really thought, deep down. I'd run into Nanase four times now, and sensed her giving me a strange look in each of those encounters. I felt like I was about to find out where her loyalties lay, but the opportunity quickly slipped from my grasp.

"I'm sorry, but please just forget we ever talked about this. What's important right now is whether our classes can cooperate with one another," said Nanase.

We both got up from our seats and left the library. Just as we were about to go our separate ways, I remembered something I had wanted to ask her.

"Oh, come to think of it, when we were talking about losing three months' worth of Private Points, you said you'd only lose two hundred and forty thousand. Why is that, anyway?" I asked.

When I asked her that question, Nanase no longer wore the expression she had only moments before. Her face was back to normal.

"Why? I simply calculated that if we were to retain the eight hundred Class Points which we were granted when we started school here, then we would end up with two hundred and forty thousand points as a result is all..." she said, sounding perplexed.

Apparently, this year's batch of new students had a different starting line than we did.

"Last year, we were given a total of a thousand Class Points at first," I told her.

"Huh? So, you're saying that we were given two hundred points less, then?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. I wonder what things are like for Class A and Class B in your grade level."

"I think that they started with eight hundred points as well. That was how Shiba-sensei explained things to us," said Nanase.

Why wasn't there any official notification put out for that, though? I imagined that if you knew that you were being given fewer Class Points than previous years had gotten, you would feel like it was a little unfair. Did the school officials simply decide that it wasn't worth showing that much consideration for the new students, because they felt like eighty thousand Private Points was quite a lot of money as is?

No—even if that were the case, they should have informed everyone right at the start, rather than try to hide it out of laziness and risk having students find out and come back to complain about it later. The students would have been more satisfied if they had put out some statement ahead of time. There were a number of other things that we knew were different from how they were last year.

"You do know that what you do every day has an effect on your Class Points, right?" I told her.

The homeroom instructor for Class 1-D, Shiba-sensei, had said something earlier that made me think they already knew. He said, "*I'm also quite sure that the school rules have been drilled into you so much by now that your head feels like it could explode.*"

"Yes. We were told that, 'Tardiness, absences, and chatting during class time will influence your Class Points,'" replied Nanase.

Was it possible that the school had reduced the number of Class Points they were awarded after taking into consideration the

fact that they'd gone to the trouble of disclosing the rules to the new students right at the beginning? We knew that societal contribution was an important metric in OAA, so even if it was hidden, the students probably would've found out anyway.

Though I was about to tell her that I understood and accepted her answer, I saw that Nanase was lost in thought for a bit. Then she got a look on her face like she'd just thought of something, but only for a moment. Immediately afterward, the look disappeared. It was a very subtle gesture. I noticed it precisely because I had met with her quite frequently over the past few days.

However, since Nanase didn't say anything, I decided that I'd refrain from pressing her about it. We walked out of the library together and made it to the entranceway.

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

Just as she was about to go, though, I called out to her and stopped her in her tracks.

"Nanase, this isn't meant as a thank-you for telling me about the whole Class Points thing earlier or anything, but have you heard about something called Protection Points?" I asked.

"Protection Points? No, I haven't heard about those before," she answered.

"It's a system where students who have those Protection Points can essentially use them to protect themselves from penalties that would normally end in expulsion. But considering the fact that very few people in our grade level have them, it's understandable that you wouldn't know about them," I replied.

"Hm, I see... Why are you telling me this, though?" said Nanase.

"Because you gave me information. I just thought I should give you a little bit in return."

After saying my piece, she and I parted ways.

I had decided to test Nanase's skills. To see if she could make use of what I'd just told her.

6.4

ALTHOUGH IT HAD TAKEN some time for everything to come together, it was decided that we were going to have a discussion with Housen (albeit forcefully), thanks to Nanase's dedicated cooperation. The situation was still entirely unpredictable, but it was still a definite step forward.

A little before six o'clock that evening, my doorbell rang. Kei must have only just gotten back to the dorms from the school building, because she was wearing her uniform, not her regular clothes.

"You know, there's lots of people coming and going at this time of day, so I had to be pretty careful. Like, I had to use the stairs and stuff," said Kei.

There probably weren't many girls who'd be coming to a boy's room, and even fewer who would visit for an extended period of time. That kind of thing didn't happen often unless a guy and a girl were dating.

"All right, let's get started, then," I told her.

"Huh?! Come on, aren't we like, gonna do some other stuff first?" wailed Kei.

She didn't take out her study materials. It sounded like she had wanted to chat instead. But time was limited. The later it got, the less time there would be to study.

"If there are no problems with your academics, then we can chat as much as you want," I told her.

"Hmph..."

"First of all, we need to find out what you're good at and what you're not so good at."

"How are you going to find that out?" asked Kei.

"With these," I replied.

I took out five test sheets. Keisei had made them for our group, to check what everyone's strengths and weaknesses were.

They were extremely useful to have, considering how much time it would've taken to have carefully screen through the number of questions needed to get things started. Horikita and Yousuke had used these sample tests in their own study groups, too.

"Most of our classmates have already been tested with these," I told her.

"Oh..."

"There's a ten-minute time limit per sheet. Go ahead and get started."

"Fine," she huffed.

Despite her grumpy response, Kei got started on the tests. After fifty minutes had passed, she collapsed onto the table like a limp noodle.

"Ugh, I'm so worn out...!"

"You did good. So you are able to concentrate on regular tests, after all."

"Oh come on. I've been studying all day today, it's tiring. It's not like I can just flip a switch," she huffed.

As she grumbled, I quickly finished grading her tests.

"Okay. I think I have a good understanding of what your abilities are, Kei," I told her.

"H-how'd I do?" she asked.

She didn't seem to know that herself, because she was looking at me with eyes filled with both expectation and anxiousness.

"You will definitely be going to Yousuke's study group from tomorrow," I told her.

"What?!"

"There's nothing to panic about. But to be honest, if you don't keep up your studies, you'll be in imminent danger of getting expelled."

"B-But, hold on, my partner's Shimazaki-san. He's got a B minus, right? So, I'll be okay, won't I?" asked Kei.

"The passing score for this special exam is five hundred and one points. Someone like you, Kei, who doesn't study enough, would probably get about two hundred points, give or take. Whereas Shimazaki would probably get around three hundred and fifty. It's hard to imagine that getting an assumed total of only five hundred and fifty points puts you entirely in the clear. And on top of that, if this Shimazaki dislikes studying like you do, then it's actually quite possible that he could end up scoring less than three hundred points," I told her.

And if that were to happen, there was a very good chance that she would fall below that five-hundred-point threshold.

"I'm starting to feel really scared all of a sudden..." said Kei quietly.

"Which is why it's important we get you to a place where you can definitely get a score of two hundred and fifty points on the test, as soon as possible."

This test was designed in such a way that even a D+ student should be able to score that well if they studied efficiently.

"Um, hey, I kinda have a question, though," said Kei.

"A question?"

"I mean, you're gonna tutor me and all, but don't you have a C in academic ability, Kiyotaka? So, doesn't that mean you're average? But I bet in reality, you like... You can do way better than that, can't you?" said Kei.

"Something like that."

"It's just like how you're really good at fighting, too. Why do you hide it all so much?" asked Kei.

"I don't want to stand out. So I don't try to get high scores is all," I replied.

"Okay, so, like, how many points do you think you could get if you were serious about it?" asked Kei.

"No idea."

"Come on, don't mess with me. Just tell me!" said Kei, forcefully but playfully pushing my shoulder and smiling at me as

she pleaded.

"I'll be more than happy to answer your question if you show up and put in the work at the study group from tomorrow onward."

"I'll go, totally. I feel, like, a sense of impending danger from what you just told me," she admitted.

"Instead of telling you how many points I can get, though, I'll tell you how many points I've decided I'm going to get," I told her.

"Wh-what's that supposed to mean? That's a pretty incredible claim to make," said Kei.

There were a total of five subjects. I had no intention of slacking off in any individual subject, considering I had to compete against Horikita in one. However, if I actually put everything I had into each subject, then my reputation amongst my peers would change dramatically.

"Four hundred points," I told her.

"...Wait, for real? Four hundred points, that's definitely..."

"The equivalent of an A rank."

That was a level only a select few bright students in our class, like Horikita and Keisei, could reach. It would've been more accurate for me to have said *near* four hundred points, but there was probably no need to amend my statement now.

"A-and you're saying that you can get that score if you want to?" asked Kei.

"Of course. There hasn't been a single problem that I thought I couldn't solve since I enrolled here."

I didn't know how many highly difficult questions would be included in this exam, but compared to the kind of studies I'd undergone in the White Room, it seemed fair to assume it was going to be pretty easy. Noticing Kei seemed to have a blank look on her face, unable to understand what I was just telling her, I decided to pull her back down to Earth.

"Now that you can see the big picture, I want you to keep that sense of impending danger in mind, and focus," I told her.

"Okay... I guess I'll study here for a bit and head back to my room then..."

It was only a little after seven at night, so there was nothing wrong with her sticking around for another hour or so. It would also be helpful for me, so that I could tell Yousuke more clearly what kind of level Kei was at tomorrow.

"Okay. Well, then, let's get started right away."

"Hey, over here," said Kei.

"Hm?"

I had intended to get started while we sat across from one another, but Kei lightly patted the floor next to her.

"Tutor me from right here, next to me," said Kei.

6.5

WE SPENT A LITTLE OVER an hour together in my room. During that time, I gave Kei advice while she studied. I got the impression that she fundamentally had a good head on her shoulders, but the fact that she hadn't taken her studies seriously all this time was holding her back. I didn't plan to point that out to her, though.

If Kei had just been neglecting her studies from an early stage, I could've admonished her over it, but in her case, it was the abuse she had suffered in junior high that had prevented her from getting a legitimate education. So because she didn't properly learn the 'basics' in junior high, she was struggling in her classes in high school. When I considered all of that, I'd say she was actually doing quite well.

Guiding her with compassion and giving her advice was probably the correct decision. If she could come to feel that studying wasn't a painful experience, she might even start growing and maturing in a big way, just like Sudou.



"Um..."

"What's up?" I asked.

Kei suddenly started looking down at the floor. Then, after what seemed like a few seconds of continued staring at the floor, she reached out and grabbed something.

I had thought maybe a small piece of garbage or some dust was laying there or something, but...

"What... is this?" asked Kei, holding her arm out to show me something she was holding between her index finger and thumb.

It was a single strand of long red hair.

"Looks like a hair," I replied.

When I came right out and said what I thought, Kei's face gradually transformed more and more into that of a raging demon's.

"A *red* hair! And...and...it's a long one! No matter how you look at it, it's gotta be a girl's hair!" she shouted.

Well, yeah, she was probably right about that. It was physically impossible for that to be my hair, considering the length. And my hair also had a completely different quality to it, of course.

The person the hair belonged to immediately sprang to mind. It had to be Amasawa Ichika, who had made me cook for her the other day.

"Who did you have over?!" asked Kei.

She was probably asking me because she had no idea who it could have come from, out of our classmates or others.

"Wait, is this that thing? Jealousy...?" I asked.

"Well, is that a bad thing?! I'm your girlfriend, Kiyotaka! I have the right to keep an eye on you when it comes to this stuff!"

This was the first time I had heard of a right like that. In any case, I supposed there was one lesson I should take from this. Namely, after inviting a girl into your room, you should clean thoroughly.

I'd thought the lesson would end there, but the disaster was still ongoing. While I was racking my brain over how best to explain myself, my doorbell rang without warning. The sound echoed throughout my room. And then, an image of the lobby was displayed on the monitor.

I, the resident of this room, wasn't the only one curious about who had just rung my bell. Kei was, too. We both peeked at the video on the monitor.

On the screen, we saw the figure of Amasawa, waving, with a big grin on her face. The first person to react wasn't me, but rather, Kei, still clutching the red hair in her hand.

"Red hair. A girl I haven't seen before..." she muttered.

It was almost like she was solving a mystery on a children's detective show. Kei reached out and pressed the call button before I could do it myself.

"Hello, who is it?!" asked Kei, her voice containing rather overt tones of anger.

Amasawa was, of course, visibly surprised.

"Huh? Wait, this is... room four-oh-one, right? Ayanokouji-senpai's room?" she said.

I forcefully pulled Kei's arm away, and I took over.

"Sorry. It's me. What do you want?" I asked.

She was an unexpected visitor, but I couldn't just let Kei deal with it. Putting the matter of Amasawa aside, there was also the problem of people coming and going in the lobby being able to hear that Kei and I were together.

"Oh, is someone there with you? Should I come back later? There was something I wanted to talk to you about, so I thought I'd drop by," said Amasawa.

Even though Kei was glaring at me, she gestured for me to let her come on up, rather than turning her away. Apparently, she wanted to be certain the hair belonged to Amasawa.

"Nah, it's okay. Come on up," I told her.

I pushed the unlock button and let Amasawa come in through the lobby.

"Are you sure this is okay? Other students are going to know you're here," I said to Kei.

"...Oh."

Apparently, she'd gotten so angry that the blood rushed to her head and she lost track of things. Kei was the one who'd told me we should keep the fact that we were boyfriend and girlfriend a secret from everyone else for now, still. If we casually bumped into someone else while together, there was a chance rumors of that sort might start going around.

"Well, it's a little late for all that. We'll just have to try and hide it," said Kei.

In any case, Amasawa had already heard Kei's voice, and rushing to get rid of her wouldn't really have much of an effect. In fact, we had to consider the possibility that doing so would lead to some strange speculation.

About a minute or so later, Amasawa must have reached the fourth floor. The doorbell for my room rang.

"I'll let her in, so just sit here and wait for now," I told Kei.

"O-... Okay."

I went to my front door and welcomed Amasawa.

"Sorry for dropping by so suddenly, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Amasawa.

After examining the look on my face, she took a look at the shoes near the entranceway, in calculating fashion. How to put it...? The way she looked around the room... It seemed like what they called a woman's intuition.

"Girlfriend?" said Amasawa, asking me straight out, with a big grin.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"Aww, you didn't bite. Well, to tell you the truth, senpai, I think I might have forgotten something in your room."

"You forgot something?" I repeated.

"My favorite hair tie. I can't seem to find it anywhere..."

So she'd come by my room after realizing it had gone missing, huh?

"In that case, come on in," I told her.

I couldn't exactly make her just stand there and wait, so I decided to let her come inside. I thought it would be quicker to let Amasawa explain things than for me to try to come up with petty excuses about the hair.

"Sorry to barge in like this!" Amasawa entered my room, completely unconcerned about the presence of the other guest who had arrived before her. She must have been on her way back from school, because she still had her book bag in her hands.

She then came face to face with Kei, who had been sitting and waiting.

"Oh, hello! I'm Amasawa Ichika," she said.

"Hi." Kei looked clearly unhappy about this, but she seemed like she was putting up with it, in her own way.

"Oh, you're my senpai too, right? I'd love to know your name."

"...Karuizawa Kei."

"Karuizawa-senpai, huh? Oh, looks like you two were studying together. Are you his girlfriend, by any chance? Ayanokouji-senpai dodged the question earlier when I tried asking him, so I wanted to try again," said Amasawa.

It was a bit of a gift to be able to just come right out and ask whatever you wanted, without hesitation.

"That's really none of your business, is it? Actually, hold on, what about you? What's your relationship with Kiyotaka?" asked Kei.

Although the fact that Kei called me by my first name naturally made Amasawa suspect even more that there was something going on, she looked around my room.

"I'll answer your question in just a sec, so hold on, okay? Hmm... I don't see it anywhere at first glance. I'm sure I took it off when I was last here, though. Hmm... Maybe it rolled along the floor somewhere?" said Amasawa.

Paying absolutely no mind to Kei glaring at her, she got down on her knees, trying to peek under the bed. As she did so, her skirt rode up, naturally accentuating her rear end, which was positioned facing us.

"Oh... senpai? I feel like this might look a little bit *naughty*," teased Amasawa, looking back at us. Her tone suggested she was doing it on purpose.

Kei reacted quickly and immediately, turning her head to direct her glare at me.

"I'll try looking for it," I told them.

I started searching, seeing if the hair tie had gotten under the bed somehow.

"Hey, can you not ignore me? Answer the question," said Kei.

"Hmm, let's see, I guess Ayanokouji-senpai is my... Hm, what's the best way to put it? My personal chef?" said Amasawa.

"Huh? Wait, what?" Kei, unable to understand what she was talking about, looked over at me once again. And she was glaring at me more intensely than she was moments before.

"She's Sudou's partner. Some stuff happened, and we became acquainted. I ended up serving her a meal once," I told Kei.

"Okay, sorry, but I really don't get what you're saying at all. Why did you cook for Sudou-kun's partner?" asked Kei.

Well, considering she'd only heard the general outline of what happened, it was understandable she'd be confused. I responded by explaining the situation more in depth, while continuing to search for the hair tie underneath the bed.

"Oh, can I go and look in the kitchen too, just in case? I might have taken it off there when I was washing dishes. Oh, but

please keep looking in the room yourself, senpai. Like maybe under the closet or something?" said Amasawa.

"All right."

I didn't find anything under the bed, so I started looking around the closet next. Kei then came up close to me.

"Wait, hold on a second... This whole thing about her hair tie maybe being here... What is *that* supposed to mean?!" said Kei, in a hushed voice, trying to confirm what was going on.

"I already told you. I invited Amasawa over and cooked a meal for her the one time. That's all."

"I-is that *really* all that happened?" said Kei.

"Of course it is," I answered.

"...Really?" she asked.

It seemed like even if I said as much, she wasn't going to believe me so easily.

"I'm gonna check with that girl and make sure that's true," said Kei.

Just as she tried to stand back up, though, I forcefully grabbed her arm. Then, I quickly brought my index finger up to my lips and gestured to her to be quiet. Kei was quick on the uptake at times like this, and didn't cause any fuss.

"I want you to search the area too," I told her.

"O-Okay," she replied.

Even though she didn't understand my intentions, she seemed to understand that it was important, and she started helping me search.

"Oh! Ayanokouji-senpai, it's here!" said Amasawa, her voice echoing from the kitchen.

When Kei and I both peeked into the kitchen at the same time, Amasawa showed us the hair tie, held in the palm of her hand.

"Looks like it fell in the gap between the counter and the fridge," she said, smiling happily as she spoke, tucking the item

into her pocket. "Anyway, it feels like I kinda got in the middle of something here, so I'll be going now."

"Sorry for all the commotion," I told her.

"No, it's okay. I shouldn't have forgotten it in the first place. Anyway, sorry again about bothering you!" said Amasawa, quickly grabbing her bag and putting on her shoes in the entranceway. "But y'know, you really are a smooth operator, senpai, aren't you? I never imagined you'd have yourself such a cute girlfriend."

She put a finger up against her cheek, as if pretending to think something over.

"Yeah, come to think of it, that's a good point. Next time I have you cook for me, it might not be a good idea for us to be alone together," she added.

"Obviously!" yelled Kei.

"In that case... Karuizawa-senpai will just have to eat with us, then. Anyway, goodbye!" said Amasawa.

She arrived like a whirlwind and departed in the same manner.

"Seems like you've gotten acquainted with a pretty cute kouhai, huh, Kiyotaka?" said Kei.

"You're probably not going to listen to me no matter what I say, are you?"

The atmosphere was no longer conducive to tutoring. I couldn't do anything but explain what had really happened over and over to Kei until she was satisfied.

6.6

FRIDAY CAME AND WENT, and now Saturday, our day off, was here. I'd had many opportunities to interact with the younger students during the week as a result of the special exam. There was my encounter with Amasawa from Class 1-A, which in turn led me to having to make her a home-cooked meal to secure a partner for Sudou. Then there were the discussions with Nanase regarding entering into an agreement with Class 1-D.

Other than what was going on with me, Kushida had had a discussion with Yagami from Class 1-B. Thanks to Kushida asking him to introduce people to some of his friends, we had managed to secure partnerships for Kei and other students in our class. While the importance of this special exam depended on your point of view, I was sure it would be deeply significant in terms of interaction between grade levels. Many students already knew the names and faces of the students in the grade above or below them, and even knew what kind of grades they had.

We had also ascertained what kind of tendencies each class had. Class 1-A did not have a clear leader at the moment. I got the impression each student was essentially free to do what they wanted. One of the reasons they were allowed to do so was the class's overall excellent grades. True to their name, they had the highest number of students with a B- or better out of the four classes in their grade level.

Many of the more academically inclined students had already individually negotiated their own terms with Class 2-A or 2-C, using points. And though there were naturally some students in their class who had been classified as D- in terms of academic ability, they were also picked up by Class 2-A because they excelled in other areas. Of the forty students in Class 1-A, thirty-four had already confirmed partnerships.

Class 1-B exhibited similar trends to A, in that they still didn't have a clear leader. Also, the good students were selling themselves off individually one after another. The difference was

that most of these partnerships weren't with Class 2-A, but with Class 2-C. I wondered if that was due to the fact that Ryuuen and his ilk were offering a larger sum of points than Sakayanagi was. The exact details of the situation were unclear at the moment, but currently, thirty-three of their students had settled on partners.

As for Class 1-D, Housen had total control, ruling his class with an iron fist. If I had to compare it to anything in our year, I'd say it was almost exactly the same as how Ryuuen used to do things. What was interesting to me was that Class D was also the class with the least number of partnerships out of everyone. We would probably find out more details when we meet on Sunday.

And finally, there was Class 1-C. The class I had hardly interacted with at all over the past week. I had already committed the names of their students to memory, but their class had never come up in conversation, not even from Horikita. What was the primary reason for this? Well, it was the meet-and-greet event spearheaded by Ichinose from Class 2-B. As a result of that, many students from their class had confirmed partnership agreements.

Ten students from their class still hadn't finalized their partnerships yet, but of those ten, none had a D- or lower in academic ability. In other words, almost everyone in their class had successfully managed to secure a safe position. Perhaps there was someone helping organize things within their class, and they had successfully managed to save their classmates by way of the meet-and-greet event.

Just past noon, I booted up the OAA app, and looked up the partnerships that had been formed as of today.

"A hundred and five partnerships formed. Close to seventy percent then, huh?"

If you looked at the number of people in the library yesterday, you could see most students had wanted to get things wrapped up before the weekend. There was more movement in Class 1-D, and now a total of eight students from their class had confirmed partnerships. I wasn't sure if the fact that it was the weekend now was making Housen impatient...

Well, at any rate, the remaining number of first-year students who hadn't yet picked a partner was fifty-five, and for second-years, fifty-two. If there was a White Room agent hiding among those remaining students, then the odds of me getting partnered with them were pretty high. To be honest, there was no guarantee that I wasn't going to end up choosing the White Room student, because they weren't showing themselves at all.

I'd been dragging things out, hoping something would present itself along the way so that I could determine if someone were a safe choice or not, but I was reaching my limit now. I was going to need to decide before my options dwindled down even further.

Though we were close to negotiating with Class 1-D, I wanted to have other options available to me. I decided to head over to Keyaki Mall on Saturday afternoon to expand my possibilities.

6.7

NATURALLY, THE MALL on a Saturday was positively packed with students, particularly ones who'd already confirmed their partnerships for the special exam. Since they had no need to panic in that regard anymore, they were just studying with their friends in preparation for the written exam next week, and having fun, to relax a bit. I hadn't come into contact with any first-year students yet, but even so, I felt like if there was a White Room agent nearby, I would've encountered them.

Still, I didn't have a gut feeling that anyone I had met was the agent. If I had to pick one example of such a feeling, I'd have to say it was the feeling I got back when I was talking with Nanase in the library. Most likely, Tsukishiro or someone else close to them had thoroughly taught the agent how to really act like a "student." The problem wasn't whether they had a personality with some quirks or not. The problem was whether they could completely mask the scent that betrayed them as someone from the White Room.

I'd been in a comparable situation myself a year ago, when I first came to this school. There were disadvantages and drawbacks of being raised without any knowledge of the world. Namely, I didn't know what it was like to be a student at all. That was naturally something we weren't taught in the White Room, as they had never intended for us to be sent to school.

Which was why, after coming here, I had briefly tried coming up with a character that I could "act out" appropriately. I tried various things, like being more talkative than I usually was and changing my tone of voice. Being a somewhat cocky student with a kind of cynical, shrewd view of the world. Well...

In the end, I found it kind of tedious to put on an act, so I quickly went back to being my regular self. Because I had come to realize that I could still be a "student" here without hiding my original self.

But the person the White Room had sent in now was different. They were putting up a front, camouflaging themselves as a student to prevent me from finding out their true identity. I had no idea if they were playing the part of a quirky student or if they were playing a blank slate. Either way, I probably wasn't going to see through their act all that easily. Anyone who had managed to survive in that world could not be underestimated, regardless of their gender.

Even though I was confident I could win when it came to individual skill, I was in an overwhelmingly disadvantageous position due to essentially being forced to go on the defensive. My opponent could get me expelled in any way they chose, while the only thing I could do was defend myself by trying to detect what they were planning.

After I finished dropping into Humming and was on my way back, I happened to bump into Sakayanagi.

"My, it seems you're being quite proactive in engaging with the new students, hm? Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Well, that's because this exam leaves students with low scores no choice but to fight desperately for their lives. I'm just helping Horikita find partners for Sudou and Ike."

"I see. It's certainly true that if either of those two drew the short straw, so to speak, and ended up with a poor excuse for a partner, expulsion would be imminent." Sakayanagi seemed to accept what I'd said, but our conversation didn't end there. "But is that really all there is to it?"

"Meaning what?" I asked in return.

"Well, I was wondering if perhaps...the White Room, or something similar to it, had sent in an assassin among the first-year students to get you expelled, Ayanokouji-kun? Even if you were to get a perfect score on the exam, if your partner got zero points, then both you and your partner would be expelled. I hope you don't mind my saying this, but I just happened to let my imagination run wild about this special exam, and came to the conclusion it might be particularly troublesome for you," said Sakayanagi.

I tried to play dumb, but this sounded like it was more than just an idea that had popped into Sakayanagi's head as a mere possibility. She spoke as if she had known from the very beginning that such a scenario was inevitable.

"You can't possibly continue to live a quiet life here at this school forever, can you? If your opponent were so inclined, they certainly wouldn't mind making your true abilities known to everyone, Ayanokouji-kun. Though I suppose if you can maintain an enjoyable life here at school regardless, this will all prove to be needless apprehension on my part," she added.

"Well, you don't have to worry about that."

"May I inquire as to your reasoning for saying so?"

"I'm going to abandon my old way of thinking. The way I've been thinking until now. I'm not planning on holding back anymore."

Right now, continuing my life here at this school was my top priority. If I kept doing things halfway, I might find the rug pulled out right from under me.

"I see. Well, I suppose you've shown some of your abilities to Mashima-sensei, so it might be more convenient for you to boldly go ahead and lay everything bare now," replied Sakayanagi, apparently quite thrilled to hear this. "Well then, I'll get right to the point. If you haven't settled on a partner for yourself as of yet, may I lend you my assistance to save you the trouble? I have only a vague idea, mind you, but there are certainly some first-year students still available who come to mind. They are children who will not adversely affect you, should they offer to partner with you, Ayanokouji-kun."

It sounded as though Sakayanagi had gone to the trouble of doing some digging herself, trying to determine which students were safe choices for me.

"That's very generous of you. But I'll have to decline your offer," I replied.

"Do you not trust my judgment?" she asked in return.

She had already seen right through me quite some time ago. She knew I needed to come to a decision soon.

"I acknowledge your abilities. But I'll be the one to decide my own fate."

If I failed after entrusting my fate to someone else, I'd have nothing left but regret.

"Besides, I have a pretty good idea of how I'm going to fight this," I added.

"Oh, is that so? Well then, I will refrain from saying anything uncouth. I will watch you from afar to see how you acquit yourself in this battle, Ayanokouji-kun. And I look forward to the day we can fight again in the near future," said Sakayanagi, bowing to me before walking off somewhere.

She didn't even consider me getting expelled a possibility. In that sense, I supposed she had immense faith in me, huh?

6.8

WHILE I WAS ON MY WAY BACK to the dorms from Keyaki Mall, I heard a somewhat slow, strained voice call out to me from behind.

“Excuse me, do you have a minute?”

When I turned around, I saw a boy and a girl staring back at me. The girl seemed to be alternating looking at me and looking at her phone. She was Tsubaki Sakurako, from Class 1-C. Her companion was from the same class. His name was Utomiya Riku.

“You’re...Ayanokouji-senpai, from Class 2-D, right?”

I couldn’t see the screen of the girl’s phone because of the angle, but she most likely had the OAA app open.

“My name is Utomiya, and her name is Tsubaki. May we talk with you about a partnership?” asked Utomiya.

“About a partnership?” I repeated.

“Yes. We’re going around looking for senpai with Cs or higher in academic ability, to see if anyone can help us,” he replied.



Since I had been out and about looking for a partner myself, this felt too good to be true. It was almost like they were waiting for me to show up. Should I see someone who blatantly walked up to me as dangerous? Or conversely, should I see them as safe? Well, no—the most dangerous thing would be for me to make a judgment based on the issue of their timing alone.

"I've been having a pretty tough time finding a partner myself. Can you tell me a little bit more?" I asked.

With the app, you could understand what a student looked like and what their name was, as well as what grades they had. But you couldn't get a sense of their personality, which was precisely why it was necessary to meet face-to-face, so that each party could determine if the other was trustworthy.

Incidentally, Utomiya had already found a partner, but Tsubaki had yet to find one for herself. Her academic ability certainly wasn't high. Only a C-. I was sure she wanted to be partnered up with someone who had a C or better. It seemed these two were out together looking for someone from my grade level with a C or higher, but were they looking to help Tsubaki find a partner? Or were they looking for someone for another classmate?

"I'd prefer not to stand around here and chat though. How about we talk at the café?" Utomiya took the lead in the conversation, speaking to me quite respectfully and suggesting we talk somewhere else.

This definitely wasn't something that could be decided upon in a minute or two, so I accepted his proposal to change venues.

It was crowded, but we found an empty space in the corner of the café and sat down there.

"I apologize for being hasty, but we'd like to get right into it, if you don't mind," said Utomiya. He then looked over at Tsubaki and motioned for her to speak up.

"I don't like having to owe anyone anything, and I don't like anyone having to owe me anything. I'm not a fan of debts. So, I want a relationship that won't come back to bite me," said Tsubaki,

looking at her nails as she spoke. She sounded both laid-back and candid.

It was true there was little difference between a C- and a C, meaning the person with the higher ranking couldn't really feel superior in such a situation.

"Can I ask you something that's been bothering me?" I asked in return.

"Yes, go ahead," said Utomiya.

"The majority of students are around C rank. Why didn't she find a partner sooner, then?"

Sure, you wouldn't get a high score that way, but you could avoid getting expelled. I was sure some second-years would have gladly partnered with Tsubaki. The fact that she remained available all this time, through the first half of the exam period, was worrisome.

"Well—"

Utomiya started to speak, but then went silent for a moment, the words getting stuck in his throat. Upon noticing him struggling, Tsubaki turned and looked at me, actually making eye contact for the first time during this entire conversation.

"That's my bad. I never said anything," said Tsubaki.

Utomiya used what she said as a starting point and supplemented it with his own explanation. "Tsubaki didn't talk to anyone about finding a partner. I'm guessing she got impatient once Friday rolled around, because she came up to me for the first time and asked me what she should do..."

So, Tsubaki's classmate Utomiya had begun helping her find a partner in a race against the clock. It seemed most of the students in their class had already found partners. Even though there was still a week left in the exam period, it was understandable that they'd be panicking.

"Considering Tsubaki's academic ability, the five percent penalty could be a problem," said Utomiya.

That seemed to be why they had approached me, a student with a C ranking. If this were a normal situation, I might have readily agreed to their request. However, there was a reason I couldn't just make a snap judgment and say yes to them right off the bat. That was because what was happening here was strikingly similar to a scenario I had imagined when the special exam had just begun. Namely, the fact that the students I had the highest probability of getting partnered with were people with the same academic ability ranking as me.

And now Tsubaki, a student with a C- ranking, had come to me in search of a partner. I had only just met Tsubaki and Utomiya for the first time. So, the first thing I needed to do was get a feel for what they were like.

"I wanted to ask you something. You said you were going around looking for a partner. How many people did you talk to before you came up to me?" I asked.

I thought I'd start with finding that one. But the response I got from Utomiya was rather unexpected.

"I'm sorry. I suppose it might have been a bit underhanded of me to say that. To tell you the truth, you're the first person we've talked to, Ayanokouji-senpai," said Utomiya, apologizing to me directly, as jumping ahead of what I might be speculating. "If that means you're not willing to partner with her, Ayanokouji-senpai, we'll just look for someone else."

"Oh, okay. You're saying that I just happened to be the first person you talked to, is all."

"It was a coincidence that we approached you, but there is a reason you're the first, Ayanokouji-senpai. We thought if we asked a student from Class 2-A or 2-C, we might need to strike a deal using Private Points," said Utomiya.

I see. It was certainly true that first-year students were being bought up by second-year students right now. In a situation like this, if they were to request that someone partner with Tsubaki, it wouldn't be surprising if a certain number of points were involved in the transaction.

But she wasn't requesting to be partnered with a student with excellent grades or anything. There were still quite a few students remaining, so there was probably a good chance she could easily team up with someone. It was unlikely they hadn't already considered all of that.

That being said, it would probably sound a little strange if I responded to them by saying something like, "I think it'll be okay, so why don't you try Class 2-A or Class C?" Objectively speaking, there wasn't a single reason for me to be reluctant to accept the offer to partner with Tsubaki. The options available to me were limited.

"I don't currently have a partner, but I have found a potential candidate. We've discussed things a few times to see if we can actually work together," I told them.

What I said was only half true, but there was no way the two of them could know that for sure. Furthermore, if saying that was enough to make them back off, it was highly likely that Tsubaki was a safe choice as a partner.

"Oh, so you have... I see," replied Utomiya, sounding somewhat troubled, casting a glance over at Tsubaki.

"In that case, guess there's nothing we can do, right? It'll probably be faster to just start looking for someone else," said Tsubaki, deciding to back off as soon as she heard I already had a candidate in mind.

"Just for reference... What first-year student are you planning on teaming up with?" asked Utomiya, somewhat insistently, though Tsubaki herself had already disengaged from the conversation.

"Can't say. The one thing I can say for sure is it's not someone in Class 1-C," I answered.

Though I didn't go into detail about the reason I couldn't tell them, I was sure they could hazard a guess. Namely that if I were dealing with someone from a rival class, I couldn't exactly give out any information about the student I was working with to a potential enemy of theirs.

"Let's go, Utomiya-kun. We shouldn't take up any more of Ayanokouji-senpai's time," said Tsubaki.

"...Yes, I suppose so."

I was grateful they had approached me, but I couldn't make a snap decision. I just had far too little data on Sakurako.

"Just in case, here's my contact info," said Utomiya, handing over a piece of paper with his information written on it, which he must have prepared ahead of time.

"This might be kind of self-serving of me, but if the person I'm talking with turns down my offer for partnership, I might call you. If she's still okay with partnering up with me at that time, I'd be happy to work something out," I told them.

"I understand. Let's go, Tsubaki," said Utomiya.

Tsubaki uncrossed her arms and stood up from her seat. She gave me a gentle bow before leaving with Utomiya, probably in search of other candidates besides me.

"Tsubaki Sakurako and Utomiya Riku. I'll have to remember them," I told myself.

Now that I had thrown away my chance of securing a partnership right here and now, my actions from this point onward would be quite important. It wouldn't be a laughing matter if I ended up getting partnered with a different student who proved to be the wrong choice.

6.9

TWO GIRLS from Class 2-D walked together, side by side. Me, Karuizawa Kei, and my friend Satou Maya-san.

Until a few months ago, we used to hang out a lot. But lately, we'd been seeing each other less and less frequently. *Much* less frequently. It wasn't like we'd quarreled or anything, though. It was just that, subconsciously, I'd started to feel guilty as of late. Which made it really hard for me to reach out to her.

"Sorry for calling you out of the blue, Karuizawa-san."

"Oh, no, it's totally fine, don't worry. I was just thinking I wanted to hang out with you too, Satou-san. Besides, it's been a long time since we went out and did anything together, hasn't it?" I replied.

"Yeah, definitely, it has! I felt like when we first started here, we were hanging out like all the time."

I was walking a little bit ahead of Satou-san. I turned to look at her and asked what we were going to do today. "So, what's up? What do you wanna do? I think it's kinda early for lunch right now."

It was only a little after eleven in the morning right now. Satou-san had called me and suggested we take a walk together around Keyaki Mall. However, just as we approached the mall entrance, she quickly spoke up, sounding kind of flustered.

"Oh, um, hey."

"What's up?"

"Can we, um...go this way?" she asked, pointing to the path that continued on to the school building, in the exact opposite direction from the mall.

"Wait, toward school? Is there something you need? But we've got the day off today, and I'm pretty sure you can't go in wearing casual clothes, right?"

"I don't have anything I need at school, but... I just wanted to go somewhere where there aren't other people around right now," said Satou-san.

I furrowed my brow in confusion, not really understanding what it was she was trying to say. Well, no, actually. I had an idea of what this might be about. But I pushed it to the back of my mind, trying to convince myself that that couldn't be it. I kept pretending I didn't notice anything.

"What's up, Satou-san? This doesn't really sound like you. You feeling okay?" I asked.

"...I just wanted to talk a little bit is all," she answered.

I had a bad feeling about this, but I couldn't really turn her down right now. So I agreed to her request, and the two of us headed away from the mall and toward the school building.

There wasn't really anyone around, as you would expect. No one who might hear our conversation.

"All right, out with it. We are friends, right?" I said, getting straight to the point.

What I'd just said wasn't gentle at all. It was cruel. But even though I was aware of that, I couldn't stop myself from saying it. Because I was Karuizawa Kei. The leader of the girls in my class. A self-centered person who didn't think about how anyone else felt, just herself. If I didn't act that part, everything I've done would fall apart.

I was guessing Satou-san's mental image of me lined up with the way I was talking to her now. That was why she didn't appear dejected or angry. She would draw her own conclusions from my behavior, seeing Karuizawa Kei as someone who didn't care and wouldn't see what she wanted to talk about as anything worth paying attention to.

I hoped that maybe, just maybe, she'd be satisfied with that and this conversation wouldn't keep going. I hoped that if I acted mean, it would make her want to avoid potentially souring our relationship, and so she wouldn't bring the topic up after all. But Satou-san didn't back down.

"Karuizawa-san... Why did you break up with Hirata-kun?" she asked.

"Huh? Didn't I already tell you the reason?"

Even though her question wasn't directly related to the subject of Kiyotaka, it was close enough to make my heart jump in my chest. Even so, I managed to keep those feelings from showing, thanks to everything I'd gone through until now.

"I mean, yeah, I've heard the reason, more or less. It's just... something about it doesn't feel right to me."

"Really? Y'know, I was thinkin' it was kinda a waste, how it went down and all. Hey, do you maybe have your sights set on trying to become Hirata-kun's girlfriend or something?" I asked her.

Satou-san was no longer interested in Kiyotaka. That was what I was hoping to hear, which was why I said what I did, like I was trying to confirm that she was now after someone else. But Satou-san didn't respond to that. Instead, she came back at me with a question that felt like a surprise attack.

"I was thinking... Is it possible you broke up with Hirata-kun because you actually had a different goal in mind?"

Oh, so she had noticed, after all. *She knows that I've fallen in love with Kiyotaka, and that our relationship is changing...*

"What're you talking about? I have no clue what you're trying to say."

Even now, I was forcing myself into a box. Trying to force myself to be the "normal" persona I'd created. Sooner or later, the day would come when I had to reveal my relationship with Kiyotaka. And when that day came, I'd have no choice but to run away, because I had decided I needed to keep all of it secret.

No matter what Satou-san might say to me, I was determined to, at least on the surface, smooth things completely over.

Well, no. I supposed I should say I *thought* I was determined to do so.

"...Karuizawa-san... Are you dating Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Huh...?"

Because I got hit with an entirely unexpected gut punch. My reaction was delayed, like I'd just gotten smacked from behind. If I had been talking to any other girl, it would've been different. But since I was talking to Satou-san, that delayed reaction was basically a fatal blow. She saw right through me, as if my answer was totally obvious.



If she'd asked me if I liked him or something, I could have handled it. But what Satou-san said went further than that.

"...So, I was right after all, huh?"

"Hey, wait, uh, no, no, why would you even think that?!" I wailed.

I denied it, of course. Whether I actually intended to deny it or not, I did it anyway. Because there was no way I could admit what was going on to her right now.

"Why would you, I mean, I, uh..." I stammered.

I kept trying to deny it, but I just got lost in Satou-san's eyes. She looked like she was about to cry, but she looked angry, too. That was totally fair. She'd trusted me and come to me asking for advice on how to get Kiyotaka into a relationship. And I'd cooperated with her, while hiding the fact that I was attracted to him.

If I were in Satou-san's shoes, I would've slapped me in the face for going out with Kiyotaka after all of that. Even if I didn't come out and admit to it, I was sure it was already becoming a certainty in Satou-san's mind.

"Did you already have your eye on Ayanokouji-kun when I said I wanted to get to know him better and asked you to help? Or did you like him before then?"

"H-hey, wait, hold on a second. I..."

I had no other choice but to stand there and take everything that Satou-san was throwing at me.

"I... I said the same thing to Matsushita-san and the others, too. That I think that you broke up with Hirata-kun because you like Ayanokouji-kun. But it's not like I was just throwing that out there randomly, you know? I've felt fairly sure about it... So, yeah, that's why I brought it up," said Satou-san.

I had already heard Matsushita-san had some suspicions about my relationship with Kiyotaka. I couldn't talk my way out of this situation anymore.

"Please tell me the truth. If you don't, I... I don't think I could see you as my friend anymore, Karuizawa-san," she added.

The intensity of her emotions could be heard in her words. If anything, it felt like she was trying her hardest to keep being my friend, until the very end.

"I..." I stammered.

Seeing how serious that look in her eyes was, I just couldn't bring myself to lie to her anymore. Where should I even start? Well, I supposed there was no point in hiding anything. The least I could do was apologize to Satou-san by opening up and telling her everything.

"I'm... Ayano... Well, it's just like you guessed, Satou-san. I'm going out with Kiyotaka," I told her.

Naturally, she reacted quite strongly when she heard me say that. Even though she'd been rejected when she told him how she felt, she still liked Kiyotaka. It was because I'd fallen for the same person that I understood how she felt.

"So, you call him Kiyotaka, huh," said Satou-san.

I wanted to run from her somewhat cold stare, but I couldn't.

"We started going out at the end of spring break. Really not very long ago," I replied.

"What I want to know most is when you started liking him," said Satou-san.

"...To tell you the truth, I'm not sure exactly when. But when you came to me earlier, talking about how you wanted to go out with him, I was starting to think of Kiyotaka as more than a classmate," I answered.

"I see..."

I didn't think she was very satisfied with my answer.

"You're mad at me, aren't you?" I asked.

Satou-san had been looking me in the eye until moments ago, but now I couldn't seem to return the favor.

"Well, I don't exactly feel good about it. You knew how I felt, but you went behind my back and started to get closer to Ayanokouji-kun yourself."

There wasn't a single thing I could say back to her about that.

"But still, Ayanokouji-kun did turn me down after I told him how I felt about him, so... I'm not really in a position where I *could* be mad at you. But it's just..."

A spring breeze gently blew past us. I was startled by a sudden, dull sound. The next moment, I realized I'd been slapped on the left cheek.

"Okay, so I guess that means we're square... Can we forget all of this ever happened and go on being friends, Karuizawa-san?" asked Satou-san.

Honestly, the fact that she had slapped me was a little unexpected. I guessed that was just how hard to forgive my actions were, in her mind.

"You want to give me one more shot?" I replied in a friendly way, offering my right cheek to her.

After all, the pain she'd felt was a lot greater than what I was dealing with right now.

"No, I don't, I mean... I really don't think I could do that. I'm sorry for hitting you..." said Satou-san.

"No, I'm the one who's sorry. I mean, falling for the same guy as you. Satou-san, and..." I replied, trailing off.

"Hey, I don't blame you for that. Ayanokouji-kun is really cool, and he's way hotter than Hirata-kun," she replied, teasing a little.

Without even thinking, I spread both my arms wide and hugged Satou-san tight.

"Whoa, hey, Karuizawa-san, what are you doing?!"

"...I'm so sorry!"

"R-really, it's okay, you don't..."

Although I felt so sorry about everything that happened, I was overjoyed, too. I hugged her tight, unable to hold back my emotions anymore. Falling for the same person was really tough, but I guessed this meant that we both understood his charms. This wasn't a situation where we could talk about who won and who lost. I mean, I was sure that from here on out, the number of people who discovered Kiyotaka's charms would only keep increasing.

And I had to keep fighting to make sure I didn't lose to any of them. If I didn't take being his girlfriend seriously, I was sure someone would swoop in and snatch him away from me. Satou-san might even end up being that rival for me.

"Wanna go grab a bite?" I asked her.

Satou-san, still in my arms, nodded in response to my self-serving request.

Chapter 7: Expulsion Approaches

IT WAS NOW just after eight thirty in the evening on Sunday. The day Nanase had chosen was finally here, and it was highly likely that the discussion we would have tonight would determine whether we could work with Class 1-D.

Well, no. We needed to make *sure* we could work together. Most students outside both our classes had already found partners. If we couldn't come to an agreement, we might be forced into making some rather major compromises to avoid being hit with penalties.

It was decided that me and Horikita would handle this discussion, with Sudou accompanying Horikita after he strongly requested to join her. I was sure he did just want to be around Horikita, but also that a big part of his reason for doing so was that he was wary of Housen. Depending on how things played out, Housen might very well raise his hand against a woman without batting an eye. So Sudou was there to be Horikita's bodyguard, to protect her.

Horikita protested of course, saying she didn't need him there, but Sudou insisted. This time around, though, Horikita didn't actually give Sudou permission herself, no matter how many times he asked. These negotiations were expected to be just that serious, and she had decided Sudou's presence would be a hindrance.

However, I made her reverse her decision. The reason I gave was that Sudou could act on my behalf, in the unlikely event something unforeseen occurred and things got dicey. Sudou's abilities should be more than enough to keep the situation in check. In the end, Horikita gave Sudou permission to accompany her, on the condition that he absolutely not lose his temper during the discussion and not threaten anyone.

When I went down to the dormitory lobby to meet up with him, Sudou was already there, sitting down on the sofa, waiting.

He smiled cheerfully and happily at me.

"Yo!" he shouted.

Actually, I should make one small correction to what I said before. It seemed like he didn't just want to be with Horikita. He *really* wanted to be with her.

"Are your studies going pretty well? For the test?" I asked.

"Course, man. Still won't be great, but I'm thinkin' I should at least get two-hundred-and-fifty points this time 'round," said Sudou.

If Sudou, who currently had an academic ability ranking of E, got two hundred and fifty points or more on this test, that would be a fantastic achievement. I was sure his rating in the OAA app would probably jump up to somewhere around C starting next month. Sudou wasn't just all talk, either. He was putting in enough effort that his claims were backed by confidence. He was arriving at class late far, far less frequently, and demonstrating a good attitude *in class*, taking his studies seriously.

"Seems like you've changed a lot... It's like you enjoy studying now or something," I told him.

"Well, it ain't really like I *like* it or anythin'. But it is pretty fun solving problems. On top of that, when Suzune compliments me, I feel like I get so amped up that I could just study and study all the time."

The prickly, snappy attitude he had when he first started school here seemed to have calmed down. It did seem like his tendency to quickly lose his temper wasn't going to be so easy to fix, but if Horikita's presence was enough to keep him grounded, that was good enough.

Sudou stood up and looked at the screen showing footage from the camera inside the elevator, as if he couldn't contain his excitement. Then he sat back down on the sofa, fiddling with his phone and with his hair. Shortly afterward, he stood back up again. He kind of looked like a young man who was about to go out on his first date.

"Hey, Ayanokouji," muttered Sudou, still looking at the camera footage. Maybe he had realized that I had been looking at him. "If I were to tell Suzune how I feel about her today, do you think she'd be, well, okay with me?"

The expression on his face was visible, even as I looked at his side profile. He looked serious. Seeing Sudou look that way, there was no way I couldn't give him an honest answer.

"Probably not," I told him.

While that might have left him feeling dejected, those were my honest thoughts, looking at it as a third party. I had thought for sure he wouldn't have been satisfied hearing that answer from me, but...

"Yeah, you're right."

Sudou agreed with me without batting an eye, almost like he already knew the answer himself.

"I know that Suzune ain't the type of person to talk 'bout stuff like love and romance and all that. But it's not just that, either... I mean, there's no way she'd be attracted to me right now. How much trouble has my cockiness made for her? How many times? No, not just her—how many times have I made trouble for everyone in our class?" said Sudou.

He seemed to be saying that there was no way Horikita would date him after taking all that into account.

"And yeah, I'm really tryin' my best now and all, sure. But I don't think that cancels out all the burdens I put on our class or anythin', of course. So over the next two years, I'm gonna work on improvin' my strengths, and also on fixin' my weaknesses, little by little. If I do all that, then I'm sure that by the time we graduate, I'll have been useful to our class," said Sudou.

"I see. Yeah, you might be right about that."

Sudou could definitely become a valuable asset to our class, thanks to his exceptional physical abilities. I was sure he could come to be an essential part of our team, like Yousuke and Kushida. He'd also grown to be able to look at himself calmly and

objectively, which was precisely why a question came to mind that I wanted to ask him.

"Hey, so what if you put in a lot of effort and become the most admirable, exemplary person in our class...but even then, Horikita still doesn't look your way. What would you do then? Would you start to hate stuff like studying?" I asked.

There was the possibility someone could fall apart when they learned all their efforts had been for naught. That was particularly possible in Sudou's case, since he was putting in all this effort *for* Horikita.

"Well, yeah, I'm sure I'd wanna just stop everything, y'know? I mean, I'd probably even feel like I wanna die. Maybe I'd even want to go out and punch somebody. But if I actually went out and did any of that stuff, I'm sure Suzune would be real disappointed in me. I mean, givin' up on studying, going on a rampage? That'd be super lame. I definitely don't wanna do any of that, no thanks," said Sudou.

An excellent response. I was sure he really believed it, too. Of course, the real truth of his words would be tested when that situation became a reality. No matter how much you claimed you were resolved to handle being faced with a negative outcome, chances were good you'd feel differently once the pain actually hit.

But that being said, if he was able to say all that right now, at this point in time, then there probably wasn't anything for me to worry about for the time being.

"Oh, looks like she's here!" said Sudou.

The camera showed Horikita getting on the elevator. Sudou must have been feeling restless or something, because he walked away, turned his back to the elevator door, and started taking deep breaths while stretching his arms out in an effort to calm himself down, like he was doing warm-up calisthenics or something.

Shortly afterward, the elevator arrived at the first floor. Sudou was still taking deep breaths.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting. What is Sudou-kun doing?" asked Horikita.

"Looks like he's taking deep breaths," I replied.

Horikita had a puzzled look on her face for a moment, but she quickly went back to her usual stiff expression.

We were going to meet up in one of the karaoke rooms in the Keyaki Mall today. On both regular weekdays and on weekends, these were popular places for people to hang out late into the night, since we were allowed to use those rooms until 10 p.m. Karaoke was, of course, one of the recreational facilities we had on campus. It was often used for things like stress relief or to chat with friends.

But at this school, it had another major purpose. The rooms were private, which made them terrific locations to have detailed discussions, without running the risk of being seen or heard by others. They were the easiest places to have secret meetings on campus without being noticed. Of course, in terms of confidentiality alone, nothing beat the privacy of one's personal room in the dormitory. But you were inevitably limited to only being able to meet certain people that way.

With the exam coming up next week, there didn't seem to be that many people around at this time of day. So you could say this was the best time to meet with Housen in secret and have a discussion.

"Hey, are you really sure we can get that cocky new kid to help us out?" asked Sudou.

"I wouldn't have spent so much time on this if I didn't think we could make a cooperative relationship work," said Horikita.

Exactly. It was precisely because we had determined it was possible that we were here today.

"At this current point in time, many of the gifted first-year students have been taken by Sakayanagi-san and Ryuuuen-kun. And Ichinose-san has offered herself up, providing salvation for the weak. The only weapons in our arsenal are points or trust," said Horikita.

"Guess you're right, yeah... We ain't gonna beat Sakayanagi or Ryuuuen in points, and we ain't beatin' Ichinose when it comes

to trust," said Sudou.

"Precisely. Which is exactly why Housen-kun presents both an opportunity and a problem for us."

Housen wouldn't be swayed by the appeal of Class A's reputation, nor by some paltry sum of Private Points. And he wouldn't so much as even notice Ichinose's offer of salvation. Which was why we, Class D, had a chance.

"So, the point is seein' how much we can push them into makin' a deal with us, without havin' to make too many compromises on our end," said Sudou.

"Right. The more time that passes, the more it'll be us second-years who start to panic. With so many students having already found partners, we'll be at an unavoidable disadvantage."

If we declined the terms Housen presented us with, he'd show no mercy. He'd simply change plans and let us end up getting paired with people at random. He didn't care whatsoever about his own classmates being penalized.

I was interested to see how Horikita intended to challenge him.

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HEY, UH, come to think of it, ain't the meetin' at nine? Aren't we kinda early?" said Sudou.

It was still well before nine now. We had about thirty minutes until we were scheduled to meet.

"It's all right. I just wanted to get there ahead of time," said Horikita.

Sudou didn't quite understand Horikita's reasoning on that, but he kept quiet, and followed along. I wondered if Horikita wanted to come early to have time to calm herself, or because she was wary there might be some kind of trap? While Sudou seemed to think of our opponent as just a new kid, Horikita showed no signs of dropping her guard. It might seem like she was being cautious to the point of excess but considering that this was Housen we were dealing with, I supposed you couldn't criticize her for being careful.

We got a slip of paper with a room number and reservation information from the employee at the reception desk, then went on inside.

"Could you please let Nanase-san know that we're here?" said Horikita.

"Got it," I replied.

I sent Nanase a message, basically telling her that we had already arrived. As expected, she replied saying they would arrive at the time we had planned on.

"Let's go ahead and order our own drinks, then," said Horikita.

"Shouldn't we wait for 'em?" said Sudou.

"It's fine."

After each deciding what we wanted to drink, we looked at the food menu next.

"You can go ahead and order, if you'd like anything. What do you want?" asked Horikita.

"Well, fries, I guess. Is that okay?" said Sudou.

"Sure."

Horikita, using the landline phone installed in the room, ordered the food and drinks that we had wanted. After we placed our orders, Sudou seemed to be a little less tense. He picked up the microphone.

"So, um, well, I think we got some time until we're supposed to meet. How about a song or two?" he said.

"I'm not going to sing," said Horikita.

"Wait, really, you're not?"

We had arrived at the karaoke room early, before the meeting, and had ordered food and drinks. I supposed Sudou had assumed the next step would be to start singing, since that was typically how things went at a place like this. He looked disappointed now, probably because he'd wanted to hear Horikita's singing voice.

"Sudou-kun. I'm warning you once again. Do not say anything unnecessary," said Horikita.

"I-I got it, yeah. But hey, shouldn't you tell that to Ayanokouji, too?"

"He doesn't speak more than necessary. Actually, if anything, he's the sort of person who doesn't speak even when he should," said Horikita.

Well, that was far from a compliment. She was just airing her grievances about me. Sudou pouted, seemingly not too happy with the answer Horikita had given him.

When it was time for our meeting, the first to arrive was Nanase.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting," said Nanase.

"Outta the way, Nanase," huffed Housen Kazuomi from behind her, forcing her to walk further inside.

"Oh, you're right on time. And here I was sure you'd be really late," said Horikita, suggesting she wouldn't have been surprised if he'd arrived late on purpose, just to irritate her. Rather like how Miyamoto Musashi had arrived late to his duel on Ganryujima.

"Hey, I'm always on time when I decide I'm gonna go somewhere. And I don't like folks who give me a hard time just because I'm a little late. Anyway, looks like you got here pretty damn early... What, did you really hate the thought of waitin' for me that much? Come on, don't be so nervous," teased Housen.

"Can you please not let your imagination get the better of you? Don't misunderstand. We were simply enjoying ourselves, since we came all the way to karaoke. Understand?" said Horikita, telling Housen that he needed to broaden his mind.

Upon the table were some partially consumed drinks, and half-eaten food. She had staged the scene to look as though we'd been having fun at karaoke right up until the last minute.

"Looks that way," said Housen.

Which meant that the negotiating had already begun.

"Well, whatever. I'll find out whether you're bluffin' soon enough, when we get to talkin'," said Housen.

He plopped down hard on the couch, as if he were some kind of big shot, so much so that it was difficult to imagine he was a new student. He spread his legs wide, taking up enough space for three people all by himself.

"Okay, so? Nanase explained everythin' to me. She said you wanted my class to help you out," said Housen.

My class, he said. From the sound of it, Class D was already completely under Housen's control, then. It had only been a couple of weeks since school had started, but I sensed no weakness in his statement.

"Not exactly. What I'm saying is that our two classes will work together. No one will be above or below the other. We'll be on equal footing," said Horikita.

"That so? So, you're not bringin' up the fact that you're one grade level above us then, huh. Gotta say, not patronizin' us, that's a wise choice."

Nanase quietly observed what Housen was saying and doing. She didn't speak up or refute any point in particular. Considering she'd been playing the role of mediator, and the fact that she was the sole person he'd brought here with him, we could probably be certain Nanase was someone Housen valued. I wasn't sure if that was because he admired how she had the guts to say she wouldn't give in to Housen's threats of violence, or if there was something else. In any case, there was a way for us to cut right through and force Nanase over to our side.

"I understand there are still a certain number of students in your grade who don't feel an intense sense of commitment to their peers, and wouldn't think anything of it if their classmates got in trouble. However, you should begin to understand how things are after seeing us. There will most certainly come a time in the future when you will need the help of your classmates," said Horikita.

"So...you're sayin' we gotta together to get through school without anyone gettin' kicked out, huh?" said Housen.

"If you really do have so much authority over your class that you view it as your private property, that's actually rather convenient to this arrangement. With just one command, a substantial number of your classmates will follow, right?" said Horikita.

Housen brought his left pinky up, stuck it inside his left ear and started twisting it around a bit. Then he removed his finger and held it up, pointed it at Horikita, and blew off what was on it in her direction. Sudou's face tensed up, but he remembered Horikita's warning, and kept himself in check. His clenched fists were shaking as he held them down on his lap.

Horikita simply endured Housen's openly vulgar conduct, without turning away. "Can you please stop?"

"Okay, so, in the first place," said Housen.

It seemed what she'd said just went in one ear and out the other, because he started speaking as though he were talking to

himself.

"It's fair to say that you're the leader of Class 2-D, right?" said Housen. He was now rewinding to check for weaknesses in the very premise of this discussion.

"You could interpret it that way," replied Horikita.

"I don't think there's anything strange about Horikita-senpai being the leader, considering her abilities," said Nanase, addressing Housen. That was the first time she had opened her mouth during this entire conversation.

"All right, then, I'll give the leader here a warning. I sure as hell ain't planning on working with you under this so-called 'equal footing' garbage or whatever," said Housen.

It seemed he wasn't going to make things that easy, after all. I supposed there was no avoiding the disparity between us. We wanted to protect our classmates no matter what, whereas Housen didn't really care one way or another about tossing his to the wolves. The relative severity of the penalties we faced were also worlds apart, with us facing expulsion and them losing out on three months' worth of Private Points.

"That sounds about right. You are that kind of person, I suppose," said Horikita.

"If you know that already, then out with it. Stop being such a penny pincher. I'll hear you out if you've got a good offer for me," said Housen.

"You'll hear me out? What exactly are you expecting? Do you seriously think we're going to pay you to get you to help us?"

Even though we were in a disadvantageous position, Horikita didn't budge an inch nor make any compromises.

"Yeah, you'll pay. You will. Because hell, you can't really *not* pay, can you? Nanase, water," barked Housen, ordering Nanase around while he looked over the karaoke menu.

Nanase nodded, picked up the phone, and ordered some water from the reception desk.

"I realize that I'm repeating myself here, but our proposal is one of equal partnership. In any case, we're absolutely not going to hand over money, goods, or any other form of compensation to you in return for this," said Horikita.

"In that case, guess that means I'll be headin' on back without gettin' my drink of water then, huh?" said Housen.

Without any hesitation at all, he slapped his thighs once, indicating to us that he was leaving.

"Please wait, Housen-kun. I think we really ought to hear what Horikita-senpai has to say." Nanase, who was still standing next to Housen and listening in on the conversation, stopped him.

"Hear what she has to say? Yeah, ain't no need," said Housen.

"No, we do need to. At this rate, our class will never be able to come together as one," said Nanase.

Horikita examined Housen and Nanase as they had their brief exchange of words, not moving.

"Yeah, and who cares? Anyone who can't follow orders might as well be tossed out with the trash. I ain't exactly gonna shed a tear if we get rid of the wimps," said Housen.

"That is not okay," said Nanase.

"Nanase. You a total moron or somethin'?" replied Housen, letting out a deep sigh. He sounded more exasperated than angry. "There just ain't any advantage to us acceptin' their terms outright."

"I understand what you're trying to say, Housen-kun. It is certainly true that Horikita-senpai and her friends are desperate to protect their classmates, and I'm sure they have good reasons for doing so. If we don't offer them a helping hand, students will be in danger of being expelled. Even if they're putting up a strong front right now, eventually, they'll have to make some concessions. That's what you're waiting for, isn't it?" said Nanase.

It didn't sound at all like Nanase had interrupted the conversation because she didn't know what Housen was doing. She knew.

Then, she continued speaking. "I don't think your strategy is a bad one, Housen-kun. While the other classes looked for partners, you deliberately chose not to make a move, deciding to forego the early initial negotiations. All to put yourself in a more advantageous position, to give yourself more bargaining power."

As the deadline loomed closer and closer, the more impatient the second-year students would become. Even students who normally wouldn't be worth paying for would come to be valuable.

"If you get what I'm doin' here, then how about you try explainin' to me the advantage of throwin' Horikita a bone? What's in it for me?" said Housen.

"That would be a relationship built on trust," said Nanase.

She looked over at Horikita, who nodded back to her in response.

"Come on, don't make me laugh. A relationship built on trust? That's useless bullshit. Just flowery words."

"Are you really sure about that?" Nanase directly rebutted Housen's response to the idea of a relationship built on trust. "It's certainly true that we may not need to make many concessions ourselves in this special exam. However, we cannot be sure the same will hold true in the future. If you make all the second-year students your enemies, Housen-kun, you may end up in the unfortunate situation of not being able to find a partner yourself, no matter how many points you have. And while you might be fine if the only penalty was points, what do you think would happen if the person you were partnered up with intentionally scored poorly? Expulsion would be unavoidable."

"Hah. You seriously think there's somebody out there who'd go that far to take me out?" said Housen.

"You know, I've heard this school apparently has something called Protection Points," said Nanase.

She looked away from Horikita and shifted her gaze towards Housen for the first time that evening. She'd brought up the very thing that I had mentioned to her back in the library during our

conversation on Friday. Although Horikita was a little surprised, she quickly grasped what was going on, and nodded.

"Yes, that's right. They're a unique kind of point that can cancel out an expulsion, just one time," she said.

Judging from the look on Housen's face, there was no doubt this was the first time he'd heard of it.

"It's no wonder you don't know about them, since you only just enrolled. Which is why you should really make a point of remembering them. When a test similar to this comes up in the future, if the person you're partnered with happens to have a Protection Point, then... Well, depending on how things play out, you could most definitely, unavoidably, be expelled," said Horikita.

The more enemies you made, the more likely that scenario would become. And the more someone hated Housen, the more forceful they would become in their attempts to get Housen expelled.

"Which is precisely why I think we need to work on building a relationship based on trust, starting now," said Nanase.

"I see. Looks like you came prepared to try and boss me around with this stupid bullshit, huh?" said Housen.

"I am a first-year student. So naturally, my top priority is Class 1-D. And because I recognize that you are a necessary component of our class, Housen-kun, I don't want to see you make the error of looking only at the short term," said Nanase.

Horikita had made sure she had the measure of Housen before she set her sights on Nanase. Then, after getting Nanase to cooperate with her in splendid fashion, they delivered a blow to Housen. We'd been in a tough situation, but things were starting to turn around for us.

All that remained was to see how Housen would respond, now that he understood. Namely, to see if he'd still try to wring some compensation out of us, resolved to face whatever consequences it might spell for him later.

"Sounds like you really racked your brains on this one, whoo boy. But, sorry to say... I still ain't planning on any kind of equal

partnership," said Housen.

Nanase and Horikita had laid out our argument to get him to say yes. But Housen shook his head and declined without even pretending to give it any thought.

"Hey, Housen! Dude, are you seriously ready to just go ahead and make enemies out of all us—"

Sudou was just about to lash out, but Horikita held out her arm, stopping him.

"He hasn't left the negotiating table yet," she said.

"Yeah, she's right. Don't go jumpin' to conclusions now," said Housen, replying to Sudou. He remained planted firmly in his seat, cocksure and bullheaded as ever, making no pretense of leaving.

"But what do you intend to do, then? We aren't going to change our stance. We're asking for an equal partnership," said Horikita.

"Yeah, I've seen enough to know that. I'll give you credit, you got guts, lady." Housen clapped his hands five times, apparently in a show of admiration of Horikita's tireless efforts. "But that bein' said, this whole equal footing thing... I can't really believe it's all that equal."

"So if we can offer you proof that it *is*, you'll work with us?" said Horikita.

"Well, somethin' like that, maybe," said Housen.

"I'm afraid that doesn't quite add up. We would both be operating under the same conditions. What reason do you have to feel that it wouldn't be equal?" said Horikita.

"You're sayin' all this stuff about a relationship built on trust, but trust goes both ways, don't it? That don't mean I should just be grateful and take whatever you're dishin' out. The fact that you're suggestin' that our class could be in a similar situation next year? That we could be in trouble? Yeah, that's somethin' I should be *so* grateful for, honey. I'm tearin' up over here. But that's just a self-serving prediction for your benefit. It ain't an absolute certainty of somethin' to come in the future," said Housen.

Housen certainly had a point. Horikita's proposal was built on the fundamental premise that we would be supporting one another. However, our class was the one that was looking for help right now. The idea was that in exchange for their help, when the time came that they needed something, we'd help them out. In that sense, it was like an insurance policy, so to speak. And there was a good chance they'd never actually have to use it.

"I suppose. Well, if you're going to go that route, why don't you tell me what you'd like, then? Just for reference," said Horikita.

"Hand over a million Private Points to me as collateral. Then, if we ever are in trouble and come to you guys for help, I'll gladly pay you back in full," said Housen.

That was actually a fairly reasonable sum, considering the number of points we'd spend dealing with other classes. However, if his class never actually used the insurance policy, that meant we'd basically be handing over a million points for nothing. In short, that meant all those points would end up in Housen's pocket.

"I mean, if this whole relationship built on trust or whatever is going to be so important in the future, like you say it is, then that ain't too steep a price, no?" said Housen.

But if his class really *did* come seeking our help sometime, we'd get the million points back.

"If ya need, I can put it in writing. How 'bout it?" said Housen.

If we put the agreement in writing, the legitimacy of the deal would be recognized by the school, who could enforce it. But this was all built on the premise that Housen would come looking for our help eventually. It was possible Housen might invoke the agreement if he were in danger of being expelled himself, but I doubted he'd give up those points to help out his classmates. Which made this more dangerous than handing over points and signing contracts on an individual basis.

Housen had hit us with a good counter. Apparently, simply being good in a fight wasn't the only thing he could boast about.

He was a skilled negotiator, a formidable foe who could be quite conniving, just like Ryuuen.

"It's true that what you're saying isn't entirely unreasonable. However, I cannot accept your terms," said Horikita.

"I see, I see. Well, that's too bad. Here I gave you a nice, easy way for us to resolve all these issues, and you go back to playing hardball," said Housen.

"It seems that way."

Apparently, Horikita had no intention of giving in and agreeing to a cooperative relationship if that meant letting Housen reap all the rewards himself. But that meant that we'd end up having partners decided at random, which, in turn, meant we'd have to do our best to mitigate risk by getting our poorer students partnered with the other classes, even if that meant throwing money at the problem.

Housen let out a short laugh.

"Ha!"

He leaned forward on the sofa, moving from his seated position for the first time since he sat down. Then, he reached his large arm out and grabbed Horikita by the collar of her shirt. The first to react to this was Sudou, who had been standing watch right beside Horikita. He grabbed Housen's thick arm forcefully and give him an intense glare.

"Hey... Don't you think about layin' a hand on a girl," snarled Sudou.

"Oh ho. What, now it's the idiot's turn, huh?" said Housen.

"Calm down, Sudou-kun," said Horikita.

"But...!"

"It's all right. The negotiations aren't over yet."

It might have appeared like negotiations had broken down, but it was also true that the words "I'm done negotiating" hadn't actually passed Housen's lips yet.

"Man, you got a confident look in your eye. Do you seriously think I won't raise a hand against a chick? Or do you think that

you can beat me, by using your social standin' as a woman or somethin'?" said Housen.

"To think that someone would actually talk that way in this day and age, my goodness. Why don't you try to rein in that misogyny a little?" said Horikita.

"Well then, how's about I give you a better option. If you can really work me over in a fight and get me to say uncle, I'll agree to your offer for an equal partnership, no strings attached. Whaddya say?" replied Housen, making a rather ridiculous proposal.

"Kay, then. In that case, I'll step up and fight you. You ain't got a problem with that, do ya?" said Sudou.

"Hell, sure, Sudou can fight me. Even that weirdo Ayanokouji over there, lookin' at me with this blank face and all—he can, too. Or even you, Horikita. I'd welcome fightin' you with open arms," said Housen. "Actually, if you want, I'll take on all three of ya at once."

"Sounds good to me, Horikita. If I win, we'll get that contract made... And besides, I'm already sick to my stomach dealin' with this guy." Sudou was clearly reaching the limit of his patience with Housen, who still had his hands on Horikita's collar and hadn't let her go.

"Determining whether or not we enter into a cooperative relationship based on a fight? That's completely absurd. Even if that was the only bargaining chip we had in this negotiation, we still shouldn't take it," said Horikita.

"Why not though? I mean, if this Housen guy says he's fine with it, then there ain't no problem," said Sudou.

Horikita ignored Sudou, and then quietly spoke her mind, telling us her thoughts on the matter.

"I really thought you'd be a little smarter than this, Housen-kun. That time you first showed your face on our floor, I picked up your intentions from what you said. You said you were willing to join forces with our class, and I agreed with that sentiment. I thought it would be wonderful if we could work together, forming a partnership, class to class," said Horikita.

"Well, yeah, guess I might have said somethin' like that," he replied.

"But... That was just a misunderstanding on my part. You weren't actually thinking anything of the sort at all," said Horikita. She briefly closed her eyes and let out a deep breath, before continuing, "These negotiations are over."

It wasn't Housen who signaled the end of these talks, but rather Horikita herself. Up until this point, Housen had seemed to be enjoying himself quite a bit, but the moment Horikita said we were finished, anger flashed across his face. He let go of his grip on Horikita's collar. Seeing that, Sudou went to sit back down, holding in his anger.

And in that next moment...

Splash! Water flew across the room. Housen had picked up a cup in his large hand and splashed its contents right in Horikita's face.

Horikita could never have predicted this happening. Before she could even utter a single word, Sudou lunged at Housen, almost jumping over the table.

"Son of a bitch!" snarled Sudou.

He'd already been pushed to his limits, desperately trying to keep his feelings in check. But when Horikita got splashed with water, that completely overrode any rationality he possessed. It seemed Housen was going to carry on behaving the way he always did, making fun of other people right to the very end. No one could blame Sudou for getting angry after seeing the girl he liked be humiliated.

"Stop!"

It was none other than Horikita who stopped Sudou in his tracks, the instant after he bellowed loudly with rage. If she had been even a single second later, Sudou's fist would have collided with Housen's cheek.

"Sudou-kun... Don't thoughtlessly play into his hands," said Horikita.

"Yeah, I know, but still!" he shouted.

Horikita looked at Housen, not even bothering to dry her wet hair. "If you're upset about the fact that negotiations have broken down, then perhaps you should have conducted yourself a little better."

She'd wanted to establish a cooperative relationship with Housen, no matter the cost, for the sake of our class. Had she determined pressing the matter any further was ultimately not worth it, then?

Housen kept his eyes locked on Horikita, but she looked away, as if to say that she had seen enough.

"Let's go," she said.

"A-are you sure?" Though clearly frustrated, Sudou asked to make sure.

"Are you really okay with this, Housen-kun?" asked Nanase, checking with Housen at almost the exact same time that Sudou asked his question.

"Huh?" replied Housen.

"I think we should have agreed to work with Horikita-senpai," said Nanase.

"*Ha!* Hey, they're the ones who walked away from the negotiatin' table. I ain't gonna meet them halfway," said Housen.

Housen and Nanase didn't protest Horikita bringing the negotiations to a close, but accepted that we would be going our separate ways.

I shot a sidelong glance at Horikita to see how she was doing. The fact that our negotiations had failed was a great setback, but from what I could tell of Horikita's expression from her side profile, she didn't seem disappointed yet. If anything, she looked like she wasn't done. Like we were still in the middle of negotiations.

7.2

THE THREE OF US left the karaoke place after Horikita took care of the bill. It seemed that would be the end of it, but Housen and Nanase followed us. Sudou turned back to glare at them menacingly from time to time, but since we had to take the same route back to the dorms, it wasn't like we could really complain about it.

Perhaps because he understood the situation now, Housen called out to us in a somewhat odd fashion. "Hang on."

"There's no reason for us to wait. We're already finished talking."

Horikita gave him the cold shoulder. But Housen showed no sign of backing down. Apparently, Horikita's all-or-nothing gamble had turned out to be a good move.

"Okay, it's just like you said, Horikita. That day, I went out to meet your class. 'Cause I knew right away that at this school, Class D is the bottom of the barrel, the lowest of the low. And rather than let the other classes treat us like a joke, the quickest way to deal with 'em would be for us to work together, Class D to Class D," said Housen.

He'd sent us a signal back then, just as Horikita had interpreted. However, whether he wanted to form the same kind of equal, cooperative partnership that was thinking of was an entirely different question.

"So?" said Horikita.

"So? Whaddya mean, so? Come on. What, you really okay with just lettin' negotiations fall apart? You and I are alike, y'know. We're leaders who thought up the same kinda thing. You get me?" said Housen.

"As you intend to keep making ridiculous demands, nothing is going to change," said Horikita.

"So, you're plannin' on goin' into this special exam as is, then? Leave things as they are, get partnered up at random, and

get hit with the penalty?"

"That's right. We are prepared to be penalized, if necessary," said Horikita.

It would be painful, for sure, but it wasn't like this test was insurmountable. Thanks to the efforts of Kushida and some other people, we'd already started to secure the safety of the students in our class who were near E-rank and D-rank in academic ability.

"All right, I gotcha. In that case, how about this idea?"

Though Horikita had said nothing about restarting negotiations, House just carried on by himself.

"I'll order everybody in my class to team up with ya. And you'll hand over your points. Two million," said Housen.

That was far from a compromise. He'd reopened negotiations in aggressive fashion, demanding an even higher number of points than before.

"Two million? Well, I suppose you've shown your true colors now," said Horikita.

"Yeah, yeah, you can say whatever you want. But it's the only way you guys can be sure to avoid gettin' expelled. Most of the people in other classes have already settled on their partners and all. Come on, there ain't nothin' for you to gain by being a tightwad who won't pay up. Or maybe you wanna be crushed by yours truly?" said Housen.

At this point, we had arrived at the junction where the path branched off in two separate directions for the first-year and second-year dormitories.

Horikita stopped and turned around to respond to Housen's question.

"Crushed? And how exactly do you plan to do that? You can't intentionally score poorly on the test because of the rules, so you can't get us expelled that way. Rules that you must follow, by the way. You don't exactly have the courage to *break* those rules, do you? In that case, all we have to do is make sure teams get at least five hundred and one points, no matter the combination of students," said Horikita.

"Yeah, I ain't gonna do it in such a roundabout way. I'll crush you with *this*," said Housen, brandishing his fist with a menacing smile.

"Control through violence... I suppose there really are people everywhere who think like you do," said Horikita.

"I don't care if you don't like it. This is how I do things," said Housen.

"I suppose so. In that case, it seems we may never be able to understand each other."

Horikita started walking once more. Even at the very end—at the last possible minute—she wasn't giving in. Or rather, I supposed I should say, Housen was the kind of opponent she *couldn't* give in to. Because if she did, we'd never get the partnership she wanted.

"Hold it."

"What is it now?" asked Horikita.

"I got it. I'll keep what you just said in mind." At the last minute, Housen said something we hadn't expected.

"What are you talking about?" asked Horikita.

"I mean, it's only natural that you'll try holdin' onto the advantage in a negotiation as long as you possibly can, right?" He was basically admitting that he'd been trying to get Horikita to give in and compromise.

"In that case, are you saying that you're agreeing to a completely equal partnership?" said Horikita.

"Think of it more like our little chat's about to go into overtime. Anyway, there's a chance people might spot us talkin' here. Let's have ourselves a change of venue," said Housen.

It was almost ten at night on a Sunday now. Most students should have gone back to their dorm rooms, but even so, I supposed there was no escaping the fact that if someone did happen to come by, they'd be able to hear our conversation.

"Even so, we can't exactly take this inside the dorms," replied Horikita.

In consideration of curfew, there were probably no suitable meeting places left for us tonight. But with time running out for both groups right now, this was a problem we didn't want to put off any longer.

"Anywhere's fine. Back at the dorms, anywhere, wherever. If we just have a little time, we can talk things out," said Housen.

He looked so completely confident that Horikita wasn't going to turn him down. She'd been hoping he would come chasing after her, even though she gave him the cold shoulder earlier.

"...Very well. You have ten minutes," said Horikita.

"C'mon, over here," said Housen.

He led us over to the dormitory building used by the third-year students last year, which was now being used by the first-years. We went around to the back of the building, a remarkably dark and quiet place that was used for no other purpose other than disposing of trash. It was unlikely anyone would see us here.

"All right, let's continue where we left off, then. The terms we've set haven't changed. Is that clear?" said Horikita.

"Yeah, let's see..."

Housen, after appearing lost in thought for a minute, briefly folded his arms. Then he immediately uncrossed them and held up the index, middle, and ring fingers on his right hand.

"Three million. You guys pay me, and I'll save all those friggin' idiots you got right now," said Housen.

After hearing his suggestion, everyone present, myself included, could only respond with stunned silence.

"What are you talking about?" said Horikita.

Was this what it was like to feel completely exasperated? Even Horikita couldn't help but let out a couple of sighs. We were supposed to be getting the negotiations back on track after they broke down earlier. But now Housen was asking for even more points than before. This defied all logic.

"What, don't you get it? I said I'll work with ya for three million," said Housen.

"Dude, stop screwin' with us. We already told ya before that we ain't handin' over a single point!" shouted Sudou.

"I ain't screwin' with anybody. I mean, I gave you another opportunity to negotiate with me, didn't I?" He spoke as though he were the one who'd set up everything about these negotiations.

"It would appear...I made an error in judgment in deciding to listen to you," said Horikita.

The chance that Housen would make a reasonable decision had been a faint ray of hope for Horikita. But in the end, her wish wasn't granted.

"Wait. You really think ya can just leave?" snarled Housen.

He smacked his fist lightly against the wall, putting on a threatening display.

"What? You think that because we're in a secluded location, you can solve things with violence? Your usual go-to?" said Horikita.

"At the very least, I can beat you half to death. How 'bout that?" said Housen.

"Go ahead, do whatever you please," said Horikita.

She shook her head and moved to leave, probably because she didn't think Housen would actually resort to getting physical. But Nanase, who had been standing next to him, turned her face away slightly, almost as if she anticipated what was about to happen next.

Housen moved.

"Suzune!!" shouted Sudou frantically, rushing over to Horikita and pulling her out of the way.

Housen's foot whipped by the very spot Horikita had been standing in just moments ago. And then, suddenly, his gigantic form barreled down on her.

"Wait, wha—!"

Horikita realized Housen was seriously trying to hurt her, but she still couldn't get her body out of the way. Sudou stepped in to protect her, catching Housen's repeated blows.

"Grh!"

"*Ha ha! C'mon, show me how much you can take!*" shouted Housen.

"Fine by me! Bring it, chump! Any jerk who raises a hand against Suzune will get no mercy from me!" shouted Sudou.

Housen, laughing like he was having the time of his life, launched an attack on Sudou. And Sudou, already well past the limits of his patience, responded in kind.

"Wh-what are you thinking...?!" shouted Horikita.

It wasn't surprising she was so upset about the fight that had just suddenly broken out in earnest. No matter how unmonitored this place might be, it would definitely be a problem if we were found. Forget suspension—we could very well be expelled.

"Horikita-senpai, perhaps the circumstances at this school have changed a little from how they were before?" said Nanase, watching this incomprehensible turn of events with a cold look on her face. "Similar to how you are intimately familiar with how things were last year, we new students understand the current situation better than you do."

"What do you mean...?" asked Horikita.

"A few representatives of the first-years were summoned to the student council room by Student Council President Nagumo, who explained the state of things to us in person. He told us that starting this year, this school was going to be more meritocratic. And therefore, the students would be given a greater degree of freedom," said Nanase.

"Are you saying fighting is one of those freedoms?" said Horikita.

"That's not what I'm saying. However, as far as Housen-kun was able to confirm, a certain amount of fighting between students is considered inevitable. And President Nagumo has promised he won't be as harsh in his judgment as he was last year," said Nanase.

Unlike Horikita's older brother, Manabu, Nagumo had a much more permissive mindset when it came to fighting. The student council acted to mediate disputes between students, so if it was true they intended to allow a certain degree of fighting, this incident was much less likely to cause trouble.

While Horikita and Nanase talked, the match between Housen and Sudou was quickly coming to a head, with the victor starting to become clear.

"Orah!"

Even though Sudou had been blessed with an impressive physique, Housen managed to shove him against the wall with more force than Sudou could muster. He then grabbed Sudou by the collar with both hands, raising him high enough into the air that Sudou's legs no longer touched the ground.

"H-hey!"

Even though he was on the ropes, Sudou tried desperately to fight back. But suspended in the air, all he could do was defend himself, not attack. Housen was exerting so much pressure on him, it was almost like he was trying to force him physically *into* the wall.

"Ngh! Y-you ass!" shouted Sudou.

He grabbed both of Housen's arms, and despite being held in place with a limited range of movement, struck Housen with his knee. Housen staggered slightly, and Sudou managed to break free of his grip. But immediately afterward, Housen hit him with a repeated series of kicks. While Sudou didn't flinch, the force of the blows slammed him back into the wall.

Before the fight broke out, they'd seemed a match for one another. But now that they'd really gotten going, the difference was considerable. Sudou made enemies rather easily and had probably been in quite a few fights himself. Thanks to his athleticism and his physique, which had been honed through playing basketball, almost no one had been a match for him in his life.

However, Housen was in a different league. He'd probably been in many, many more fights than Sudou. A countless number of them, in fact. *And* he'd probably survived some extremely violent, dangerous situations. The difference in their experience was obvious.

Additionally, his arms were so strong and thick that it was hard to believe he and Sudou were only a year apart. And yet, despite his size, his movements were quick and nimble, demonstrating a kind of innate agility.

There was a reason that even Ryuuen, of all people, had stopped himself from fighting Housen. Namely, he knew that Housen wasn't the kind of opponent you could beat in a straight hand-to-hand fight.

Even so, Sudou wouldn't go down so easily. He was one of the strongest students in the entire school—head and shoulders above most of the rest. But that only meant he would end up taking Housen's blows for a much, much longer time.

Housen continued to whale on him, barraging him with blows from left and right. Much as Sudou wanted to break through and find an opening, the best he could do was simply take Housen's furious punches. If he tried to counter in any way, his guard would be broken in an instant, and Housen would put him down.

"No one stands to gain from this!" shouted Horikita.

Her words didn't reach Housen. At this point, it was impossible to stop Housen with words alone.

However, they *did* reach Sudou's ears. Though for only a brief instant, Sudou glanced at Horikita. Hearing the voice of the girl he had to protect somehow lit a great fire within him.

"Oraaaah!"

Sudou tackled Housen with the determination of someone ready to put his life on the line, pushing him away from the wall and trying to force him to the ground.

"Oh ho, you wanna do a test of pure strength, huh?" said Housen.

He caught Sudou's large frame, smiling, latched onto him and lifted him into the air again.

"Wh-whoa?!"

Housen flipped Sudou around so he was now up against the wall. He pushed him away, and then taunted him, beckoning him to come over with his left hand.

"Oh, poor baby, was it hard being all cramped up against the wall? Hey, that's just the right kinda handicap for me, though. Bring it."

"I've had enough of you!" howled Sudou, his engines now running at full throttle.

He was about to launch another all-out attack against Housen, when—

"Hey, Sudou, check out Horikita over there. Man, she's glarin' at you something *fierce*, dude, she's pissed. Dontcha think?" said Housen, unclenching his fists and pointing a finger at Horikita, behind Sudou.

In the middle of their fight, Housen had done something that left him completely defenseless. Sudou realized he had completely lost his temper and gotten himself into a full-on brawl. In a panic, he looked away from the powerful foe in front of him and back at Horikita.

Of course, Horikita wasn't thrilled about Sudou getting in a fight. But she wasn't glaring at him, either. Her expression was one of worry, agonizing over what she should do, unable to do anything but shout at them to stop.

The moment that Sudou turned to look back at Horikita, he was distracted. He left himself open. By the time he realized what had happened, it was already too late. Housen, a wicked grin on his face, landed a furious blow on Sudou's cheek while Sudou was still looking the other way. A hard blow that took him completely by surprise.

Even though Sudou was most certainly a strong fighter who could take a lot of punishment, the smack he'd just taken was probably the most painful thing he'd ever experienced. If he'd

been an ordinary student with an ordinary neck, it might have been more than just painful—it could've seriously hurt him.

Sudou's large body was sent flying backward. He skidded along the ground, unable to catch himself.

"Nghh...?!"

He let out an almost inaudible groan, all but passing out in agony from the pain. Housen, who had controlled the whole fight so far without using any dirty tricks, had deliberately lured Sudou into a simple trap. To hurt him not just physically but mentally as well.

Although Sudou didn't seem to have lost consciousness, he was writhing in agony on the ground. I found myself wondering again what kind of person Housen Kazuomi was. I wondered what Housen was thinking about, what was going through his mind, what had brought him to the negotiating table today.

It was true—just as Horikita had said before—that it had sounded like he wanted something from our class back when we first met. And as Housen himself had admitted earlier, he'd thought it would be useful to team up with another Class D. Until this point, he had just been using his superior position as a bargaining chip in our talks, and there wasn't anything particularly wrong with that. However, once he saw how hard a line Horikita was taking, he realized that trying to keep pressuring us was going to be difficult.

He realized that if he continued to be this pushy in our negotiations, Horikita would just give up on the idea of working together. But even so, instead of trying to compromise and meet us halfway, he just grew even more aggressive, violent and belligerent. He threw water in a woman's face and was still seriously attacking Sudou, right now.

How could he be so violent and aggressive when he risked being suspended or expelled? That was what I'd been thinking about all this time. Did Housen really think he could turn the tides in his favor by sheer force? No, I couldn't imagine someone like him would be that foolish. In that case, what was he looking for? What exactly was Housen hoping to gain from this fight?

"Well, all right, all right. Your faithful bodyguard is eating dirt. Who's next?" said Housen.

He drew closer, taking turns looking at Horikita and me. Even though he had just finished fighting with Sudou, he didn't even seem out of breath.

"Do you think we... Do you think we will submit to your acts of violence?" asked Horikita.

"I'll just keep pounding you into the ground. Maybe even make you sign a binding pledge or two while you're cryin' your eyes out. And if you refuse to do any of that, then I'll just keep comin' after you relentlessly, till I drive you to your death," said Housen.

No matter how tolerant they claimed the student council intended to be of fighting, there would be consequences if this went too far. Besides, if Housen forced Horikita to sign something under these circumstances, there was no way it could actually hold up as legitimate. Horikita could pretend to obey his command and play along to defuse the situation, but I didn't think she would do that. Because she simply couldn't give in to Housen's way of doing things.

"...Very well. I'll stop you," said Horikita.

She steeled herself and took up a fighting stance.

"Hoo boy, now ain't this somethin'. Well, now, if you wanna do this, then I'm more than happy to take you on," said Housen.

Housen probably wasn't expecting Horikita to have any kind of martial arts experience. However, he wasn't the kind of opponent who'd fall for cheap tricks. That was something Horikita still didn't understand.

Suddenly, without warning, Housen thrust out his large arm. Horikita nimbly dodged and launched an attack of her own, aiming straight for Housen's chin. She was hoping to settle things with one sudden, decisive knockout right out of the gate.

"Oh ho?"

However, Housen caught hold of Horikita's delicate fist with almost alarming ease.

"Hey, now, that was a pretty good move, lady. But too bad."

He took a wide swing, repeatedly slapping Horikita across the face. Horikita tried to defend herself or dodge the attacks, of course, but in the face of Housen's overwhelming speed, there was nothing she could do but take the hits. She was sent flying backward, almost as if she'd been punched with a closed fist instead, and tumbled along the ground but then caught herself.

"S-Suzune!" shouted Sudou, gritting his teeth, trying to stand back up. But his legs just wouldn't cooperate, and he couldn't do it.

"Hey, Horikita. Sign the contract," Housen threatened Horikita, who had collapsed on the ground and was looking up at him while struggling through the pain. "Five million. Five million, and everything will be all right. Okay?"

The price had skyrocketed. It had jumped so high as to be impossible to pay.

"Y-you must be joking... Ayanokouji-kun, call... call the teachers..." said Horikita.

At this point, adult intervention was probably the only way this situation could be contained. Alternatively, if a crowd gathered, even Housen would have no choice but to stop.

"Pft, so after figurin' out you're no match for me, you go and say that...? Well, whatever. You sure you wanna go that route? Even if not all of you tried to take me on, fact is, some of you threw punches back, didn't you? What about that? You sure you wanna get suspended right alongside me?" said Housen.

Even if we appealed to the school and tried to make the case that we were justified in fighting back, it was inevitable we'd also come under fire. Nevertheless, if we wanted to avoid any further tragedy, we really should get a third party to intervene.

"You asshole!" shouted Sudou.

"Stay down!"

Sudou had managed to get back up and launched himself at Housen once again. But Housen took him down with a merciless kick, and then he finally set his sights on me.

"How long are you just gonna stand there and watch, huh?" he said.

"R-run... Ayanokouji...kun..."

"Run? Yeah, don't do that. If you run away, Horikita and Sudou's injuries are about to get way, way worse," said Housen.

Even now, I kept thinking. What did Housen want to do here exactly? Was he really going to try using violence to advance a demand that was never going to be met? No. That was just illogical.

"Horikita. I'll give ya one last chance."

"...Last?"

"Submit to me right here and now, and fork over your points. Do that, and...I won't kill Ayanokouji."

As Housen said that, he put his hand into his pocket and took something out. For a moment, I couldn't tell what it was because of the cover of darkness. But when he removed what was covering it and revealed the pointed edge, I saw something shining silver.

"Y-you've...!"

"C'mon, you got eyes, you can tell what this is. It's a knife, man. A knife. And a real one, no doubt," said Housen.

From the way it shone, it was clearly different from the retractable knife toys you saw used as party props.

"You say no to my offer, and I'll stab Ayanokouji with this," said Housen.

"Stop this nonsense!" shouted Horikita.

"What nonsense? Nothing nonsense 'bout it. If I can get points out of it, I'll *gladly* go this far. You get me?"

He slowly approached me, holding the knife in his right hand.

"After all this, though, I still don't get it. What makes you so special?" he said, looking me in the eyes. He sounded both dismissive and exasperated. "Hey, maybe I didn't even need to do all this, take on such a big risk and all."

What he was saying made it sound almost like this absurd series of events was all a result of him taking precautions. Being wary of something. Step by step, Housen drew closer to me.

The one who stepped in and tried to stop him was the person from his class. Nanase.

"Please stop. Don't do anything else. I just can't... I can't accept your way of doing things, after all," said Nanase.

She got between us, spreading her arms out wide, stopping Housen in his tracks.

"Move, Nanase. You're supposed be standin' watch to make sure no one runs away. So go stand watch," said Housen.

"I thought that if it were for the sake of our class, I could lend you my support until the end, Housen-kun. No matter how terrible your strategies were, I was convinced of that. But it seems I was wrong."

Even though Nanase was standing in front of Housen and barring his path, she directed her gaze squarely at Horikita.



"It was impossible for you to work something out with Housen-kun all along, Horikita-senpai. You got the idea of forming a partnership after Housen-kun came to your floor and said something about your class. But...that was nothing more than a ruse, all along. Even if you did pay them a ridiculous sum of points, like the five million he's asking for, you would still have suffered the same fate," said Nanase.

After hearing this shocking truth from Nanase, Horikita couldn't help but feel even more shaken and upset. No matter how hard she pressed Housen to negotiate, no matter how much effort she put into it, he was never going to actually listen to her. And this wasn't Horikita's fault at all. There was no one on our side who could have predicted things would turn out this way.

This inexplicable series of events was probably the result of an unequal distribution of information. There was information that was given to Housen and Nanase, but not given to us. Under such circumstances, there had never been a way for us to have any real negotiations.

"Damn, all your yappin' is really pissing me off. You're the one who said you'd let me handle everything in the first place, remember? If I take out Ayanokouji, our class is gonna get tons of cash. It's obvious how much of an advantage that'll give us," said Housen.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. But I still cannot figure out why it's only Ayanokouji-senpai who needs to be targeted like this," said Nanase.

"That ain't any of my concern. If you're gonna get in my way, then you can just piss off too!" shouted Housen. His huge form barreled down on Nanase and slapped her out of the way just like he'd done to Horikita before.

As I stood there by myself, watching this spectacle, I came to one single conclusion. And with that, everything made sense.

"Here I come, Ayanokouji!"

Held in Housen's right hand was, quite clearly, a dangerous weapon. Naturally, everyone assumed he had meant to use it

against me. Housen, smiling, raised the knife. I pitched forward, readying myself, while at the same time feeling my thoughts becoming clearer.

"Ayanokouji-kun...!"

While everyone else thought I should obviously run from Housen in a situation like this, I was, instead, rushing toward him. I bet they were all thinking the same thing in that moment—that I had lost my mind. After all, facing off with someone holding a knife wasn't exactly the mark of a sane person. And Housen wasn't some weak, two-bit opponent, either. He was already formidable to begin with.

But seeing this, Housen's smile widened. He probably thought I was an idiot for leaping toward him. But I wasn't actually trying to stop him from stabbing me by rushing at him like this.

Housen, sensing that I was getting in close, accelerated the downward arc of his arm. What he was swinging the knife at—what he was aiming the blade at—wasn't my body.

Housen Kazuomi was aiming for himself.

As he was mid-swing, I used my left hand to stop the knife from reaching its intended destination. I didn't do so by grabbing his arm. Nor did I try to get out of the way. Instead, I thrust my palm forward.

"Wha—?!" shouted Housen in surprise.

What I'd just done was something he clearly hadn't expected. Well, I supposed it would've been nearly impossible for him to predict my actions. No one would assume I'd purposefully let myself be stabbed.

The arm Housen had swung down came to a complete stop, and the smile on his face vanished in an instant.

"You... Ayanokouji!!" he snarled.

He was baffled, naturally. Anyone would have been perplexed by my decision to deliberately allow myself to be stabbed. My actions must have seemed desperate and reckless.

Fresh blood spurted from where the knife had impaled my palm.

"That knife. Or to be more accurate, that petty knife. It's the one I purchased," I told Housen.



"What are you on about...?"

"You were going to stab yourself in the leg using that knife. A knife that belongs to me. Afterward, all you had to do was make a fuss about being stabbed, and then you'd have me expelled, using your wound as physical evidence. That was your plan, wasn't it?" I asked him.

Judging from the way Housen had held the knife as he swung it, it was clear he wasn't intending to stab someone else. He was keeping the blade at a height that made it look like someone else was stabbing him, and it was obvious he swung the knife while holding the handle in reverse, so he could thrust it into his leg with more force.

"Ha...! So, you figured all that out, but still let yourself get stabbed, huh? You outta your mind?" replied Housen with a dry chuckle, though he was certainly a little shaken.

"Because this was the best way to stop you completely. Besides, you had a similar plan in mind, anyway. You came here prepared to receive a severe injury."

Even if you understood it to be a valid strategy, most people couldn't bring themselves to commit such a dangerous act of self-harm. Which was exactly why he would've been able to stab himself and claim I'd been the one to do it.

"It seems there's some other kind of special exam going on. One that was given to a limited number of you first-years. And judging from your conversation with Nanase, the nature of that exam is about getting me expelled. The idea was to somehow lure me out to this place and force a fight to happen. You'd torment Horikita and Sudou, then say I flew into a rage and came at you with a knife that I happened to be carrying, just in case, and stabbed you. Then you'd have me expelled... That's your entire absurd plot," I told him.

Even if the school was supposedly being more tolerant of fighting, going so far as using a knife wouldn't be met simply by suspension. It would probably lead not just to expulsion, but also to criminal charges.

"I heard you weren't nobody to mess with. But to be real with you, I didn't get the feelin' that you were all that tough, so I didn't think much of you. I mean, I never imagined you'd just let yourself get stabbed like that... How'd you even know this knife belongs to you?" said Housen.

"I've been doing some research of my own. As of yesterday, I was still the only person who'd purchased a petty knife here. And yet, you have one. Which means the answer is pretty obvious."

It would have been simple enough for me to slip under Housen's swing and grab his arm. However, that wouldn't fundamentally solve the problem at hand. All he had to do was get his distance from me and try to stab himself all over again. The only way to stop him for certain was to make sure he couldn't pull off his strategy at all.

Housen tried to pull the knife out of my hand, but I kept his fist locked in place with the sheer strength of my grip.

"...What the hell... are you...?" huffed Housen.

Having understood the extent of my strength, he completely lost the composure he had just moments ago.

"Well, then, what're you going to do now?" I asked him. "Even though I'm the owner of this knife, you're the one who stabbed me. And on top of that, I know you tried to buy one yourself ahead of time. If you can't talk your way out of this, you're going to be expelled, Housen."

My fingerprints were on the handle, but so were Housen's. And the fact that the knife was sticking through my palm right now couldn't easily be explained away. The very strategy Housen had devised had come back to bite him.

"Wait, you saw this far ahead...?!"

After Housen had finished glaring at me, he let go of the knife and put some distance between us. The knife remained embedded in my palm. And now, the tables had completely turned.

In the meantime, Horikita and Sudou slowly stood back up, beginning to recover their strength.

"A-are you all right... Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Horikita.

"Ayanokouji..." said Sudou, amazed.

"Don't worry."

It was understandable that my two classmates were perplexed by everything that was happening, but that would have to wait. It was essential for me to completely shut Housen down right now.

"Damn, how much do you even know...? Wait, Nanase! Don't tell me you went and blabbed to him. Did you?" said Housen.

"I didn't say anything," replied Nanase.

"I first felt like there was something odd back when I was shopping with Amasawa at Keyaki Mall," I replied.

"Amasawa-san? Are you saying she's involved in this...?" asked Horikita.

"Yeah. When Housen was about to buy a knife, she stopped him. The store clerk saw it happen. You're the one who came up with this absurd plan, Housen, but Amasawa was the one who perfected it. If you stabbed yourself with a knife that you'd bought, the school would investigate and you'd be in trouble. But if you could somehow make sure *I* had bought the knife instead, there was a good chance you could completely turn the situation around."

The reason Amasawa had deliberately chosen the petty knife was because it was the only one that came with a sheath, which likely made it the most convenient choice for Amasawa and Housen. Of course, there were other ways to conceal an exposed blade, but if you considered that you'd be carrying it around with you, buying one with a sheath was the easiest and most reliable option.

I had felt like there was something off when Amasawa had picked out this knife, without any hesitation whatsoever, in a store that she should have never been in before. That was the first thing that struck me. Then, Amasawa visited my room on Friday. She said she'd lost her hair tie, but the only reason she'd come by was

to recover the knife. It was safe to assume she'd deliberately planted the hair tie or was simply lying about it.

Also, it was possible I'd notice the knife was missing if she came to retrieve it too soon. So she made sure to wait until the last possible minute, seeking the right time. She took the knife out of my room without getting her own fingerprints on it and offered it to Housen. If she hadn't been able to recover the knife, they probably would've postponed their plan.

"*Tch*. Guess workin' with that rando was a mistake, huh?" said Housen.

"No, not really. It was thanks to Amasawa that your plan came together. If it were just you acting alone, everything would've fallen apart," I replied.

"Whatever. Anyway, looks like you've got the upper hand here now though, Ayanokouji-senpai."

The blood from my wound had also gotten on Housen's clothes. There was no way he could talk his way out of this. Even if he took the knife back now and stabbed himself in the leg, he wasn't going to be able to spin this in his favor. Of course, if he *did* try to do that, I'd just use my full strength to stop him.

Housen, standing across from me right now, could likely sense this much himself. The important part was what came next.

"Horikita, Sudou, and I can keep this matter between us," I told him.

"What are you plottin'? You're just gonna throw away this valuable chance to get me thrown outta school?" said Housen.

"In exchange, I have two conditions."

"Two?"

He probably knew the first one without me having to say it.

"You'll agree to initiate a fair, cooperative partnership with Horikita, between our two classes."

"Well, ain't like I got much of a choice, since if I say no, I'll get kicked out. What's the other condition?" asked Housen.

"I want you to partner with me for the upcoming special exam."

From the moment I'd first laid eyes on Housen, I had thought that if I were in a position to select whatever partner I wanted, he'd be the guy I'd pick. While I had several reasons for thinking so, the biggest one was that he didn't seem to care one bit about attracting attention to his problematic behavior. If I were in Tsukishiro's position, I would have instructed whoever he sent after me to avoid doing anything to stand out.

If negotiations with Horikita didn't work out, I'd considered reaching out to Housen privately and trying to come to terms with him. In that sense, this chain of events was actually quite convenient for me.

"...You serious?" asked Housen.

"You've only just enrolled here. There are still countless things you haven't done yet. If you get expelled right now, it'll be all over. You'll never get to enjoy any of them. I don't know how things were back when you were in junior high, but all that talk about how you're a match for Ryuuken will end up being just that—talk. People will say you really weren't that big a deal. And based on what I've seen from Ryuuken over the past year, you can't even begin to compare to him as you are now. He's strong," I replied, taunting him.

"You...!"

Housen Kazuomi was an incredibly proud guy. He thought highly of himself, considering himself a strong person. Even though he might be physically stronger than Ryuuken, it would infuriate him to be told Ryuuken was actually better than him.

More importantly, though, there was no way he could stomach the idea of being outsmarted by me. If Housen, who had a B+ in academic ability, were to deliberately score a zero on the test, he would inevitable be expelled.

Of course, it was entirely possible he'd try and take me down with him as revenge. While I was as certain as I possibly could be that he wasn't the White Room student, it was also true that I

wasn't 100% certain. I could never fully clear him of that one suspicion, no matter how thoroughly I investigated and examined.

However, that had changed now. Even if Housen did deliberately cut corners on the test, the fact that I'd been stabbed remained. If it was clear there'd been something bizarre happening behind the scenes, not even Tsukishiro would be able to force my expulsion right away. The school would certainly want to investigate the matter to figure out exactly what had happened, and why Housen got a zero on the exam. Whatever tricks Tsukishiro tried to pull, I'd hold my ground until expulsion was no longer a possibility.

"Hey, all right, pretty good there, Ayanokouji-senpai! Never had an opponent that got my blood pumping like you before. You should know, I ain't gonna be tryin' to just make you surrender with brute strength anymore. I'm gonna really beat ya to death, so I hope you're lookin' forward to it," said Housen.

That slight hint of him wavering was now a thing of the past. Housen had already changed gears and was focusing on the next battle.

"I'll stay here. There are still some things I should explain to Ayanokouji-senpai," said Nanase.

"Huh? What are you plottin', Nanase?"

"I've decided it would be in the best interests of Class 1-D for me to tell him some things. Ayanokouji-senpai and Horikita-senpai are intensely wary of us right now. If that's the case, don't you think it would be a good idea for us to make sure they're cautious of all of the other classes, too?" she answered.

While I didn't understand exactly what Nanase was getting at, Housen seemed to accept her proposal.

"Whatever, go ahead," he replied.

And with that, he was the first to leave, heading for the dormitory.

7.3

IT WAS NOW just Horikita, Sudou, the first-year student Nanase, and me. While I was sure there were a few things for us to discuss, there was something else we needed to attend to first. Namely calming down Horikita, who had lost her cool after seeing the knife piercing my left hand.

"Wh-what should we do...? The...the knife, I mean, should we...should we take it out?" she stammered. The normally cool and collected Horikita had probably never been in a situation like this before.

"No. I know it's probably not great to look at, but we should leave it alone for the time being." If we just carelessly pulled it out, it might result in me losing a lot more blood. "More importantly, what about you two? Are you okay?"

"Looking at your injury, I'd say I'm practically unscathed..." said Horikita.

"Yeah... I'm definitely okay too," said Sudou.

He came closer, until he was standing right beside me. His face contorted in disgust when he saw the miserable state of my left hand.

"Dude, how can you be so calm with your hand like that?"

"Hm, dunno. I wonder."

I just did what I normally did. Nothing special.

"But, dude, like...you are *crazy* good in a fight, wow..." added Sudou.

"I just forced myself to stop the knife is all," I replied.

"...That ain't how it looked to me though, man," said Sudou, speaking his mind about what he'd thought when he saw me charge at Housen just a little while ago.

Sudou had been in a number of violent situations in his lifetime. I didn't think I could fake him out, and I probably couldn't deceive Horikita, either.

I took out my phone with my right hand and dialed the number that would connect me with Chabashira.

"I'm going to need a little help. I'm behind the first-year dormitory building right now. Can you hurry on over? Discreetly, of course. Oh, and also, please bring a bath towel," I told her.

Although Chabashira seemed a little baffled by my sudden call, she sensed the urgency of the situation and promised to head over right away. In the meantime, it would probably be best not to move from this spot. It would be awkward if we tried moving locations and another student happened to see my hand.

Even so... Nanase showed no signs whatsoever of being upset. She was completely unfazed, remaining calm and collected even after seeing the knife impaling my hand and the spurting blood. She didn't seem bothered one bit by the graphic, visually arresting spectacle.

"So, Nanase, can you tell us what's going on?" I asked.

"If I don't, it seems it would only put my class at more of a disadvantage," she answered.

"You were aware things were going to turn out this way... Is that correct?" said Horikita.

"That's correct. The idea was that Housen-kun would stab himself in the leg and have Ayanokouji-senpai expelled," said Nanase.

She didn't seem to feel guilty or ashamed at all. She explained what they had planned in the same polite tone she usually used.

"Are you saying that the friendliness that you showed us—it was all just part of the act?" asked Horikita.

"No, that's not true. I really do want to join forces with you, Horikita-senpai, and for our classes to support one another. It's just... The plan to target Ayanokouji-senpai was our top priority," said Nanase.

Which meant that the reason why Housen and Nanase were so obsessed with our class was because I was in it.

"Why would you do all of that? Also, unlike Ayanokouji-kun, I don't recall ever forgiving you for what happened tonight. Depending on how things play out, I might consider reporting you to the school right away." Horikita, unable to understand why I'd been targeted, pressed Nanase to answer.

"I think there were problems with how we did things, yes, but trying to get Ayanokouji-senpai expelled from school itself is not counter to the school's wishes. Very few first-year students know about this, but it's possible to earn a considerable number of points by having Ayanokouji-senpai expelled," said Nanase.

Now, the reason why I'd been targeted by Housen finally became clear.

"We were given a special exam. For this exam, we were told that anyone who managed to get Ayanokouji Kiyotaka from Class 2-D expelled would be paid twenty million Private Points," explained Nanase.

"What are you talking about? This makes no sense. Who in the world came up with such an incredibly stupid, outrageous special exam?" asked Horikita.

Nanase didn't answer that question.

"...I've told you what I needed to say, for now. I'm sure this will make you far more wary of every class in my grade level, not just us now. Won't it, Ayanokouji-senpai?" she said instead, turning to me.

Nanase hadn't said much. Really, she'd only told us the bare minimum she needed to. She and Housen obviously knew what was going on, and needless to say, Amasawa was aware of the second special exam, too. Given everything I'd heard, it was reasonable to assume that some students in Class 1-B and Class 1-C probably knew about it, too.

"How do you think we could possibly be satisfied with an answer like that? The truth of the matter is, Ayanokouji-kun was seriously injured, and—"

"I'm fine. Just getting an understanding of the situation is enough. Thanks for your help, Nanase," I told her.

"I chose to cooperate with Housen-kun for the good of the case, despite knowing how unjust this is. Because the fact remains that if the twenty million points were to fall into the hands of another class, it would create a significant gap between us," said Nanase.

Twenty million points was essentially a single ticket to Class A. But when you considered things like this current special exam, the more financial power you had, the more advantages you'd gain.

"However, that is not the only reason why I lent Housen-kun a helping hand," said Nanase.

She spoke softly and calmly, but there was something about the way she looked at me, like she was staring daggers at me.

"Cause I really didn't... I mean, because I did not think that Ayanokouji-senpai was someone suitable for this school," said Nanase.

For the first time, she openly stated her intense hatred for me. But I couldn't really figure out why.

Not too long afterward, Nanase bowed to us and left.

Chapter 8: A Deepening Mystery

THE FOLLOWING DAY, Monday, Nanase and Horikita held a discussion that resulted in them successfully forming an equal, cooperative partnership between our two classes. By Tuesday, a total of one hundred and fifty-seven pairs had been made, and everyone moved on from there to concentrate on the written exam. Kouenji didn't exactly appear willing to cooperate, but when Nanase went to him in person and asked him to be her partner, he agreed to her request surprisingly easily. That surprised both Horikita and me.

My left hand was seriously injured, but I supposed I could say it was worth it. Many students were quite surprised to see my hand wrapped up in bandages, but with the help of both Chabashira and Mashima-sensei, everything was kept secret. And, thanks to that, I was able to tackle the special exam without increasing the number of people who knew the truth.

Even though I'd had many opportunities to interact with the first-year students over the past two weeks, in the end, I still didn't know who the White Room student was. Considering their apparent lack of activity even after the special exam ended, I was honestly starting to doubt whether this person really existed at all. Regardless, all the people I'd come into close contact with were possible suspects I needed to watch out for.

Normally, one would think I could exclude Housen from that list, since his exploits from junior high had become public knowledge. However, neither Ryuuuen nor Akito were directly acquainted with Housen. In other words, it was possible this person was an imposter who'd contacted the real Housen and gotten all kinds of information about his past.

Nanase hadn't seemed like she bore me any ill will at first glance, but the way she'd closed the distance between herself and me, the way she acted in the karaoke room and afterward, and

the fact that her contact with me from the beginning had been calculated were all factors that couldn't be overlooked.

Amasawa was someone I needed to be wary of, considering she'd tried to get me expelled by working with Housen. But when I considered that everything that they'd done was for the purpose of securing twenty million Private Points, it made sense. In any case, I didn't have a single shred of evidence linking any of them to the White Room. It also seemed like if I presented even the slightest weakness for someone to exploit, I'd be eaten alive. And it seemed that was going to be the case for a while.

And then... We arrived at this day. The first of May. The day we'd find out the results of the special exam, which would be announced during sixth period, the final class period of the day.

"I will now announce the results of the special exam. The results will be shown up on the blackboard, but they can also be viewed on your tablet devices, so you can look over them in detail," said Chabashira.

Our tablets let us zoom in and magnify any part that we wanted to, without having to stare at the blackboard. I could tell Horikita's eyes were on me. There was no doubt that this special exam was the most difficult we'd had, in terms of how hard it was to get a high score. It was unlikely our contest would end in a tie.

On the day of the written test, the subject Horikita chose to compete with me in was Mathematics. I opened up the app and went to the results page, bringing up the test results on my tablet. Most of the students in our class didn't really pay attention to the other numbers, but went to check their own scores first. I, on the other hand, didn't bother looking at my score. Instead, I scanned the overall state of things with our class.

As for who was getting expelled... Well, it seemed we'd successfully managed to avoid having anyone get expelled this time. When I brought up the list of scores in order, I saw the lowest combined score was five hundred and seventy-nine points. It seemed everyone had managed to make it through without a hitch.

The students had worked hard, of course. But this also proved the school hadn't been planning to hit us with a tremendously difficult exam right away in April, at the start of the new school year. The actual test questions were the sort that Ike, Satou and other students could easily score two hundred and fifty points or more on. In other words, the predicted scores chart that we were shown at the start of the test period had featured intentionally low scores.

Sighs of relief and shouts of joy could be heard one after another from the students around me. *Now, then, let's go ahead and check Horikita's score, just in case.*

I filtered the results to show math scores, and then set them to display in order, with the highest scores first. Wow. I supposed it really showed that this was the subject we'd decided to compete in. Horikita had scored eighty-even points. Considering that the person after her was Keisei, with eighty-four points, I couldn't even imagine how much effort she had put into studying for this.

The students who came after those two were all generally those with high academic ability rankings, close to A. But it seemed that the eighty-point mark was a pretty significant hurdle for everyone, in all subjects. After all, out of the possible one hundred points, the final ten points or so worth of questions were based on things completely outside our curriculum from the past year. And they were difficult questions, to boot.

While our class was overjoyed with how things had turned out, I could tell the students were gradually starting to stir. Of course, I didn't really need to wonder why. I felt Chabashira's gaze on me, and the gazes of the other students who had noticed the truth of the matter.

That was no wonder, I supposed, after they saw my name above Horikita's in the test results list for math, even though she had eighty-seven points.

"A-a perfect score... Wait, seriously?"

Even if you went and sorted the results for any subject, no one in our class had scored ninety points or higher. There was

only one exception. Mathematics, with my score. Incidentally, I had generally scored around seventy points, give or take, in the other subjects. Most of the students probably couldn't comprehend why I had scored so highly in just one of the subjects.

The written exam was more difficult than I had expected it to be. Despite the risk that I would get a perfect score, I deliberately chose not to hold back. It was inevitable that doing so would draw my classmates' attention, and the attention of the school at large. But considering what Tsukishiro would be doing in the days to come, I supposed there was no harm in showing everyone just a glimpse of what I could do. If anything, it was probably better for me to make the first move, so that I'd have fewer problems to deal with later on.

Sudou, who'd normally be making a fuss together with Ike in situations like this, looked at me, shocked but quiet. Considering he'd seen what I'd done up to this point, and what happened with Housen and I the other day, I supposed he would be less surprised than other students.

Anyway, things had started to change greatly in April. I supposed I ought to be prepared to have lots of conversations with the students who were looking at me strangely.

8.1

WHILE CLASS WAS IN SESSION, no one could come up to me to talk. But after class was a different story. As soon as Chabashira dismissed us for the day, the first person to come up to me wasn't Horikita, but rather someone from the Ayanokouji Group. Keisei.

"Hey, Kiyotaka, you got a minute?" he asked.

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that Keisei was the top student in Class D, boasting high scores. Which was exactly why he knew how difficult it was to get a hundred points. I was sure he had several questions in mind.

"I'm sorry, but would you mind waiting until later, Yukimura-kun? I would like to have a moment with him first," said Horikita, cutting in, pushing Keisei aside.

"Yeah, okay. Sorry Keisei. I'll chat with you later," I told him.

"O-okay," he answered.

As I left the classroom with Horikita, I saw it wasn't just Haruka and Airi who had their eyes on me either. I'd attracted the attention of many other students, too.

After a few moments of silence, Horikita confirmed that there was no one else around and then looked at me.

"I'm not going to make any excuses. I did the best I could, yet you got a perfect score," she said.

"You don't want to go for a rematch?" I asked.

"I couldn't even understand what the final questions said. There was no way I could even solve them at my current level of knowledge. I honestly don't even know *when* I'll learn how to solve those problems," said Horikita.

"Hm, well, I guess stuff like measurement and Lebesgue integration... Probably when you get to college, I'd say?" I replied.

I wasn't very familiar with how things worked for ordinary students in a regular curriculum, so I couldn't give her a precise

answer. I mean, even if I told her that those were things I'd learned when I was a small child, it wasn't going to be of any use to her.

"...Never mind. It was stupid of me to say anything," said Horikita.

She let out a deep, forced sigh, almost like she was giving up on something, and then looked at me with a stony gaze.

"It's frustrating, but I admit defeat. The two things that had happened recently make me feel as though I can't help but acknowledge you. If I resist any longer, I'll only end up feeling like an idiot," said Horikita.

Horikita had tried her absolute best and fought admirably but complimenting her right now would only have the opposite effect.

"So, about the condition that you mentioned earlier—"

"Ah, there you are, Ayanokouji."

Horikita was probably going to talk to me about the student council, but she was interrupted. It seemed our homeroom teacher, Chabashira, had come looking for me.

"Do you need something?" I asked.

"Wow, that's cold. Wouldn't you be in quite a bit of trouble right now if I didn't come to help you?" said Chabashira.

"Yes, that's true. You really helped me out there."

"I'm heading back for today. We'll talk again later."

As expected, Horikita wasn't able to say what she wanted to in front of Chabashira, so she excused herself and left. After Chabashira watched her go, she set her sights back on me.

"It seems I've interrupted your conversation, but this is urgent. Acting Director Tsukishiro has been calling for you. Come along," she said.

"I see," I replied.

That was certainly something she needed to tell me about, even if that meant interrupting.

Chabashira continued talking to me while walking slightly ahead, not turning back to look at me. "In case you're wondering, according to Mashima-sensei, Acting Director Tsukishiro didn't exhibit any unusual behaviors during the special exam."

"That makes sense. He only made his move before the exam. When I was getting ready," I told her.

During the special exam, all he'd done was wait for the results to come out.

"Is there any possibility he might use strong-arm tactics in the future?" asked Chabashira.

"Meaning?" I asked.

"It's not every day you get stabbed with a knife. That's a pretty big deal, wouldn't you say? Your father was making his move, wasn't he?"

"My hand has nothing to do with that."

I hadn't reported the precise details of what had happened to Chabashira. Of course, I hadn't told her about the issue of the twenty million points either. Chabashira likely knew nothing about that.

"I certainly hope so. I thought he might try to restrain you somehow. and forcefully drag you out of this school," replied Chabashira.

"He would need to actually get his hands on me to do that. That's nothing you need to worry about," I answered.

Trussing up a little rabbit was one thing, but you couldn't abscond with a full-sized human quite as easily.

"In that case, good. Because I need you to be of use to me. The fact that you got a perfect score on the math test this time has made it perfectly clear to me that you are quite special," said Chabashira.

Getting a perfect score in that exam had quite a few downsides. And while there were only a few side effects of me having gotten that score, this was certainly one of them.

Shortly afterward, we arrived at the reception room. I left Chabashira behind and stepped inside by myself.

"Thank you for going to the trouble of coming to meet me here, Ayanokouji-kun," said Tsukishiro.

"Going as far as using my homeroom teacher, huh? What are you playing at with that? She probably suspects something is up," I replied.

I wasn't going to reveal the fact that I'd already gotten Chabashira over to my side, so I pretended to be puzzled by the Acting Director having called me to his office so suddenly.

"Well, now, I can't exactly go parading around the classrooms as the acting director now, can I?" said Tsukishiro.

He kindly urged me to take a seat, but I chose to ignore his prompting and remained standing. After he noticed that, he started talking once more.

"Well, now that April has ended, have you managed to figure out the identity of the student who was sent in after you? I was just thinking I should make sure of that," said Tsukishiro.

So he wanted to talk about the little game he'd proposed. He told me that if I figured out the identity of the student from the White Room before the end of April, he would back off.

"Unfortunately, I don't know the identity of the person from the White Room," I replied.

"What a flat answer. Shouldn't you at least list the names of students you feel are reasonably suspicious?" said Tsukishiro.

"I won't say anything about something I'm not certain of. At least, not in this situation," I answered.

"I see. So, that child has managed to conceal their presence quite well, then." Tsukishiro nodded, apparently impressed by that, a look of satisfaction on his face.

"I haven't been able to detect even the slightest telltale signs of the White Room agent. They've managed to cover their tracks quite beautifully," I remarked.

"Well, I suppose that's because for the past few months, they've engaged in a specialized curriculum to learn how to act like a high-school student," said Tsukishiro.

Which meant they'd been planning all this well in advance. Well, if they hadn't been doing that, we wouldn't be having this conversation at all.

"You, on the other hand, seemed to struggle quite a bit when you first arrived at this institution. From the way you talked to the way you behaved, the way you thought, even the way you spent your time. You came off as rather unnatural, in many respects," said Tsukishiro.

He sounded like he was merely teasing me, indicating that he had control over everything.

"That's because the reality of being a regular high school student had only ever been a fantasy to me," I answered.

"At any rate, you haven't found out their identity for now, Ayanokouji-kun. Now that I've confirmed that much, this meeting is finished. You may leave," said Tsukishiro, indicating that this talk was over and urging me to leave the room.

There was no sign he intended to comment on the bandages on my left hand. I stood my ground firmly, making no attempt to leave, and instead continued speaking to Tsukishiro.

"Acting Director Tsukishiro, is it possible that you perhaps made a miscalculation?" I asked.

"What in the world are you talking about?"

"It's already May now. Didn't you want to have this matter settled by the end of April?"

"No, no, there's no need for me to rush. I've actually been given a surprisingly long extension. Longer than you might think," said Tsukishiro.

"Oh, is that so? And here I was thinking you must surely have run into some *unexpected* trouble or something."

"Now, that's a rather interesting statement. What's your basis for that?" he asked.

"Well, I had the impression you were fully prepared to get me expelled with this special exam. All that remained was for the White Room student to get in contact with me, partner up, and that'd be it. However, none of the new students showed any signs of even attempting to do that."

Of course, there was Tsubaki, who had come up to me earlier hoping to partner up...but that hardly counted.

"Actually, I'm almost tempted to think there isn't a White Room agent among the first-year students at all," I added.

"You don't really think that, do you?" he asked.

"In any case, it just doesn't add up."

"Thanks to the OAA app, I knew you were having trouble finding a partner until about the midway point of the exam period," said Tsukishiro. "But you're a special person. I decided it would be dangerous to simply send the White Room student after you and subsequently be discovered by you. I thought it would be wiser to go after you next time, or sometime after that."

"Talk about taking your time."

"That might be true."

"Or, despite your wishes, the person from the White Room didn't follow orders, Acting Director Tsukishiro. If you think about the situation that way, this whole sequence of events seems to fit into place."

"My word. You certainly come up with some interesting ideas, don't you?"

Tsukishiro, smiling and apparently amused, took a sip of tea out of his cup. After a moment of silence, he brought the cup away from his mouth.

"Very well. It really is quite a bother for you to question the credibility of my words, but I'll admit it. We really did plan to have you expelled for sure with this special exam. However, that child ignored those plans," said Tsukishiro.

Though he'd denied everything at first, he immediately changed his mind and admitted the truth.

"They are a child, after all, I suppose. If this is simply due to them being in a rebellious phase, well, we could consider that endearing. But if that's not the case...let's just say it won't be a laughing matter," said Tsukishiro.

The student who had been given orders and sent into this school hadn't followed Tsukishiro's instructions. If that really was true, it certainly wouldn't be a laughing matter at all.

"Please do be careful, Ayanokouji-kun. I wasn't the only one who decided to send in someone from the White Room this time. Also, considering that the assassin has disobeyed my orders and started acting on their own, I fear my superiors might be considering something questionable," said Tsukishiro.

"What, are they thinking of giving up on you? I mean, your performance has been awful."

"That might be true. However, the fact that I've been ordered to have you expelled hasn't changed. Even if I'm being used as a pawn, I will continue to carry out my orders until the very end. If I fail and am cast aside, so be it. I'll simply move on to my next post."

I had thought of this White Room student and Tsukishiro as one entity, a monolith. But now the possibility that their relationship wasn't quite so simple had emerged. But if what Tsukishiro was saying is true, then what are they after? If they worked together to get me expelled, then their chances of successfully pulling it off would certainly go up. Or was this perhaps a feint, meant to mislead me?

Was the White Room student running wild...? Or was *he* pulling the strings from the shadows? I'd say the odds of either being the case were about even. It was also important for me to keep in mind just how deceitful Tsukishiro was. At the very least, he didn't seem hurried at all, nor did he seem shaken.

"Oh, one last thing... If that child is ignoring your father's wishes, then depending on how things go, it may be better for you to choose to drop out of this school yourself. After all, the more unshakeable your position as the magnum opus of the White Room, the more unfathomable their jealousy and hatred for

your position will be. I shudder to think about what that child will do to you before they're satisfied," said Tsukishiro.

The warning sounded so dire I could almost interpret it to be a joke. I turned my back to him and left the room.

Special Exam – Overall Rankings

First Place: Second Year Class A, Average of 725 Points

Second Place: Second Year Class C, Average of 673 Points

Third Place: Second Year Class D, Average of 640 Points

Fourth Place: Second Year Class B, Average of 621 Points

Class Points as of May First

Second Year Class A, led by Sakayanagi: 1169 Points

Second Year Class B, led by Ryuuuen: 565 Points

Second Year Class C, led by Ichinose: 539 Points

Second Year Class D, led by Horikita: 283 Points

Postscript

HEY THERE, it's 2020 now! Looks like I was able to make it to the new year and see all of you again without incident.

It's Kinuko... You remember, right? You didn't forget, did you?

...Okay! So, yeah, anyway, I'm Kinuko... Or not, actually. Kinugasa Syougo here. Happy new year to you all.

Apparently, we also managed to release the first volume of the second-year arc without incident! Whether you've been reading since the first-year arc or you're new to the series, welcome, and I'm looking forward to bringing you more stories this year as well. Also, the release of this book happens to coincide with the release date for the second *Classroom* art book, it turns out. I hope you enjoy that, too.

Starting at the end of the month, we're going to be holding an event to commemorate moving onto the second year of the story, so we're looking forward to seeing people from all over the globe turn up at the venue! Figured I'd squeeze in some advertising about that here and there!

Well, then, now that we've plunged into a memorable new arc, we're moving forward with more things than ever before. Ayanokouji and the rest were still quite immature when they first started school, but they've sure started to show signs of maturing, haven't they? With the changes they're going through after entering their second year, and the arrival of new students, among other things, there's certainly a lot to write about. So many things, in fact, that I ended up using the maximum number of pages allowed and had to cut a page from the postscript. Just barely managed to make it!

Anyway, I couldn't say too much this time because I had so little space to work with here, but I'm sure we'll meet again soon, so I hope to see you back next time! Oh, and there's more fun to be had over at the official website!



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