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## Year 2 Volume 2 – Author → Shōgo Kinugasa

*Presented By Anime Anyway*









つばき さくらに  
椿 桜子





「あの女は無視していい」

「桐山副会長と同じ3年生ですからね、  
そうもいきません」

「……あいつは鬼龍院、俺と同じBクラスの人間だ」

「OAAで見ました」

高い評価を受けてる生徒ですよな」

「成績だけはな。だが鬼龍院には、南雲のような  
後ろ盾は一切ない。満足な友人一人いない人間だ」

「そう褒めてくれるな。テレるだろう？」

全く褒めていないのに、鬼龍院は不敵に笑う。

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## Prologue

The White Room student's monologue

This very moment, in a 1st year classroom within the Advanced Nurturing high school.

The teacher was teaching a coarse and extremely low level curriculum.

Students my age were actually scratching their heads when faced with a question that bored me to tears.

I then created an illusion with a bunch of kindergarten students with me as an adult in the midst of them.

This wasn't the first time, but I lamented the futility of the learning here, and the waste of precious time.

Every now and then, a certain someone popped into my head.

Because, just like that, the emotion known as "hatred" leaked out of my heart, reminding me why I'm here. And power would inadvertently pour into my right hand that held the pen of the tablet.

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

When did I first become aware of that name?

Even if I tried to remember it, it was hard to recall the exact date.

But I'm pretty sure, however, that the name had been etched in my memory for as long as I could remember.

No one who studied in the White Room didn't know that name.

That was why.

The reason for this was simple. He was better than any student, at any grade or age.

No one could surpass the 4th generation Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

As a result, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was set up to be the perfect model.

Just one small child, but he had a huge impact on the entire White Room.

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that those of us in the 5th generation, a year below him, had been influenced the most by him.

It was said that no matter how extreme a training program was, he was able to leave behind a legacy of excellence.

However, as for that, I was the same. I've always been the one to have exceptional grades among the 5th generation.

I've always proven that I was more of a genius than everyone else.

But...genius as I am, I've never been praised even once.

As for the reason, I don't think I need to say it.

It was always the same cold words that came from the instructor's mouth.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was much better than you a year ago"

No matter how hard I tried, no matter how excellent my grades were, I still wasn't recognized.

All I got were commands, telling me to catch up to the unreachable, god-like being.

Some of those who studied in the same room as me began to "worship" Ayanokouji Kiyotaka who had been made a God.

What a shame.

They originally accepted education to become number 1, but they gave up on becoming number 1 themselves.

That kind of person, how could they survive the White Room till the end?

In the end, I didn't need to snicker at how the group was eliminated one by one.

However, I wasn't entirely without periods of weakness. While it's true I didn't worship him, I suspected that the figure known as Ayanokouji Kiyotaka didn't actually exist, and instead was just a character used to motivate us.



The instructors must have seen right through my feelings.

One day, I received the instructor's orders to be taken to one of the visiting rooms used by the outsiders.

It was through a layer of class, but there, for the first time, I was able to confirm the existence of Ayanokouji Kiyotaka with my own eyes.

He couldn't have known I was looking at him, but he played down his surprising grades.

To this day, I still remember his figure, and shiver without even realizing it.

However, ask me if I felt like I was looking at a God, and I would strongly deny it.

That's not how it works. That existence is our enemy.

"Worship" wasn't fine. Only "hatred" was a feeling that could make us grow.

Yes, it was the feeling of hatred that was making my body tremble. It was because of my nonstop hatred for him that allowed me to successfully stay at the White Room until the end.

But at the end of the day, reverence, hatred, and the like were just an individual's private feelings or thoughts.

To the people in the organization, what the students thought weren't important.

The ultimate goal of the White Room wasn't to create people who could become number 1.

Instead, it was to establish the research that could allow for mass production of exceptional people.

That was the real reason for the White Room's existence.

It didn't matter if it was me or Ayanokouji Kiyotaka. As long as it was an example of a success, it didn't matter who it was.

And that was why failures were of no value.

In other words, if Ayanokouji Kiyotaka was chosen as the success story, then what would happen to the meaning of my existence, who was currently doing all this studying?

It would only be considered as one of many failures, ending a life as a worthless one.

What a tragic end of a road.

I would end up in the same place as the students who were eliminated.

How could I agree to such a thing?

I needed to prove that “Ayanokouji Kiyotaka” wasn’t number one by all means necessary.

I had to be recognized by that organization as the true success story.

And then a once in a lifetime opportunity presented itself to me.

Ayanokouji Kiyotaka breaks his orders, refusing to come back to the recently restarted White Room.

Thanks to this, the me who had never interacted with him before obtained a chance to contact Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.

-That’s right.

The unique opportunity for me to bury him had finally arrived.

And for that reason, it was better to just throw out this fabricated common sense.

By all accounts, killing him...was also one way to solve this problem.

## Chapter 1

School Life Is Changing

### Intro

On that day, class 2-D faced a strange situation that it had never experienced before.

Teruhiko Yukimura’s right leg trembled, as he looked towards the entrance of the classroom again and again.

“Can you calm down a little? It hasn’t even been 5 minutes since Kiyopon left. He was called out by the teacher, right? It’s going to be a while.”

Hasebe Haruka, a classmate and close friend, spoke to Yukimura.

Sakura Airi and Miyake Akito sat around her.

"I'm calm... don't worry."Yukimura answered. Although he stopped shaking his leg temporarily, it didn't take long for him to tense up again. He quietly shook his leg up and down, and it rustled his trousers..

Yukimura was planning to talk to Ayanokouji after school, but he gave up temporarily because of Horikita's appearance. Then he heard from her that Chabashira had called him away and he had gone off somewhere, so he resorted to waiting in the classroom for him to return. Hasebe sighed, somewhat helplessly, and looked out the window.

Knowing full well that Yukimura didn't normally shake his leg, she quickly realized that there was no point in trying to calm him down anymore. The atmosphere in the 2nd year Class D's classroom was heavy.

The May sky that ushered in the spring was so azure and clear, so beautiful, Hasebe thought to herself.

Then, she thought about it all over again. How had the situation become like this?

The first and second years had paired up for the special exam in April.

In the fifth subject test of that exam,, their friend Ayanokouji Kiyotaka achieved a perfect score in math.

If it were a normal test, it wouldn't be surprising to see students get a perfect score.

With the academically strong Yukimura in the lead, students who got a perfect score would appear every now and then. Of course, occasionally an unexpected hidden student would get a perfect score. These people either studied really hard before the exams, or they got lucky with how much the exam covered.

But this exam was like a world away from the previous one.

Of course, even though she wasn't as strong as Yukimura, Hasebe had still vaguely noticed it.

In this special exam, regardless of the subject, the only one in the class that had achieved a perfect score was Ayanokouji himself.

It couldn't be explained by cramming beforehand or by chance.



“It’s only been 6 minutes, huh... I don’t think he’ll come back yet.”

As a friend, she couldn’t leave the restless Yukimura alone. Hasebe was planning to move on to a completely different topic, but at the end, decided to stay with Yukimura, and leave the topic of the conversation to him. Although the reason for doing this was mainly because she thought she would be able to distract him a little, Hasebe herself wanted to know how incredible was the fact that Ayanokouji had achieved that perfect score in math.”

“Was the question *that* hard?”

Hearing the question, Yukimura nodded his head without hesitation.

“It’s not a question of whether it’s hard or not. I didn’t even understand the meaning of the question during the exam.”

What Yukimura meant was that it wasn’t that he couldn’t solve the answer; it was that he couldn’t even understand the question itself.

“After the exam, I tried to analyze the question through my memory and found that it was completely out of range for a highschool student. In other words, this was a question that we shouldn’t have been able to solve.”

“What’s up with that? What’s the school’s problem? It’s not even a question of what’s beyond the range of an exam anymore.”

“It really is unreasonable. That’s why the points you could get for each subject dropped drastically. But, there were also a lot of questions that weren’t as hard as what Chabshira told us they would be.”

In addition to forcing in a few unexpectedly difficult questions, there were also several low-level questions mixed in.

So, in other words, this exam was prepared so that even if you couldn’t get a perfect score, you also wouldn’t get a low score.

“So they made up for it by raising our average score?”

“After all, exam results are directly linked to expulsion. It was a big help to the class.”

This in itself was something to be happy about, but to Yukimura, it was just a small thing.

“Ayanokouji got a perfect score, which should be impossible. I...it's like I'm witnessing a magic trick!”

The fact that he specifically used his last name to call him showed Yukimura's resentment.

“S-so he solved such a question, Kiyotaka-kun sure is amazing!”

To try to change the current dreary atmosphere slightly, Sakura said this with a sage smile on her face.

But this seemed to have the opposite effect, and Yukimura's face tightened even more.

“I've worked to understand everyone's academic abilities during our first year, at least at a certain level. That's why I'm so surprised by this result because I judged that no one could do the question, based on that.”

“Do tell me more.”

Hearing the Ayanokouji group's conversation, Shinohara joined in.

Before he knew it, many of his classmates were listening to what Yukimura was saying.

“You've all checked the tablet, right? Is there anyone in the class who got a perfect score in one of the subjects? No, look at the other classes as well, and it'll be clear. Look at the entirety of the 2nd year. Not a single student, not even Ichinose or Sakayanagi, got a perfect score.”

Facts spoke louder than words. Yukimura brought the reality of what happened and put it on the table.

Using the tablet, you could see the results of the exams outside class 2D.

“I didn't even notice. You can even see the results of the other classes. Why is that?”

The shocked Shinohara took the tablet handed to her, and swiped incredulously.

“Who knows. Maybe it's because of the introduction of the OAA, or maybe it's some other reason. No matter what the reason is, we'll have to wait until the announcement of the details of the next exam to know the answer.”

“Waaah, I hate this! Wouldn't this mean that a lot of people will know my scores? This is the worst!”

Karuizawa Kei, the leader of the girls in the class said this as she lamented.

Then she went on to say this:

“Maybe Ayanokouji-kun is just a math genius! You know, sometimes in those TV dramas and stuff, isn’t there, like, a protagonist that only uses math or something to solve the murder case? I’m getting that kind of feeling.”

Hearing the words of Karuizawa, which although was from a different direction but just as tone deaf, Yukimura dismissed it with a dumbfounded expression.

“Then tell me, why didn’t he get a perfect score on his previous math tests? If he can solve questions of the kind that came this time, it doesn’t make sense for him to not have gotten a full score or something close to it all along.

Yukimura retorted forcefully, as if he felt that the other person had utterly missed the point.

“What’s the point in asking me that? Well, maybe it’s something like, he studied really hard during the spring break or something?”

Karuizawa’s off-the-point answer caused Yukimura to steadily grow more and more irritated.

“This isn’t something that can be done in a short amount of time. Even if he had studied at a higher level than I could imagine, it doesn’t explain how he was able to solve questions that are far beyond the knowledge of a high school student! If you can’t even understand that, then keep your mouth shut.”

His blunt response irritated Karuizawa as well, and it all gradually approached the boiling point.

“I don’t know anything about that. So can you stop getting so angry so easily? You’re pissing me off.”

“Yeah, yeah! Isn’t it weird that you’re taking your anger out on Karuizawa-san?”

Maezono immediately fired back at Yukimura, helping out Karuizawa.

Karuizawa, who had gained an ally, immediately turned around and started digging into what Yukimura had said.



“You’ve got a big mouth, but couldn’t it just be that you didn’t understand the question? Maybe it’s just you that couldn’t solve the question, but the question itself wasn’t that hard, was it?”

Karuizawa knew deep down that her words were far fetched.

But she didn’t change her attitude, because she felt as if she had to play the fool here.

However, as the atmosphere heated up at the scene, the doubts surrounding Ayanokouji inevitably grew deeper.

“Have you forgotten already? The question was such that even Sakayanagi and Ichinose couldn’t get full marks.”

“Then maybe he just happened to know that question?”

“I just said-“

Yukimura had already surpassed the realm of anger and had reached the point of speechlessness.

And then, in order to organize his emotions, he began to explain.

“I... well, basically, that guy... could probably be good at math at an unbelievable degree, I think.”

“So what’s the problem? That’s what I said, that he was a math genius, right?”

“That’s not the main point. If that’s the case, then that guy-“

“Ah, sorry for interrupting. I had a thought...”

Just as the conversation was taking an unexpected turn, Minami Setsuya threw himself into the fray.

“Ayanokouji getting a perfect score is indeed confusing, and I don’t think there’s anything strange with what Yukimura said. It’s just that, isn’t this happening too suddenly? After all, he’s never gotten any amazing marks before.”

This time the statement was as if to add to what Yukimura had said, yet launching doubts from a different direction at the same time.

“That’s why I was wondering, has this Ayanokouji done something shady?”

What began to occur in the minds of Yukimura and many other students was the idea of “Ayanokouji is a math genius”. However, another opinion that rejected that head-on had also come up.

The doubt of “What if he didn’t do it with his own strength?”

“It’s definitely possible. Like seeing the question paper beforehand or something. Remember, didn’t that happen in the 1st year as well? It was the one test that asked the exact same questions as the previous years!”

Remembering this, Kanji Ike said loudly.

A year ago in the spring, his classmate got the past questions from a 3rd year. It was an extremely difficult test, but if you could remember the answers, anyone could get a high score.

“But assuming that the questions were exactly the same as those in the past, isn’t it weird that he didn’t give us that information? And it’s also weird that no one in the other classes noticed it as well.”

Hearing Ike’s statement, Miyamoto calmly pointed out the parts that he couldn’t accept.

“Then... it’s the method that must not be named, knowing the answer to the question in advance...? Cheating.”

“Cheat? How would he even cheat?”

Shinohara, who was standing beside him, asked him that in response to his vague statement.

“Hacking the school computers and stealing the answers or something! Isn’t that possible!”

“That’s as stupid as what Karuizawa said...”

Yukimura had a headache, in the face of the class’s already unmanageable mess.

Yet miraculously, it was through this speculative topic that the time began to flow solidly.

The heat of the discussion focused around the possibility that Ayanokouji hadn’t solved the problem with his own strength, instead getting the answer in some other way.

Considering that he never scored high before, this was probably the natural course for the discussion.

But the one who reversed the direction was Sudo Ken, who had been listening silently until then.

He stood up, and his towering 186cm tall frame instantly gathered the attention of the entire class.

“You seem to be getting rather excited, but there isn’t even a shred of evidence of Ayanokouji cheating, is there? Don’t just jump to conclusions when the person in question isn’t here.”

The words themselves were perfectly reasonable, but the fact that those words came out of Sudo surprised everyone.

In particular, Ike, who had been good friends with Sudou for a long time, didn’t seem pleased.

“What do you mean, Ken? Don’t tell me you’re taking Ayanokouji’s side?”

“That’s not what I meant. But there is no way he was easily able to see the question paper, right?... I just thought that it’s more likely that he got that perfect score with his own abilities.”

The 2nd half of what he said wasn’t as clear, but he expressed his opinion nonetheless.

“If we’re talking about ability, his academic score in OAA last month was lower than mine, right? It would have been impossible if he was not cheating!”

Miyamoto, who had looked at the just updated OAA data after school, said as if he had already decided that Ayanokouji had cheated.

“That just means he’s different from last year. Anyone can grow.”

“Isn’t it just as Sudo-kun says? After all, Sudo-kun’s academic ability surpassed Miyamoto-kun’s too.”

Kei’s sharp criticism embarrassed Miyamoto for a moment.

One year ago, calling Sudo the worst in the entire year wasn’t an exaggeration. But now, after the OAA was updated, his academic ability had suddenly climbed to 54. It was only one more point than Miyamoto’s 53, but it was still higher.

“We-well, that’s because Sudo was studying hard, I acknowledge his growth, but...but Ayanokouji is growing too much, too fast!”



“So that’s why there’s a possibility that he’s holding back, just like Koenji!”

Now, Karuizawa’s previous point of him being a math genius started up again.

It seemed like the conversation had come full circle, and was headed towards an even worse direction.

“Well isn’t that even more of a problem? Doesn’t that mean he didn’t contribute to the class?”

Points that could have been scored, but he didn’t go for them.

If he really were hiding his strength, then there would be nothing wrong with what Ike just said.

Sudo and the others, who always had a good relationship in their friend circle, were about to be plunged into internal strife.

Judging that they couldn’t let this drag on any longer, one of the students acted as the arbitrator.

“Let’s all calm down a bit. We can’t solve the problem by just getting heated up here, can we?”

At a time when the class’s atmosphere was getting worse, Hirata Yosuke stepped in and pressed the pause button. Hirata, who usually took the lead in unifying the class, kept quiet until the very end this time. He decided to wait until he was sure of what the class was considering, what they were thinking, before acting to break the impasse.

Hirata first spoke to Sudo gently.

“Sudo-kun, isn’t it almost time for your club activities?”

“Eh? Ahhhh, now that you say that...”

The reality check suddenly woke Sudo up.

“I know you’re concerned about this topic, but there are many things that are uncertain right now. I do not think it is good to let your club activities be affected by mere speculation. You know by now that the “I’ll be late just this one time” excuse won’t work, right?”

Hirata judged that the primary goal for now was to reduce the number of students in the classroom.

He calmed down Sudo and the others, who had gotten so hot headed that they'd forgotten about their club activities. The introduction of the OAA had caused the number of students concerned about their grades to skyrocket, Sudo included.

Sudo picked up his bag quietly, after briefly glancing at the back of Suzune, who hadn't said a word through the entire commotion, left the classroom. The other students who belonged to clubs followed suit.

"I have to go too. I'm sorry, I'll leave Keisei to you."

"Yeah. Miyacchi, see you later."

Miyake, who was a member of the Ayanokouji group, packed up his archery club things and left the turbulent atmosphere of the classroom, with Sakura and Hasebe seeing him off.

Although there were a few more students who left, more than half of the class still remained in the classroom.

## Part - 1

Our Class D had just finished our first special exam after becoming 2nd years.

Although I injured my left hand in the conflict against Hosen, I managed to eliminate my risk of getting expelled. The wound which was the price I paid for that would probably take a while to heal, but that couldn't be helped.

Under Tsukishiro's watch, I left the reception room, and as soon as the door was closed I let out a short breath.

And now, my daily routine of a carefree student life would finally return...

As if the current situation would allow for such naive thoughts.

Besides, the current environment had already begun to drift away from everyday life.

In the eyes of many students, being called to talk with the Acting Director was an astonishing thing. As I thought about it, I had to accept the reality in front of my eyes, the reality that I couldn't do anything about.

I could only conclude like this: I had escaped to this school, but there was now a chain that would follow me forever. After all, the only way to be free of it was to get expelled.

“Looks like you’re done talking?”

“Well, yeah.”

Chabashira, who was waiting not far from the reception room, casually joined me.

I was a bit dejected, looking at Chabashira’s figure, but I didn’t let it show on my face.

As of now, Tsukishiro didn’t know that I was working with Chabashira, who was the homeroom teacher of Class 2-D, and Mashima-sensei of Class 2-A. In that situation, Chabashira was waiting here for me after I had been summoned by Tsukishiro. What was that if not unnatural?

If you thought of it as Chabashira’s duty as a class teacher to summon me, I guess it wasn’t a problem; but this was Tsukishiro, so I couldn’t rule out the possibility of this being one of his traps. Because of that, my intention was for her to have left without meeting me again.

For an ordinary student teacher pair, it would be unnatural for the teacher to wait around for the student.

If she were calmer, Chabashira might have arrived at that conclusion herself.

She must have been influenced by the fact that I got a perfect score in math, and that I had made part of my strength public. It’s not like I couldn’t understand her restlessness, but this was careless of her.

In her defence, she and I have very different ideas of that man.

To Chabashira, the foremost thing was that he was connected to the father of one of her students.

After all, she didn’t know anything about the background of the White Room, so it was excusable.

It was only natural that our sense of caution and warmth towards him differed.

And such, I won’t make any comments about it..

The only thing I could do now was leave the scene as fast as possible, so I continued walking forward.

“You’ll be a bit of a celebrity from now on.”

I was wondering what she would say, and it turned out to be about *that*.

“I’m not too happy about it, but it was a necessary measure. I can only assume that this is within the bounds of what is permitted.”

“Ignoring the students in the other classes for a moment, how are you going to explain it to your own class? You’ve always done your best to try and seem inconspicuous, but suddenly you get a perfect score in that difficult math test. Of course they won’t leave you alone now. Have you prepared for this scenario beforehand?”

I ignored her words as I thought about what to do for the rest of the day.

I’d left my bag in the classroom, so I had to go back.

“There’s no use in acting in advance. I’ll start from this stage.”

Specifically telling my classmates beforehand that I was going to get a perfect score in math in the special exam would have been a questionable thing to do.

“This is going to be hard for you. Prepare yourself to be bombarded with questions.”

“I know.”

If you already had some idea of what was going to happen, couldn’t you just let me go now?

“Can we stop here? If I’m walking with a teacher alone from now on, it’ll attract a lot of unnecessary attention.”

I know, I know. Chabashira muttered as she headed towards the office.

She looked like she was trying her best to suppress her emotions, but I could easily tell that she was overflowing with joy.

Compared to the rest of the homeroom teachers, she seemed to be the one who maintained the most distance from her students, but in reality, she might actually be the closest. It was precisely because of the regrets she has from the time she was a student that her hard-to-suppress feelings came out.

In front of the average student, her poker face would be sufficient... but to me, it was just comical. Being easy to manipulate was an advantage, but now it was just getting in the way.

There was no point in wasting my energy on Chabashira, so I cast her into the back of my mind for the time being.

After that, I tried to call Horikita, and although it connected, she didn't pick up.

I then tried sending her a simple text, but she didn't read it.

"Can't be helped, huh."

Right now, Horikita seemed like the most helpful person to resolve the situation, due to the past year, her involvement in the mathematics duel and the matters relating to the student council.

Explaining the situation a bit would allow for a bit more flexibility. If possible, I would have liked to have prepared a bit first, but it looks like we'll have to do it off the cuff.

I could already see my classroom.

I wonder what it was like in the classroom just after my perfect score in math came out.

It would be ideal if almost all the students went back to their dormitories like normal.

As soon as I got back to the classroom, I could see that the scene in front of me differed from what I had been hoping for.

It had been just about thirty minutes since I'd been summoned by Tsukishiro.

Normally, a large majority of the students would have left the school already.

However, even though the only students in the classroom were the ones who didn't have club activities, there were still quite a few that remained.

Their objective went without saying. It had to be me.

For those who experienced the atmosphere of the scene and the way they were looking at me, it was clear as day.

Horikita, who hadn't answered my call before, was also here.

Looks like Horikita had assessed the situation better than I would have expected.

I didn't have time to express my gratitude, because as soon as I stepped in, a horde of students descended on me.

The one leading the charge was a member of the Ayanokouji group, Keisei. In stark contrast to the overjoyed Chabashira, his expression was somewhat resentful.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t talk to you when you called out earlier.”

Keisei wanted to talk to me right after school, but Horikita’s appearance cut him off, so I first apologized for that.

“That’s fine. I take it you have time now? I have a few questions I want to ask.”

Haruka and Airi, who were also from the Ayanokouji group, gathered around him.

Akito wasn’t there, probably due to the club activities I had mentioned before.

And a large portion of the other spectators also pricked up their ears and watched the situation.

“You... what’s with the 100 points in math? I checked the scores of all the other 2nd years with the OAA, and even Ichinose and Sakayanagi didn’t get perfect scores. You’re the only one in the entire year.”

Normally, just getting a good score in an exam wouldn’t create this kind of atmosphere.

But this exam was an entirely different beast.

In particular, the more academic ability a student had, the more they could grasp the abnormality of getting a perfect score in this exam.

It seemed like even those who were too academically weak to understand it themselves had also understood that abnormality after the students around them told them about it.

“About that-“

My eyes wandered over to Horikita, whose seat was in the front row, to ask for help.

“Well, let me explain this.”

Normally by this time, Horikita would have returned to the dorm, but she must have seen the situation with the remaining students in the classroom and decided to stay. An accurate judgement. Because of the fact that her attention was on me this whole time, I did not need to confirm with her that she had stayed back to try and help me smooth things over.

To help collect the dispersed attention, she stood up and walked up to my side.



"I'm... asking Kiyotaka."

Keisei expressed his intense disgust at Horikita, who had stepped in as an unnecessary outsider.

"Yes. But, Yukimura-kun, I am the one who has the answers you are looking for."

"... What do you mean?"

Because she had used a deliberately mystifying expression, Horikita managed to gather the attention of Keisei and all the other students with a single sentence.

"Yukimura-kun and I- no, the entire 2nd year couldn't get this perfect score, so how was Ayanokouji-kun able to achieve that? Don't you all think that's inconceivable?"

Horikita directed the question to Keisei, but everyone on the scene was definitely thinking it too.

"That's right... To be honest, my head is a mess. I said this before, right? The questions at the end of the paper were impossible to solve. But Kiyotaka did them all like nobody's business, and I just can't understand it."

In fact, when the exam concluded, I remember that part of the class were extremely shocked with the content of the exam. Starting with Keisei and Yosuke, the students who had the best grades were discussing the extremely difficult questions. The topic had even spread over to the Ayanokouji group, and I remember that instead of giving a clear answer as to whether I'd solved it or not, I vaguely dodged the question.

"Kiyotaka should know very well that nobody in the class could solve those problems. Yet we didn't even see him brag about how he solved them. Isn't that weird? It even makes it seem like he has something he can't reveal... maybe he did something bad, and kn

ew the answers from the start, or something like that."

"He cheated... Of course, it's not surprising that you want to think that."

Horikita took Keisei's euphemistically phrased words and put them bluntly.

Keisei looked away in embarrassment, but Horikita continued to pursue the topic.

"In this situation, it's hard not to be suspicious. If I were a student who knew nothing, I would definitely feel the same way, and believe that Ayanokouji-kun had been secretly cheating. However, that isn't the case here."

Horikita took a breath, and scanned the students who were watching her.

“I’m planning to explain the same thing for the people who aren’t here now. To solve the mystery of Ayanokouji-kun’s perfect score, we’ll have to go back to spring of last year.”

Spring of last year. In other words, the time in which we first came to this school.

“We have since switched seats, but it must still be fresh in your memory that until recently, we were seatmates, right? Not long after school started, when I was talking to Ayanokouji-kun, I happened to find out that he was extremely good at academics... Even better than me.”

“Better than you in academics? Hold on. I remember Kiyotaka’s scores being about average all around since school started. I’m sorry, but I can’t see anything about it being worthy of special attention. Isn’t his grade on the OAA a C, the overall average?”

Even Keisei’s sharp question which came from his clear memory of the past didn’t faze Horikita.

“Of course. That’s because my strategy was already in motion before the first exam was completed.”

As Horikita said that, she moved away from me, towards the lectern. This was meant to shift the focus of all the students. She must have done this to draw attention away from me.

I did think that she would help me out, but the way she did it was better than I expected.

“From the very start he had the knowledge to get perfect scores in math. As I knew this before anyone else, I thought up a little strategy.”

“...A little strategy?”

For Keisei, he wouldn’t have just one or two questions.

He had to be wondering how I had obtained that knowledge.

But for now, Horikita moved away from that, and continued on with the topic.

On not how I had obtained that knowledge, but about why it was necessary to conceal my academic excellence.

Horikita merely treated it as a focal point to attract the attention of the other people onto this point.

“Last April, we of Class D were overjoyed to have received such a large sum of money. I’m ashamed to say that I was also one of them. But I had a feeling something unexpected was going to happen in turn. During that time, I asked Ayanokouji-kun, who sat next to me, if he could hold back in the exam. You could call this a reserve tactic or a trump card. Of course, I told him to keep it at a level which wouldn’t hold the class back. And that’s how his academic ability got rated C by the school.”

Horikita spun the utterly unremarkable academic ability that I’d maintained until now as a part of a formulated strategy. Of course, if people carefully looked back at what happened a year ago, some would definitely find it weird. The fact that Horikita back then wasn’t someone who could get along with others, what the exact time was when Horikita noticed that I was good at academics, et cetera. There were holes everywhere.

However, to most people, memories from a year ago were of a distant past. Unlike the intense events that had been engraved into the hippocampus itself, that scene did not make a deep impression, so it was even more forgettable.

Only a handful of people would be able to remember those events as if it were yesterday.

Most would go, “so it was like that, huh” and use their imagination to fill in the gaps in memory.

Of course, it wouldn’t pass for people such as Keisei who had a strong sense of mistrust.

He didn’t let go of Horikita, and went after the parts that would be difficult to explain.

“...Your words are hardly convincing. If you had doubts surrounding the rules of the school, it would be beneficial for the class as a whole for him to get higher scores from the start. Since he got a perfect score on this exam, getting an A or A+ in academic ability isn’t impossible. You could say it was just one person’s grades, but even that could’ve slowly increased the number of points of our class.”

Keisei expressed that he was completely unable to grasp the advantages of this reserve strategy.

“That, huh. If we were only looking at the class points in front of us, that would be fine. But if he had gone all out from the start – what do you think would’ve happened to Ayanokouji by now? No, to put it more accurately, what do you think his future would have been like?”

Faced with Keisei’s mistrust, Horikita improvised and took it head on without running away.

She was so eloquent it was like she planned this all out from the start.

“What I think his future would have been like...?”

As he didn’t understand, Keisei repeated the question, so Horikita started to elaborate.

“Let us go by what Yukimura-kun said, and assume that Ayanokouji-kun had gone all out since April of last year. If that was the case, then by May, Sakayanagi-san, Ichinose-san, and Ryuen-kun would definitely have learned of his name. If they ignored the person who was the best in math in the entire year, he would become an obstacle to them sooner or later. It wouldn’t be surprising if someone moved to try and get him expelled.”

“So you’re saying, people might have targeted him?”

“Correct. Anything can happen in this school. After all, there was even an exam which forcibly expelled people through an intra-class vote. And in fact, at that time, Ayanokouji-kun was at risk of dropping out due to Sakayanagi-san’s strategy. Although that was when he was completely average and was coincidentally chosen as a patsy, it’s possible that it really was aimed at him.”

Horikita was saying that according to the situation, the one who got expelled might have been me instead of Yamauchi.

“No, that’s wrong. If Kiyotaka had been serious from the start, even if we were to put Yamauchi and him at different ends of a balance the result would have been clear as day.”

“I wonder. In order to avoid getting expelled, Yamauchi would have been more careful when making his moves, and Sakayanagi-san’s strategy would have been more complex and harder to see through. Besides, Yamauchi-kun had at least had more people close to him than Ayanokouji-kun. As the things put on both ends of the scales would be different, opinions would follow that change.”

If it continued on like this, it would end up as nothing more than arguing for the sake of argument, so Keisei was unable to investigate this point in depth.

Even if he brought up any of the other exams, the logic would be the same.

“...So why are you revealing this now? If you carelessly reveal his strength, the results will be the same. He’s been drawing attention now that you suddenly showed his strength to everyone, and soon he could also become a target.”

Keisei thought that there was no difference in the risks of going all out from the start and going all out now.

But it seemed like Horikita was expecting him to say that, and showed no signs of panicking.

“No, there’s a huge difference between showing his strength a year ago and revealing his strength now. In the past year, the unity of our Class D had grown by leaps and bounds, and each of us has grown in individual strength. We’ve become able to make the right decisions.”

I’m sure that if he looked back at himself a year ago, Keisei would have seen it the same way.

“It isn’t just Ayanokouji-kun. Let’s say, yes... He isn’t here, but it might be easier to understand with the example of Sudo-kun. This time last year, he was hard to look at, and undoubtedly the biggest burden to our class. But what about now? Although there’s still remnants of his wild nature left over, he has improved dramatically. In terms of academic ability, he’s shown outstanding growth. And with his already excellent physical abilities combined, his OAA evaluation as of May is even higher than yours, Yukimura-kun.”

Keisei was still above him in April, but with this exam, Sudo turned the tables on him.

She struck Keisei with the irrefutable fact of the OAA overall evaluation score.

“When we first entered this school, did either of us have the strength or willingness to protect Sudo-kun?”

For those students who had discussed whether they should abandon Sudo, who didn’t even bother thinking of ways to save him, would they have been able to seriously try and protect a fellow classmate? That’s what Horikita meant. However, if Sudo was in trouble now, Keisei would definitely rack his brains along with the others to think of a strategy to protect him.

“But now, if someone has their attention on Ayanokouji-kun, we could now work together to protect him. That is how I have judged it. And that’s why I’ve made Ayanokouji-kun’s true strength public, and started to raise the overall strength of our class.”

There were already some students that had accepted what she had said.

However, more than half of the students still harboured doubts.

Then again, Horikita didn’t have the material to be able to convince everyone.

Since the entire story was varnished with lies, it was inevitable that it would come off at points.

Of course, it wasn't as if it was impossible to strike a truce for now.

However, things would be different if we had much stronger backup.

After confirming that most of the attention was on Horikita, I looked at Yousuke.

The boy who enjoyed the absolute trust of the class.

Although Yousuke was facing Horikita, he would occasionally pretend to look around while actually observing me. Then, when he judged that it wouldn't be noticed, he met my eyes.

Just like with the other students, there were a lot of things I didn't tell Yousuke. If it had been any other student, they would probably be just as suspicious or doubtful of me as Keisei and the others were, and would join them in throwing harsh questions at me; but I had nothing to worry about only from Yousuke.

He would give the highest priority to the thing that would be the best for the class as a whole.

In the current situation, even without being told he clearly understood what his role was.

"I understand, if only a little bit, this reserve strategy of yours, Horikita. On that basis, I have another question. Is Ayanokouji outstanding at math alone?"

"I can't comment on that at this stage."

Horikita calmly responded to Keisei's question.

"The student known as Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, has he shown the full extent of his abilities, or is he still holding back? No matter what the "real truth" is, we can hide it to ensure Ayanokouji continues to remain a thorn on their side for the other classes."

"That—"

"I see. I clearly understand what Horikita-san is trying to say."

Just as Keisei was about to press on Horikita, he was hit by covering fire from Yousuke, who had been observing from the start.

And then Yousuke slowly made his way over to Horikita's side.

"I didn't get it at first, but I've been listening to the discussion, and now I understand. It's true that an enemy whose abilities are unknown can be dangerous. They will then want



to know more and try to gather information. But if even our own classmates don't know the truth, it'll be pointless for them to keep digging."

By lucidly conveying it to everyone around them, he supported Horikita and filled in the gaps in her arguments.

Judging that Yousuke was her ally, Horikita joined in step with him and agreed.

"Yeah. He's bound to attract attention in the future anyway, so let's just make full use of him. Letting our opponents see him as an unknown factor is the better course of action. There might even be students outside listening in on us right now. This is that kind of school."

Everyone glanced towards the hallway. Was the student known as Ayanokouji only good at math, or did his excellence extend to the other subjects? We will mislead the other classes and make them wonder about how much of a threat I should be considered. When mixed with Yousuke's, Horikita's words immediately became heavier.

"Horikita-san really is good, isn't she? I'm a little moved."

Right then, Kei struck with a casual statement.

"Don't you think so as well, Shinohara-san?"

Then she sought agreement from her own friend, Shinohara.

I think she was trying to split the others' attention by drawing it away from my abilities and elevating Horikita as well. Even though I hadn't given Kei a signal or instructions like I did with Yousuke, she instantly understood what she had to do and did it.

"That's right! I feel like I've been seeing Horikita-san and Ayanokouji-kun talking secretly for a long time now, but it turns out that they're really just doing it for the class!"

When she first came to school, Horikita didn't talk to anyone but me.

This fact, in the end, turned out to be useful material.

And now, it seems like it gave us a sense of credibility.

The brilliant way in which Yousuke and Kei covered for us surreptitiously had an outstanding effect. The group mentality of "If Yousuke and the others think it's true, then it must be true" was also working powerfully.

“A strategy of hiding our strength.... That’s true, the other classes must also be quite shocked now.”

Even Keisei, who had been suspicious up to now was no exception

“Although I didn’t completely understand the situation of the school, I thought keeping an insurance plan would be good. I don’t know if this is fortunate or unfortunate, but Ayanokouji-kun is bad at communicating, and it seems like he didn’t like to stand out. For those reasons as well, I also wanted him to hide it.”

Horikita expressed that the strategy was possible because both of our plans happened to line up.

She then looked away from Keisei, and addressed the class.

“That’s the secret of how Ayanokouji-kun got a full score in math. Sorry for surprising you all.”

Horikita had but one chance at it, and she survived beautifully and prevailed. But if we let them hang around here for too long, questions might start sprouting up again.

“I think it would be better if we left it at that for now. As Horikita-san said, the walls have ears.”

Yousuke closed the topic cleanly, and explained to the others why it would be bad to keep talking like this. The smarter the student was, the more doubts they would have, but at the same time, as the smarter they were, they more likely they would realise that this wasn’t a conversation we ought to have here. The proof of this was that even the never ending verbal onslaught of Keisei stopped.

In a way, you could say that this meeting diverted their doubts to some extent.

And thanks to Horikita’s achievements which surpassed my imagination, it would be easier for me to act in the future.

Even if I showed my strength outside of mathematics, it could be explained by the fact that I had been concealing it. The preparation that she did here was crucial.

I’m honestly grateful to her for dealing with this without even preparing with me in advance.

Part - 2

The classroom after dismissal.

The students dispersed, welcoming the late end to the school day.

I'll thank Horikita and Yosuke another day. They might have understood what I intended, as Horikita was the first to leave. While, Yosuke was laughing with the girls with Kei at the centre as they started walking out the classroom, just like normal. I picked my bag up, mixed in with everyone, and walked out into the hallway.

My day would have been considered over... But the situation now wasn't as simple.

Although it's enough for making everyone to understand the main points, personal problems were different.

A few people chased after me right away. I knew without even thinking that they were members of the Ayanokouji group. Among the people approaching from behind, there was someone at the front whose footsteps sounded intense. There was no need to look back to know how much frustration Keisei had built up

I pretended not to notice and continued to walk forward. After a bit, he spoke to me.

"Kiyotaka."

I slowed to a halt after my name was called.

Looking back, all three of them still had stiff expressions.

"Going back without even saying hello, isn't that a bit cruel?"

Haruka, the most outspoken of the group, forcefully spoke.

Representing both the severe Keisei at the front and the concerned Airi at the back, she expressed what they both wanted to say.

This seemed to have an effect, as the emotional Keisei who was on the verge of bursting kept his mouth shut for the time being.

After taking a breath, he said this once more.

"Why didn't you tell us before?... If it's to hide information as Horikita said, does that mean that you don't trust us at all?"

Although he acknowledged Horikita's statements to an extent, he still looked dissatisfied.

That was par for the course.

It was like I crushed Keisei's feelings as he was kindly, and seriously, teaching me.

Because they were clear on this point, Haruka and Airi were also following him.

The easy way to get this over with was to put all the blame on Horikita.

But I couldn't bear doing such a thing to her, as she'd just crucially helped me right before.

No, this sentiment was unnecessary. There was a need to think about the future.

Keisei was an excellent student, and he was not one of the slow ones in the class in terms of accurately judging situations. But if I don't positively accept him, I'll just be making him carry a strong psychological burden from now on. And if he couldn't function properly, it would be damaging to the class. It also wouldn't be good for Horikita who held the reins of power.

"I've always trusted you guys. But I judged that not revealing it to anyone was better for the plan in the future. It's because I've been so close to you guys that I've had to stifle my desire to tell you and keep quiet."

Instead of placing the blame on someone else, I told Keisei that it was my own judgement. Even though he approached aggressively, seeing that he hesitated to say what he wanted after listening to Haruka, doing this would make him have no choice but to move his emotions to the side.

"I completely understand your anger over this incident. After all, this is related to the group you're closest with, and you even tutored me. I'm truly sorry."

Anyone would feel uncomfortable if the person you were teaching was hiding that is better than you.

And I guess Haruka and Airi by his side felt the same.

Haruka heard my apology from the side, and she didn't say anything else.

She probably judged that she had to let Keisei think, and digest it on his own, so she kept silent.

"To be honest, I'm still angry. You could have told me from the start that you didn't need to be taught, that you could have passed the exam without any problems, and that you could have handled it on your own."

“You’re right.”

To Keisei, my situation and background didn’t matter.

It’s only natural that he wanted me to have told him from the start.

“And based on what Horikita said, you’ll continue to hold back after this, right? If you don’t tell me which subject you will and will not hold back in, I can’t completely trust you.”

From now on, Keisei will always have his doubts. Stuff like, “what was this guy good at, and what was he not good at.”

As someone who taught others, he had to think badly of having someone as strange as that close to him.

“I want out of this group- Well, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t have that thought.”

“Yukimuu, are you serious?”

Haruka, who had remained silent, spoke up.

After all, it’s impossible to stay silent after hearing that.

“Yeah, I’m serious. Until I heard Horikita’s explanation, I was determined to leave because I didn’t think Kiyotaka could be trusted at all. But...even so, after being in the same group for so long, I can still understand some things. I know that Kiyotaka isn’t a bad person. Since he was hiding something for the sake of the entire class, it’s understandable that he didn’t want to tell anyone. Kiyotaka could have told me that he didn’t need tutoring, that is true, but he’s bad with words, so he couldn’t say it. I can understand that too.”

Keisei clenched his fists and said it without trying to hide it.

“It’s just...yeah, it’s just... I need some time to sort my thoughts out.”

Saying that, Keisei deliberately sighed loudly.

“There’s no advantage in taking this further... In the end, what I wanted to say, what I wanted to express is... it doesn’t matter even if you hide your strength in other areas. It’s not like you’re holding the class back like Koenji, so no one has the right to complain. If I continue to criticize you forcefully, the atmosphere will become even worse.”

Arguably the most dissatisfied and unconvinced person, Keisei, chose to suppress those feelings for the sake of the Ayanokouji group, as well as his fellow classmates.

“Even though my rational side is clear with that, I can’t suppress it emotionally, so I’ll need to reflect on that. Next, I’ll recognize the part of your strength that you revealed as a real thing. As for the other subjects, I’ll continue to use my previous assumption that you’re passable, and I’ll continue to tutor you. Is that fine?”

In a situation where our friendship could collapse, this was definitely a valuable proposal.

I had no reason to refuse, so I nodded my head and straightforwardly accepted.

“Thank you, Keisei.”

I chose to express my gratitude in words.

Airi, who had witnessed everything, finally found the courage to speak.

“H-how about you two do a...reconciliation handshake?”

“A reconciliation handshake? That’s nice!”

Hearing Airi’s proposal, Haruka expressed her agreement.

Feeling the heavy, depressed atmosphere being gradually dispelled, Keisei immediately shook his head.

“Don’t, it’s embarrassing.”

Haruka quickly grabbed the right hand of Keisei who wanted to refuse. She also grabbed my right hand at basically the same time.

“Alright, make up!”

Saying that, she shoved our hands together, forcing us to shake them.

We didn’t prepare our hands to shake, so they just touched each other.

“If you don’t shake hands, I won’t let go, alright?”

“I know, I know...!”



Perhaps having his hand touch mine in this half-assed handshake was even more humiliating, as Keisei gave in in the end.

With that, the two of us shook hands, a symbol of our official reconciliation.

“I’m fine with it, but Akito still doesn’t know anything.”

“Miyacchi probably won’t be a problem. I think he’ll just accept Kiyopon like normal right?”

“...That’s true.”

Keisei thought for a bit. He quickly came to the same conclusion after thinking about his image of Akito.

“Well, everything’s back to normal. It feels we’ve taken a huge weight off our shoulders, right?”

Right~? Haruka and Airi looked at each other, both agreeing.

“In any case, you’ve become a celebrity so quickly, Kiyopon... That...”

Haruka stared at me like she remembered something, and became stiff.

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

“What’s wrong, Haruka-chan?”

Airi, worried about the Haruka who stopped moving, said something to her.

At that moment, she continued, as if the magic had become undone.

“Oh, ahh. Well, it’s nothing. Anyway, it’s going to be hard for you since you’re a celebrity now!”

“Isn’t getting full marks a bit excessive? Sakayanagi, who was 2nd in the year, got 91 points.”

After Keisei acknowledged me, his worries shifted to something else.

“Speaking of Sakayanagi-san, she got similar scores in all her subjects, right?”

Airi tried to think back.

She got 91 points in math, and surprisingly, she had similar scores in the other subjects. Considering the difficulty of the exams, she was a student who was undoubtedly extremely good at academics. In the entire year, she was definitely second only to me. What was more impressive was that she hadn't studied in an extraordinary environment like the White Room. In that case, it wasn't an exaggeration for her to call herself a genius.

"I know she was smart, but ever since the introduction of the OAA, her strength has become more apparent."

Although there was regret in his voice, Keisei honestly acknowledged Sakayanagi's strength.

There was no need to doubt her high scores in the past, but her strength had now reached another level.

Had she deliberately held back, or had she started to study outside of class?

No matter what, there's no doubt she'd become more of a problem than before, and even more of an opponent we had to beat.

"As a commemoration of our conciliation, why don't we meet at Keyaki mall once Miyacchi's club activities end?"

There wasn't a single person who refused Haruka's suggestion.

### Part - 3

Evening, 7 pm, in front of Keyaki mall.

I came here before them and silently waited for them.

As the one who caused the chaos, I thought it'd be better not keep anyone waiting, especially today.

"I've arrived too early..."

The clock right now pointed to 6:30.

Even so, I didn't find waiting to be painful. Rather, it wouldn't be much of a stretch to call it one of my special skills.

It was nice to have some time to empty my mind.

However, although it wasn't a small price, things changed into something troublesome.

In other words, me being alone would attract attention instead. Because my test results were shown to everyone but the 3rd years, it probably won't be long before it gets noticed by students across all school years.. I'm afraid that the inquisitive eyes of my senpais and kouhais will be on me for a while.

I had nothing to do for the time being, and so I just stood there. Suddenly, my phone vibrated, and so I took it out, noticing a message from the Ayanokouji group. Airi said that she was leaving the dormitory now. The other 4 had all read the message.

I haven't told them I was already here, and so I just skimmed through their respective statuses.

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

I wasn't paying attention since I was immersed with my phone. It was Ichinose who called out to me, so I lifted my head.

She was accompanied by her classmate Kanzaki. Although the school prided itself on its large school area, the places students went to were limited. As a result, if you waited at the Keyaki mall entrance, a place where many students frequented, bumping into people you knew was normal.

"I'm waiting for my friends to go eat. How about you guys?"

There was nothing to hide about it, so I answered honestly.

Ichinose and Kanzaki replied in time with each other, without even exchanging looks.

"We're doing something similar, aren't we?"

"Yes."

Kanzaki curtly replied. But his gaze was more focused on Ichinose than it was on me.

Something similar, eh? But even if something was similar, it was also different.

"Say, I've seen your exam results. You actually got a perfect score in math, that's amazing!"

"Judging from last year's OAA, you shouldn't have the strength to get a full score."

Ichinose didn't raise any questions about me hiding my strength. Kanzaki, on the other hand, opposed her, not hiding his displeasure in his words in the slightest.

"There's a lot of reasons for this. It was only after discussing with my comrades that I decided to hide the fact that I'm good at math."

I explained it like that. If it were Ichinose and Kanzaki, they would understand the situation to an extent.

They should be able to use their imaginations to reinforce what I've said to make it more complete.

Usually, explaining it like that would be enough. But this time, Kanzaki's sharp glance didn't fade.

"So you're saying that you've been hiding it all this time. It looks like you're even more of an issue than I thought."

"Kanzaki-kun, don't say it like that. No matter what class it is, they'll have their own ideas, and of course, their own strategies."

Kanzaki accepted Ichinose's criticism as a matter of course.

"That's true. He didn't use dirty tricks as Ryuen did as well. Still, there's a few things I don't like about him. Ichinose, you should be very aware of the fact that it's not at all easy to be able to solve that extremely difficult question to get full marks. He says he's following his comrade's instructions but--"

Kanzaki was about to continue, but Ichinose stopped him with a rare forceful tone.

"Ayanokouji-kun is not our enemy."

Ichinose was very dissatisfied with Kanzaki's thorny, hostile attitude. It's true that that sort of attitude was rare for Kanzaki, but if I had to choose who had the correct attitude, I'd definitely select Kanzaki, who was on guard.

"Our alliance has been dissolved. There's no doubt that Class 2-D is our enemy."

"That's...but there's no point for us to engage in a pointless dispute!"

"This isn't a dispute. It's just necessary for us to know the true strength of our opponent."

“Ayanokouji-kun did indeed hide the fact that he was good at math; this was a fact that had been hidden.”

Kanzaki took a step forward; now the distance between us was less than the distance between him and Ichinose.

“Then, what else? Is it just math? No, it can’t be just math. What other abilities are you hiding? Did you hide those legs you’re so proud of during last year’s sports festival because of orders from your comrades? To Class B... No, Class C, the worst thing is that you still have other strengths hidden away.”

“However, there’s a limit to test scores. No matter how good you are at studying, the max you can get on a subject is 100 points, and the highest grade is an A+. Even if he gets full marks in all of them, there’s not much of a gap between him and Sakayanagi-san, the second in the year.”

In reality, there was only a 9 point difference between Sakayanagi-san and me.

Even if we had the same difference in all five subjects, it would only add up to 45 points. Ichinose didn’t think that was much of a threat.

“Our overall scores in Class C are much higher than that. The point difference from Ayanokouji-kun after showing his true strength, we just have to make up for that with our whole class.

“That might be true if it’s just a written test... but-“

“We should stop here, Kanzaki-kun. You also know that this isn’t a thing we should be arguing about heatedly here, right?”

Ichinose, who had always been a pacifist, was worried that if we kept arguing intensely in front of Keyaki mall, which was a crowded place, it would sooner or later descend into chaos.

“It seems like I’ve indeed lost my cool.”

Kanzaki, perhaps thinking that continuing the argument here wouldn’t solve the problem, shut his mouth, and helplessly averted his gaze.

“I’ll go first.”

With that, Kanzaki left Ichinose here, and quickly disappeared into Keyaki mall.

We quietly looked at him leaving.

"I'm sorry, but given the current situation, Kanzaki-kun definitely doesn't have much legroom."

Class B, which had always maintained its position, had now fallen to Class C.

Given the failure of the style of fighting that had worked so far, the entire class had no choice but to change its direction. In this situation, it was understandable that he was like that.

Or rather, the Ichinose who was still able to be pleasant to me in this situation was the one who was different.

Kanzaki was starting to think they should abandon their naivety in the future, and he was right.

"Was it me that's wrong...?"

Ichinose wasn't completely unaware of what Kanzaki was thinking.

But even if she did, she still decided to follow herself.

There was a world of difference between that and knowing nothing but obstinately clinging to one's course.

"Do you remember what I told you before?"

"Yes, you told me to stick with my classmates and go forward, right, didn't you?"

"There may be students who want to change their own class appearing from now on, just like Kanzaki. Or there may be some that are dissatisfied with you and want to stop you. Maybe even some that will betray the class too. It won't be surprising to think some will do whatever just to make a change. Class 1-B, the class that only you protected, that class doesn't exist anymore."

Of all students of 2-C, those words were likely to resonate with Ichinose the most.

"No matter what happens from here, I want for you to trust your classmates, put their safety first and continue the fight."

"It's okay. I'm definitely going to protect them. If there comes a time someone from my class has to leave, I think I will be the first one."

She wasn't putting up a bold front, Ichinose will certainly do so.



She would take responsibility for the class' recession and choose to leave the school first.

"I'm relieved to hear that, but there's one thing I'm dissatisfied with."

"Dissatisfied...?"

She somehow didn't take the hint as she tilted her head slightly.

"I won't ever let you get expelled."

There was a need to make her remember the most important thing.

For this year, it was of utmost importance that she will continue running forward without ever stopping.

I looked her in the eyes, and then lighting a blazing fire inside the depths of her pupils.

What she received wasn't darkness.

It was a light that would never fade.

If there was a possibility that light will spread in the wrong direction, I would take it myself.

"T-that... y-yeah... I'll ...definitely...stay."

She looked up at me and mumbled, embarrassed.

"Y-you.... Are really amazing, Ayanokouji-kun..." To think you managed to get a perfect score at such a difficult exam."

She said while looking another way as if trying to change the subject.

"It may be my only redeeming feature at school, though."

"Even so that's still amazing. It just means you have a weapon that won't lose to anyone else."

"You are the same too. You certainly have such a weapon yourself."

"That would be nice, but..."

But there was a lack of people around her who could proficiently wield it.

It wasn't that she wasn't blessed with good classmates.

It was due to the cons of this weapon.

Ichinose's ability to include people was strong enough to kill off her own classmates' individualities.

They would depend on others. Thus the vicious circle made them lose even more of their individualism.

"...I need to leave soon. We're standing too much out here, and I feel bad letting Kanzaki wait for me."

I nodded slightly and saw her off, watching her trailing figure.

Thinking that it was almost time to meet up, I pulled out my phone again to confirm it.

"What were you talking about with Ichinose-san just now?"

Suddenly, Haruka's voice came from a little bit away.

I looked over, and Akito, Keisei, and Airi had all arrived, looking over at me uniformly.

It looked like the other group members had already gotten together while I was talking to Ichinose.

"My perfect score in math."

"No wonder. After all, the better you are at academics, the more they would be conscious about it."

As soon as I explained it with a sensible reason, Keisei immediately looked like he understood.

But there was something off about Haruka.

She didn't ask further, and quickly returned to her usual expression.

Tomorrow, starting from the 2nd of May, we were about to welcome the arrival of the Golden Week.

The students had all passed their special exams without a hitch, so I'm sure we'll all be leisurely enjoying the holiday carefreely.

#### Part - 4

That Golden Week ended in a flash, and we were back to our school lives.

The scenery remained the same, but everyday life began to change slowly.

"... Yo."

In the morning just after the break, Sudou was the first person I ran into, near the shoe locker at the school.

It was just a run-in with a classmate, but it was also part of that changing everyday life.

"It hasn't been easy for you for a while. Are you alright now?"

"No problem. It's the same as before. I made it through Golden Week with no problems."

"I see. You know, this vacation went by real quick."

I walked side by side with Sudou, who had adjusted his walking pace to match mine, to the classroom.

Because he had to leave the classroom for his club activities, Sudou must have heard the details from Ike or Hondou afterwards.

I didn't need to tell him what happened in that classroom, as he should have understood everything.

"So you were hiding the fact you're good at studying because of Suzune's strategy, right?"

I nodded my head a bit in agreement, and Sudou pouted a bit. He looked away from me and turned straight ahead.

"Well, you two have been close ever since school started. A bit late now, but I understand that."

"We didn't get along. If anything, at first it was more like we wanted to keep our distance from each other."

"It was like that? Sorry, didn't look like that to me."

That was probably because Sudou was viewing Horikita as a person of the opposite sex.

There was no point in me pointing that out, so I skipped over his words.

"I heard about it from Yousuke afterwards. You put in a good word for me, didn't you?"

"I can't say I was covering for you; I was only stating the facts."

"You call them facts, but you didn't know the truth at that time either."

"Course I know that!"

Sudou got a bit angry and pouted again, as he spoke again.

"It was a secret that you're a genius at math, but is the fact that you're good at fighting also a secret?"

To Sudou, this aspect was apparently more important than the bit about math.

"I don't know what you mean."

I pretended not to understand what he was talking about.

However, Sudou was no longer the kind of person to back down on hearing that.

"Don't play dumb with me. I fought with Housen, so I'm clear on it. His superhuman strength is the real deal. And he's faster than anyone I've fought so far. Honestly, he's a monster."

Sudou said that it was precisely because he had confronted him that he was able to experience it first hand.

"That was the first time I've ever felt scared in a fight. Even now his smiling face is burnt into my brain."

Stopping, he poked his temple with his left index finger two, three times.

"You were scared, huh. Even so, it looked like you fought bravely for Horikita."

“Well, there was no other choice. That guy has more than a few screws loose.”

I couldn't deny that. From what I've seen up close, Housen's obsession with violence was truly extraordinary.

“But you had a chance to win, too, didn't you?”

A few days before, Sudou was KO'd by Housen only because he got baited.

In a situation that required one to keep their opponent in their sights, Housen used Horikita as bait to make Sudou expose his defenseless side.

It turned out to be fatal for Sudou, and ended the fight with his defeat.

“Who knows... In a real, serious fight, I don't think I can win against him.”

Sudou was definitely not weak. If Sudou, who had excellent physical ability and coordination, talked about Housen like this, he was not one to be trifled with.

Even carefully selected people such as Horikita's older brother, Horikita Manabu, who had studied martial arts, or Albert, who was born with a remarkable body, could not beat Housen in a fight.

“Hey- that's not what I wanted to talk about! My affairs don't matter.”

At that moment, Sudou looked at my face.

“You... you surpassed that monster Housen's strength and stopped him. I'm not wrong, am I?”

Something like “I reflexively used more power than I normally can” certainly wouldn't work on Sudou anymore.

It's natural for him to associate that with, “this guy also got a perfect score in math, so it's not surprising.”

And there were things he could see only because of his fondness for Horikita.

“And you're sure it wasn't just a misunderstanding, Sudou?”

“Yeah, that's right.”

Sudou grabbed my biceps with his right hand.

To confirm how powerful my muscles were, Sudou lightly gripped them several times and said, “I’ve had this feeling since last year, when I saw you at the pool. You weren’t even participating in any club activities, but you had a super muscular body. It’s hard to tell with clothes on, but those firm muscles... you wouldn’t get those without considerable training.”

Sudou has focused on his body and trained regularly. There was no point in trying to fool him anymore.

Saying something like I work out on my own after getting out of bed has no chance of convincing him.

He wasn’t merely watching. When touched like this, my body itself would tell him the truth.

“Speaking of that, your grip strength when we measured it before the sports festival was around 60kg, right?”

Sudou gradually thought back about last year.

“That time, I already thought that was amazing... but you were holding back. How much can you grip exactly?”

“Who knows. I honestly don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t remember ever measuring my grip strength properly.”

“How is that even possible? We have physical evaluations so many times in primary and middle school!”

I honestly don’t remember.

Of course, there were periodical physical examinations in the white room. They collected vastly more data than what a normal school’s physical examinations would measure.

However, only the instructor would know those things.

The instructor wouldn’t bother telling individual students the details of their values.

And then the students themselves had no interest in the numbers that changed every day.

It was because they only saw them as numbers that went up or down.

However, while I was training to maintain my body every day, my physical ability was slowly decreasing now when compared to when I was in the white room.

“You really don’t know?” Sudou said. He was looking straight into my eyes, so he must’ve understood that I wasn’t lying.

“Back then, I heard that a grip strength of 60kg was the average for a 1st year at high school, so I adjusted my strength to around that. I was trying not to stand out.”

Later, I learned that this was higher than average, and I remember being a little surprised.

“I’m talking about you, how strong is the real you?”

A questing heart filled with envy and jealousy.

“How strong... huh.”

Depending on what the reference point was, the answer and perception would change with it.

While I was thinking—

“Forget it. You don’t have to answer.”

Sudou withdrew his own question as if he was refusing my answer.

Even if I tell him everything about my situation here, it wasn’t something just anyone could understand.

In the end, it wasn’t something that could be expressed clearly with just a few words.

“Powerful or not, there’s no point if I don’t see it with my own eyes.”

He let go of my bicep that he had grabbed earlier.

Sudou, just like Keisei, had started to digest things by himself.

“But I understand now that you’re a pretty unbelievable guy. You’re seriously powerful, Ayanokouji.”

“Doesn’t it upset you that I’ve always been hiding my strength?”

“Well, in the beginning I thought, ‘what’s with that?’, and I get how Yukimura feels. If I feel like I’m already super powerful, it sure wouldn’t feel good to know that someone by my side was hiding his powers and is actually more powerful than me. But it’s not like I can’t understand what you’re thinking, you don’t like to stand out, right? Somehow, I’ve come to understand your approach, I guess.”

From Sudou came a reply that I wasn’t expecting at all.

“It would definitely be a lie if I said I didn’t care, but I’m doing my best in my own way to grow. That’s got nothing to do with how other guys are, that’s what I think.”

Cater to yourself, not other people.

He said that as if to instruct himself to become someone that would be the best for himself.

“Besides, no matter how good you are, at basketball I’m definitely better.”

For the first time today, Sudou laughed boldly.

It was a statement brimming with confidence, about something he didn’t even need to confirm.

Of course, it was indisputable.

Even if I had played once or twice, the result was extremely clear. I had no chance of winning.

“If it’s basketball, we can have a match any time!”

“Spare me. I don’t want to become your punching bag.”

“Hahahahah! I see you understand that!”

As long as people have something they’re better at than others at, their mood would find it easy to relax.

“So I won’t talk about the situation with Housen to anyone. I feel like this was very roundabout, but that was what I wanted to say today.”

“Alright.”



I appreciated him from the bottom of my heart, for his consideration for me.

“Ah yes, let’s not talk about Housen again, but can I ask one last thing?”

“If it’s something that I can answer.”

“Did you not think I would tell anybody else about the fight with Housen?”

A sudden question, perhaps one that was bound to be asked during the conversation.

If Sudou had been a witness, there was every possibility that I’d have to force him to keep quiet about it.

Of course, just in case, I thought about asking Horikita to force his mouth shut about it, but after that night, and the full score in math afterwards, I could guess what he was thinking from Sudou’s eyes.

“If it were the old Sudou, I probably would’ve arranged for it. I’d even go so far as to request Horikita to tell you to keep quiet.”

“If it were the old me?”

“From the OAA evaluation, the one with the highest growth in Class D is you. Unlike the time when you were hotheaded, You’re now able to calmly assess the situation. That’s why I didn’t take any measures.”

This decision was based on my own analysis of Sudou Ken.

But if it were another student such as Ike or Hondou in that situation, there could have been different developments.

“I feel like... I’m being talked up to.”

Sudou had a surprised expression, and sighed in admiration.

“I’m totally convinced. Doesn’t feel bad to know that you have a high opinion of me.”

Saying that, Sudou brought his face close to mine.

“There’s one more question I’d like to ask. You and Suzune...”

“We’re not dating.”

As I took my distance from the face that was far too close, I used a “it’s the truth” attitude to reply to him.

“Oh...”

The instant reply made Sudou skirt a bit.

“For that, well, it’s not like I’m telling you not to date her. Suzune is free to go out with me, or you, or anyone else if she wants. But, well, if you’re deliberately hiding it, then I won’t have any mercy on you.”

“Okay, okay... If, by *any* chance, that happens, I’ll tell you right away, alright?”

“Good. Wait, no, that’s not o—! ...k, but, no, that’s fine.”

Now that he’d asked everything he wanted to ask, Sudou breathed out a sigh of relief.

“It might be cold coming from a friend of Haruki, but I’m glad you didn’t get expelled during the class vote. There’s no doubt that you’re someone we need to rise up to Class A. See you later, Ayanokouji.”

Saying that, Sudou picked up his pace a little, and moved towards the classroom.

Was it meant to hide that we were talking to bystanders?

“Someone we need to rise to Class A...huh.”

I never thought that I’d get such an evaluation from Sudou.

However, I wasn’t the kind of person that the class currently needed.

There was no doubt that Sudou himself was indispensable to the class.

## Chapter 2

### The flowing passage of time

#### Intro

April, where all kinds of dazzling things happened, finally came to an end, and it has already been almost two weeks since the start of May.

The student sent in by the white room still didn't seem to have any plans for me. It seemed to be out of Tsukishiro's control, but what exactly were they thinking? But as long as I can live in peace, I won't complain.

On that mid-May morning, Horikita and I had arranged to meet up at the lobby.

The conspicuous situation that had occurred due to the results of the test had slowly subsided. The students brushing past wouldn't cast any special glances at me anymore.

Of course, there were definitely still students who had their private thoughts about it, but the situation can be considered temporarily over at this stage.

While I was waiting for Horikita, I once again opened up the OAA which had just updated it's values.

The OAA was a system that reflected the grades of the students every month, and from there, it could acquire the new update for the 2nd year.

I got a perfect score in math, but my total score in the five subjects was 386. As a result, my academic evaluation was changed to an A-. My overall evaluation seemed to be higher than expected. The other evaluations had not changed much from last year.

2-D Ayanokouji Kiyotaka

2nd-year evaluation

Academics: A- (81)

Physical Ability: B- (61)

Adaptability: D+ (40)

Social Contribution: B (68)

Overall: B- (62)

Students who got an A in academics last year, like Horikita and Mii-chan, maintained their As. Maybe those who had scored more than 400 points in the exams would be given an A or higher in academics.

The OAA app clearly showed how the grades had improved for everyone, but as said before, the one with the most significant increase was Sudou.

2-D Sudou Ken

2nd-year evaluation

Academics: C (54)

Physical Ability: A+ (96)

Adaptability: C- (42)

Social Contribution: C+ (60)

Overall: B- (63)

Considering the fact that in his first year, his overall evaluation was only a C with 47 points, it was amazing growth, to say the least.

His outstanding physical abilities also boosted his evaluation.

It was just a score the OAA gave, but his overall ability was even higher than Keisei and Akito.

If he could improve his academics and social contribution in the future, he might even be able to stand shoulder to shoulder with Yosuke and Kushida. This was the good points of being one of the outstanding students.

However, although the student evaluations were reset, relating to the adaptability and social contribution this year... Basically, I should assume parts of last year was used as data for the school to decide those evaluations. After all, the relationship with your friends and communication skills wouldn't change instantly as we moved up a year. Having said that, a month later, if Sudo lived a serious life for the past six months, his social contribution number would rise at the very least.

Leaving beside Sudo, the overall strength of the other students had also improved from the first year. They were mostly students who had a comparatively lower evaluation for adaptability or social contribution, or both. So in other words, they've all improved by leap and bounds in that area.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Horikita came down from upstairs a little earlier than the appointed time.

"I didn't wait very long."

Since there was no need to stay in the lobby to talk, we walked straight to school.

It was easier to talk outside.

"Thanks again. Because of your quick-witted speech, I didn't need to be baptized under the attentive eyes of my classmates for this to end. It left a similar impression in the other classes as well."

There was almost no direct effect on the other classes, other than making them a bit more alert.

Class A's Sakayanagi knew about me from before, and Ryuen had the experience of being beaten down by me, so he would naturally know that I wasn't only good at math. Ichinose's words also showed that she felt that I wasn't ordinary.

"It's nothing; I just thought that it would be good for the class in the future. If I said that you were the one who took the liberty of holding back, you'd be disliked, wouldn't you? By the way, what would you have done if I hadn't been there at the time?"

“Who knows what I would have done.”

I feigned ignorance, but the result had to be similar.

Saying that it was just another one of Horikita’s strategies to stall, and then waiting for another day to bring a similar topic up. That way, even without explicitly using words to explain it, Horikita should be able to notice it.

“I’m lending it to you as a favour.”

“I’ll obediently take it, then.”

Horikita cast a glance at my left hand.

“Is your left hand alright now?”

“It’s slowly recovering. It’s going to take a while, but it’s not that big of a deal since it’s not my dominant hand.”

“That’s good... By the way, have you been in contact with Housen after that?”

“Not at all. I passed by Housen and Nanase once, but I didn’t say anything.”

Although our eyes were on each other, neither of them greeted me.

“They hadn’t come to offer an apology, but at least they’re aware that they’ve done something bad.”

“Who knows, it doesn’t feel like they did.”

“Both of them?”

“Yeah.”

Having the courage to make a massive move, not wavering in the slightest. The first years this time were very brave.

“That, if someone gets you expelled, they get 20 million points, is that true?”

“I don’t have any proof at the moment. But, if there wasn’t a reward for it, nobody would do something like that.”

“That’s true...”

It was inconceivable that someone would risk injury and expulsion in doing something meaningless.

The only one who would do it would be the student from the White Room.

"It'll be clear soon enough if it's true or not."

"But that's- that's not a good development. Although the exam was unreasonable, if it's a special exam, all four classes should know about it, right?"

"Nanase said so too. In order to make us alert of all the other classes."

In that case, there would be at least three people in three of the remaining classes that would know about it.

"Class A's Amasawa-san... Although we're indebted to her since she teamed up with Sudo, she definitely joined Housen-kun, right?"

I nodded slightly. Class 1-A's Amasawa Ichika was almost certainly someone who knew about the 20 million point special exam. The 1-B and 1-C students were left, and I had no idea who among them knew about the exam.

"So there's only three people who want you expelled that have taken action so far?"

"That's as far as I've noticed."

"That's a bit weird... Even if I'm trying to be polite here, Housen-kun shouldn't be that popular in the first year. Could they really ignore him while he confidently snatches those points away?"

That was the part which I cared about. However, it was extremely difficult to narrow it down.

Was it because they didn't think Housen and Nanase were enough to get me expelled...

Or was it that they didn't plan on joining the special exam from the beginning.

Or maybe, they just didn't believe the exam as authentic at all.

Horikita, who was walking by my side, couldn't answer it as well.

So I tried to change the subject of my thinking a bit.

“What do you think is the reason why the first years don’t share information between them?”

Since the topic was going to come up anyway, I planned to ask Horikita’s opinion.

“Yes... If the entire grade was told about the special exam of getting you expelled, there is a high probability that the 2nd and 3rd years will hear about it in a matter of time, not only just the 1st years. Hearing about this unreasonable special exam, our class would surely do everything we could do to fight back. So they did it in a way to prevent us from knowing about it, right?”

There was no doubt that Horikita had the right answer. But there was something deeper in that response that was more concerning.

“Did the school really approve of such an unreasonable special exam...”

“Yes. Although I tried to confirm it with Chabashira-sensei tactfully, she didn’t show signs she knew about it.

Although it wasn’t fully confirmed, it was certain that Chabashira was not informed about it.

“When you think about it like this, there’s only two possibilities. One of them is that what Housen and Nanase said was a scam, and that there’s no special exam to get me expelled. However, as I said earlier, it’s inconceivable to do something like this without any kind of reward. Therefore, eliminate this possibility due to that point.

“Mhm.”

“The other possibility is that it wasn’t really a special exam. In other words, someone offered to pay 20 million private points in order to get me expelled, and thus inciting the first years to go and do it.”

“I see. It would make sense if an individual set the bounty on you.”

While what had been done was in a grey area, it’s true that it hadn’t violated any school rules. And so as she sorted out the situation, Horikita worked her mind and gradually approached the truth.

“In other words, there’s someone in the same or a higher grade that had prepared that many points?”

Horikita didn’t know about the individual actions that Tsukishiro might take, so her options were bound to be limited.



“Although we can’t rule out the chance that this was a game set up by a first year, I don’t think they have the trust or the capital to make a deal under those conditions because they’ve just entered school, so the probability for that is low.”

“Someone who can pay 20 million points, and is also trusted by the first years.”

Under her course of reasoning, a certain person came to Horikita’s mind.

“—The student council president.”

The words that escaped her mutter shocked her.

“Could it be that President Nagumo might have something to do with this?”

“How would that work? It’s true that he doesn’t like me, but using such a large amount of points as 20 million all to get me expelled? I have many doubts about that. And using 1st-year students of unknown ability in itself is extremely strange.”

If you really wanted to get me expelled by someone else’s hand, it would be more reasonable to use a 3rd year, who was under his control.

“But, there might be a chance that it has nothing to do with him.”

No evidence could deny the connection that existed.

Having the title of student council president, that would remove any doubts from the first years.

“Without realizing it, maybe you aroused Nagumo’s jealousy. President Nagumo had always been interested in brother’s affairs, because he had always been only interested in your affairs. Even if he has complicated feelings like me, it’s not strange.”

If there were, it would be along those lines.

“Although it’s a bit late, this is the topic of today’s conversation with you. I’m preparing after school to go to the student council, and ask President Nagumo about joining it.”

“I see.”

It’s been a few twists and turns, but it’s an excellent way to make progress on the issue of Nagumo that Manabu was worried about.

“But if I can’t get Nagumo’s approval, it’s not my responsibility.”

“As I told you before, the president won’t reject anyone who comes to him.”

“...You did say that.”

At the time when Manabu-senpai had graduated, Horikita was pretty emotional, but she still seemed to remember what was said. Although Nagumo had said that all newcomers were welcome, of course it wouldn’t be only that. The sister of Horikita Manabu that would follow him wherever he went. He wouldn’t ignore such a precious existence.

“The reason why you wanted me to join the student council... It was so I could spy on President Nagumo, but actually, that’s not the only reason, right?”

Horikita was asking me what she should do after joining.

“I think you already slightly noticed. What your brother thinks is completely different from what Nagumo thinks. It’s because he values tradition that he thinks Nagumo’s reforms are wrong. He said it to me right before he left. The class is a community that should share the same fate. He didn’t want the framework to be changed.”

“What the student council is doing now, that’s certainly the complete opposite.”

“But I’m not going to judge who’s right and who’s wrong. Now, I just want to see Nagumo’s reforms.”

That’s right; there was nothing wrong with Horikita-senpai’s or Nagumo’s way of thinking.

“So that’s why you won’t give me specific instructions?”

“Mhm.”

“Then why do you need me to join, if the only thing you want is to see Nagumo’s reforms? There’s no need for me to monitor the student council at all, then!”

“If Nagumo is going in the wrong direction, there’s a need to stop him.”

And then, it shouldn’t be me who would do that, but rather, Horikita Manabu’s sister, Horikita Suzune.

Of course, in order to get her to do it unilaterally since it was an unreasonable task I pushed on her, I proposed an exam to see who won.

“There’s still some things I’m not satisfied with, but I’ll put it as convenient.”

This should be related to the part about the bounty that Horikita had mentioned.

By entering the student council, the possibility of gaining information about that should go up.

“I don’t think it’s good for me to ask anything of you since I lost the match, but will you come with me?”

“Come with you?”

“Well, I’d like to show you using the meeting with Nagumo as evidence.”

To prevent the situation if the student council rejected her to show that she didn’t lie.

“If President Nagumo has something to do with that bounty, we might also see some kind of reaction.”

Indeed, we might get a lead on the 20 million point bounty.

“I see. After school, then?”

Having made that appointment with Horikita, our day began.

Part - 1.

School ended, and we both headed to the student council.

“Have you made an appointment?”

If you paid a surprise visit, there was no guarantee that President Nagumo would be at the student council office.

“Of course, there’s no problem since I asked through Chabashira-sensei to meet with president Nagumo. That’s also why they put it off until today. But that’s probably a good thing, since I’m a bit more motivated to join now anyway.

“Because of the bounty?”

“Yes, the student council is supposed to be an absolutely neutral presence, but if they are unfair to only our class 2-D... if that’s true, then we’ll have to defend with all our might.”

I sneaked a sideways glance at Horikita, whose face was filled with the determination she was expressing.

“Being motivated is good, but don’t get too excited. There’s no evidence against Nagumo yet. Even if there is indeed a connection, he’s not someone you can take by yourself.”

He would not obey us and withdraw that test just with us asking.

“Of course, I won’t do anything rash until I’m sure.”

I felt relieved seeing that while she was enthusiastic, she also had self-control

It didn’t take us long to reach the student council office, and we opened the door.

“Excuse us.”

Stepping into the student council office, the person who was sitting in the student council president’s chair was obviously Nagumo.

He stretched his legs, and greeted Horikita as if he was a king.

To that, I didn’t feel the slightest sense of uncomfortability. I wonder if the fact that it suited him was proof of his divinity

I felt more composure coming from him than ever before.

The absence of Horikita Manabu, his only equal, had a clear effect.

And standing next to him was Vice President Kiriyama.

After glancing towards me first, Kiriyama quickly shifted his gaze towards Horikita.

“You have something to say to me?”

“Yes, thank you so much for your time.”

Kiriyama motioned towards me and Horikita to sit down, so we obediently obliged.

“Don’t worry, we’re pretty free right now.”

Even having me in front of him, Nagumo’s attitude was the same as usual.

Even if there was just a bit of guilt, it wouldn’t be strange if it was shown, but...

“So what did you want to talk to me about? You didn’t come just to talk, right?”

Although Nagumo’s gesture was to welcome us, it also allowed Horikita to cut straight to the chase.

“I know that your time is valuable, president, so I’ll get straight into it. I want to join the student council.”

Horikita’s clear voice echoed in the student council office.

Hearing that, the two members of the student council reacted in a similar manner.

Neither welcoming nor rejecting, they were both surprised.

“You want to join the student council?”

Hearing what Horikita had said, Nagumo’s expression slightly changed from surprise to anticipation.

“Well, what a turn of events! I don’t really want to obediently say yes.”

“So I’m not welcome to join you?”

“Not really, I’m basically one of those people who can’t refuse. As long as there’s space in the student council, I’ll allow people to join. I won’t even care about your reason for joining the council. It doesn’t matter if it’s for the OAA, or wanting to assume a post in the future, or maybe you just have a sense of righteousness. I don’t really care.”

Unlike Manabu, opening the door to anyone was how Nagumo operated.

“But then again, you’re special, Horikita Suzune. Let me at least mention one condition for your membership.”

“What condition?”

“Why do you choose to join the student council at this time? Would you please tell me that?”

Did he feel threatened by me, who accompanied Horikita?

No, in a good way, Nagumo was not the type of person who cared about minor things.

He simply just wanted to know why Manabu’s sister wanted to join the student council.

Of course, Horikita wouldn’t say that she was joining because she lost to me.

Although entering the student council was still possible, that would probably be the end of it.

Horikita would never be able to gain Nagumo’s trust.

“I had an argument with my brother in the past, and so I chose to enter this school to settle them. But my relationship with my brother hasn’t changed since I’ve entered this school.”

Although she spoke slowly, Nagumo listened clearly to what Horikita said.

“My brother couldn’t possibly approve of me who hadn’t grown in the slightest. As a result, I hadn’t spoken to him properly this year, at least up until his graduation.

Now, Horikita seemed to be selectively expressing those truths from the past.

“And then? Have you reconciled?”

“Yes. At the very last second, I’ve reconciled with him. And then, for the first time, I became interested in the student council that my brother devoted his school life to. Although I’ve taken a long detour, I also want to walk the same path my brother has.”

From the start, Horikita didn’t want to join the student council

In other words, if you asked her if her response was from her heart, part of the response would be ‘no’.

But covering up with several truths could blur Nagumo’s eyes that were able to differentiate between truth and lies.

“The road brother took, it really is a nice story.”

It looks like Nagumo’s blurred vision put him on alert

“In other words, can I assume that you have the intention to become the student council president?”

No matter what kind of answer she gave in this place, there was no way she could convince Nagumo.

In this case, a simple lie would give a bad impression.

“That’s right. Just like the road my brother walked, I also want to become student council president.”

But Horikita herself stubbornly chose to challenge that high wall.

There was no hint of a lie in her words as well.

Since she had chosen to join the student council, it was as if she had the awareness to pursue Manabu.

“I see. But Honami has been working hard behind the scenes for a year as a member of the student council. You’re already a year behind her in your quest in becoming the student council president. You can understand that, right?”

“I don’t think it’s a distance that can’t be recovered.”

That was a stronger answer than before.

“She doesn’t look that similar to him, but she really is Horikita-senpai’s little sister!”

Vice President Kiriama, who had remained silent up until now, spoke to Nagumo.

“I’m kind of comfortable calling you Horikita. I may have referred to you with that already but I’ll call you Suzune from now on, okay?”

“Do as you wish.”

“I was troubled since the only member in the student council from the 2nd year was just Honami.”

Through his direct questions, Nagumo came to understand Horikita's true thoughts, and agreed to let her join the student council.

Then Nagumo left his seat and walked towards the standing Horikita, stretching out his left hand.

Horikita gripped Nagumo's hand head-on.

"Welcome to the student council. From today onward, I want you to work for me as a member of the council without any worries, Suzune."

"Of course."

"As a congratulations for joining, I'll tell you something interesting. The past presidents of the student council have always graduated in Class A. Remember that and work towards a higher goal."





Nagumo said to Horikita, who was currently in Class D, as if to motivate her.

“Don’t worry. I don’t plan to graduate outside of Class A.”

“Then show me that isn’t just all talk.”

The handshake that had been maintained for long finally ended as the conversation also ended.

“I’m Kiriya, the Vice President.”

“It’s a pleasure.”

After shaking hands with Kiriya, Horikita became an official member of the student council.

From now on, Horikita would use her own eyes to observe Nagumo’s actions.

A meritocratic school system.

This system had completely deviated from what Manabu once defended, so how would she take it?

I guess that the area where I could interrupt them had already passed. Especially since I can’t even get info on the bounty, I’ll try to find an opening to leave...

As I was thinking about how I could escape.

“Are you going to join the student council by the way? Ayanokouji.”

“What are you thinking, Nagumo? You would even invite him into the council?”

It was because Nagumo’s proposal was so rare that Kiriya on the other side said in surprise.

“It’s nothing strange. He had the attention of Horikita-senpai after all. I don’t have a reason to refuse him. And in the special test the other day he was the only one who got a perfect score in a subject.”

Saying that, it was like Nagumo just noticed me.

It seems like he already knew all the information that was made public to the 1st and 2nd years.

“I’ll pass, my personality isn’t suited to being on the council.”

“I knew you would say that.”

He quickly eliminated me from consideration as if his offer was just to be polite.

I didn’t know what he was thinking, but he turned his attention back to me once more.

“Ayanokouji.”

After calling my name out, Nagumo and I stared at each other in silence.

“There’s a lot more work in the student council than I thought , but everything has started to calm down now, so when summer starts, I’ll spend my time with my kouhais.”

What meaning did that have?

Before I could ask him, he spoke again.

“I’ll play with you, so look forward to it.”

This doesn’t reach the level of a declaration of war.

It was an order from the strong to the weak.

“Sakayanagi, Ichinose, Ryuen. Those people would probably cry from the joy.”

After that, Nagumo completely ignored me.

“By the way, Kiriya, why did you get involved with this today?”

“...What do you mean?”

“When the 1st and 2nd years requested to enter the student council you had no intention to attend. But this time when Horikita Suzune said she wanted to meet me, you showed up. It’s weird isn’t it?”

Nagumo said those words towards the end of the conversation.

It was like those words were for me, who was preparing to go back, to hear. At the last second, the unexpected statement suddenly broke the flow. Of course, I wouldn't know why Kiriya was here, but he seemed to be shaken.

"I just was interested in Horikita-senpai's little sister, anything wrong with that?"

Although Kiriya calmly answered Nagumo's question, his voice was a bit sharp from his nervousness.

Nagumo happily laughed out loud, apparently that was interesting.

"It's nothing, nothing. Don't mind it."

After seeing that reaction, as if it were enough, Nagumo didn't pursue the matter any further.

"Then, Suzune, I want to introduce you to the student council members outside of Kiriya. You stay right here."

"I understand."

There was no reason for me to stay here anymore, as I refused to join the student council.

I left Horikita and Nagumo behind, leaving the scene.

Part - 2.

I left the student council and moved to the entrance of the school.

Kiriya was someone who had struggled to overthrow Nagumo. He supported Manabu and had been scheming for ways to the point where he even reached out to me when I was in the first year. Just as he was throwing in the towel, he discovered that Manabu's sister Horikita was going to join the student council, so he might have wanted to take some kind of action.

However, judging by how he looked today, the battle between Kiriya and Nagumo had already been settled.

One could feel that an insurmountable gap had been created.

Well... If Kiriya has n't given up yet, eventually he might act.

"Well then."

I don't want to use my brain anymore today.

I'll go straight home today and slowly burn through the rest of the day.

I took my phone out and checked the time.

"Well, if you don't have any special plans... Can I come over to your room to hang out?"

I was paying attention to the conversation at the student council meeting, so I didn't realize Kei had sent a message.

Although it had already been 30 minutes, since she didn't retract it or offer a follow up, Kei might still be waiting for my reply.

I decided to reply to her now, even if it was late, because I didn't have anything special lined up after that.

Although we were dating, we haven't made it public yet.

There were very limited places where just the two of us could spend time together without being noticed.

And even the dormitory isn't very safe. Rather, even if we were seen once, it could easily become the decisive blow.

But if it came to that, we would just decide on a decisive solution.

"Want to come to my room?" I replied to her, and within a second, it showed that it had been read.

Was it just a coincidence that she was playing with her phone, or was she waiting for my reply all along?

"I'll come!" A short reply from Kei.

"Is it alright if I come now!?"

The messages were coming one after the other. I replied that I'm coming back now, and that she could come whenever she wanted after 20 minutes. And then she could just come over following the usual guidelines.

Even if someone else was on the same floor, Kei would be able to handle to some extent.

It took me about 10 minutes to get back to the dorm. I kept the door open and used the time to clean my room a little. Then I heard three fierce knocks on the door.

Kei and I have set a few codes for secret meetings. Although it mostly involved ringing the doorbell, I asked Kei to knock three times in urgent situations. That's because in a dormitory that had a lot of student traffic, sometimes there would be situations when you couldn't open and close the door at leisure.

And in an extremely urgent and dangerous situation, entering without a signal was also allowed.

"I'm coming in!"

Kei replied as she panickedly got in through the door.

Then she used force to push the door shut and let out a breath to calm herself down.

"I really panicked when I saw the elevator stop at the 4th floor~!"

Maybe because her heart was beating faster, Kei pressed her hand on her chest.

Since getting through the hallway was fairly difficult, it was no wonder Kei was panicking.

"It's impossible to hide it forever, you know?"

"I know that..."

I put Kei's shoes in the shoe closet.

Then, just in case, I locked the door and hung the U-shaped chain.

This way, even if someone came to visit, I could turn that person back without letting them enter the door.

However, using a U-lock this early was somewhat unnatural.

I hadn't planned to do this, but I did it because of the precedent set by Amasawa.

It was better than accidentally letting someone in the room and letting them see that it was just me and Kei inside.

Even if an urgent situation happened, it would be fine as long as I was prepared to go out.

If I tell the person my room was a mess, ask them to stay outside for a while, and go out quickly, it would be fine.

And then after I'd left with that person, Kei would be able to quietly sneak out of the room.

"Whew... I'm relieved."

Kei, who was sitting on the bed, patted her chest in relief.

"That's good."

After all, the dorm would be full of people returning home from school in the evening.

But, the risk of inviting someone in the middle of the night was even bigger. Because although there would be fewer people going in and out, it would be a big problem if someone found out that I had a girl over in my room in the middle of the night.

That's why the daytime on a day off or a night on the weekday, where we could come up with an excuse, were better.

Even if the relationship was exposed, it would be one of the acceptable behaviors.

"Do you want something to drink?"

I said to Kei after she calmed down. Flustered, she ran from the living room to the kitchen.

"I'll do it."

"That's a surprise, what made you want to do it? You wouldn't normally do this."

"It's hard when your left hand is injured, right? Look, even I know how to boil water!"

It seems like she was worried about my injury.

"Then I'll leave it to you..."

"Ok. I'll have black tea, what would you like, Kiyotaka?"

"Then... I'll have the same, Kei."

I was planning to match her because I wanted to lighten the workload on Kei a little, but I guess it backfired. She looked disgruntled.

“You don’t have any faith in me, do you?”

“...I see, then I’ll have a cup of coffee.”

“Leave it to me! Isn’t it in that cabinet over there?”

Saying that, Kei opened the kitchen cabinet.

Then she probably noticed my gaze, so she ordered me to wait in the living room.

It would be troublesome if I made Kei angry, so I decided to obediently wait for her while watching TV.

“By the way, I was thinking of telling you this when we met, but Kiyotaka, you have a big responsibility.”

As soon as I picked up the TV remote, those words flew in from the kitchen.

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

“Because you’ve gotten a full score in math, it’s become harder for me to come out with the dating thing.”

I was wondering what it was, and this is what it turned out to be.

Indeed, if Kei were to open up about us dating at this stage, it would probably cause some controversy...

“Who knows what would happen if we publicize that we’re dating now...”

“So is this situation going to continue as it is for a while?”

“It can’t be helped... It’s annoying, making it feel like I’m dating you because of your status.”

“Is it bad to date someone for status?”

“No, I’m not saying it’s bad either...”

“Like dating a cute girl is a symbol of status for guys, right? Wouldn’t it be a little too harsh to ask for people not to want that?”



Of course, everyone's preferences for appearance is different, and nothing is absolute.

But even so, I've roughly learned that this extensive yet ordinary standard existed.

I somewhat refuted her point about dating for status, but got no response. I thought she was thinking about how to counter that, but she slowly moved so just her face showed from the kitchen.

"A-am I cute?"

It didn't seem like she was thinking about how she would counter me.

She seemed to be just focusing on the part about dating a cuter than expected girl.

"Would you want to date someone who's not cute?"

Kei with her upturned lip tried her best to escape, not wanting to look directly at me, as if trying to escape my gaze.

The kettle started to make its boiling sounds.

What made one think the other person was cute wasn't just limited to appearance. Personality and body type, voice and manner, family background and upbringing. All kinds of factors overlapped together to make you feel that the person was cute.

"Ahhh... me too, I also think you're super handsome, Kiyotaka."

Although I didn't ask her how she felt about me, Kei still said that and shrunk back into the kitchen.

After the water was completely boiled, I listened to the sound of it being poured into the cup, while pointlessly sifting back and forth through the TV channels.

It didn't take long for Kei, who was finished with her work, to return, proudly placing the cup with coffee onto the table. Although the black tea that Kei clearly said she wanted had somehow turned into café au lait.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

We spread out the textbooks from the first year on the table.

And we got the notebooks and pens ready, creating a scene that looked like we were studying.

That way, if something unexpected happens, we can bluff our way through using the excuse of us studying.

If possible, I didn't want that kind of situation to occur.

From the moment we entered the room till now, everything was a defense strategy carried out based on Amasawa.

After that, we spent our time on trivial topics.

Starting from the things I ran into at school today, and going back a few days to what happened then.

Who we met up with in Golden Week, and what kind of TV we watched.

I looked at the pictures Kei took, wasting time together.

We discussed all sorts of topics, long and short, sometimes switching over suddenly.

The two of us wasted a lot of time talking about useless stuff together. But this wasn't a bad thing.

Unconsciously, I was starting to understand what love is, bit by bit.

An indoor date, with Kei sometimes laughing, sometimes angry, showing me all kinds of different expressions.

As we burned through the topics, the conversation between us gradually decreased. The casual chit chat started to disappear, and the amount of silence gradually increased. It was clear that the mood in the room had changed from what it had been previously.

Toward each other, we each began to feel something.

Began to be aware of something.

No, it's not just something.

I already knew what it was.

Towards each other, the feelings of wanting to touch the other person, of craving a response, were gradually expanding.

But, this is something that didn't need to be spoken.

Only our eyes that were looking at each other could communicate that.

But it was never easy to take that step.

No matter how thoroughly you see through the other person, you still need to consider the 1 in 10,000 risk.

Although both parties were supposed to have the same intentions, you need to consider the possibility that they may not.

If you were rejected, the negative feelings would gush out like a geyser.

Even so——

I was still catching Kei's gaze as she tried to turn her eyes away.

Is it okay? But, but...such feelings colliding with each other.

Soon, as if she had resigned herself, Kei gave up on her escape.

The more time seemed to freeze, the more I felt it through my body

The distance between our bodies, our faces, gradually shortened.

We finally reached the distance where we could breath on each other's skin and could almost touch each other.

From Kei's mouth came the scent of coffee and milk blended.

In 2, no, only 1 second, our lips would touch.

——Ding dong

Our time alone for the two of us was ruthlessly broken by the door ringing.

Only a mere sliver of distance separated our untouched lips.

My consciousness which was drifting away and dissipating was suddenly brought back into reality.

“Ah, eh, the door...?”

Kei pulled away in a panic, her cheeks tinged with a blush, but I didn’t even have time to take a closer look. Indeed. The ringing wasn’t coming from the hall, it was coming from the entrance.

The internal phone clearly showed that this was a call notification coming from the entrance. Unlike the front hall, there are no cameras installed here, so it’s impossible to know for certain who it was. Although I could lie that I wasn’t home, if someone sees that Kei had come into my room, that would be bad.

Better to know beforehand who is coming to me and for what purpose.

“Give me a minute.”

“Uh, mhm.”

Kei nodded, slightly nervous. Because of the last conversation with Amasawa, Kei’s shoes were already placed in the cabinet, so at first glance, I seemed to be the only one inside.

Only that this method was not perfect.

The optimal solution would be to stand and chat in the hallway.

But as soon as someone asks to come inside the room, it would head in a suspicious direction. Bringing a girl to your room and then even going as far as to hide her shoes. That kind of scene would be revealed.

Just in case, locking the U-lock on the door was the right thing to do.

This way, they won’t be able to see the shoes even if they look through the opening, and we won’t be exposed that easily.

I could prepare the reason for why I locked the door when talking to the other party.

On top of that, postponing it to later, or going to the other person’s room afterwards would be fine.

But who was the person coming directly to my room?

Horikita? Or is it one of the boys? As I thought of this, I confirmed who the visitor was through the peephole.

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

“Senpai~”

Followed closely by her sweet voice.

It’s as if she knows I’m watching her through the peephole.

“It’s me~”

From the sound of her voice coming in through the door, she seemed to be convinced that I was in the room.

The girl in the casual clothes was smiling.

Both her hands were free, she looked like she didn’t bring anything with her.

I slowly unlocked the door and opened it.

I hadn’t been in contact with Amasawa Ichika from the 1st year Class A since the end of April.

Because of the fact that she hadn’t contacted us, this could be considered a surprise appearance.

In order to assist Housen, she took the same knife from my room, and through that, since she knew that I knew that she was in cahoots with Housen, she would keep a certain distance.

However, Amasawa who appeared right in front of my eyes again, didn’t seem like she had done anything bad.

Did she think that the fact that she was an accomplice wasn’t known to me?

No, when Housen’s plan went into action, it was essentially revealed that Amasawa was an accomplice.

“How did you get into the dormitory?”

“There was another senpai who was returning, so I went in with him. I thought I’d give you a surprise.”

If she used the phone in the lobby, no matter what, her identity would be revealed to me.

So she used another student in order to avoid that situation.

“And?”

“Is your hand alright now? I was worried so I came to see you.”

The clever Amasawa didn't consider the situation where her role in the plan had not been discovered.

Instead, she hinted that she was related to the matter.

She touched the U-lock softly with her right index finger.

“This, can you unlock it for me?”

While keeping her devilish smile, she confirmed that there were shoes put at the entrance.

Did she predict that someone was here because of the U-Lock? Or was it...

“It's late in the evening already, so can we talk tomorrow? It'll be a problem bringing in a kouhai in my room without any reason.”

If she came to visit just for the reason of my hand, she would have left after hearing that.

However, Amasawa didn't have any intention of leaving.

Her left hand was placed on her lip, an action that seemed to show her thinking.

“Senpai, you look like you are alone anyway, so cook for me.”

In order to find a way to get into my room, Amasawa suddenly changed the subject.

“I have that right, right? The thing about teaming up with Sudou-senpai, you haven't forgotten about that have you?”

If she wants to force herself into the room, she would naturally use that method, I was already expecting it.

In that case, I'll have to go along with her.

“I’m sorry, but I ran out of ingredients. There’s nothing in the fridge.”

“Eeeh—— Is that so—? You should have reserves~”

Amasawa showed an expression that was troubled and not troubled at the same time, voicing her dissatisfaction.

“If it has to be today, how about I go and get ready now, and we can buy the ingredients together?”

Although the date with Kei would be over, there was no need to add unnecessary trouble.

Since they had already met once, I didn’t want her to know that I often called Kei to my room.

“I see, you don’t have any ingredients~That’s too bad~”

Amasawa showed a slightly amused expression.

“Please don’t close the door, okay?”

After saying that, Amasawa disappeared from my vision for a split second.





After that——she used her left hand to lift the plastic bag she placed on the hallway floor, so I could see what she was holding through the gap of the door. I confirmed that she wasn't holding anything with her using the peephole before, but it would be difficult to see anything that had been placed at her feet from the beginning.

It seems like she had prepared a plastic bag full of ingredients out of my sight.

She saw right through my escape route.

My reason for denying her entry because the lack of ingredients had been shut down.

I knew that Amasawa had a sharp mind, but this was far more than what I had imagined.

After this, should I admit that I was lying, and then look for another way out?

Saying that I was in a bad mood today, and that I lied because I wanted to reject her should be fine.

After what happened with Amasawa last time, I made a lot of plans, but in the end, the first person to put these plans to the test was still Amasawa.

However, whether Amasawa would accept it or not was another matter.

I had more confidence with regard to other students, but Amasawa also knew about me and Kei.

“Did you lie to me because you didn't want me to come into the room?”

It took less than a second of silence for Amasawa to push me to the wall.

So it seems that it was no coincidence that Amasawa picked this time to visit me today.

“Senpai is not alone right?”

“Why do you think that?”

As expected, she took action after she was sure that Kei had entered my room.

Kei must have been watched somewhere.

“Because~ I saw it. I've been watching Karuizawa-senpai all the time since she came back to the dormitories~”

As if proving this point, Amasawa spoke the truth. After secretly confirming that Kei went into my room, she bought the ingredients. Braving the risk of the lobby's automatic lock locking her out twice, she made such a strategy.

"From the fact that you've hidden your girlfriend's shoes, were you two doing lewd things?"

"It was just a precaution because we didn't tell anyone that we were dating yet."

"Ah, are you finally admitting it? Well, it's not like I don't understand your feelings of wanting to hide it, but I know about it already, so there's no need to lie to me, OK?"

As if expressing her displeasure at being hidden from the matter, Amasawa showed a disagreeable expression.

"I kept it a secret for now out of goodwill... But, I wonder if I shall reveal it?"

Even the fact that we weren't publicly dating seemed to have been investigated by Amasawa.

Otherwise, she wouldn't have used it as material for negotiation.

In other words, this conversation was only a formality.

If I refused her now, there is a real possibility that she might blab.

If Amasawa revealed that Kei and I were dating, it would not be good for Kei in the future.

In the end, only revealing our relationship ourselves is the sensible thing to do. With what just happened, I'll just have to leave it to fate. I admitted my defeat under these unfavorable defense conditions.

"Hold on, I'll unlock the door."

"Okay~"

Amasawa replied honestly. I then closed the door and used my eyes to convey a message to the uneasy Kei that it's alright. Amasawa had already taken the steps to get here brazenly. We'll have to face her straight on. Unlocking the U-Lock, I let Amasawa in the room.

After matching her gaze with Kei, who she had met before, Amasawa smiled widely.

On the other hand, Kei was standing there with a sour expression, like she ate something bitter.

“This isn’t good, a young couple alone with the door locked~”

Amasawa who was filled with energy said that as she took her shoes off.

“It’s not like we can’t. There’s a lot of couples out there.”

“Well~ that’s true. But when I look at you two, I feel something lewd between you.”

Although I wanted to argue with her, I couldn’t scold her for the accusation she had made, when I remembered the atmosphere during the time of the kissing.

As soon as she entered the living room, she set her eyes on the bed.

“Your clothes aren’t messy, and the bed is tidy, so it doesn’t look like you were doing anything.”

“Well isn’t that normal! Anyway, why did you come here all of a sudden!”

Because of Amasawa’s appearance, Kei, who had been meek up until just now, became angry.

The anger also contained a little bit of anxiety as well.

She probably should know that if she made Amasawa unhappy, she would make our relationship public.

“I thought you would have an illicit sexual relationship for sure... I mean having sex.”

Although it was a lewd conversation, Amasawa still took it a step further, pursuing the topic.

And it wasn’t me she was aiming at, but Kei.

Kei was lost for words, and her face couldn’t be described as simply red, but even more.

It was a twisted expression that said, “what was this person talking about?”

It was like Amasawa was probing our situation all along, and whenever she checked, she would look at Kei’s face.

After understanding that she couldn't dig up any useful information from me, she started to gather it from Kei.

I couldn't burden Kei anymore, so I interrupted and said.

"That's something forbidden by the school rules."

I calmly responded to Amasawa, so that Kei's restless heart can calm down.

But even after hearing my words, Amasawa didn't show any signs of backing down.

"Isn't violating the school rules just a decoration? There are a lot of couples that are doing lovey-dovey things openly in the school. If you go to the convenience store there are contraceptives. In fact I tried to buy it once, and the employee pretended not to see. Well, if everything is forbidden and a young guy goes berserk...and it results in a pregnancy, that would be the real problem, right?"

After saying that, Amasawa used her left hand to take the contraceptive device out from the plastic bag and placed it onto the table.

As if to prove that she really did buy it.

Indeed, without the existence of these goods, the result of an impure relationship would be pregnancy.

The prohibition by the school was, to put it bluntly, an unspoken regulation that if you were going to do it, it must not be exposed, and you'll need to use contraception.

Kei was lost for words, while her gaze went back and forth from the contraception, me, and Amasawa.

"Take this as a gift from me... No, take it as an apology."

"I don't remember you having anything to apologize for."

"Quit playing dumb, the wound on your hand, I had a part in that right? Because I teamed up with Housen."

Amasawa wasn't ashamed of telling the truth.

She didn't let me force her to admit it; instead she confessed it first herself.

"Is...that so?"

Hearing those words, Kei was surprised.

I hope she doesn't say anything unnecessary at a time like this, for her own sake.

A surprising statement was the same as giving information to the other party.

Amasawa could tell from this how much I've told Kei, and whether or not Kei was someone worth talking to.

"Ayanokouji-senpai, I think you're misunderstanding me a bit?"

"Misunderstand?"

"I'm not Ayanokouji-senpai's enemy."

"Although you might have realised my hostility towards you already, but let me be clear. I can't believe that."

"Is that so? Just because I shared my knowledge out to Housen-kun from the sidelines?"

If Amasawa hadn't gotten in contact with me, this incident would have been completely different.

Housen's self inflicted injury couldn't have become my responsibility, and it would probably have ended in the form of his self-destruction.

No, if it was Housen, he should be able to think of other methods; but in any case, because of Amasawa's intervention, there was no doubt that she had elevated the plan into an established strategy.

"Let me guess what senpai is thinking about now. I played a part in Housen's plan to get you expelled, which raised the possibility of your expulsion. That's why you think it's ridiculous for someone like that to say that they were not an enemy. Is that right? I've been underestimated by senpai."

"I don't remember underestimating you. I've made a full evaluation of you."

"Really? I don't think so."

The stunned Kei gradually calmed down after hearing Amasawa's words.

"Wa-wait a minute. You said you were going to get Kiyotaka expelled... What does that mean?"

Although I told Kei about the injury to my left hand, I didn't tell her the specifics.

"Hee~ "

Seeing Kei's panic reaction, Amasawa smiled meaningfully, revealing her interest.

"Ayanokouji-senpai, haven't you told your girlfriend about that? Then what about the 20 million point bounty?"

"W-what!? You said 20 million?"

Amasawa intentionally started the conversation, no doubt using it as an opportunity to explore my relationship with Kei.

"Let your boyfriend tell you the details later, alright, senpai?"

After she said that, I had to explain this to Kei afterwards.

"Housen-kun and I wanted to use that knife to get senpai expelled——And the reason why senpai noticed this was because you went shopping with me, right?"

Listening to Amasawa up to now, I started to change my thoughts.

"It was the first time I saw the kitchen tools at school, but there wasn't a bit of hesitation when I chose the knife. Later, you checked with the clerk and learned that someone wanted to buy the same knife. That's why you immediately judged that you could defend against Housen-kun's self-destructive actions...right?"

The reason I could have known that answer was because Amasawa left a trace.

But it was a trace that hadn't been deliberately erased.

I understood what the right answer was, so I could defend against Housen's plan in advance.

It's true that if Amasawa had acted perfectly, the situation might change.

"How considerate of you."

"Because senpai suddenly had a bounty for his head, and I thought that it was a pity that you would be expelled without even knowing the situation."

Could an average first year high school student have such a brain circuit? I had my doubts.

Amasawa Ichika.

With how she thinks, I could accept it if she was the white room student.

But if that's the case, her saying all this was almost as if she wanted to reveal her true identity to me.

But what's the benefit in revealing her true self to me now?

Or maybe she was the same as Sakayanagi, honing her abilities in a place that had nothing to do with the White Room.

Regardless, my level of vigilance against Amasawa had increased in my mind.

"Ahh—My mouth is a little dry~. I'd like some coffee or something."

As if craving for something, Amasawa asked for a drink with a voice that sounded like something a cat would make when getting petted.

Kei, who was listening to her voice and paying attention to her attitude, showed undisguised disgust.

"Go make a cup of coffee for Amasawa."

"Eh? Me!?"

"If you don't like it, I'll do it, and you can talk to Amasawa."

"...I'll do it."

Making her coffee or talking with her. Kei seemed to have weighed the options and to choose the better decision.

Kei stood up and headed to the kitchen, while behind her, Amasawa added a request to her order.

"Sugar and milk as well please~"

"Argh! I got it, I got it!"

Amasawa added to Kei, who was puffing out her cheeks violently.

"Don't put garbage or sewage into my coffee because you don't like me."

“I wouldn’t do anything of the sort!”

Amasawa, who had no qualms about saying things that would infuriate others, laughed happily.

No doubt a little demon... No, maybe the demon wasn’t so little anymore.

After Kei left our sight, we were left alone in the living room for a while.

Amasawa looked towards the textbooks and the notebooks on the table.

“These study supplies look soooo out of place.”

“Because you’re already biased, you can see that.”

Since she had doubts about what we’ve been doing from the beginning, it was pointless to cover it up.

“Let’s see, hmmm? What was the convention adopted at the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in 1972?”

After reading the question, Amasawa, holding a mechanical pencil in her left hand, wrote the words “World Heritage Convention” in a blank notebook with pretty handwriting.

“Correct, correct~”

Amasawa applauded herself for the answer she wrote.

“Hey! Don’t go writing in my notebooks without permission!”

Kei, who was interested in the situation, showed her face, warning Amasawa for writing in her notebook without permission.

“Isn’t it alright? Just a little bit”

“Not at all!”

The angry Kei pulled her face back.

“Senpai’s girlfriend... seems to have a habit of being angry.”

Amasawa whispered in my ear. It would be a big problem if Kei sees us like this.



Fortunately, Kei didn't see us in the end. Displaying her unconcealed displeasure, Kei brought back the cup of coffee with the milk and sugar added.

"Here. You. Are!"

"Thank you, Karuizawa-senpai~"

Amasawa smiled slightly.

However, instead of drinking the coffee, she stood up.

"Well, I've already given you my condolence gift, so it's time for me to go back. Please feel free to use the ingredients."

Amasawa, who had finished saying what she wanted, turned her back on us and prepared to leave.

"Huh? What do you mean? Not drinking? You told me to make it though?!"

"I don't mind relaxing here, but how about you?"

"That...fine...go home."

"That's what I thought~ Then I'll go now~"

It seems like she made Kei make the coffee on purpose to tease her.

Is this what it meant to not know what true terror was?

Standing up in one fell swoop, she left like the wind.

After Amasawa left, the room returned to its original silence.

However, the sweet atmosphere from just before, I had no idea where it went. Right now, the atmosphere was very heavy.

"Kiyotaka! What's wrong with that kid!"

"I'd like to know that too."

"...Made me so mad!"

Although Kei was feeling very irritated, she knew that to continue talking about Amasawa was of no use.

So she wanted to change the topic herself. She changed the topic and spoke.

“Explain, what exactly is the 20 million point bounty, and does it have anything to do with your injury?”

Being silent wasn’t because I wanted to keep this a secret.

It was because I didn’t want Kei to worry about it for nothing.

But now it turned into a situation where I had to talk about it.

So I decided to tell Kei about the current situation.

## Chapter 3

### Summer's approaching, Premonition of a fierce battle

#### Intro

The middle of June was gradually approaching.

There were no new special exams after the one in April, and so we were able to get on with our normal school lives for a while. And the White Room student who was targeting me hadn't made any moves yet.

Up to now, the only thing that had affected me was the time when Amasawa came to my room, and the major crisis concerning whether or not I would get expelled hadn't happened at all.

However, that accident seemed to have left too deep an impression on us, so much so that we hadn't yet found the right timing to kiss again. No matter how good an atmosphere we created, there was always like an invisible wall between us. Although I would like to break this wall down as soon as possible to make progress on our relationship, there was really no need to rush. Over time, Kei would be able to slowly remove that wall herself, moving onto the next stage naturally. That would help her growth.

As a high school student, I was living a substantial school life. At the same time, the season was changing into summer day by day.

The temperature outside began to rise slowly, just like every year.

On a sunny day, the temperature could reach around 30 degrees, and like every year, the temperature started to rise, bit by bit, announcing that summer heat would take over the spring breeze.

Living an ordinary school life for a long time, I've often heard this topic brought up.

What was one's favorite season? But it was an unexpectedly deep and interesting topic.

Even people who were born and raised in the same place had different favorite seasons.

After experiencing the change of the four seasons at this school, I was once again looking forward to the hot season. If I thought about it, my favorite season is probably summer.

Maybe that's why the blue sky felt so beautiful and dazzling in this season.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-senpai."

As I was walking while looking up at the sky, I was greeted by someone in front of me.

Following the voice, it seemed to be Nanase Tsubasa, a student of Class 1-D.

She seemed to be on her way to school by herself, as the people walking around her didn't seem to be her friends.

"Oh it's you. Good morning."

Since she was walking in front of me, did she just happen to turn around and see me, or did she deliberately wait here because she had something to talk to me?

"Is there something in the sky?"

I didn't notice Nanase's presence because I focused my attention on the blue sky. But since she noticed that fact, she probably was looking at me for a while.

"Nothing, just looking out at the blue sky."

"Looking at the blue sky, huh?"

Nanase, who walked by my side, followed my example, and also looked up at the blue sky.

Today's sky was cloudless, just a vast blue sea.

"What a beautiful day."

"Yeah. By the way, I haven't seen you for a long time."

Although we've passed by each other once, it's been a long time since I've talked to her like this.

“Yes, we haven’t met for about a month and a half.”

Nanase and Housen jointly formulated a plan to get me expelled. Like Amasawa, if it were a normal person, feeling that it was hard to approach me would not be surprising at all.

“I’ve always felt sorry for what I did to you, Ayanokouji-senpai.”

Looking at the sky, Nanase said.

It seemed like the way she thought was deeper than I had originally thought.

“Senpai, do you hate me?”

“I don’t have any reason to hate you. It was for the special exam, right? There’s no way out of it. Besides, I saw how you were trying to protect me, Nanase.”

Nanase, even though she joined forces with Housen, rushed out and stopped Housen at a critical moment, despite the danger.

I still remember firmly the fact that she had confronted Housen who was hostile towards me.

“Is that special exam over? I didn’t hear you mentioning anything about a deadline.”

“No, the exam is still going on. The deadline is the start of the second semester.”

In other words, the special exam would still continue on for a little bit? But then, the silence of Nanase and Housen in the past month and a half was a bit strange.

“Are you wondering why I haven’t visited you since then?”

“It would be a lie if I said I wasn’t wondering about that. I’m still wondering if you’re up to something behind my back.”

“Because of what happened last time, I’m convinced that even with a plan, it might not work out that easily. Also, after you knew our purpose, it would be very hard to pressure you in your everyday life.”

“Then are you waiting for the other years to have their special exams? But what about the rest of you students?”

“I don’t know how, but I think they already know that Housen-kun has already made a move.”

“And since even someone like Housen failed, people judged that it wouldn’t work out without good preparation? Then it’s worthwhile for me to be so badly injured.”

“I don’t know if that’s worth the cost of your left hand, senpai.”

Among the 1st years, Housen Kazuomi, for better or worse, was one of those students who attracted all the attention.

It was perhaps a fortunate thing that Housen was the first to act against me.

The question was, however, who exactly was behind this special exam. Although it would be easy to just ask Nanase here...

However, the few times I looked at her, she looked away, so I had no choice but to give up asking her and looked forward again. Even if I asked her the question now, Nanase couldn’t answer it. Within the remaining three classes, lurked unidentified insiders. It was also impossible for her to betray them to maintain fairness. In the end, Nanase just admitted the existence of the special exam to prevent her own Class D from being disadvantaged.

“Thank you for understanding me.”

Since I’ve maintained my silence, Nanase said that, as though she understood what I was thinking.

Since we were going to school together anyway, I decided to talk about completely unrelated topics.

“You seem to be already completely used to life at this school.”

From the way she was acting and speaking, she had shed the naivety of when she first arrived, and was fitting in well with the atmosphere of the school.

“Yes. I think the students in my grade, including myself, have become able to deal with all sorts of special situations. Although I don’t know how much the upperclassmen know, us 1st years had taken our 2nd special exam at the end of May.”

Just like how we 2nd years had our own battle, the 1st years had their own battles as well.

“Although I haven’t heard from anyone directly, I’ve noticed rumors that there was already someone who was expelled.”

The 2nd years have also heard that there was one student who got expelled during that special exam.

“Ah, so you do know about it? One boy dropped out of Class C in the first year.”

After all, that student disappeared from the OAA list. But the one who dropped out was a student with an A in Academic Ability, so I guess he got a special penalty.

“There’s always going to be rumors about such a big event.”

“At this school, yesterday’s friends who you were laughing with could be expelled without mercy today. That’s why I’ve come to realize that every day of this school life must be lived without regrets.”

Although right now was a matter of just watching and letting the others fight among themselves, the time will come for Class 1-D to face the same situation. It was really important to have a sense of crisis like Nanase does.

Even so, in terms of the class points of the other years, I had no way of knowing.

That’s why I didn’t know which class won and which class lost in the exam.

“How did your Class D place in the results of the exam?”

“The previous time, we came in last, and this time, unfortunately, we only made third. But this time, Class A and B battled fiercely, so the point difference created between the classes is very small.”

It seemed like even having Class A and B as opponents for her class, they were able to stick closely to them.

On the other hand, the main reason why Class C came in last was probably because they had someone expelled.

“Is Housen more well-behaved recently? Or...?”

“It’d be a lie if I said he hadn’t done anything. But it’s true that he has nothing to do with this time’s expulsion. You’re the only one in his eyes now, Ayanokouji-senpai.”

Nanase, who had been looking at the sky, finally looked towards me for the first time, with a bitter smile.

“Although it’s a far-fetched theory based on only the result, I think it’s thanks to you that he has become a bit more well-behaved. I guess you could say that he’s taking some of

the energy focused on the first year students and placing it on the upperclassmen. Recently, he keeps saying things like, "Let me fight the 2nd years". That's just great."

This was indeed a good thing for a first year. But now that she said that, the fact that Housen would meet my eye when I passed his huge body was really just a sign of provocation.

"There should be a chance to fight with you first years sooner or later."

Although we've only had one chance to work with them up till now.

But as long as Nagumo continues to pursue his policies, we would definitely compete with each other sooner or later.

"I hope I can spend my school life here without any regrets.

"That'll be good."

As Nanase said, the friends you were laughing with yesterday might not be with you today.

That was the kind of thing that could happen in this school.

That's why we can't take every day we live here for granted, but rather, enrich it by ourselves.

Because each day that passed was a fixed past that could never come back.

"You must not leave any regrets in your school life as well, Ayanokouji-senpai"

Her words seemed to suggest that there is not much time left of my school life.

Her eyes contained a strong determination.

"Of course, I'll do my best to leave no regrets."

After hearing my reply, Nanase nodded with force, as if she was satisfied.

"Then I'll take my leave."

Having almost reached the school building, Nanase bowed her head and left.



## Part 1

Considering that the 1st years had taken their 2nd special exam at the end of May, as 2nd years, it wouldn't have been surprising for our special exam to be announced at any time. It was about time for us to be ready for that.

As if to test that readiness, the homeroom began differently than usual.

"It seems like everyone is here, that's good."

After taking attendance, Chabashira worked the tablet on her hand to show the images on the monitor.

It didn't take long for her to get ready. She switched to a white screen and then turned back to us.

"I've been with you guys for a while now, so I'm sure you must've guessed what this is."

A new special exam is about to begin.

Even though everyone had that sentence in their throat, they still waited for Chabashira's next words.

Apart from some students, most students had their eyes on Chabashira, and after a pause, Chabashira laughed lightly.

"It's true that we'll be discussing the topic of the special exam after this, but to maintain the suspense for a bit longer, I'll pick it up later. First, let's talk about summer vacation."

After saying that, Chabashira looked at her tablet, and then an image appeared on the monitor.

The first thing shown was a picture of a luxury cruise ship.

Our Class D had memories of a similar ship.

"Now I'll explain to you what'll happen in the summer vacation before it actually starts."

For a moment, the students looked at each other, as if they were trying to express their inner joy with sweet words.

However, the combination of a boat and a vacation also brought up a different memory deep inside everyone.

This school wouldn't just feed us sweet things. As we thought back on this, the monitor switched from pictures from the exterior of the ship to the interior. The schedule was also shown.

"From August 4 to August 11, you can enjoy to your heart's content your summer vacation on this luxury cruise for a total of eight days and seven nights. You can watch plays or pamper your taste buds. And there will not be anything like a special exam on the cruise."

In other words, we were being promised a real, genuine one-week vacation.

The strongly sceptical students eased up a bit.

However, as soon as those images were cleared, that ease disappeared.

It was as if saying that it was a temptation.

"But in order to fully enjoy this cruise trip, you must successfully complete the next special exam."

Just after the students were treated to a fantasy for a little while, they were quickly dragged back to reality.

This approach of lifting us up and then bringing us down would usually be very frustrating to us students.

However, the students instantly changed their mindsets to one of alertness to the forthcoming battle.

"Looks like you're indeed learning."

A smile of admiration appeared on Chabashira's face.

It wasn't as if she had brought up the vacation first and foremost just to be mean.

Even though we were still in Class D, she wanted us to prove that we are different from the Class D of a year ago.

Through trial after trial in succession, we had learned how to brace ourselves.

"When would the special exam begin?"

Horikita, who was sitting in the front row's centre seat, asked a question.

"Usually, the course of events would be such that the test would start the same day or the next day, but unfortunately, this test is still a ways away. The next special exam will be held during summer vacation."

So, the school would use the summer vacation to carry out the special exam after the end of the first semester?

What caught my mind is that it was way too early to explain right now. They were announcing it now even though there was still over a month to go, so what did that mean?

In any case, from the schedule announced so far, like it or not, there was one special exam that would come up in the students' minds. The very moment when everyone was probably thinking the same thing, Chabashira's words transformed our thoughts into reality.

"You will have to participate in the "Uninhabited Island Survival" special exam and compete with each other."

Special exam, survival on an uninhabited island. The inter-class battle that took place during the summer vacation in the first year was still fresh in our minds. Each class had to compete using a limited amount of class points, and there were rules for the special exam such as guessing who the leader was for the other classes, and occupying strategic points to obtain points.

"We have to do that again this year, huh..."

Keisei, who usually would quietly listen to the instructions of the special exams, murmured as if recalling memories of that.

Then, the boys and girls in Class D had a heated internal dispute and endured a number of hardships.

"You all probably recalled the uninhabited island survival exam from last year, but the exam this year is very different from the previous one. It's probably going to be tougher and more unforgiving than any other special exam before. Of course, in turn, the number of class points and private points you can get has increased dramatically."

In last year's uninhabited island, you were free to choose how you fight. If you wanted to win, you had to economize, but if you gave up on winning, you were permitted to live more freely. Also, you would not face harsh punishments like getting expelled so long as you didn't violate the important rules.

Although it was said that the exam would become tougher and more unforgiving, what would be the changes compared to last year?

There's no need to hurry in thinking of the answer, as Chabashira would probably tell us soon enough.

"First, I'll start by explaining the schedule in detail. There's no need to take notes now because you can download and check them afterwards on your smartphone or tablet."

Chabashira gave these instructions, and put the schedule of the special exam on the monitor.

July 19: Assemble at the sports field, take the bus to the port, and board the ship.

July 20: Special Exam starts; the exam will be explained, and supplies will be given.

August 3: Special Exam ends; rankings will be announced on the ship, and rewards will be paid out accordingly.

\*Private points for August will be awarded after the uninhabited island exam.

August 4: On the cruise, free to do anything the whole day.

August 11: Arrive at the port, return to school and be dismissed.

The closing ceremony declaring the end of the first semester is on Friday the 16th, and the schedule said we were to head out for the special exam three days later. Furthermore, the duration of the special exam is twice as long as the last one, lasting two weeks.

"Sensei, based on this schedule, won't our summer vacation be very short?"

Nishimura shot out a question like an arrow out of a bow. Summer vacation was normally about 40 days, but even if we count the voyage on the ship as summer vacation, there would only be about 24 days of summer vacation. It's understandable that the students would express their discontent.

"Unfortunately, there will be no making up for that time. The shortening of the summer vacation is final."

The school caught the arrow the students shot head-on.

Of course, getting some voices of disapproval were unavoidable.

Because for most students, a day off is more valuable than a day spent studying in school.

“However, as compensation, there’ll be a week’s voyage on the luxury cruise ship. Based on how you think about it, this week should be worth more than the two weeks that you will lose. As I just said, that period of time during the voyage would be free time purely for your enjoyment.”

Chabashira seemed like she was trying to encourage us with that.

Last year we also went on board a luxury cruise ship, but there was very little time to enjoy it then fully. I recalled the time when the zodiac exam was added after the uninhabited island survival exam.

For us living within the school campus, the outside world was both new, and exciting. Even though we would be on a ship, being able to live a different life than usual could make it the ultimate summer vacation. The students who had been expressing their discontent seemed to have been more or less convinced by that. If you couldn’t accept it, you couldn’t move forward.

And this year, unlike last year, because the students were to some extent loaded with private points, they wouldn’t have to face any inconvenience on the ship. That was also an important reason why it was less stressful for the students.

“Okay, now back to the topic at hand. Although the uninhabited island survival exam was also held last year, the biggest difference between them can be said to be “scale”. The duration of the exam is two weeks, and the area of the uninhabited island used for this exam will be larger than before.”

An uninhabited island floating on the sea filmed from above by a drone was shown.

“Also, not just students from the same year, but all the students from all the school years will be competing against each other.”

In other words, this scale of this exam would be far bigger than the last one in many ways.

“The number of people you’ll have to fight will also be higher than ever before.”

What an unexpected unfolding; All the years would be involved in this survival exam.

And the fighting wouldn’t be just against students in the same year. That was the particularly surprising part.

“Wouldn’t that... be extremely disadvantageous to the first-year students, and advantageous for the third years?”

Hirata, who hates inequality, raised his doubts. If the test would involve participating with the other school years, then everyone should be equal. But that wasn’t the case this time. Thus, based on the difference in age, physical ability and experience, a considerable gap would arise.

“I know what you’re saying, but I’m going to state in advance that no exam can be 100% fair. Even just taking you 2nd years as an example, there’s almost a year’s difference between the students who were born late and early in the same year, but you’re still fighting on the same stage, right?”

But in other words, although there was a year’s difference in terms of school year, if we look at age, there could even be a disadvantage of nearly 2 years that had to be borne by the later-born.

“If a first-year asked for advice, as a senpai, it is the nature of a senior to at least answer it, but how much one says is up to them. It is the same when you ask the third years for advice.”

There was no problem with consulting if necessary, but it would be like helping one’s enemy.

“Although there are more or less some gaps between the school years, everyone’s basically fighting under the same stage. Therefore, in order to fill in the gaps between the school years, the younger students will receive higher rewards, and their corresponding penalties will be lighter.”

So, the higher your school year is, the less you get paid, and the harsher your punishment? This seems to be drawn from the special exam in April where students had to find partners. In that exam, although it was the same test, the penalty for the 2nd years was expulsion, while the first years were punished by taking away their private points. There was a huge difference between the two punishments.

“On the basis of this, I’ll continue. Now, I’ll proceed onto explaining “*part*” of the new rules for the uninhabited island survival exam.”

The word “part” made the students look at each other.

“In other words, not all the rules will be made public today.”

Chabashira first instructed us to listen obediently, and then switched the screen on the monitor.

On the screen, the word “group” stood out.

“In order to understand the rules of the uninhabited island survival exam, you must understand the groups.”

It seemed like the introduction to this particular exam was much longer than ever before.

This seemed to be hinting at the difficulty of the uninhabited island survival exam that awaited us.

“The next special exam, the uninhabited island survival exam, will have a rule which allows a maximum of 6 people to form a big group to work with each other. Remember this first; if the people you group with are in the same year, you will be allowed to form the group regardless of any class boundaries.”

“Which means... the students in the 2nd year, are our allies...?”

Horikita, who used to believe that everyone not from her own class is an enemy, talked to herself, her voice echoing within the classroom.

Chabashira had to have heard Horikita’s words, but she continued to speak without replying.

“In the period from today till Friday, July 16 inclusive, approximately four weeks, you have the right to select up to two second-year students of your choice to form a small group of a maximum of 3 people. The small groups form the basis of the big groups. However, although I said you could form the group with whoever you liked, there are still rules that exist. First, as I already said, you can only group up with students from the same grade. You can’t form a group with 1st or 3rd years.”

In other words, it’s alright to partner up with a Class 2-A or a Class 2-C student.

A maximum of four can be in a small group created by the 1st years, and 3rd years could have up to three people in a group, same as the 2nd years. This is probably one of the handicaps prepared for each school year. This rule was clearly displayed on the screen. A situation in which all classes worked together to form the strongest group for the competition could also occur. If you could freely form an ideal group, the possibility of winning would certainly appear. Or rather, the other years would surely pick out the best candidates to form the groups, so in order to counter that, we have to gather all our power.

“And then, for the ratio of boys to girls in the next exam, when both boys and girls form a mixed group, the proportion of girls to boys must be at least 2 to 3.”

This means that the combinations of 2 boys and 1 girl, or 1 boy and 1 girl would not be allowed.

The possible combinations of the small groups were shown on the monitor.

[1 boy] [2 boys] [3 boys]

[1 girl] [2 girls] [3 girls]

[1 boy, 2 girls]

There were seven combinations in total. On the contrary, groups of [2 boys, 1 girls] and [1 boy, 1 girl] cannot be formed and will be rejected.

“What happens if you don’t form a group... or if you can’t form a group?”

“As shown in the list of possible combinations, a group of 1 person can be established. Although the benefits are reduced, no special problems will arise. This is because the next special exam can be done regardless of the size of the group. If anyone, whether male or female, wants to take on the challenge by himself or herself, it’s allowed.”

Although there would be nothing better than having as many people as possible, a single person can still take the special exam without any issues.

“Although there will also be students who think that it would be easier with only one person, there would be nothing better than having as many people as possible. Apart from the advantages of having more people, special privileges are afforded to groups with more people. Therefore, I would not recommend choosing to fight on your own except as a last resort.”

If you could easily handle the exam, forming a one-man group might not be a bad option, but students who couldn’t form a group would be forced to take the exam under unfavourable conditions. In this case, for a normal student, forming a group of three would be the lowest requirement to stand on the same starting line as everyone else.

“There’s nothing but advantages to forming a group, but there’s also a point worthy of attention. That is, once you’ve established a group, you can’t switch to another group whatever the reason may be.”

After forming a group, it seems like the group members will have to be together as allies until the end of the special exam.



“We can’t change groups, but we could form a group of up to 6 for the special exam, right? But so far, we can only form small groups of up to three people. What’s up with that?”

Hirata raised his question to Chabashira.

“Yeah, that’s the key point. After the special exam starts, the small groups will be allowed to come together. 2 groups of 3 people or 3 groups of 2 people or even 6 lone wolves could form one big group. However, the conditions for forming a group still exist. In a big group of more than 4 people, the percentage of girls in the group must be at least 50%.”

The rules for the proportion of girls in a group will be changed from 2:3 to 1:2. If the restrictions are going to change, sticking to small groups of 1 or 2 people to begin with can be a strategy.

“From this, some students might think that they can just form their groups after the special exam starts, but that won’t be an easy thing to do. Although you are allowed to group with anyone freely, it will be extremely difficult to form your ideal big group in the exam. Situations, where one wants to form a big group with the maximum of 6 people but isn’t able to, could be very common.”

While having a small number of people in a group didn’t seem entirely without its benefits, considering the risks of going through the uninhabited island survival exam from the beginning to the end all alone, forming a group of three people beforehand would be safer.

Without considering the dropouts, in the whole year, each class has 40 people. That’s 160 students in each year with four classes. Since it’s clearly stated that only groups with a maximum of 6 people can be formed, there will be at least 81 groups in the entire school when the exam starts. And since there’s no guarantee that every group will be able to have 6 people, the number of big groups competing against each other might reach triple digits.

“Okay, I also know that asking you guys to form groups as you please might still leave you confused. After all, if you don’t know the contents of the exam, you won’t be able to target the people you need.”

Presumably, everyone was thinking that way. Chabashira continued on.

“I cannot tell you the contents of the next exam. However, let me touch upon what kinds of abilities will be needed.”

After saying that, Chabashira looked at the students who were wearing stiff expressions.

“In last year’s uninhabited island survival exam, there were many students who were worried because they didn’t get a chance to show their potential. But this year’s exam can be considered to require ‘all types of abilities’. Academic ability, physical ability, mental ability, communication ability. In addition to the abilities I just listed, there’s a high likelihood that you’ll need to use the abilities in which you’re good at.”

It’s not good enough to be only good at studies or only good at sports.

I guess it means that the more things you are good at, the more of an advantage you have.

At first glance, it was hard to see the connection between an uninhabited island and academics, but there are actually many ways to test it.

For example, if the rules were designed so that if you couldn’t answer a question correctly, you couldn’t get any food.

It is possible for a group made entirely of people proud of their physical ability to get knocked out immediately.

“Although forming a group with students who you are close with is important, it’s very likely that the overall ability of the group will directly relate to the results you’ll get on the special exam, so I advise everyone to consider the right talents when forming your groups.”

Students with a high overall ability forming a group will simply be more beneficial.

However, as Chabashira said, choosing students who you have a good relationship with is a point that couldn’t be overlooked.

We don’t know the contents of the exam, and it’s possible effective teamwork could make all the difference.

“Although I said the more people you have, the greater the advantage, the biggest reason for that is not that you have six bodies or six brains. Rather, it’s because of the rule regarding the dropping out of group members from the exam. Let’s compare the situation where Hirata takes the official exam on by himself till the end, to the situation where the trio of Hirata, Sudo, and Hondou challenges the exam till the end.”

After Chabashira finished typing something on the tablet, the image on the screen switched. Displaying Hirata's name in a one-man group and the names in a three-man group including Hirata. The borders of each name were coloured blue.

"Suppose that during the special exam, Hirata is met with some kind of accident and could not continue the exam. Of course, if he was participating alone, his group would be disqualified immediately, and will pay the penalties."

Hirata's name in the one-man group turned red, indicating his disqualification.

"On the other hand, what would happen if Hirata dropped out in the three-man group...?"

Although Hirata's name turned red, the names of the other two group members remained blue.

"While Hirata will be disqualified and sent back to the ship, the other two members can continue the exam without any issues. And if that group persevered until the very end and got first place, Hirata, as one of the group members, would also be considered as ending up in first place."

In other words, even if individuals were eliminated, it was fine as long as the group survived?

Basically, having fewer people in a group would only bring disadvantages.

"No matter how many people drop out in the middle of the exam, the group can continue to function without any issues until the last person drops out. To put it simply, the more people there are in a group, the more chances they have to survive."

So that's the case. It's confirmed that the groups are tremendously important.

No matter how capable a student is, they still could meet with an accident and get injured or fall ill.

In terms of dispersing that risk, forming a 6 man group is a condition essential to victory.

"Now that you know the importance of groups, I'll explain the rewards."

At this point, the impact of the uninhabited island survival exam on the class will be made public for the first time.

## #Rewards

Group placed First:

300 Class Points, 1 million Private Points, 1 Protection Point.

Group placed Second:

200 Class Points, 500,000 Private Points.

Group placed Third:

100 Class Points, 250,000 Private Points.

Groups placed in the top 50% (including groups placed 1st to 3rd):

50,000 Private Points.

Groups placed in the top 70% (including groups placed 1st to 3rd):

10,000 Private Points.

\*Class Points rewards for the top three groups will be taken from the class years of the bottom-placed three groups.

Class Points are not related to the number of people, but are divided equally by the number of classes (rounded.)

From what's shown on the screen, the rewards in both Class and Private Points are quite high. There would be huge changes if the top 3 places are taken by the same class, but there was something weird to take note of.

"This is the list of rewards for this time. Keep in mind that since you can't group with anyone outside of your year this time, it will inevitably turn into a competition between the years. However, both the rewards and penalties will be given out by group per class. In other words, if a group consisting of only Class D students gets first place, the rewards for first place will be given entirely to Class D. On the other hand, if a group consisting of students from all four classes gets first place, the rewards will be divided equally among the four classes. While a group made up of the best students of each class might have a higher chance of winning, it wouldn't change the class point standings in the slightest."

Because the difference in the number of people from each class in the group wouldn't matter, the 300 class points will just be divided equally among the four classes.

This way, even getting first place would not narrow the gap in class points. No, at any rate, at this current stage where we can only form small groups with a maximum of 3 people, one class wouldn't be able to join. This would make an ideal negotiation impossible.

“And— — the colossal total reward of 600 class points for the top three groups, will be evenly collected from the years of the bottom three placed groups. If the first-placed group is a second-year group and the last-placed group is a first-year group, the reward will be taken equally from every first-year class's class points. The second-placed group corresponds to the second-to-last group, and the third-placed group corresponds to the third-to-last group.

In other words, it's likely to become a situation where the years would be robbing each other's class points.

“Next, for comparison, I will explain what will happen in case the top and bottom groups are from the same year. In that situation, there will be a special arrangement. The classes in the last placed group will have to pay 100 points each to the classes in the top group, while the classes in the 2nd to last-placed group will have to pay 66 points each, and the third to last with 33 points each. If a class wins first place alone, they will receive 300 points, but if that class also has a student alone in a group in last place, 100 points will be deducted, and they'll only get 200 points.”

The class points that a mixed group of 4 classes would receive if they win is 75 points per class. Even if your class has a group in 1st place, if a group containing students from your class comes in the last place, your class would still be at a loss.

“In addition, if the levied class points do not reach the reward amount, the school will fill in the remainder. This rule applies to the other year's levies as well.”

Even if the levied class points are not enough, the rewards will still be guaranteed.

“Furthermore, if a group with a mix of 4 classes finishes bottom, the number of class points to be taken will be reduced slightly. The 1st, 2nd, and 3rd last place will be reduced to 75, 50, and 25 class points respectively, again, an equal burden.”

Was that a bonus because it is difficult to work together in this exam?

“There are, of course, penalties for the groups placed at the bottom of the rankings. Only the bottom 3 groups will have their class points taken away, but that isn’t all. The students of the bottom 5 groups will be expelled.”

The students held their breaths.

5 groups, up to 30 people might be expelled.

“I-If only Class 2-D becomes the target of expulsion...”

“In the worst-case scenario, Class D would be reduced to 9 people. But that would be extremely rare. In the event that you do face the penalty for the exam, you can pay 6 million private points to be exempt from it. The division of this amount is based on the number of people in the group. For a group of six, a million private points per person would do.”

Even if you were penalized, there seems to be still a way to save yourself.

“After the exam starts, you cannot borrow or lend points to each other. As a result, it is necessary to keep enough points to save yourself from the penalty on your own phone before boarding the cruise.”

The option to help each other afterwards doesn’t exist, so it seems necessary to raise points in advance before the special exam starts.

“Within the group that is penalized, there might be some students who can pay and some students who can’t. If there’s even one person who doesn’t have enough points, what will happen?”

“Don’t worry about that; Even if 5 out of the 6 students fall short, the other student who has enough can bail themselves out by paying 1 million private points.”

From the look of it, so long as you have the right number of people, there is no need to worry about having others drag you down with them.

“Are there any questions?”

The one who raised her hand now was Horikita who was sitting right in front of Chabashira.

“If you form a group with the other classes, the reward will be split equally among the classes. Wouldn’t that rule result in only choosing people from your own class to form the groups?”

Horikita thought it would be pointless to work hard to survive and achieve victory just to get the class points split evenly among the classes.

“If you decide that there’s no benefit in that, then you can just form groups with students of your own class. That is all.”

Chabashira retorted by telling us to figure out by ourselves what to do.

There is no objectively correct solution to this problem. But what is certain is that if one wanted to monopolize the rewards and created groups with only one’s classmates, the leftover groups would be forced to engage in difficult battles and some groups could be formed which would be likely to get expelled. On the other hand, increasing the number of classes in a group would decrease the reward itself, but it would also make it easier to form a broader group and control the risk of the penalty. Of course, that might create other risks as well.

Forming groups for survival on the uninhabited island.

Here’s a summary of the information Chabashira has given us so far.

- Survive for up to two weeks on the uninhabited island.
- Because of the variety of abilities needed, groups with higher overall strength have an advantage, but the unity of the team mustn’t be ignored.
- The top groups will be given special rewards such as class points, private points, protection points. (But class points will be divided equally by the number of classes in the groups.)
- Groups must be formed with at least 1 to at most 6 people, and the more people, the more advantageous. (The ranking of the group will depend on the last person in the group that gets eliminated.)
- The bottom groups will receive penalties, including getting expelled.
- Subject to the rules, small groups can be freely formed within one’s year (up to 3 people.)
- Forming big groups during the exam won’t be easy.

That’s the gist of it, but that explanation alone still doesn’t give a complete picture of the exam.

“I’ve given you all a tedious explanation so far, but there’s more to explain apart from that.”

Chabashira took a breath and continued to what needed to be explained.

“Take a look at this.”

The monitor display switched screens, displaying 8 items.

#### Basic Cards overview

1. Head Start: At the start of the exam, the points you can use are multiplied by 1.5.
2. Bonus: The owner of this card gets twice as many private points from rewards.
3. Half Off: In the event of a penalty, reduces the number of private points to be paid by half. Only valid for the cardholder.
4. Free Ride: Designate a group at the start of the exam. Receive as a bonus half of the private points won by the designated group. Joining with the designated group nullifies the effect of the card.
5. Insurance: In case the owner of this card is to be eliminated due to ill health, gives that person one grace day to recover. Not valid if the elimination is due to cheating.

#### Special Cards overview

1. More People: The owner of this card can join a group as the 7th person. This card can be used once the exam starts, and the required ratio of boys to girls will not apply.
2. Nullify: In the event of a penalty, reduces the number of private points to be paid to 0. Only valid for the cardholder.
3. Trial: Receive the right to get 1.5 times as many class points from the rewards of the special exam. However, the group will be penalized if they don't enter the top 30%. The school will provide the additional class points for the rewards.

“What, what are those?”

“These are like items that can affect the uninhabited island survival exam, and everyone will receive one of these. Except for one of them, there is no harm to having one of these. You can more or less understand that by reading the instructions.”

It was a lineup of a total of 8 types of cards, ranging from cards that would allow you to gain an advantage in the special exam to cards that are designed to protect you. The latter would be useful to protect yourself, but if you consider it as a safeguard against failure, then the evaluation would be different. The trickiest one is probably



the “Trial” card, which contains the only drawback. If used well, it has the potential to pay more than any other reward, but placing in the top 30% wouldn’t be easy.

“Each student will receive one of these eight cards at random. The cards will be distributed tomorrow morning, and until the special exam begins, you can transfer or trade the card you get, so long as it is within your school year. Anyone can look up who holds what card in the OAA. You can either sell them to students who want to buy them, or you could collect multiple cards by buying them. But the effects of the same cards do not stack, so there’s absolutely no point in getting two identical cards.”

### Cards overview and rules

1. Both Basic and Special Cards can be traded within the same year.
2. You couldn’t trade within your class, and once a card has changed owners, it cannot be traded further.
3. The effects do not stack when you use the same card.

In other words, a student can hold and use up to 7 cards.

However, because some of them can only be used in positive or negative cases, not all of the cards’ effects can be used. In the end, you just get effective options to use in either case.

“Also, of the three special cards, they will be randomly distributed, and each school year will get only one of each type. Therefore, it is possible that one class might coincidentally end up with all three of the special cards. That is all.”

Explanations regarding the instructions for the uninhabited island survival exam, and of the rewards and penalties.

And then explanations regarding the distribution of items known as Cards.

At this point, we finally finished listening to the long overview of the uninhabited island survival exam.

“Some of you might not be able to understand the explanations this time fully, but before lunch break, a manual will be automatically sent to everyone’s tablet, so you can check from that.”

Just as Chabashira finished her explanations, the bell rang, and the first class ended.

“There’s plenty of time for you to think slowly about what strategy for grouping to use.”

Leaving that advice, Chabashira left the classroom. The students gathered after that.

Under these circumstances, Kouenji, who was sitting to my left across an empty seat, left his seat and walked towards the corridor. Although it looked like his usual egotistical behaviour we had become very familiar with, he was walking quicker than usual.

I felt that Kouenji’s behaviour was a bit odd and decided to follow him.

In order not to be noticed, I tried to eliminate the sound of my footsteps and other related scents. That said, since this place wasn’t like the uninhabited island, which had lots of cover, there wasn’t much I could do.

But normal people usually don’t spend their lives cautious of being followed. Suppose an amateur was tailing another amateur, even if they half-assed it, they probably wouldn’t get noticed.

Shortly after, I could hear Chabashira and Kouenji from around the corner.

I held my breath at the corner and listened to the conversation between the two.

“So, what did you want to talk about, Kouenji?”

“I just don’t think Teacher explained a crucial point.”

Chabashira, presumably standing face to face with Kouenji, waited for his question.

“A crucial point?”

“If a person who is taking the special exam alone falls sick on the day, what happens then?”

“And here I was wondering what you’d ask. How boring.”

Although I couldn’t see her, Chabashira laughed somewhat delightfully.

“You withdrew from the exam last year by taking sick leave, right? Unfortunately, that won’t work this year. You will be penalized without any special treatment. In other words, you’ll have to pay 6 million private points. From what you have on hand, it’s impossible.”

“Fufu, that’s true. I’m an avaricious and insatiable person, so this is quite troubling.”

Even for this time’s uninhabited island survival exam, Kouenji seemed to have planned to withdraw as usual.

But there is no way for a solo participant surviving on the uninhabited island to escape.

“So what are you going to do then? Carry out your freedom, and then get expelled?”

“Really, I wonder what I should do? You can leave now, teacher.”

Kouenji seemed to be satisfied with Chabashira’s answer, so he asked Chabashira to leave. In a bit, the sound of her footsteps disappeared.

Kouenji, too, will probably set out soon, and so staying here would be pointless.

And so I decided to leave that place quietly.

But—

“By the way, who’s the one who’s hiding and spying on me, and from where?”

Kouenji noticed me, who was hiding. I could tell just by the direction of his voice that he had turned around.

“Whether you come out or not is up to you.”

He hadn’t just said that on a whim. He’s as acute as an animal...

Although I could have gone back to the classroom without showing my face, I decided to reveal myself honestly.

“It’s the Ayanokouji boy? Do you want anything from me?”

Without even a hint of surprise, he indifferently accepted my presence.

More than him predicting it, it was like he just didn’t care who it was.

“Horikita told me to keep an eye out on your actions. We don’t know how Kouenji will act, she said.”

“Hmm.”

Kouenji slowly walked towards me, his eyes appraising me.

“You seem to be good at hiding yourself. But I can’t see through your truths and lies, Ayanokouji boy. I won’t trust the words of someone like that.”

“I didn’t think you were the type to trust someone.”

“Fufufu, that’s true. I have no trust in anyone except myself. Rather, it’s more like I have no interest in anyone else.”

Kouenji, who came to my side, stopped walking for a moment.

“That applies to you as well, Ayanokouji boy.”

After I got the perfect score in math, Kouenji left the classroom with no expression on his face.

There were no signs of him asking anybody else about the details later either.

I couldn’t detect a single lie from Kouenji’s words.

“What are you going to do in this special exam?”

“Yeah... Speaking of that, can I join your group?”

I was wondering how he was going to respond. I see how it is.

As long as Kouenji groups up with someone, he can easily withdraw after the special exam starts.

“Sorry, but I’ll have to reject you. I don’t have the leisure to accept someone who’s guaranteed to quit at the very beginning.”

“Fufufu, is that so, there’s no helping it then.”

“But is that way of thinking really good? Even if you find a group that you can join, you’ll end up having to trust others with your fate of getting expelled.”

“That’s true, if I quit without doing anything.”

Kouenji once again took a step, walking forward.

“What should I do? I’ll carefully think about it until it officially starts.”

Leaving behind those words, Kouenji returned to the classroom.

## Part 2

“A special exam on an uninhabited island for the second year in a row. Although it’s not like I haven’t thought about this...”

“I thought it was coming, and it really has.”

After returning to the classroom, the routine conversation to prepare for the special exam began.

Everyone, along with Yosuke, gathered around the front row seat of Horikita, sorting out the current situation.

Kouenji also returned to his seat, using his usual mirror to look at himself, revelling in it.

“The particularly important part of this exam is, although there are certain conditions, we can form groups with anyone in the same year at will.”

This was a new rule that had never existed in the special exams up to now.

And in the end, the appearance of such a rule was beyond what had been expected.

“But, what about the distribution of class points when you win? Although I understand the reason behind it, there’s no benefit in grouping up with other classes. It just feels like we’d be messing around if we do that.”

Exactly. Sudo’s thoughts were just a matter of course, as he delved into the point. This special exam was not just a competition across the year groups, but also a battle between classes of the same year. Forming groups consisting of members of just your own class was the only way to complete this exam efficiently.

Even so, the school had prepared some interesting rules.

Grouping up with strong students within the school year would make it easier to get into the upper rankings. Low risk, but low reward. On the other hand, grouping up with only members of the same class would present a high risk, high reward opportunity.

The ideal situation would be forming groups of 2 or 3 within the class, and then converging into the big groups later.

However, it was not easy to form big groups after the special exam began. If there was no guarantee of being able to form a big group before freely, then the danger of failing would be great. But despite this, it was also true that this special exam hid previously unimagined destructive power. If one class took all three top spots, they'd receive 600 class points. If Class 2-D achieved this goal, it'd be an express ticket to Class 2-B.

"But if we rely on only our class, there are some talents that can't be offset. And if it's only our class that forms groups within our own class... What if the other classes join forces? The worst-case scenario would be that only Class D falls behind as the gap widens."

It would be ideal to win with only Class D, but at the end of the day, that is just an ideal situation.

If any class chose to challenge the special exam alone, that class would run the risk of getting targeted by all the other three classes working together. If that class lost, there wouldn't be any sort of high reward waiting for them.

"If it's just that we can't win, that's a different story, but if we withdraw too early, we'll run the risk of expulsion. In other words, if we have enough self-confidence... No, if we can't be certain of victory, then we'll have to form groups of 6 with the other classes."

A special exam like this one, in which the other classes were both comrade and enemy, had never existed until now.

When considered this way, wasn't it also an important part of a strategy to form groups with the students in the other classes right from the start? However, there was no easy guarantee that the pace of the other classes would be in line with each other. Although in terms of results, there's not much advantage in grouping up within your own class, since there could be a large change in class points this exam, you'd want to try to outperform the other classes as much as possible. Not to mention the classes that are at the bottom.

And so, under the premise of having to form groups, which direction to turn the rudder to start with?

"How will Sakayanagi, Ryuen, and Ichinose act?"

In order to decide on the groupings, Horikita used Yosuke's words as a basis to speak to everyone.

"Class A, who is in the leading position, probably wouldn't be troubled by the mixing together of the classes. It doesn't matter which group wins, as long as the gap of points between their class and the other classes does not become narrower. On the contrary, the next three classes that rank below them, including us, would like to narrow that gap."

"Then how about an alliance between the three classes? If the gap is extended by Class A, let's first establish an alliance from Class B to D. To be able to narrow that gap with Class A wouldn't be bad."

Sudo, who was listening to the conversations, came up with a good idea.

Joining forces with which we have a common enemy, to attack Class A together.

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend, is what you mean. It's not a bad objective to isolate Class A. If it is Ichinose, she probably will accept this proposal."

"But if we propose to isolate Class A, we have to be prepared for Class A's hostility. Considering Sakayanagi's character, I think that, even with our Class D, the bottommost class, she'll still mercilessly use her resources to deal with us."

In general, Class A's energy would be focused on the 2nd place Class B that is trying to catch up.

But, as Yosuke said, Sakayanagi tended never to let the prey she decided on escape.

"We still need to quietly get closer to the top classes as much as possible."

"Even if the three classes are to fight together, it's better if it's not us who makes that proposal."

Allowing the other proposers to accept Sakayanagi's hostility.

Easier said than done.

The most troublesome thing about this special exam is that only negotiating within your class couldn't solve all the problems.

No matter how heated the discussion got here, nothing would get done. If we couldn't grasp what Class B and Class C were actually thinking, if there would be no unified

guidelines being implemented, then it'll end up as nothing more than a theoretical plan, useless in practice.

That being said, it wasn't so easy, getting the three classes to talk with each other without any trouble.

Ichinose aside, it's hard to imagine Ryuen would readily agree to it.

If Sakayanagi became aware of this information, she would naturally make her move as well.

"Seems hard to make a judgement..."

Although there was more than a month to form the groups, there was no way to stay calm as groups formed around us, one by one.

"It would be of great help if another class raises a similar proposal..."

The students of Class D were having a hard time with this.

"Just forming a group by itself is quite a headache."

Besides forming a group, there was another important thing.

That is the existence of cards with various effects. Tomorrow morning, the school would give all students each a unique card that couldn't be transferred between classmates. And because cards that have been transferred once would be locked in place, they couldn't return to the original owners' hands. In other words, you could only simply trade, or buy, or sell them with students outside of the class.

"Actually, most people will probably start to act tomorrow."

"Yeah. Gathering effective cards into a group is also a key point."

The day when the prohibitions of forming a group for the next special exam were lifted.

Of course, there would occur a significant change in the situation of the classes, including Class D.



After school, the cell phones of the students who had excellent academic or physical abilities rang at the same time. Horikita approached me as she watched the situation.

“It seems like everyone’s quickly making their move. After all, it’s natural to want to bring the outstanding students into one’s group.”

Regardless of the strategies of the class to which you belonged to, the first to make their move wouldn’t lose anything.

“Did you not get any messages, Horikita?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“I see. After all, there are only very few people who know your contact.”

“You knew it already, and you still had to mention it deliberately. You’re a nasty guy. So, did anyone contact you? Ayanokouji-kun, who got a perfect score in math? Your cell phone is surprisingly quiet.”

Horikita asked me back, so I decided to look at my phone, which hadn’t made a sound yet.

“Unfortunately, my battery’s dead. I haven’t charged it for two or three days.”

“If you don’t use your phone frequently, you’ll charge it less often.”

No, although I would like to deny that it didn’t happen, she wasn’t wrong. If you didn’t use your cell phone much, you might unknowingly forget to charge it.

“Don’t you need to pay more attention to our classmates? It’ll be really troublesome later if they hastily form groups.”

“I’ve already instructed them on what they should do earlier. I summed it up in an easy to understand way and sent it to everyone. But you didn’t seem to notice it, since your battery’s dead.”

While Horikita said that, she turned her cell phone screen towards me.

-Please don’t form a group before Class D reaches an agreement.

-Nevertheless, if you absolutely want to decide on your group as early as possible, please contact Horikita.

It seemed like Horikita had anticipated this situation, and set up some minimum regulations.

“This is not enforced, because this matter ultimately depends on personal judgement.”

With whom to group up with or not was indeed a matter of personal choice. You couldn't form a group with people who didn't fit your personality, which would affect your chances of getting expelled. Even if all four classes work together, there was no ideal combination of groups where no one would get expelled.

Due to that, we could only make some suggestions.

I always carried my phone charger with me, so I plugged it in and left my seat.

Because there might be students in the classroom eavesdropping on our conversation.

“Has there been communication from Ichinose? It wouldn't be strange if she proposes a plan for the whole year to help each other.”

“There doesn't seem to be contact yet. Neither Class A nor Class B has made any proposals. If all the 2nd years had the thought of wanting to come together, then there probably should be some communication between them at this stage.”

If people grouped up without permission based on their own preferences, cooperation would become more and more difficult. If there were no plans for a peaceful discussion from the beginning, it would end up with all the 2nd years fighting with each other. If Horikita wanted to establish a cooperative relationship between the classes, she would probably have taken action.

Horikita didn't show any particular signs of displeasure from me leaving my seat and instead followed me.

It seemed like she still had something to say.

After walking into the corridor, and confirming that no one was around, she spoke to me again.

“This time's uninhabited island exam... Can you get first place by yourself?”

“Leave me alone. The only thing we know now is that it's an uninhabited island special exam.”

“I was wondering if you, who got a perfect score in math, even needed a group.”

What kind of reasoning was that? Are her forceful words her way of trying to express what she wanted to say?

“If we come in first place, our Class D will gain points for certain. We can let the 1st and 3rd years fight for the 2nd and 3rd place. Better than letting the other 2nd years get it.”

Easier said than done.

“If that is the case, we can form the groups with the core objective of avoiding any dropouts, and forming the groups would be easier .”

If we shifted our direction to forming strong groups to win, then weak groups would inevitably be created.

“Not everyone can afford to pay the private points for relief.”

“Yes. For the students who are a little worried, I would like to collect as many private points as possible, but if the student who lends me points receives the penalty of expulsion, there’s no helping it.”

There’s nothing more futile than saving someone else while falling down yourself.

“If you don’t want that, then you can only ask students with a points surplus.”

That would work, but there were a limited number of such students.

“Although a method that would result in no dropouts exists, I don’t think anyone would want to do it.”

“The plan to withdraw intentionally from the start?”

It seemed like that Horikita had already noticed a loophole in this exam. According to the rules, only the first 5 groups to withdraw would get expelled. In that case, if we intentionally prepared 5 sacrificial groups and let them withdraw, the rest of the students wouldn’t have to worry about getting expelled. However, to do this, a total of 30 million private points would need to be prepared, not to mention the fact that the years of the top three groups would take class points from the years of the bottom three groups. Even if the students in the sacrificial groups were from the same year, because the rewards were reduced, we wouldn’t be able to recover from our losses. The fact that the top three and the bottom three groups were linked together could be considered as the school’s way of trying to prevent improper behaviours.

“It feels like we can only rely on our own strength to survive.”

“That’s true. Can I consult you again?”

Horikita, who had stopped walking, said that.

“If it’s within the acceptable range.”

“That’s enough, thank you.”

It seemed like Horikita had something to talk about, as she returned to the classroom.

I watched Horikita’s back as she left, and decided to head for the elevator.

#### Part 4

On the way from the corridor to the entrance.

“Yo!”

The person who greeted me as I was looking at the black screen before the phone turned on was a student of Class 2-B, Ishizaki Daichi, who had a smile floating on his face. Did he encounter some good news?

“I contacted you through your cell phone, but there was no response, so I came straight to you.

“Sorry about that, my phone happened to run out of battery.”

“Forget it, it’s fine, just do me a favour and give me some time, alright?”

“Is that supposed to be a threat?”

“Wha, that’s an interesting joke. Does a guy who can intimidate you really exist in this school?”

Ishizaki responded to my joke with his own.

“Are you busy after this?”

“No, I’m just about to go back.”

“Really? Then there’s no problem. Come.”

With a smile that didn’t give me any chance to speak, Ishizaki beckoned with his hand and strode forward.

If I watched him go like this, I’d lose track of him in the blink of an eye.

If he were going to make trouble here, it would only attract everyone’s attention.

Since I had time, I decided to follow Ishizaki from behind.

But as I turned around the corner, a big wall that shouldn’t have been here appeared suddenly before my eyes.

No, it wasn’t a wall. It was Ishizaki’s classmate, Yamada Albert.

He was wearing sunglasses, and he put his right hand, which had an air of intimidation about it, on my shoulder.

“Hey.”

“... Hey.”

I wasn’t quite sure what was going on, so I just answered him with the same word. What on earth just happened?

The intimidation which I thought was a joke actually had a touch of reality in it.

“Hi, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Next to the wall-sized Albert, the figure of Hiyori appeared.

“What a rare combination.”

“Maybe so.”

I thought Ryuen would be here too, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“What are you doing here, let’s go.”

“Go? Go where?”



“Well...yeah, I haven’t thought about that yet.”

Ishizaki rubbed his left index finger under his nose, laughing sheepishly.

“I have a bad feeling about this, so could you let me go?”

I felt like the developments here wouldn’t be any good, so I asked to leave.

“You’re free, right? I won’t let you go back.”

“Won’t let me go back... what are you doing?”

Albert, who was standing behind me, grabbed me with his immense strength, and wrung me firmly. Then, Hiyori also pulled my arm into her chest. Together the two of them captured me.

“Sorry, Ayanokouji-kun, but you can’t run away.”

“Huh...?”

In the end, this could totally be called intimidation.

...Could this kind of joke stop before it went too far?

Anyway, it looked like these three were going to take me away from here.

“We stand out here a lot. We should move, Ishizaki-kun?”

“Yeah. So, where to?”

“Hmm, then... how about Ishizaki-kun’s room?”

Hiyori suggested casually.

“Huh? My....my room? No, no, that’s a bit...! Never, never!”

When Ishizaki heard that his room had been suggested, he refused, flustered.

“What’s wrong? Are there any inconveniences?”

“That, that’s because, there are various reasons. Even if you asked me, you said that so out of the blue...”



“We wouldn’t mind if your room is a bit messy, right?”

Albert, who was asked for his consent, turned his face.

...Japanese, isn’t it good that he understood?

He surely needed to use it in exams and lessons, but I wanted to hear him speak Japanese once.

“Yeah, yeah. Not just a little bit, it’s extremely messy! There’s nowhere to put your foot! Aiya, what a huge shame!”

“Don’t worry. If you need it, I’ll help you clean up.”

“Nononono! Tissues and stuff, I can’t let a girl clean them up!”

He couldn’t help but blurt out those messy things.

“Tissues...? What does that mean?”

Hiyori tilted her head incredulously. What was that all about?

“Anyway my room is a bit...! Yes, that’s right, let’s go to Albert’s room!”

Ishizaki changed the topic in a panic.

“Right, isn’t Albert’s room great? Right? Right?”

Ishizaki suggested, as if he was running away from something.

“OK.”

So he understood Japanese, after all. Albert showed his agreement with a brief response.

After that, he started moving while carrying me.

“But...Am I going to just be carried away like this?”

“It’s okay. Yamada-kun is very strong.”

No, that wasn’t the problem.

It just felt like we've become unusually conspicuous.

"No problem. In a way, it's also a kind of dissemination."

After saying that, Hiyori, gently smiling, as usual, walked over like a leader.

"I see, as expected of Shiina! Great idea, great idea!"

What did you want to do by taking me away?

With that question in mind, I was taken to the dormitory.

## Part 5

This was the first time I'd visited Albert's room.

Although he was of a greater physique and size, the layout of his room was still the same

However, each room had its own arrangement, and this was a bit unique.

A large American flag and a Japanese flag adorned the center of the room. Not only that, flags of countless countries, such as those of China, Italy, and some African countries, though small in size, decorated one of the walls. They weren't just made of printed paper, but out of fabric, which gave us a sense for his passion.

"Albert's a flag fanatic. Surprised ain'tcha?"

Ishizaki had probably been to his room before, which is why he was able to explain all of this to us in such a calm fashion

"That seems to be the case."

After he released me, Albert casually urged me to sit.

Once I confirmed that all of us were seated, I proceeded to ask them what they wanted.

“So, what do you three want?”

The three of them looked at each other.

For some reason, they all had large smiles on their faces.

And then, Ishizaki, as their representative, told me.

“Let’s cut to the chase, here’s my proposal.... Let’s form a group for the next special exam!”

As expected, it was about the special exam.

“Form...a group? Can you give me more details?”

“More details? That’s all there is to it”

“It doesn’t seem like that at all to me. I can’t even identify who I’m supposed to be grouping up with.”

The number of people present here were four, which was one more than the rules allowed. Also since Hiyori was a girl she didn’t qualify as a teammate due to the gender ratio rule, so it probably meant that I had to group up with Ishizaki and Albert. But if he didn’t elaborate on this clearly, I’d have no idea about it.

“With whoever you want. It can be me, Albert, Shiina, anybody really. The point is that you team up with somebody from our class.”

What a lofty and brazen proposal.

In a sense, it was the type of proposal that could only be made because Ishizaki was the one offering it.

“In other words, you want me to enter into a group with two people from your class?”

“Right. And then when the exam starts, you’ll combine your group with another three person group from Class B, so it’ll be a perfect six person group. With five people from our class, and you being the sixth, Ayanakouji, let’s aim for first place!”

Although such a proposal could move one to tears, there was an urgent need to think it through first.

“Hiyori, did you carefully explain the exam rules to Ishizaki?”

“No.”

Hiyori gave a forthright answer.

“If I’d interrupted and tried to explain, I felt like there would’ve been something I needed to correct within 5 seconds. So, I thought it would be better to let him carry on with his momentum.”

Better? Definitely not.

Indeed, 5 seconds into the conversation and it already looked like Ishizaki hadn’t understood the exam rules....

“Although I’ve got many questions, I’ll narrow it down to two... No, three questions. First off, after the special exam starts, there’s no guarantee that you can easily form your ideal big group.”

In fact, our class teacher had already told us that it wouldn’t be an easy thing.

If we could form big groups by just thinking or saying, “let’s group up”, or “let’s do it”, then there would be no point forcing students to form groups of three right now. There wouldn’t be much advantage to it.

It’s precisely because it’s difficult to form a big group during the official exam, that we were given freedom of choice to form smaller teams now.

“Really?”

Ishizaki seemed completely baffled, with an incredulous expression, he tilted his head towards Hiyori as if he needed her to explain.

“If you organize the exam description, that’s what it means. Basically, depending on the situation, we might have to work with a group we didn’t expect or want.”

“Wha. I haven’t a clue what you mean.”

“During the exam there might just be certain conditions that we need to meet in order to combine our groups. That’s what I’m talking about.”

“What the heck are those?”

If we’d known that, then it wouldn’t have been so troublesome.

"We don't know the details. Judging from the school's explanation, there's no doubt that they won't be easy to meet."

"But... Even if there are conditions, we have to prepare under the premise that we'll be able to form our groups right?"

"Well, if you put it that way, it's true."

"Then we're good. For the exam, just follow my proposal and prepare accordingly."

It's kind of respectable that he was able to think simply at this point.

Hiyori also listened to Ishizaki's proposal with great interest.

"Ain't no point in worrying about things I don't understand."

Was this Ishizaki Daichi's unique charm?

"Well then... my second point."

Since it seems like I couldn't make him understand the first point, I went ahead with the next one.

"Other than me, who else have you talked to? Or who else were you planning to talk to?"

"We didn't talk to anyone, and we don't intend to. Right?"

The two of them nodded in agreement with Ishizaki's statement.

"So that means it's only me. Why's that?"

"Well, 'course it's just you. I reckon you're just as powerful as Ryuen... Nah, if I had to say, it's cuz I now think that you're even better than him. You're strong as hell at fighting, and your mental agility is even acknowledged by him. Plus, in the spring exam, you got a perfect score in math. That was truly incredible. The group which has Ayanokouji has the exam in the bag. So I see no reason for us not to invite you, eh?"

"That was high praise, Ayanokouji-kun, but my opinion is also the same."

Albert nodded without hesitation.

I initially said I wanted to ask three questions, but now I've got a fourth one. That was, how much Japanese Albert understood, and how much he could speak. Although I haven't seen him in class, I think he uses Japanese to learn...

They didn't hesitate to mention that they needed to acquire me.

"Then, the third... this proposal, how does it benefit me? If I assume that the top places are taken by Class B, then it's just you guys that benefit."

Even if the class points were evenly split, there'd be a huge difference in the amount of private points I get versus their class with the majority of the members.

"The heck, of course you can't be the only one who doesn't get any benefits! If we're promoted to Class A, we'll give you 20 million points to come to our class, Ayanokouji. Waddya say?"

After answering confidently, Ishizaki continued.

"In other words, you can get either your class into Class A, or our class into Class A. This way, you have a 50% chance of graduating from Class A."

How about that? He put this proposal forward with a proud smile on his face.

That reasoning would've been true if all four classes had equal chances of moving up to Class A. However since each class differed in various factors such as abilities and points, it was impossible to calculate the accurate probability of a class ascending to Class A.

Of course, there's no doubt that having another class I could move to whenever I wanted was a big advantage.

"Are Hiyori and Albert of the same opinion?"

"Yes. We'd love to have you."

"YES."

Both of them went along with Ishizaki's proposal, knowing that it was absurd. Was that what was happening? Nevertheless, before I accepted this absurd proposal, I had to get to the bottom of this. So I asked my final question.

"Was it Ryuen who decided to invite me? Or is this Ishizaki's arbitrary decision?"

Ishizaki, who had been replying with ease till now, suddenly had a tense expression for the first time.

“It’s my own decision. Ryuuen knows nothing about it.”

So it seemed that Ishizaki had thought and decided on this plan himself.

Although I had speculated this would be the case, this really was reckless.

Now, I could understand why Ibuki who normally hung around Ishizaki wasn’t present here.

So Ishizaki’s supporters are Albert and Hiyori?

“Have you thought about what would happen if Ryuuen found out about this?”

“Never thought about it! No need to dwell on that! Even so... I’m ready for that.”

Although Ishizaki was slightly scared, he tried his best to put on a brave face.

“The rules allow us to form groups with students from within the same year, right? So I thought Ayanokouji was absolutely necessary in order to form the best team. What’s wrong about that? ”

That was true. As long as forming a group within one’s own class wasn’t their policy, Ryuuen had no right to be dissatisfied with Ishizaki’s actions.

“The key point of this special exam is to prevent the 2nd year students’ class points from being taken away by the others. Of course, it’s also necessary to aim for the top spots in the overall ranking. For which, Ayanokouji is indispensable.”

“That’s right.”

“Anyway, even though there are still many aspects to this plan that I’m concerned about... I understand what you mean.”

“Then, will you join our group?”

“Although I don’t think there’s anything wrong in inviting me, I can’t say yes to it right now.”

“Wh-why?”

“It’s because he has his own class to deal with, right?”

Even though Hiyori supported Ishizaki's plan, she understood why I had refused without even having to ask me.

"Besides, I think the terms we've offered him are weak as well."

"Weak...? You sayin' 20 million points ain't enough?"

"I'm not saying anything like that. I think it's certainly an exceptional amount, that is, in terms of quantity. But in effect, the only thing we'd really be giving him is the right to transfer over to our class, yes?"

"B-but we can't just fork over 20 million and let 'im transfer over to Sakayanagi's."

If I was allowed to freely use the points they'd be giving me, it's only natural that I'd use them to secure my place in Class A in the end. Class B wouldn't be able to bolster their forces in the meantime by adding me to their class.

"Additionally, Ishizaki-kun did say that it'd be fine so long as Ayanokouji-kun joins up with somebody from Class B, but there's a problem with that as well. Surviving on the uninhabited island won't be a one-man effort. If you're really aiming for the top spot, you'll be better off with a strong team to back you up."

Hiyori, who had mostly just been quietly listening to the discussion unfold before this, brought up the shortcomings one after another.

And, with each correction, Ishizaki began to panic, his brow visibly dampened with sweat.

"Th-then anyone would be fine!"

"If it was up to me to choose the small group Hmm. Ryuen-kun, Kaneda-kun, and Ayanokouji-kun, those three. It's fine if Kaneda-kun is replaced by Yamada-kun, but Ryuen-kun is indispensable."

There were only a few people in the 2nd year who had his authority, and were bold enough to create tactics that would break the rules without hesitation. This fact that he was the only one from his class who stayed behind in last year's island exam, and went unnoticed till the last minute, was a testament to his ability and value. The other choices would be Kaneda who possessed high academic ability or Albert who prided himself on his iron fist.

Indeed, in order to maximise the odds, having two of those three would be necessary.

"Don't be ridiculous! Do you think Ryuen-kun will ever approve of our plan!?"



“I don’t think he will.”

“Exactly!”

“Kaneda-kun is the same, he won’t ignore Ryuuken-kun’s orders and participate in a strategy he’s unsure of.”

“Then what should we do?”

“At this stage, I guess it can’t be helped.”

“Well... That’s troubling...”

Ishizaki crossed his arms as he racked his brain, but couldn’t come up with anything on the spot.

“We were able to convey ours and Ishizaki’s thoughts to you, so we should be satisfied with that for now.”

It seems like that was Hiyori’s objective all along.

She knew from the beginning that forming a group with me wouldn’t be easy, therefore she judged it would be better to just show me their intent to form one, for now.

Perhaps Albert also understood that this was a reckless attempt, and he patted Ishizaki’s shoulder gently.

“... I get it. Well, if that’s the case, there’s no helping it...”

Although reluctantly, Ishizaki agreed after listening to both of them.

“I don’t know if I can do what you want, let me think about it for now.”

In this situation, I judged this was the best answer.

That being said, I didn’t plan to form a group with anyone at the moment.

This was because of Tsukishiro and the White Room student lurking in the 1st year.

The first semester was almost over.

There’s no way they were going to keep putting it off and let me just spend my campus life like this.

I'm afraid the next special exam will be the final showdown between me and Tsukishiro.

In other words, he may attack regardless of anything else.

If I formed a group, others would surely get involved.

If that really happened, I needed to make sure that I was the only one who dropped out to ensure there were minimum casualties.

I left them, while confirming this in my heart once again.

## Part 6

The next morning, after getting ready for school, I turned on my phone.

The school had sent me a notice through my personal email, informing me that I had been given the "Trial" card.

"Never thought I'd get a special card..."

Just when I thought I had finally gotten past all the strange looks I had been getting due to my perfect score in the math test, I ended up getting this card. That being said, it was a double-edged sword, as the strong effect of this "Trial" card meant that there was a possibility that I could attract attention again. While it would be safe, and desirable, to trade the card with a student who needed it, the uncertain strength it provided meant that there would be consequences for doing so if I'm not careful about who I traded it to. I would probably be the one held responsible if the group I traded it to ended up taking first place.

It's possible that Tsukishiro had given me the card in order to help force my expulsion, but given that the card can be transferred, that was far too weak of a strategy to pressure me. It would be more natural to interpret it as nothing more than the luck of the draw. The two remaining special cards, "More People" and "Nullify", went to Class C's Asakura Mako and Class A's Yano Koharu respectively. It was probably fortunate that they were separated like this, at least to a certain extent.

I proceeded to leave the dormitory earlier than usual, thinking about what I should do from now on.

Then, I bumped into Shinohara in the elevator.

“Good morning.”

“G’ morning.”

Despite being in the same class, we didn’t know each other very well, so neither of us said anything else; Just a simple greeting as we took the elevator to the lobby.

The ride in the elevator didn’t last for very long. When we reached the first floor, I pressed the door button to let Shinohara get off the elevator first.

Ike, who usually came to school relatively late, was waiting in the lobby as we arrived. He looked towards us nervously.

I thought he was simply waiting for Sudo, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

At first, he simply greeted Shinohara and watched her as she made her way out of the lobby, but after a moment, he immediately followed her.

I intentionally slowed down my pace, maintaining just enough distance to ensure that I wouldn’t get in their way.

“Hey, Shinohara.”

“What?”

Once outside the lobby, I could hear their conversation from behind, albeit only faintly.

“Uh, it’s gotta do with that. Ya know, the groups for this new uninhabited island exam... Have you talked to anyone about grouping up yet?”

“No, not yet... Why do you ask?”

“Nothing. Just askin’ is all.”

“Oh, really? What about you? You’re gonna be with Sudo-kun and Hondo-kun either way, right?”

“Sorry. It’d probably be a blast to be with them.”

“Probably, huh~.”

Shinohara laughed, almost as if she was making fun of him, but Ike didn’t seem to care.

Ike seemed to have something he wanted to say, but was struggling to find the right words.

“But, well, those guys can get by on their own, ya know... plus, like, Ken’s pretty strong, so I think they’ve got more than enough manpower with just him in the group.”

“I guess.”

Although Shinohara’s reaction was a bit indifferent, she didn’t seem to hate talking with Ike.

“How do I say this. I should be able to help you where you need it... So, if you’re feeling troubled... uh, I can form a group with you, yeah?”

“The heck? Look at you acting all high and mighty.”

“You saw it last year, right? I’m a boy scout, so I’d like to think I’m pretty useful in an exam like this.”

He was trying his best to sell Shinohara on the idea that she could capitalize on his survival skills.

Essentially, it seemed like he just wanted a reason to group up with her.

“Well, I guess I can consider it, but... You sure want to be in the same group as me?”

“Ah, hey, don’t get me wrong. You see, you’re one of those people at risk of being expelled right? Which is why I’m being nice here and offering to make some sacrifices to protect you!”

Unable to speak honestly, Ike blurted out words that he would surely regret saying later on.

“Huh!? Sacrifice what? I didn’t ask for that!”

Of course, after being told something like that, there was no way Shinohara would willingly ask to join the group.

The mood between them was starting to change.

“Ah, good morning, Ike-kun, are you free right now?”

Just as the atmosphere was at its heaviest, Kushida came up from behind and called out to Ike.

As she did, Ike looked away from Shinohara and waved his hand excitedly.

“What, what is it!? I’m super free right now!”

With that, Ike left Shinohara and ran over to Kushida’s side.

Shinohara simply watched it happen with a somewhat cold look in her eyes.

“Actually, Kobashi-san from Class C said she wants to invite you to her group, Ike-kun. She seems to be at school already. Could you go discuss it with her?”

“Seriously? Let’s go, let’s go! I’ll go right now!”

Upon learning that he was being invited by a girl, Ike became extremely excited.

“Ah, but just now you seemed to be talking to Shinohara-san about that... Is it alright?”

Kushida looked to Shinohara to confirm that she would be fine with it.

“No, it’s alright, he’s been bothering me since he first called out to me. Take him.”

“You’re the one who’s been bothering me!”

They were at each other’s throats. Despite the fact that he was mainly at fault here, Ike left together with Kushida with a spring in his step.

Shinohara stopped walking, with a somewhat lonely look on her face as she watched them leave.

Before too long, I caught up to where Shinohara was standing and passed her by.

After all, Ike is the type of person who gets carried away all too easily.

It seems like he was so excited about receiving an invitation from a girl that he ended up overlooking something important.

“Satsuki.”

Suddenly, I heard a student call Shinohara’s name from behind. I couldn’t help but look back, wondering who it was.

“Ah, Komiya-kun... Good morning.”

The student was none other than Class 2-B's Komiya Kyogo.

"What's wrong? Are you crying?"

"Eh? W-why do you ask?"

"Well, because your eyes are red."

"Ah, you got me, huh? Something got in my eyes just now... Oww."

She was putting up a front, not just to deceive Komiya, but also herself.

"By the way, I heard from Sudo-kun that you're gonna be a regular on the basketball team?"

"Yeah, it's been a long time coming."

"Yeah you always practice until late at night, so I'd be lying if I said you didn't deserve it."

As Shinohara had stopped walking, I gradually pulled further and further away from the two of them, until eventually, I couldn't hear them anymore.

## Part 7

"You're having a string of bad luck, huh, drawing the Trial card and all. I'm sure you're drawing attention again."

As soon as she entered the class that morning, Horikita approached me as she said that.

"I, too, was distressed by the same thing this morning."

"It would've been nice if we could trade cards freely within the class. No student who isn't confident of winning would want the Trial card, and yet we cannot just give it to a student who is confident of winning."

Horikita drew the Half Off card. Although the card was useful when you received a penalty, it was as good as useless for students who were aiming for the top.

“That being the case, you have no choice but to be in the top 30%, and maybe even get a podium finish, isn’t it?”

“You’re saying that like it has nothing to do with you. As a classmate, could you worry about me a bit more?”

“If you really want to rely on me, I’ll certainly lend a hand.”

Horikita was slowly getting cheeky, or rather more difficult to deal with than before.

That aggravating gaze that seemed to say “What do you want?” made me not want to rely on her.

“I’m sorry, but if I find someone who wanted to buy it off me, I might just let him have it.”

“What you decide to do is up to you. Although, it would be nice if you could easily find a buyer. The Trial card affects not just the person holding the card but their entire group. It’s a dangerous risk to take.”

She was nice and polite while explaining that, but I felt like she was just being sarcastic.

“For the record, I’m being sarcastic.”

“Of course.”

“This is payback for all the times you’ve teased me so far.”

“I don’t remember teasing you, though...”

The Trial card was a troublesome thing to have, but it could also serve as a sort of protective charm. I expect there’ll be fewer students who will thoughtlessly ask to group up with me. In the worst case scenario, I might have to take the uninhabited island survival exam solo with this card.

“Since it’s you, can I take it as you can handle yourself?”

I could rely on Horikita, but as she was the leader of the class, there were bound to be other students who couldn’t do without her support. It would be better if I could ease her burden as much as possible.

“Well, I’ll try my best.”

After I told her that I would get through this on my own, I took my seat. While I was looking up who had drawn which card, I heard Ike, who had come to class late, raise his voice.

“Huh? You, er... found someone to group up with?!”

“Yeah, anything wrong with that?”

It seems like Shinohara had already decided on a group while Ike was away.

Her partner must be-

“But, just a while ago I’d just invited you! Anyway, it’s forbidden to form a group without Horikita’s permission!”

“Forbidden what, I haven’t officially confirmed yet. Well, I’m going to confirm today though.”

“Wha...”

“And what are you talking about, saying that you invited me. Who’s the one who got all horny and ignored me?”

“Ah, that wasn’t like that! I even turned them down for you, you know!”

“Turned someone down? Ah, you’re really pissing me off. You really are a horrible person.”

“Group... Who did you decide to group up with?”

“What’s it got to do with you?”

“Nothing, but I’m just curious, okay?”

“Class B’s Komiya-san. He invited me just after the special exam started yesterday.”

So it was Komiya. One of them must’ve brought it up while they were coming to school together.

“Ah? Komiya? Komiya, he’s that flashy guy on the basketball team, right? Unbelievable!”

Somewhere inside him, Ike must’ve arrogantly assumed that Shinohara would group with him.



“He isn’t flashy, and I promised to meet up at the cafe after school to discuss it.”

After saying that, Shinohara turned away from Ike. To the students in the classroom who were eavesdropping on the conversation, it couldn’t be taken as anything more than an extension of their usual arguments.

After school, Shinohara left the classroom early, as she had mentioned earlier.

Ike quietly watched Shinohara leave, but then he left the classroom quickly with a look in his eyes, as if he had made up his mind about something.

“Is this a good time?”

Yousuke had seen the whole scene, and after Ike left he approached me.

Maybe to avoid being overheard, he wanted to talk in the corridor, and I obeyed his wishes.

“About Ike, I don’t think it’s too good to leave him alone like this.”

“Yeah. He might be a bit arrogant, but Ike’s knowledge and experience will be of use in the uninhabited island survival exam. It’s possible this incident with Shinohara may prevent him from fulfilling his potential.”

“Yes. Seeing that, I’m also worried about what will happen if he watches the discussion between Shinohara and Komiya while he’s like that.”

Yousuke was apprehensive, and I understood his concerns.

It wasn’t a good idea to get into dispute with Class B right now.

“I’d like to go see what’s going on. If you’re okay with it, can you come along? I don’t think Ike-kun likes me very much.”

If we were to talk about that, well, Ike didn’t like me either.

That said, it was normal for Yousuke to feel uneasy.

“Shinohara said she’s going to meet Komiya at the cafe, right?”

“Yeah. Shall we go and see what’s going on, just in case?”

“Sure.”

I decided to check out the situation at the cafe in Keyaki mall with Yosuke.

As we were on our way, we also talked a little bit about the composition of the small groups.

“I wanted to recommend a plan where all of the 2nd years help each other and fight against the 1st and 3rd years, but it doesn’t seem like any of the other classes want to unite at all. It’s like every class is trying to form their ideal group. It isn’t impossible for us to unite to take a course where absolutely no 2nd years get expelled, but there would be no shortage of pain with that.”

I discussed this with Horikita yesterday, that deliberately withdrawing from the exams would prevent any drop outs. But the grades that implement that plan would have to bear heavy losses no matter what. And to be honest, it’s a bit unrealistic to expect the whole grade to share that burden.

That’s why, even after an entire day, there were no students making such an idealistic suggestion.

“It seems like we can only form groups that leave us with no regrets.”

“Yeah...”

“You must’ve been invited by quite a few people, Yosuke?”

Yosuke was popular with both the boys and the girls, and was excellent in every aspect, so there’s no way nobody has invited him yet.

“For me, I’d like to select 2 people from Class D to form a group. Instead of aiming for the top places, I’d rather fight to not get penalized.”

It’s the students of Class D that he should protect, not the other classes. That was the logical way of thinking. If the student was strong and popular, it wouldn’t be a problem for the other person when they formed a group, but for the less powerful students, it would be hard for them to ask for help from anyone else.

“Is Sakura-san alright?”

Yosuke was worried about Airi, who was a part of my group and was last in terms of ability.

“As of now, she’s going to form a group with Akito and Haruka.”

“Miyake-kun has good motor skills, so I feel the group is well balanced.”

Although Keisei was left out, thanks to his mind, the other classes were trying to scout him for his mind. It would be a formidable group if he could choose students who could cover for his lack of physical ability.

However, while we were chasing Ike, a problem surfaced.

There was a person following us. They had tried their best not to be seen while following me before, but this time they seemed to be prepared to be spotted by me. Ike was walking straight towards Keyaki mall. Then it was me and Yosuke, and after that was the person following us. This state of double-stalking continued on like this. Although ignoring them wasn't hard, if this continued in the future, it would be a bit troublesome.

As we were approaching Keyaki mall, I stopped in my tracks.

"Sorry, Yosuke, but can you go on first?"

"What is it?"

"I remembered something I have to take care of. I think I'll be back in around 10 minutes."

"Alright, I'll call you if something happens."

Without asking any questions, Yosuke disappeared into Keyaki mall.

A little while after that, the student who was following us took that as her cue and walked over.

It was a classmate, Chiaki Matsushita.

"You don't seem very surprised. Did you notice from the start?"

"I just don't show any surprise in my expression."

Was this the first time since spring break that I've talked to Matsushita alone like this?

No, take away the condition of us being alone, and it'll still be the first time I've talked to her since.

"What were you and Hirata-kun talking about? About Ike-kun? Or about the uninhabited island survival exam?"

Matsushita, who was standing by my side, raised her head as she judged the situation.

“Is that any of your business, Matsushita?”

“It’s not so much about me, as it’s about us. Ayanokouji-kun, you’re an important existence for us to get into Class A.”

She seems to think highly of me, but what was her objective?



For how smart she is, she should have known that trying to flatter me wouldn't work.

But I don't think she approached me now for no reason.

"Don't be so cautious, I approached you because I just had something to tell you today as soon as possible."

"Something you need to tell me?"

"The Trial card is an item with a very powerful effect. But it's difficult to use it. If you've got any problems, I would like to help you, Ayanokouji-kun. How about it?"

Setting aside my thoughts and opinions on the matter, she expressed that she was willing to help me out any time because she was on my side. When I didn't respond, she looked a bit embarrassed.

"I guess you won't answer unless I straight up say it."

It wasn't like I was trying to be mean to her, but I didn't want to be forced into a conversation while it was crowded. It was after school, and we could see a fair number of students showing up in the area around us. Matsushita must've been aware of that, too, so without waiting for an answer, she started speaking.

"You need to stay in the top of the rankings to avoid the penalty, so it's hard for you to find people who'll group with you, right? So I just wanted you to rely on me if you're in trouble."

After replying, as if she'd forgotten to say something important, she added:

"Of course, during the exam, I'll completely follow your instructions."

That seemed to be what she had gone so far as to chase me to say.

"Although I'm happy that you're willing to assist me, if we don't make it to the top 30%, you'll be penalized. You know the risks, right?"

"I do. That's why I think it's important for me to cooperate with you to help you."

I don't think she didn't have any good intentions, but the essence of the matter lay somewhere else.

While suppressing my desire to hurry up and go to Yosuke, I turned to Matsushita who was walking beside me.

“Did you judge that your odds of survival are the highest if you grouped up with me?”

Normally, a group who had the trial card would be more likely to get expelled. Nevertheless, Matsushita offered to assist me, despite the danger. Pure goodwill couldn't explain it.

“...So I've been exposed?”

Matsushita narrowed her eyes and smiled, raising the white flag early.

“I don't think it'd be difficult to stay in the top ranks if it were you. Even if we don't end up on the podium, we're bound to reach the top 30%. It would be more dangerous if I put my friends first and make a half-assed group with them.”

So this was what Matsushita really meant. She weighed me against her other options to form a group and chose me.

“I thought you'd get snapped up quickly, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Greet me as soon as possible. It also made understanding the evaluation of the other person's intentions easier.

While it's something to be grateful for, I never intended to come to a conclusion here from the start.

There was nothing wrong with Matsushita, but the outcome would've been the same no matter who it was.

“I won't decide on my group, at least for this month.”

“You mean that you want to wait and watch how things go?”

“After all, I'd like to see how the other classes move.”

I told her the most important factor.

But the part I cared about was different from what ordinary students cared about.

The special exam on the uninhabited island required a lot of preparation.

It was absolutely inconceivable that Tsukishiro had nothing to do with it.

It had been a month and a half since the last special exam, but he hadn't made any noticeable moves.

Day by day we were getting farther away from April, which was when he had planned to expel me from this school.

Because of the White Room Student's arbitrary actions, the gears were in chaos.

They probably have done something in this group formation stage, which can be called the prelude to the battle.

Matsushita didn't understand the element of danger involved. If she got dragged into this, it wouldn't end easily for her.

"It seems like I won't get a satisfactory answer now. I see, give it some thought."

Maybe she never intended to push me on it. Soon, she waved her hand to say goodbye.

"Ah, right. Here's my contact information."

Seemingly prepared in advance, she handed me a paper with her ID written on it.

"There, I've said what I wanted to say."

Having wrapped up the conversation without wasting any time, Matsushita turned around and began to walk towards the dormitory.

"Well, it certainly doesn't feel bad to have another girl's contact info."

It's unclear if I'll be able to meet Matsushita's expectations in the future.

After that, I met up with Yosuke at Keyaki mall.

"What's the situation?"

"I don't think it'll be as bad as it can be, but..."

Following Yosuke's gaze, I spotted Shinohara and Komiya, who were talking and laughing in the cafe.

A little further away, I also spotted Ike, who had his back to us as he quietly watched them, depressed.

"What should we do?"

"First, if Ike doesn't show any signs of charging in and going berserk, let's just see how this scene develops. Carelessly calling Ike out might not lead us to a solution."



Yosuke nodded his head in agreement.

“Anyway, I wanted to ask about Komiya first. Why did Komiya invite Shinohara to his group? If we’re not sure about that, we can’t take any action.”

“I’ll think about who would be the best person for Ike to group up with if he can’t group with Shinohara.”

“Please do.”

We then agreed to gather information separate from each other.

## Part 8

After leaving Yosuke, I gave Ishizaki, from Komiya’s class, a call, and asked him out.

Since I thought he was still at school, I set off to meet him.

“Yo! Are you finally thinking to group up with us!?”

He said that enthusiastically with a bright smile on his face.

“Sorry, that’s still under deliberation. I’m here for something else today.”

Ishizaki looked slightly regretful upon hearing these words, but recovered quickly.

“So, what did you want to discuss with me?”

I wanted to discuss my problem with him right away, but a girl was approaching Ishizaki. It was Nishino Takeko from Class 2-B.

“What, you said you ‘something’, did you mean a meeting with Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Hey, didn’t I tell you not to follow me, Nishino? Sorry about this, Ayanokouji.”

After apologizing to me, Ishizaki urged Nishino to go to Keyaki mall first.

However, Nishino didn’t listen to Ishizaki and approached me.

“You’re rather close with Ishizaki. That’s a surprise.”

Nishino observed me as she directly addressed Ishizaki without an honorific.

“Hey, you didn’t listen to me at all! This is why you’re ostracized!”

“Ostracized?”

“Ah no, just that this girl’s isolated in our class right now. That’s become a bit of a problem.”

“Isolated? I’m hardly troubled by that.”

Speaking of isolation, Ibuki was also a lone wolf, and Nishino seemed to belong to the same category.

“Anyway, can you just leave, okay?”

“No.”

“No? Yo-you say no? This girl... Sorry, Ayanokouji, wait a minute. I’ll just get rid of her right now.”

“But I’m curious as to why you and Ayanokouji-kun are secretly meeting, Ishizaki.”

Although I’d never spoken to Nishino, she seemed to be the type who spoke her mind without hesitation.

People like her made enemies easily. However, it was only natural for her to be incredulous, seeing us meeting secretly. Chasing her away without giving an explanation would only backfire on us, so I decided to tell Nishino about what Ishizaki and I were going to discuss.

“Our relationship became better after being in the same group in last year’s Mixed Training Camp.”

First, I told her how our current relationship got to here, and then got to the topic at hand.

“I contacted Ishizaki because I wanted to ask him a few questions about Komiya from your class. I decided to meet here because this conversation isn’t meant for others to hear.”

“Because of Komiya-kun? What’s going on?”

She didn't drop the suffix while talking about Komiya. I explained my reasons as I held that impression.

"I heard that he and Shinohara from my class decided to form a group. Do you know about this?"

"No, it's the first time I've heard of it. But it's not that strange, right?"

Wanting to team up with someone from another class was indeed nothing out of the ordinary.

So it wasn't unreasonable for Ishizaki to find my asking about it to be a bit strange.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Because even in the kindest of terms, Shinohara isn't the kind of person who would be very active in this uninhabited island exam. So our class is worried about whether her grouping up with Komiya is a good idea or not. We want to know what kind of person he is beforehand."

"He's just a nice guy in general, right? He also has good motor skills, and because he's in the basketball club, he has good physical strength as well."

Right? Ishizaki confirmed this with Nishino who nodded her head in agreement.

"It seems like one of them invited the other to form a group, are they dating?"

"Eh? Th-that's hard to say..."

"Even if you ask Ishizaki these things, he wouldn't understand. You don't know anything about love, do you?"

"Shut up! Do you understand it then?"

"At least more than you. Although they're not dating, Komiya-kun certainly likes Shinohara-san, right?"

"Eh? Komiya likes Shinohara, really? Oh, but he did say he liked a girl from another class... although I only vaguely remember it..."

Ishizaki recalled a past memory, and told us this.

If any students were to form a group, it was natural for one to seek something from the other. Elements such as ability, friendship, or even, romantic feelings. Like Nishino said,

if Komiya had a crush on Shinohara, then it was reasonable for him to want to form a group with her.

“But why do you care about that?”

“I saw the two of them together this morning. Since Komiya called Shinohara by her first name, I felt that they were close, which is why I thought it might be the case.”

“Ahh... Eh, what? Don’t tell me, Ayanokouji, that.... You like Shinohara?”

“No.”

Even though I denied it immediately, Ishizaki had a delighted smirk as if he had already convinced himself of that fact

“Wha? She’s the type of girl a blockhead like you’d fall for though? Am I right, am I right?”

“I just said no.”

“Don’t hide it from me, we’re close friends, eh?”

No, I don’t think we were that close at all until the Mixed Training Camp...

Indeed, I had recently gotten to know his character even better than my own not-so-familiar classmates.

“But since it’s you, I’m pretty sure you can aim for a cuter girl.”

If this continued any further, there was a possibility that false rumours would start spreading.

If that happened, the relationship between Ike and Shinohara might become even more tenuous than it is now.

“It’s Ike. Ike from my class likes Shinohara.”

“Huh? The heck, isn’t it you, Ayanokouji?”

“Which is why I was trying to understand their situation.”

“I get it now, but, love isn’t something that others can interfere with.”

“I also agree with that, meddling in someone else’s business is out of the question.”

“Normally, that would be true. However, for our class, it’s a situation that we can’t ignore. Ike being active in the special exam is indispensable to Class D.”

The more strained their relationship became, the more chance Ike would go off in a strange direction.

The uninhabited island exam, where his skills can finally be of use, was approaching. However, this development was not favorable. That being said, helping out in this situation wouldn’t do any good to Class B. Rather, it would give an advantage to their enemy. It was probably something that they wouldn’t want to help out with.

Although that’s what I was thinking—

“Alrighty, I can help out if you need it. What can I do?”

Ishizaki offered to help me out, as he said he didn’t mind helping.

“Wait, Ishizaki, are you serious? You’re Komiya’s friend right?”

“So I should just ignore Ayanokouji, who’s currently in dire straits?”

“No, you have to leave it alone. I understand that you’re friends, but you’re also supposed to be enemies.”

“Isn’t there a saying, that yesterday’s enemies are tomorrow’s friends?”

Technically speaking, it should be “today’s friends”, but that was fine, so I ignored it.

“Although that’s very generous of you, I’d be troubled if you want something in return.”

“Something in return? I won’t ask for anything. It’s normal to want to help out a friend who is in trouble.”

Ishizaki wasn’t a good liar, so I knew he meant it when he said that he would help me unconditionally.

Although that was very generous of him, I couldn’t make such an unreasonable request of him considering that he was Komiya’s friend.

And if we forcefully separated Komiya and Shinohara, it would invite Nishino’s ire.

“In that case, hmmm... Could you first ask about Komiya’s feelings for me, Ishizaki?”

“So you just want to know if he actually likes Shinohara, Ayanokouji?”

“Yeah, but please keep the fact that somebody’s specifically asking for this under wraps.”

“Of course, but how should I confirm that? Any ideas?”

Nishino lent a helping hand to Ishizaki, who couldn’t think of a way to approach Komiya on this matter.

“Ayanokouji-kun, you saw the two of them enjoying each other’s company, right? Then let’s just pretend that Ishizaki was the one who witnessed this instead of you and use it to find out whether they’re dating. As a guy who’s not popular with girls, it would simply look like he cared that his friend might have gotten a girlfriend before him, right?”

Ishizaki, who had little material to use as a motive for asking, immediately accepted Nishino’s suggestion.

“Fe-feels somewhat empty as a motive, but I suppose it’ll work... Al-Alright, I’ll give it a try then. Give me a moment. club activities haven’t yet started—”

Ishizaki guessed that it might just work, and gave Komiya a call after saying that.

“... Ah, Komiya? Sorry to call you right before club activities start. Ah no, I’ve got something I wanted to ask you. Did you talk to Shinohara from Class D this morning? ... Just as I thought. No, we formed a pact of not getting a girlfriend before telling each other, but I think you might be leaving me behind in that respect.”

Ishizaki smoothly asked Komiya about Shinohara, unexpectedly.

“You’re telling me you aren’t dating? Really? If you’re lying, then you’ll be in trouble later, eh?”

After confirming that Komiya and Shinohara weren’t dating, Ishizaki made an OK gesture with his right hand.

However, immediately after that, his expression changed slightly.

“Eh... Seriously? Oh, oh, I see, ahh...”

Ishizaki, was asking the questions in a manner easy for me to understand, but the amount of information I got from him suddenly diminished.

He was listening carefully to what Komiya was saying on the other end of the phone.

“... Is that so? Ah, I see, nah I get it. The time has finally come for you to become a man, and of course, I’m rooting for you. Let me know how it goes.”

From the direction of the conversation, I was able to roughly understand what Komiya told Ishizaki.

After ending the call, Ishizaki looked at me somewhat awkwardly.

“That Komiya guy, he’s planning to confess to Shinohara on the uninhabited island.”

“I see—”

If they form a group, they would have to work together the entire day. A perfect time for him to confess would present itself.

“What can we do? In the end, there’s no way we can stop it.”

That’s true. Komiya had the right to confess his feelings.

After all, even though Ike and Shinohara liked each other, neither was willing to take a step forward. So if someone came in between them, then that was just fate. Or maybe Ike might just be able to win her back at the last minute.

“Anyway, thanks for the great help. I think I’ll talk to Horikita about this. If Nishino’s having trouble forming a group, you can talk to me. I might be able to help in some way.”

“I said I don’t need anything in return.”

“We should help each other when things are tough. I’ll help you as much as I can.”

“Thanks, although it’s not easy for you either, do your best.”

After listening to Ishizaki’s word of sympathy, I decided to tell Horikita about this.

## Part 9

That evening, I called Horikita to the cafeteria.

Since the cafe was a busy place, even if there were students around us trying to eavesdrop on our conversation, they would have a hard time trying to make out what was being said.

I expressed my concerns to Horikita about the current situation between Ike, Shinohara, and Komiya and that it might affect this upcoming uninhabited island exam. Ike liked Shinohara but still hasn't made a move. Komiya, however, was planning to confess soon.

Horikita's reaction upon hearing my concerns was...

"Isn't it fine to just leave them alone?"

As I had partly expected, her reaction to this was indifference.

"I thought we had a serious problem on our hands, since you're the one coming to consult me... but this isn't our problem to fix. Besides, I've evaluated Ike-kun's ability as a boy scout to be high, so we should group him with regards to his ability, not his feelings."

"I don't know about that. Ike seems to be overly concerned about Shinohara's affairs. Depending on the situation, he might not be as effective as last year. That alone would have been acceptable, but now there's a possibility that he could become a liability to his group due to his concern over Shinohara's affairs."

"So he could be expelled due to his feelings for Shinohara leading him by the nose?"

"I can't say that he definitely won't be."

"... That would be problematic. This is so stupid."

Annoyed, Horikita let out a heavy sigh.

"It seems like Komiya and Shinohara have already agreed to form a group, but because of your orders, they haven't confirmed yet. However, if you give them permission, 9 times out of 10, they'll form a group. You're the leader of Class D now, so if you tell Shinohara that grouping up with Komiya is strategically disadvantageous, she can't forcefully disobey."



“So you’re saying it’s necessary to prevent that? But if we stop them from forming a group, won’t Komiya-kun just change the timing of his confession? Depending on the situation, he might just confess on that same day.”

“We can’t discount that possibility.”

“This is a lot more complicated than it sounds. We can’t take care of them until they start dating.”

“Then what should we do?”

“Why don’t we just make Ike-kun confess? If Shinohara-san accepts, Ike-kun will fight hard to stay at the school no matter what group he’s in, right? On the other hand, if he gets rejected, he can forget about this whole matter and focus on the exam.”

While I think the former is true, it was hard to say what would happen if he gets rejected.

There’s a risk that he would just give up and stop trying in this exam.

However, this isn’t something we can settle through talking alone.

Maybe getting Ike to confess soon was the fastest way out.

“Although you’re good at many things, you don’t seem to be good at romance at all.”

“I’m studying hard right now.”

“For real?... Well, let me see what I can do. For now, I’ll start with asking Ike-kun and Shinohara-san to form a group together, alright?”

Even though we hadn’t finished our meals, Horikita took out her phone and launched the OAA app.

Only to discover something completely unexpected.

“Unfortunately, it seems like we’re too late.”

Horikita put her phone on the table and slid it toward me so that I could see the screen. On the OAA, you could see the groups that have been formed, and it showed that Shinohara and Komiya had already formed a group. The third person in their group was Kinoshita Minori of Class B.

“Since we’ve already reached this point, we must take measures to prevent Ike-kun’s loss of motivation.”

“Let’s discuss this with Yosuke as well. He’s thinking about the best group for Ike right now.”

The prospect of forming groups for the uninhabited island exam would be difficult.

## Part 10

Post nightfall my customary date with Kei began in my room.

Today’s conversation focused on the groupings for the exam, starting with the fight between Ike and Shinohara.

“Hey... Kiyotaka, who do you plan to group up with for this uninhabited island exam?”

With a somewhat shy expression, Kei looked up at me and raised this question.

“At the moment, I’ve no plans to group up with anyone.”

“Eh? Wh-why?”

I could sense that Kei wanted to group up with me, but I was afraid that it wouldn’t be beneficial to me even if we grouped up. Not due to any lack of ability on Kei’s part but it was unsuitable considering my battle with Tsukishiro.

“Forming a group undoubtedly has its own advantages. Even so, it’s not that one definitely cannot win alone. Rather, it has the benefit of allowing the student to move around freely without being influenced by others. Moreover, depending upon the situation, that student can assist other groups and even join them if they are on the verge of dropping out.

“Basically, you can be more adaptable when going solo...”

Regardless of whether you were a boy or a girl, taking the exam alone was within the rules. In other words, it’s also a chance for students who believed they were all-rounders to win on their own.

“If a student came in first place alone, that itself would give the class 300 class points.”

“Kiyotaka, if it’s you, are you able to take first place?”

“What do you think?”

Our eyes met as I threw the question back at Kei. While we gazed at each other, she was stiff while thinking.

“I feel like... You’d take first place non-nonchalantly. Eh, but wait a minute. In that case, wouldn’t it be harder to say that we’re dating!?”

Kei couldn’t help but get panicky at the thought of the future.

“If you come in first place by yourself, Kiyotaka, I would be so ecstatic that I might just pass out and think you’re so cool. But, but, ah— I don’t know what would be ideal anymore!”

“You’re getting overly excited. Don’t worry, securing first place is not an easy task by any means.”

“So, so... even you don’t think you can win, Kiyotaka?”

“Let’s just say, there’s a 50/50 chance.”

“Just answering that there’s a 50% chance is already super impressive...”

“Anyway, the thing you should be worried about isn’t who you should group up with, Kei.”

“Eh? Isn’t that important? Since I might get expelled if I’m not careful about it.”

“Right, this special exam does involve expulsion. If you are in the bottom 5 groups, you’ll have to face that penalty. That’s why you can’t randomly choose who you group up with.”

“Yeah. That’s why, I wanted to group up with you, Kiyotaka... I hoped you could protect me.”

Kei who had invited me in a roundabout way earlier finally came out and said that straightforwardly.

“Even if I don’t protect you, there’s still a way to save yourself, right? That is, to keep a deposit of the amount of private points needed to nullify the expulsion.”

“That’s true, but...”

Although a large amount of private points were required, as long as you had them, you definitely won’t be expelled.

“That’s true, but even if you do form a group of 6 students in the exam, you’ll still need 1 million points to avoid expulsion, right? I don’t have that much.”

“How much do you have left now?”

“Um... 240,000 points.... E-even so, I’m considered to be someone who has saved up a lot recently!”

Not that I was making an accusation against that.

Since I was in a similar situation, I was hardly one to assign blame.

“So you’re short 760,000 points?”

I had about 250,000 on my hands. Even if I gave it all to Kei, she still wouldn’t even have half the required amount.

“Kei, you’ve got the Free Ride card, right?”

“Yeah. How much is that card worth?”

“Honestly, I can’t say that it’s a good card. Whether it’s in a good or a bad way, the impact on yourself would be the least out of all the cards, as it’s neither a card that rewards you for effort, nor a card that helps you if you commit a mistake during the exam.”

Since you could only use it to bet on a group that you think would likely win, you could say that it’s at the bottom of the list in terms of value.

“... Sure enough, that’s true.”

Kei more or less understood that from the start, and sighed in disappointment.

“Kiyotaka, your card is the Trial card, right? It’s a card that has a strong effect if you win, but conversely if you lose it would be tragic... Ah, of course, I know that you’ll have no problem at all. I wanted the Half Off or the Nullify card though.”

For a student like Kei, it was natural that the relief cards feel more valuable than cards like the Trial card.

“It’s not like there’s no hope for the Free Ride card. There are probably also many students who think that the Half-Off card or the Nullify card is worthless. In their eyes, the Free Ride card also holds a certain value.”

Unlike the Head Start card and the Bonus card, it wouldn’t affect the students who were confident about their abilities; rather, it targeted the students at the middle of the pack who reckoned they couldn’t win. Also, since most students were in the middle, it would be easy to find someone to trade with. However, cards like the Half Off card would be coveted by some students in the middle and students in the bottom. Depending upon the cardholder, even a worthless card could dazzle like a gold one.

“I’ll prepare the points.”

“Eh? You say you’ll prepare... How?”

“There are many ways, but selling the Trial card is one way to get you the required points.”

“But then, you’ll have to give up the Trial card... Is that really okay?”

“It’s more important to prevent you from getting expelled.”

“Ye-yeah... Th-thanks.”

After saying that, Kei blushed.

Soon after, our conversation shifted to the approaching summer vacation, and the room’s atmosphere got more lively, but, there wasn’t any further progress in our relationship.

## Part 11

There was a rule that groups of up to three people could be formed before the special exam started in the summer.

But there was also a conversation going on that went beyond that, one that looked to the future.

“Ah, you’re here, Ichinose-san.”

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Sakayanagi-san.”

It was the Friday of the first weekend after the group formations had started.

Sakayanagi had contacted Ichinose and asked her to come to the cafe.

“Is this a good time? Since I asked so suddenly, I was also prepared for you to reject me and not come.”

“It’s no problem at all, although I didn’t think you would contact me so I was a little surprised.”

That day, an hour before meeting at the cafe, Sakayanagi had extended a sudden invitation to Ichinose.

It wouldn’t be strange for Ichinose to reject the invitation if she already had things scheduled.

“It’s because no matter what, I wanted to meet you today, Ichinose-san.”

Sakayanagi was lying.

Inviting Ichinose on such short notice was a strategy to not give her the time to think.

Had she been told a few days in advance, Ichinose would have speculated on what the meeting would be about.

Depending on the occasion, she might even ask a classmate like Kanzaki for help.

This was just a precautionary measure.

“By the way, why did you accept my sudden request?”

“Why? Because I had nothing special planned for today.”

“That’s not what I meant. I’ve done some terrible things to you before, Ichinose-san. It wouldn’t be surprising if you hated me.”

In order to suppress Ichinose, Sakayanagi had secretly found out about Ichinose’s past.

She exposed Ichinose’s past which she didn’t want to be known to everyone, a painful thing to Ichinose.

If you were betrayed by someone you had trusted, you would come to hate that person. Even if you didn’t hate them, you would certainly hold a strong sense of mistrust towards them and keep your distance from them.

However, not only did Ichinose immediately accept Sakayanagi’s sudden invitation, she also didn’t seem to resent her at all.

“Well– I don’t think you did anything excessive, Sakayanagi-san. Indeed, I have to reflect on what happened during middle school, as I also think that it was a shameful act. Also, it’s not like I asked you to keep it a secret, so I don’t think it’s right to blame you for exposing it.”

What Ichinose meant was that in the end, it was her own fault that she revealed her past.

“You’re definitely a good person, Ichinose-san.”

“Am I? I’m not too sure about that.”

Ichinose seemed to be a bit embarrassed, scratching her cheeks lightly and averting her eyes, as if she couldn’t handle the sight of Sakayanagi gently gazing at her.

“So... What do you want to talk to me about?”

Perhaps Ichinose thought that she would feel uncomfortable if they continued with this topic, so she urged Sakayanagi to get to the point.

“As you wish, I’ll get to the point, but you might not be very comfortable with that either.”

Ichinose mumbled to herself, “Please have mercy”, as Sakayanagi said this as a warning.

“Bluntly speaking, if this continues, Class A will naturally feel the danger of Class B approaching them again. Do you mind telling me your thoughts on this matter?”

Sakayanagi mercilessly pointed out the current situation where Ichinose and her class were being left out in the cold.

“Ahaha... Truly blunt.”

For a moment, Ichinose’s mind went blank, and then started fanning herself with a bitter smile on her face.

With a deliberate smile, Sakayanagi waited for her answer.

“It’s true that our state of being left out in the cold can’t be called good.”

On May 1st, the difference in class points between Ichinose’s class and Class B led by Ryuuken, whom she was chasing after, was only 26 points. Ichinose thought it was possible to catch up even without a special exam, as points can be affected by things like absences or tardiness. In fact, over the past year, the small point differences created from everyday actions accumulated and ultimately affected the class points by a lot.

However, when Ryuuken’s class rose to Class B, there were no holes found in his class from such everyday actions that would have decreased their class points. As June approached, the gap was reduced, but only by 2 points. You could sense the strong will of Ryuuken and his class to never be surpassed by Ichinose’s class.

Ichinose didn’t have to say it out loud for Sakayanagi, who was being chased by Ryuuken, to feel that as well.

“I also know just how formidable they are.”

“Even if you do know, aren’t there things you can’t do anything about? They haven’t caused any problems lately, unlike Ryuuken-kun’s previously disruptive strategies. If you can’t catch up in daily life, your only hope is the special exams.”

Ichinose nodded slightly. However, Sakayanagi would not respond with sweet words.

“He’s not an ordinary person. For you who only face your problems head on, in a sense, it’s no exaggeration to say that he’s your greatest opponent.”

Ichinose, who had faced off against Ryuuken at the end of year exams, understood this point very well.

The aggressive and unconventional Ryuuken didn’t mind breaking the rules.

For Ichinose, he’s an opponent she wanted to avoid if possible.



“But, in order to climb the ladder, there’s no avoiding that road. Besides, while it’s true that Ryuuen-kun is a tough opponent, you’re not someone that can be easily defeated either, Sakayanagi-san.”

Although Sakayanagi had a past dispute over leadership of their class with Katsuragi, Class A had almost twice as many points as Ryuuen’s Class B and was the undisputed number one. That gap ensured that even if Class A lost one or two times, they would still comfortably remain on top.

“Even though Class C and D have a difference of over 200 points, Class D is gaining momentum, right? Are you sure that you won’t be overtaken by them?”

“Horikita-san and her class are also rapidly gaining strength. In terms of individual strength, some of them wouldn’t lose to anyone in the other classes... Looking at it this way, It seems like I really don’t have any room to spare.”

“Indeed, there are some interesting talented individuals in Class D. Headed by Hirata-kun and Kushida-san, who have strong communication skills, and have well-balanced grades, along with Sudo-kun, who’s the only one to get an A+ rating in physical ability in the entire 2nd year. Meanwhile, their hidden trump card, Ayanokouji-kun, got a perfect score on an extremely difficult math test. Then, there’s also Kouenji-kun, whose strengths and limits are still a mystery; he too is a dangerous adversary.”

From saying it deliberately, Sakayanagi made Ichinose feel the thick layer of students in Class 2-D once again.

“And then, the leader who brought them together and led them forward, Horikita-san. She has both excellent academic and physical abilities, and has recently joined the student council.”

Sakayanagi once again made Ichinose reaffirm her current situation of being left out in the cold.

“Sorry for continuing with the tough words, but I think it’s only a matter of time before your class falls to Class D.”

“Right now, that evaluation might be accurate, but—”

“But what? Are you going to talk about the value of effort and friendship, those kinds of abstract concepts?”

Sakayanagi simply took the words out of Ichinose’s mouth, and Ichinose could only swallow back what she was going to say.

"It's impossible to win with these kinds of vague things, no matter how hard you try. While every class has clearly increased their strength over the course of the year, I don't see much growth in yours, Ichinose-san."

"That... that's not the case. We've grown as well."

"I didn't say that you haven't grown. It's just a matter of how much."

"You might not believe it, Sakayanagi-san, but I don't think we'll lose."

Sakayanagi smiled slightly, and slowly shook her head.

"If you look at the OAA, it's obvious at first glance that your class has grown the least out of the four when comparing the overall abilities of when we were 1st years to now. I thought you would've done analysis on this level as well... Is it that you knew, and pretended not to notice, or is it because you were afraid to face reality, that you didn't dare check..."

Ichinose recalled the time when she had been alone with Sakayanagi.

They were like a child and an adult respectively.

It was only natural that she would be refuted, and felt like she was being pushed into a corner by Sakayanagi.

Faced with Sakayanagi, who was precisely attacking her weaknesses, a rebuttal would be blocked.

"You're a smart student. If we were to compete on equal footing, you would definitely not be weaker than me. However, when you are in a disadvantageous situation, you can't demonstrate your strengths. Whether it was last time, or this time, you could only stay silent after being attacked through your weaknesses. However, both Ryuen-kun and I are able to bare our fangs even if we're in a disadvantageous situation, you know?"

"Ye...Yes."

These two people would probably not doubt that they were strong no matter what the situation was.

"I can say for sure now, that you have no chance at winning, Ichinose-san."

"Did you call me out just to tell me that?"

"If it was just to find fault within you, I could have done that anywhere. I wouldn't waste a precious holiday."

At that moment, Sakayanagi decided to tell Ichinose the real reason as to why she had called her out today.

"Why don't you work with me? Ichinose-san."

"Eh...?"

Sakayanagi's proposal was so unexpected that Ichinose couldn't say a word in response.

"This is the only way you'll be able to catch up to my class."

"No, but that's—"

"A cooperative relationship between classes isn't a bad thing. In fact, didn't you have a similar relationship with Horikita-san of Class D when you were 1st years?"

It wasn't surprising that Sakayanagi knew they had a cooperative relationship.

"What I'm going to say is just speculation on my part, but I think you have already dissolved that partnership with Horikita. Even though they were last place, they were able to accumulate more class points than any other class last year, and are catching up with incredible momentum. Compared to that, Ichinose-san, you guys took a step back and fell down to Class C. For Horikita-san and her class, there's not only advantages in continuing to work with you."

It was as if she had witnessed that conversation between Ichinose and Horikita. Sakayanagi perfectly pointed it out.

Ichinose couldn't deny it, and she replied in a form of near admission.

"That's right... partnerships can't last forever."

"Yeah. In order to maintain a cooperative relationship, you need to meet a "certain condition." Both yours and Horikita-san's class met this requirement last year, so you were able to build a good relationship without uselessly competing with each other."

Ichinose nodded her head in agreement.

"That condition was... the difference in class points."

In fact, the reason why Ichinose and Horikita's class ceased their hostility towards each other, was because of the huge difference in class points.

"Although it wasn't intentional, right now there's a sufficient difference in class points between our classes. In other words, I don't think it's impossible for us to join forces."

"What makes me sad is that this isn't a happy proposal. After all, it implies that our class is not worthy of your caution, an insignificant existence to you."

"Crudely speaking, that's it."

The merciless reality of Sakayanagi's words struck Ichinose.

Nevertheless, Ichinose was still smiling. Although emotional denial was easy, she couldn't ignore the reality that her class was being pushed down into desperate straits.

"I don't think it'll be beneficial for you to cooperate with us, Sakayanagi-san."

"No, that's not true. Indeed, if we only talk about fighting strength, you have many shortcomings. However, you have a powerful weapon that no other class possesses."

Sakayanagi smiled and said.

"That is— "trust". Ichinose-san, I can say for sure that as long as we are joining forces, you would not betray me no matter what happens. That is a very important factor to consider when creating an alliance."

A partner who you can trust to watch your back. Sakayanagi said that this factor in itself made the alliance worthwhile.

"Although it's nice to receive that evaluation from you, we're in a situation where we don't care anymore, right?"

"Still, I don't think you'll let go of the weapon known as trust that you have built up so far. If there is a betrayal, then it would be my own fault for having misjudged you."

Even if this was a trap, Ichinose didn't consider being trusted to be a bad thing.

However, she already knew that Sakayanagi was an opponent who couldn't be taken lightly.

"Could you be a bit more specific?"

"Can I take this to mean that you want to move forward with our partnership?"

“... That’s right.”

“If so, let’s talk about it.”

Sakayanagi set out to bring Class 2-C led by Ichinose under her banner.

“There is a slightly annoying rule for the upcoming uninhabited island exam. Only students of the same year may form a group, and the rewards will be divided equally among the classes. In other words, even if the best members from each class are selected to form a group, it wouldn’t create a difference in class points.”

“Right. So I guess we’ll inevitably have to build a winning group from our own class.”



“If both of our classes work together...”

“Although the gap with our class wouldn’t be narrowed, you can catch up with Ryuuen-kun’s class, and widen the gap with Class D.”

“But— If we do that, we’ll lose a chance to catch up to your class.”

“Shouldn’t getting back to a stable position be your first priority to prepare for the 2nd and 3rd semesters? If you refuse my offer now, it’s not like you can surely win. Am I wrong?”

“That...”

“Not to mention, if you do lose again to the other classes, you’ll fall to Class D. You’ll also lose a lot of class points, and fall into an extremely difficult situation. In which case, your aim for Class A will become almost impossible.”

Once again, Ichinose fell silent, as she couldn’t respond to what Sakayanagi had said.

“I think you’re still suspicious of me. However, there aren’t many opportunities to work with the other classes. Whether it be Class D or B, in order to catch up to my class, they won’t join forces with me. If they were to join forces, there’s only the option of forming an alliance of three classes to challenge Class A. That way, strong groups can be created.”

No matter how strong Class A was, if Class B, C, and D all worked together, it would be hard for them to win.

“It’d be lying if I said I haven’t thought about that before.”

“Right? However, the strategy for the three classes to form an alliance is not realistic. Tell me Ichinose-san, have you received any invitations to this since the day the rules were announced? It’s been a few days since then already.”

Ichinose lowered her eyes, and slowly shook her head.

“If three classes formed a group, the class point rewards would be divided equally amongst them. Even if you do your utmost and secure 1st place, the point difference will only be decreased by 100 points. For 2nd place by 67 points, and 3rd place by just 33 points.”

Even if the 2nd year classes B,C and D took all the top spots, the point difference with Class A would only decrease by 200 points.

Although it was by no means a small amount, this special exam was, in the first place, a difficult one to monopolize the rewards.

“It’s natural to want to win alone and narrow the gap by 300 or 400 points.”

“But if you and I group up, Horikita-san and Ryuuen-kun might also group up... Besides, including my class, there were already groups that have been formed, right?”

“Right. Rather, I’ve been waiting for the groups to start to be formed. In the current situation where none of the classes want to join forces on a class level, I propose that we select only the main forces from our classes to form a group.”

“What do you mean by ‘main forces’?”

“Just like last year, I am unable to move around the uninhabited island because of my handicap. However, I am allowed to participate in this exam, just in somewhat of a special position.”

“Special?”

“Students who are unable to participate due to ill health are eliminated from the start of the exam, right? However, I will be participating as a ‘semi-eliminated’ student.”

“Semi-eliminated?”

“Even though I can’t walk around the island freely because of my legs, I have the right to remain at the starting point and compete within the same rules as everyone else. In other words, if you asked me for advice, I can help you, and if there’s a difficult problem, we can solve it together. Though, when I am the only person left in the group, at that point the group will be eliminated.”

“So Sakayanagi-san, you can participate under this special position?”

Ichinose immediately understood that Sakayanagi would play a big factor in functioning as the brain, though a means to communicate with her will be needed..

“From my class, you are free to choose from 4 students – Hashimoto-kun, Kitou-kun, Masumi-san and myself. We are undoubtedly the main forces of Class A. From Class B, there are you and Kanzaki-kun, as well as Shibata-kun, right?”

All of the students that had been listed had not yet formed a group, and were observing the situation.

At this stage, there was no inconvenience for both sides.



“That’s right. When you consider that physical strength will also be necessary on the uninhabited island, that is true. However, There’s no guarantee we’ll be able to merge as we please after the special exam begins, right?”

“Although it’s difficult, it’s not impossible.”

Sakayanagi smiled. It showed that she was confident that she could get the big group together no matter the difficulties they would face.

“Sakayanagi-san, may I tell you how I really feel?”

“Of course.”

“Sakayanagi-san, you don’t want the three classes to fight together, more than I originally thought. Or to say, you’re afraid of that situation, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said we were someone you could trust, and I think you meant that. However, the most important thing for you is to prevent Class B, Class C, and Class D from working together to catch up to Class A. Indeed, the amount of class points we can get if we win together will decrease, but there’s no guarantee that such a development wouldn’t appear in the future— That the three classes would continue to help each other.”

Ichinose, who had been pushed back by Sakayanagi’s words until now, attacked her with her feelings.

“An alliance between the three classes to force Class A out. If that is successful, you would be forced into a bitter battle from now on, Sakayanagi-san... Isn’t that so?”

Sakayanagi was a bit surprised by Ichinose’s counterattack, who had been on the defensive until then.

“I guess I’ve underestimated you a little, Ichinose-san.”

It didn’t matter to Sakayanagi if any of the lower classes got more than 300 points in this special exam. As Class A that’s in the leading position, what Sakayanagi should avoid the most in this exam is for the lower three classes to form an alliance. This was an action taken by Sakayanagi who predicted more of these exams to come. If there was a talent who could bring together the three classes, it would probably be Ichinose Honami. Which was why Sakayanagi was trying to get Ichinose on her side, before this scenario could take place.

“This proposal to work together. Are you going to accept it or not?”

After acknowledging her words, Sakayanagi asked for Ichinose's cooperation.

"If you work with me, I can give you three people's worth of deposits. I'll lend to you a total of 3 million points for the students who are at a high risk of expulsion. If they receive the penalty, you can use this to pay for their relief. To you, who doesn't want anyone to drop out more than any other class, this should be a proposal of great help to you."

Fearing rejection, Sakayanagi held out her hand to Ichinose.

"Then can you give me five people's worth? That way I would feel completely reassured."

"How greedy. Although I was planning to spend a similar amount of money recently, I'll finance it specially, just for you."

For more than a year, Class A had consistently received a higher amount of private points than any other class. Therefore, the amount of points each student saved would not be comparable to the other classes.

"With that our contract is complete. Even if you hadn't offered to loan me the deposit points, I would have chosen to join forces with you. Our main goal is of course to reach Class A, but as you said, we fell to Class C and we can't afford to fall even more. Since, if we fall down to Class D, our class's motivation would surely be greatly reduced, and that is something we want to avoid."

Ichinose sought to shake hands with Sakayanagi.

"The proposal for an alliance between Class 2-C and Class 2-A— I accept it."

By shaking hands, they had established an alliance between their two classes.

"With this, I can fight reassured. Although it's a bit hurried, I have a request."

"In order to maximize our chances of winning, it's necessary to start with giving the main force of Class A the "More People" card... right?"

As an ally, Ichinose had already begun to form the best strategy going forward.

Using the "More People" card of which there was only one in the 2nd year, you could form a group of 7 members.

That was another reason why Sakayanagi had decided to fight alongside Ichinose.

“It’s helpful that you understood so quickly.”

“However, both Ryuuken-kun and Horikita-san are formidable opponents.”

Sakayanagi also wasn’t underestimating either of them.

Considering Horikita had Ayanokouji behind her, the battle was never going to be easy.

However, she chose to fight with Ichinose under the certainty that she would definitely win.

“First place will be ours. I won’t skimp on the efforts necessary for that.”

With their main forces consolidated, they were going to challenge both Ryuuken and Horikita’s classes along with the 1st and 3rd years.

## Chapter – 4

### The Battle Of The First Years and Third Years

#### Intro

Now, nearly 3 months into the school year, the 1st years had gotten to understand the Advanced Nurturing High School and its rules a little better.

They were also in the process of forming groups for the next special exam.

However, due to unforeseen circumstances, their process wasn’t going as smoothly as expected.

Students of Class 1-D, led by Kazuomi Housen, were making their move, stubbornly refusing to participate in the groupings and wanting to trade their cards at exorbitant prices. They were demanding points without which they were unwilling to cooperate with the remaining year.

Housen's goal was to put each class into a situation where no one could freely form groups.

Although representatives from each of the classes had hoped that Housen would have changed his mind come July 1st, his stance on the matter hadn't changed.

However, there was a chorus of voices from the 1st years to just ignore Class-D in the team formation process. Nevertheless, Takuya Yagami from Class 1-B was still waiting for the situation to resolve itself. While it would've been easy to simply ignore Housen's class, cooperation was essential in this exam as it was a battle within all three school years instead of just the 1st years. He believed it was necessary to select talented people from the entire year in order to maximise their chances of winning. Some students who had the same idea as him expressed their support, and an agreement was formed by the three classes to wait until July came.

Housen, however, had gone through the entire time with a negligent attitude, causing their negotiations to bear no fruit

Finally, the deadline had arrived and representatives from all 4 classes had to come together to discuss.

In order to keep the negotiations an open matter for the 1st year, Yagami had advocated for a simple gathering. Although all the class leaders had agreed on this, there was still no reply from Class-D by the end of the school day.

Yagami had arrived in the corridors of one of the empty 1st year classrooms. As the one who had proposed this, he felt obliged to arrive before anyone else did.

Not long after that, Utomiya Riku from Class C showed up.

"Looks like it's only you, Yagami."

"Utomiya-kun. I thought you would be the last person to attend this gathering."

"Although I'm not the leader of my class or anything, the other students didn't want to come. While I prefer speaking my mind on most topics, I don't have much taste for these troublesome matters."

"Isn't it because they believe you to be a reliable student that they sent you? I saw this month's updated OAA, and your Social Contribution has been raised to a B."

Yagami said so with a bright smile.

Utomiya frowned, despite the praise he received.

Although Yagami had a C in Physical Ability, his Academic Ability was rated A. Moreover, due to his repeated contributions to his class his Adaptability and Social Contribution scores had both risen up to A.

Since Utomiya's Class-C didn't have anyone with similar talents, he was resentful of the fact that Yagami did.

"We've recently lost a comrade. Honestly, it's turned out to be a pretty heavy loss."

"I also didn't think that Hatano-kun would get expelled. How regretful."

"... Ah!"

Hatano had been one of the boys in Class 1-C, a valuable student with an A in Academic Ability.

However, the penalty for breaking any of the school rules was expulsion and that had been a fatal blow to Class-C.

This had provided the lax 1st years a much needed wakeup call and showed them how harsh the school could be.

That being said, it had been a month since Hatano had been expelled.

Utomiya, who was his fellow classmate, didn't even get the time to mourn his loss.

Having lost such an excellent student, getting a solid result on the next exam became necessary.

"Looks like you got along with Hatano very well."

"We had made a pact to join the student council together and create a livelier environment for everyone in this school"

Utomiya nodded lightly, and turned his attention to Class 1-D's classroom

"What do you think are the odds of Housen actually coming

Utomiya asked Yagami.

"50/50, I think."

"50/50? You seem to trust Housen quite a bit, I bet he won't come at all."

"If he fails to show up this time, then we'll just form groups within the remaining classes. With that, Class-D who were trying to extort us would be left behind, and their chances of winning would eventually disappear "my edit still works then?

“If he thinks he can simply force us to hand over our points like that, he is too arrogant. The most important thing to ensure was the formation of the groups, since we’ll also be facing the other years this time around. However, Housen has refused our offer time and again”

Although they were all 1st years, they were wasting time and energy fighting in areas where they didn’t have to.

“It might seem like that on the surface, but I don’t think that’s Housen’s endgame.”

"I understand that this is his strategy. However, it stands no chance of winning."

“If he’s truly intent on carrying out this strategy, it would be a blessing Our class doesn’t think that Housen is much of a threat at all ”

"...Yeah."

Yagami was busy conjecturing what Housen’s real strategy might be, when suddenly a third person appeared----

"Oh! Riku, Takuya. It's you guys."

Takahashi Osamu of Class 1-A waved his hand and approached them boisterously..



Although he was an unassuming figure with only a C+ in Academic Ability, he was approachable, and as a result often invited out to any social gatherings that took place. He had amassed many friends in the other classes and years in the short time he'd been here.

"Osamu-kun, you're here? Were you forced to come again?"

"The leader of my class is the type who hates these kinds of troublesome things. That's why they sent me here instead of them."

"Well it's better since you came, Takahashi."

Like Utomiya, it was fine if the student who came to this forum wasn't the leader of their class.

Not to mention, if a student with good communication skills came, it would be appreciated by the other classes as well

"The only one left now is Kazuomi."

There was still about three minutes to go before this meeting started. If he didn't show up they would simply start without him

"Isn't it better to work together now? I seriously just want to isolate Class D and crush them as soon as possible."

"We were told that this uninhabited island exam would take all skills including academic ability into consideration. While Class D might be last place in terms of overall academic ability, their physical abilities are second in our year. That makes them a valuable asset in forming optimal groups for this exam. "

"I understand what Riku has to say, even for our class this has created a troubling situation. However, it's too soon to simply brush aside, Right? There's no guarantee that cooperating with each other in an exam will be a yearly thing and that it won't take place in the future."

While Riku planned to destroy Class-D, Yagami wanted to work with them. Takahashi, on the other hand, held a neutral position on this matter.

"The cooperation within our three classes is good enough. While it's true that Class D has some students that could be valuable assets, they aren't worth bending over backwards to meet Housen's demands. It's almost time, I hope we can work together with just the three of our classes."

"That also doesn't seem like it will work out, Riku."

This man slowly walked out, seemingly as if he had seen how this conversation would pan out.

"Looks like you came after all, Housen-kun."

Housen, after being greeted by Yagami, approached with all of his terrifying white teeth on full display. Utomiya averted his eyes to the window sill after a quick glance.

"You've shown up at a great time, Kazuomi."

Takahashi didn't shy away from Housen, instead striking up a friendly conversation.

All he wanted was for everyone to get along.

"Don't address me by my first name like we're friends, or I'll kill ya"

Having intimidated Takahasi, Housen then turned to Yagami and Utomiya once again.

"So have you guys decided upon paying up?"

"That's hilarious. I am not giving you a penny."

"Anyway, let's calm down first. There's no way to have a discussion if you're bickering from the start."

"Then, now that everyone's here, let's start with the contents of the conversation. The groups—"

"Don't just go off on me like that."

Housen suddenly pushed Takahashi's shoulder, causing him to fall on his butt.

Utomiya, who was unhappy with this display, shot a steely glare at Housen.

"Housen, keep your violent behaviour away from us."

"Oh? Do you want to get in my way?"

"If it's necessary."

"Interesting. Come and try, if you can."

As soon as he raised his left hand, Takahashi, who was sitting on the floor, called out in a panic.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. I just slipped and fell, calm down, Riku."

"That does seem to be the case, no?"

"Unfortunately, I'm not as forgiving as Takahashi."

"Then let's see what you got."

Utomiya grabbed Housen's arm before he was able to clench his fist.

"Oh..?"

Housen smiled happily upon feeling the strength of his opponent's grip. Utomiya's gaze didn't just stop at the surface, his eyes burned with determination as if he was willing to fight him here and now if need be.

Housen thought getting into a fight then and there would have been fun, but reconsidered.

Although his approach might have been different, Housen was probably the most eager to fight the students in the other years.

"Looks like playing with you is going to be fun, I'll save it for the next time we fight."

"Do you think of violence as a game?"

"Ahah, of course it's a game."

"How boring, but, if that's what you want, you don't have to wait until next time. I am more than happy to entertain you whenever you want. That is only if you promise not to attack any more of my classmates."



In that tense atmosphere, both of them looked at each other with an unyielding look in their eyes.

"Huh, what do you mean by that?"

"I know you're the one who got Hatano expelled. He's not the kind of student who would deliberately break the school rules."

"It's only natural that small fries would get expelled. Nothing more than an implosion on his part."

"I still remember the look on his face when he got expelled from school. He had been tricked."

"And, you're saying it was me?"

"Who else could it possibly be?"

Although Utomiya tried to calm down, Housen began antagonising him again.

"Calm down, both of you. If you start a fight here, you'll be doing exactly Kazuomi wants."



"Takahashi is right. The most important thing now is to focus on the uninhabited island exam."

"Ah, that's right, the next special exam will have us group together with other classes."

Housen said that as if he hadn't thought about it until now.

"What's wrong with you? Since you have refused to work with the other classes, this has nothing to do with you."

"Well if you insist, I'll work with you. Reluctantly, at least."

"Don't be ridiculous. I wouldn't group up with you if you were the last man remaining."

"How cold."

Utomiya slowly let go of Housen's arm.

Yagami, who was watching, seized this as the right moment to speak.

"We're wasting time, shall we begin?"

"Who said I'd join your little conversation? Don't get started with me"

"So why are you here? To simply pass the time?"

"What if I said yes?"

"I don't believe that, you're not that stupid.

Confronted with Housen, Yagami answered with a timid smile.

"Although the uninhabited island survival exam is a bizarre thing, the 2nd and 3rd years have already experienced it once. We 1st years have to challenge this test against overwhelming odds."

"But we were given an advantage, right?"

Faced with the optimistic Takahashi, Yagami continued in a gentle manner.

"That doesn't change the fact that the 2nd years have the advantage over us in terms of overall academic and physical ability. So, if we can't cooperate with each other, we might just become food for the older students, right?"

Yagami stressed that because of that, cooperation between the four classes was essential.

"Your meek attitude is pissing me off, Yagami. 2nd year, 3rd year, I can crush them all."

"Of course, there are some individually outstanding students. However, you can't deny that we are weaker in terms of overall ability. Not everyone is as lucky as you, Housen-kun."

Yagami's gentle attitude and him praising Housen was what kept the conversation going.

"That's why-- I think we should at least form one strong group of 4 in our year. Just like what Housen said, a group that won't lose to the 2nd and 3rd years."

"In other words, we won't compete with each other for class points in this special exam?"

"Exactly, the 2nd and 3rd years who don't have much time left, can't squander this opportunity away to gain Class Points and recuperate any losses they might incur. We 1st years on the other hand have more than two years left, which is why I think we should simply give up on the Class Points."

From Class A to D, the difference between Class Points was only about 300 points. Compared to Yagami, who thought there was no reason to panic, Utomiya thought differently, and frowned.

"The benefits of cooperating with the other classes are too small. It's not smart to simply give up on obtaining any Class Points."

"Losing class points won't be our only concern if we end up becoming food for the upperclassmen

"If we go with that strategy then we won't be able to make any difference to our current class standings."

Utomiya emphasized that if they were going to fight, then there was no helping it.

"Ah, wait a moment. I'm a little concerned about what Takuya said. Why only make one team? All the top three teams will get Class Points, right? If we're considering merging the teams during the official exam, shouldn't we form more than just one strong team?"

Yagami immediately replied to Takahashi's question.

"Of course, that's the way it should be. However, if we want to create a lot of strong groups from the get go, we'll have to consider the balance of each team. Our opponents are older students, and won't be easy to beat. That's why our highest priority should be to form the strongest group of 4, that can get first place. During the official exam, it'll be difficult to form bigger groups freely, so even if the older

students cooperate with each other, they can only choose 3 people from 3 classes to work together."

Takahashi, who had been listening to what Yagami said, realized what he meant.

"So as long as we get 1st place, it doesn't matter what we sacrifice to achieve it."

"If we ignore Housen-kun, and cooperate with just three classes, we can still form a really strong group. But if we do that, we'll be on the same playing field as the other years. That's why I really hope that all four classes will cooperate with each other, not only for the sake of selecting strength from the classes but because I think that unity in our class year would be essential in this exam.

Forming "groups of 4 or less" for us 1st years. We need to take advantage of this rule. It would be a shame to throw away the upper hand that we were given."

Ostracising Class-D would be detrimental to our plans of winning first place.

If that happened, then they would do their best to sabotage the other 1st years during the exam.

Yagami hoped that they were ideally able to get all 4 classes working together.

And then, Yagami confronted Housen once again.

"You're the only one who fully understands how the upperclassmen battle, so I hope you can help us."

Yagami said that the cooperation of all 4 classes was necessary, no matter what, but Utomiya still suspected Housen.

He didn't think that Housen would agree to it, since he had refused all negotiations for more than two weeks now.

"Alright, I'll help you."

However, Housen readily accepted Yagami's proposal.

"... What are you trying to do? Housen."

"What am I trying to do? Doesn't he want my help? Aren't I just listening to his cute wishes?"

"Then let me ask this. What are your conditions?"

Yagami didn't want to waste any time so he urged Housen, who had suddenly changed his attitude.

"The remaining two spots in the strongest team must be reserved for Class D. That's a must."

"What?"

Utomiya was disgusted by Housen's proposal that only benefited his class.

"But what if we can't form big groups at will?"

"Didn't I just say? My only condition is that 2 students from Class D must be in the group."

"I see. If we can't group with the two Class D students, we would have to clear it with just the four of us."

"After all, you've already prepared the strongest four person group, so there's no question that you'll win, right?"

"You've got to be kidding, Housen."

"It's not a joke. If you don't want to, fuck off."

"You bastard..."

Utomiya clashed with Housen on his unreasonable demands.

But, Yagami jumped in between them, as if he were jumping a queue.

"Calm down, Utomiya, I don't think it's that bad of a condition."

"You're just going to give all the benefits to Class D like this?"

"The most important thing is that the 1st years work together as a team, and don't lose to the other years."

"If we let him take advantage of us now, he'll be sure to do it again."

"Then, what do you think will happen if we just abandon Housen-kun's Class D here?"

"That..."

"The most important thing in this exam is for us 1st years to get first place. If we get that, nothing else matters."



"I agree. I understand how you feel, Riku, but first, we should have the 1st years work together."

Utomiya made a face, but gave in, at the request of Yagami and Takahashi.

"Is there anything else, Housen-kun, if not thank you and goodbye."

Housen turned his back without a care in the world, as if to signal the end of their conversation.

"There's one last thing we have to do. In order to avoid any dispute regarding the rewards, we'll need to redistribute the item cards that everyone has in order to make the most out of them. It's also important that students in the lower tier groups have Half-Off cards. Are you fine with that, Housen-kun?"

"Do what you want."

Housen immediately left, without any reluctance on his expression.

While the three of them were watching him leave Takahashi said to Yagami.

"Anyway Takuya, who are you going to choose from Class B?"

"At least, I think that all of us who participated here can be in the strongest team, including even Housen-kun. Right?"

Yagami looked at Takahashi and Utomiya with a gentle yet sharp gaze, and kept an eye on Housen's retreating figure.

"Even if his strength is the real deal, it would be a mistake to let him join the group. That guy-"

"Well, we'll decide on that later. For now, it's enough that we're on the same page."

"... I understand."

"Let's work together to get 1st place. That's our objective."

Although Utomiya was reluctant, he accepted the proposal after listening to Yagami's words, after which they all disbanded.

## Part 1

The next day, after school, I was at the cafe at Keyaki.

"The second hand just keeps going round, and round, and round, it's so annoying. I hate these kinds of watches."

Amasawa stared at Housen's watch, who was sitting in front of her, and vented out her frustrations.

"Shut the fuck up, do you know how much this is worth?"

"Worth? I don't care or have time for things I hate."

"Huh? This is exactly why girls are so boring."

Housen laughed after saying that, and touched his watch.

"You... Well, never mind. What do you want from me?"

"I called you out because of the coming exam. Team up with me, Amasawa."

"Asking me to help you out, huh? And on the uninhabited island at that? Are you thinking of doing something vulgar?"

"Huh?"

Housen frowned at Amasawa and fearlessly returned her devilish smile.

Amasawa slowly lowered her crossed legs, then quietly opened them up.

"You want to see my panties? You can sneak a peek at them under the table, yeah?"

If one went into a crawling posture, one could see what was between those legs.

Faced with this temptation, Housen placed his right elbow on the table, and leaned forward.

"Do you think I wouldn't lay my hands on a woman?"

"Not at all. Don't worry, I reckon you're the type of guy who would beat someone up and act as if nothing had happened."

"Then stop sprouting your bullshit. It's a waste of time."

"A waste of time, huh. Then let me hear it first. Your plan. Why did you invite me?"

"It's because you were bold enough to try and get Ayanakouji expelled last time."

"Well, that's true. There are some people who don't do anything, even though they know about the bounty, and there are some people who want to do something but give up halfway. If you can get 20 million points, then it's worth going all out."

Amasawa didn't show any signs of disgust, and answered.

"Then what's my reward if I group with you? After all, I'm not a cheap girl."

While Amasawa was asking what she could get, a serious voice came from behind her.

"It should be split equally amongst us. That's what we said before."

It was Nanase, who was a bit late.

"Equal? That's too cute. Are you going to say nothing in response to this shocking statement, Housen-kun?"

The three of them gathered around the table.

"I see. The group that Housen-kun was thinking of forming was the three of us. Do we need one more?"

"That's not necessary. The winner of the uninhabited island exam will neither be a 2nd nor a 3rd year group. It will be the three of us."

"Cocky aren't you? But, it seems to me like there's a lotta formidable upperclassmen compared to the first-years though?"

"So what?, I'll crush them all."

"Well, even if you're the strongest, Housen-kun... Didn't the 1st year agree to work together as four classes? If we're talking about the main players in Class D, it's just the two of you, right?"

"The one who makes the decisions and the one who's in charge of Class D, is me. Understand?"

"So you're going to send in the small fries as the representatives in our stead. In other words, you're going to fight the other classes?"

"Still depends on what the main focus is. It won't be a big deal if we let the students with strong academic or physical abilities participate. Also, if Housen-kun joins the strongest group, problems will arise."

"Since we haven't even started working together yet, as long as you don't confront them head on, there shouldn't be a problem. Anyway, how much do I get?"

"No points for you. Like I said before, you're on equal footing with us. Of course, any extra private points we might get from the rewards will be shared equally with you."

Nanase asked if she was satisfied with that answer.

"But, everyone's contribution will be different, and during the exam, I'm confident that I'll be able to contribute the most, no matter where I am. Can you keep up, Nanase? This exam requires physical ability."

"Do you want to test my abilities for yourself?"

Nanase aggressively responded to her provocation. Amasawa turned her attention to Housen for a moment, then suddenly stretched her hand out to Nanase's face and tried to slap her in order to rattle her.

But Nanase grabbed her extended arm without hesitation.

"You've got guts, eh? You actually tried something like this in this situation."

"Woah. Damn, you're pretty good aren't you? I love strong girls."

"You're not so bad yourself."

"You think? Can I try again?"

One side was laughing, the other was stone-faced.

Time passed slowly, as if they were testing each other.

"Nanase and you, I'll form a group with you guys. Alright?"

"Although I know Nanase-chan has considerable skill, I still don't think she and I are on equal footing."

"Why? Just because two out of three of us are from Class D?"

"I don't care about that stuff. However it seems like we will get the same points.... If we're going to work together, you'll have to pay extra."

Amasawa said that, while pinching the thumb and index finger of her left hand and rubbing them together as if asking for a bribe.

"If you're trying to bribe me, then I'll obviously have to increase my price."



"What an arrogant attitude. Be it Nanase or you, both of you women are more scary than Yagami and Takahashi combined."

"Don't you know? Nowadays, girls are the strong ones."

"Then I'll listen to what you have to say. What else do you want, besides the group rewards?"

"First place, of course, but that's not the only thing."

Amasawa changed the position of her left hand, and raised only her thumb to her neck.

Then, slowly slid it from left to right..

"I must receive all the points from the bounty to expel Ayanokouji-senpai. That's my final condition for forming a group with you."

"Hah, you might be bold, but that's not something I'll just simply give up."

"Then say no. However, what will you do without me? If you don't have anyone apart from Nanase that you can trust, you'll have a very difficult time winning this special exam."

Housen struggled with what Amasawa had just said.

And with all four classes working together, if they were a selfish group, the other classes would definitely not want to help them, just like Amasawa said.

"Once I team up with Housen-kun, I'll be even more isolated in Class A than I am now, so isn't it only natural that I want something more to compensate for that loss?"

Housen and Amasawa looked into each other's eyes.

"If you give me the bounty for getting him expelled, I won't ask for anything else. The honor of getting Ayanokouji-senpai expelled from the school will only be given to you Housen-kun. Isn't that enough?"

"There's no need to accept this proposal. If Class A gets an extra 20 million points, think about what they would do."

"Shut up, Nanase."

Rejecting Nanase's advice, Housen continued to stare at Amasawa.

"The bounty is yours."

"Thanks. The fact that you're not a stingy guy is just brilliant."

After saying that, Amasawa briskly stood up from her seat.

"Please take care of me during the official exam."

There was no need to stay now that the negotiation was over, so Amasawa left without hesitation

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes."

"I know, since you're the one who makes the decision and all. Nonetheless, are you sure it's okay to trust Amasawa? I think she's the type who would betray her friends without giving it another thought."

"Credibility? Don't just assume that I trust her implicitly. That goes for you too, I don't trust either of you."

"So, why group up with her?"

"Because she's different from the rest of the trash. She's got a hidden side, just like you."

"I see, that's probably true. Even so, 20 million points is too much."

"That verbal agreement is useless. As long as I am the one who gets Ayanakouji expelled, I'll be the one who receives the points. I don't care how much she cries about any verbal deal made."

Housen expressed that he had no intention of keeping his promise from the start.

"You really are a despicable person."

"Ayanokouji, Ryuen, the others, I don't care. Those motherfuckers really piss me off, I'm going to crush them all. I'm sick of being bogged down by school rules."

Housen was so happy, that he couldn't help but laugh out loud.

## Part 2

Summer vacation was soon approaching, and it was now July 6th. The entire group, apart from Akito, who went to his club, gathered by my seat near the classroom door. This was because we had agreed to go to Keisei's room together later.

"Ayanokouji-kun, can I talk to you for a second?"

As we were leaving the classroom, Kushida called after me.

"What's up?"

Since the number of times Kushida had come to talk to me had decreased a lot lately, this sudden call could only be called a surprise.

Our relationship for now only consisted of me transferring a fixed percentage of my points to her according to our contract. Since the class's individual point earnings were consistent every month, I gave them to her without a second thought.

"Actually, a 1st year student told me that he wanted to meet you, Ayanokouji-kun... But is this a bad time?"

Kushida looked at Haruka and the others in the group, embarrassed at the sight, and continued

"He asked me to arrange a meeting with you. It'll take about an hour. "

"What, what?? Don't tell me she's confessing?"

Airi panicked upon hearing Haruka's interruption.

"Eh? Ehhh?! Is that true?"

"If that's the case, I don't think we can allow them to meet."

They spoke their minds out loud and even decided my fate for me.

"... Is that the case?"

Anyway, I decided to check with Kushida first.

"Eh? Ah, that... It's actually a boy that wants to meet you... Sorry."

Kushida apologized, with a troubled expression.

No, you didn't need to apologize for that at all.

Although it wasn't something like that to begin with, I still felt relieved.

"Isn't that great? It's good to communicate with the 1st years, right?"

"Right, after all, our group is really bad at interpersonal relationships. It wouldn't be a bad thing if Kiyotaka could meet up with a 1st year."

Forget what the 1st year said, since both parties are telling me to go now, I'll have to meet him. Airi grew relieved after hearing that it wasn't a confession, and wanted me to go. Now, I had no reason to refuse.

"I see, what should I do?"

"Thanks! Well, I'll just tell them you said yes."

Kushida took out her phone to send a reply.

"Then we'll go for now, let's meet up later yeah?"

After a brief talk, the members of the Ayanokouji group went back to the dormitory.

"Sorry about this."

Kushida apologized to me as she held her phone to her ear, though it hadn't connected yet.

"It's not a big deal. Nobody in the group'll have any cause for complaint."

The 1st year boy picked up the phone shortly after.

"Ah, hello? Ayanokouji-kun said that you could meet him now. Uh-huh, ah, is that so? Then we'll just wait here."

Kushida hung up in less than ten seconds.

"He seems to be heading this way already, so let's just wait here, so that we don't miss him, okay?"

The 1st year student who wanted to meet me seemed to be on his way over.

"So, you're already on good terms with the 1st years?"

"Eh? It's July already, it's been a long time..."

"... That's true."



It's been over three months since the 1st years joined the school. On an unrelated note, the sun was burning bright outside the window in the hallway.

It will soon be time for the cicadas to begin singing their cantatas.

Even though it had only been three months in my socially awkward perspective, it was more than enough for Kushida to form friendships with the 1st years.

"Ayanokouji-kun, you've made friends with some of the first years, right?"

I mean I should've, but I haven't been able to make any.

"There's no one I can call a friend."

"That's, so... I see... There's no need to rush. It's just the beginning of the year."

Anyway, focusing on that would make me feel empty. I have spoken to a few first years occasionally. However, that hasn't done anything for my interpersonal skills.

Due to the uncomfortable atmosphere, the dialogue between us came to a halt at some point.

As I was thinking of how to respond to Kushida, the 1st year appeared in the corridor

"Kushida-senpai."

Appearing from the corner was Takuya Yagami, who had graduated from the same junior high school as Horikita and Kushida. Due to his appearance, the awkward atmosphere dissipated and Kushida let out a smile.

"Yagami-kun is the one who wanted to meet you, Ayanokouji-kun."

"It's the first time we have met, Ayanokouji-senpai, thanks for taking the time to come here."

Because it was a 1st year who had greeted Kushida before, I had a faint idea about him.

"I think it was... Class 1-B, right?"

"Yes. I'm Takuya Yagami of Class 1-B."

I've seen Yagami before, but I've never spoken with him till now. We're finally having our first conversation before summer comes.

Apparently, he had assumed leadership of Class 1-B, but exactly how far did he reach? A good-natured person who treated people well. Add to that a high academic ability, and you get someone who was very popular.

"Why don't we go to my room to talk? I recently got my hands on a pretty rare black tea, and although it takes time to steep, it's delicious!"

Yagami suggested that we should definitely go to his room if we could.

Since I didn't usually drink black tea, I was slightly interested.

It's just that, would we finish in an hour? It seemed improbable.

"Ah, sorry Yagami-kun, but actually, after this, Ayanokouji-kun has to meet up with his classmates in an hour, so can we try to keep this short?"

Kushida noticed that it might take some time, so she explained my situation to him.

"I see, that's fine. Let's talk at the cafe in Keyaki mall then."

Although a bit disappointed, Yagami readily agreed after understanding the situation.

"Then, let's go Ayanokouji-kun."

I slightly nodded, and decided to go to the Keyaki mall with Kushida and Yagami.

"So, the special exam on the uninhabited island is about to start. I heard that you guys had the same special exam last year."

"Yeah. It was pretty tough."

"Could you tell me about the rules and what happened? Since we have no experience as 1st years, we want to at least gather some information beforehand."

"That's fine... But I don't know if it'll be of any help. The rules this year are completely different from last year's."

"I know. The rules of the uninhabited island exam that the 3rd year senpais took at the time also seemed to be different from the rules of the exam you took, Kushida-senpai."

"Oh, so the 3rd years also took the uninhabited island exam."

"Like you guys, they all took it in the 1st year. In the past, the uninhabited island exam was only conducted once during one's time at the school--- Is this year an exception, or has that rule changed?"

It seemed like Yagami had more information than we did.

"Are you surprised? About how I have information about the 3rd years."

Yagami asked me, who had been quiet all this time.

"It's because I joined the student council. I asked President Nagumo about the uninhabited island survival exam two years ago, and he kindly told me. At that time, they were divided into 4 groups within the class, and a total of 12 groups competed."

The rules for their special exam were different from the rules we had been given.

Apart from a few similarities, the different years essentially took different special exams.

"Maybe there's a hint concealed within the uninhabited island exam the 2nd years took."

Even if Kushida and I had kept Yagami in the dark, it wouldn't have mattered. There was no need to deliberately hide it from him and it looked like Kushida was going to tell him.

As expected, Kushida started to explain to him in detail about the uninhabited island exam last year.



I listened in silence as I followed them.

### Part 3

It seemed like we had arrived at Keyaki mall just as we finished the talk about our previous uninhabited island exam.

We had planned to go to the cafe, but had failed to account for the rush.

"It's so crowded."

The cafe was already full, and there were even more students at the entrance waiting for a seat.

"What should we do? Shall we go to the second floor?"

"Just a minute."

Yagami took out his cell phone and started to use it with his left hand.



"I just checked with a friend, and the cafe on the 2nd floor seems to be just as crowded. Since we've to wait either way, why not just wait here?"

It seemed like his friend was already at the cafe, so he got in touch with him right away. A quick decision to avoid wasting time. When we agreed with his proposal, Yagami noticed a student approaching from behind. He unhurriedly moved us one place further down the queue. While holding his phone in his left hand and a pen in the other, he wrote his name and the number of people he had brought on the reservation sheet in front of the cafe. His handwriting was much better than the other students above him.

"Wow, your handwriting is really good, Yagami-kun~"

It was only natural for Kushida to make such a compliment upon seeing it.

Yagami, on being praised, smiled happily.

And then, accordingly, the three of us went to the waiting chairs that had been placed outside the store.

"My grandfather told me that even if I'm not good at studying, I should still be able to write well."

"Your grandpa?"

"Yes, because my grandfather is a calligraphy teacher."

"That's amazing. My handwriting isn't very good at all."

Even though Kushida was modest, you only needed to see her handwriting a few times to know that it wasn't poor at all. Although not as elegant as Yagami's refined handwriting, I remember it was a round style commonly used by girls, which was beautiful.

It seems like Yagami was a student who didn't show off his abilities at all. Even though he said he wasn't good at studying, he got an A in the OAA evaluation for Academic Ability. He was an honor student that wasn't disliked by others. He was on the same level as Yosuke.

After a while, a table of four became available, and we gave our orders.

"Actually— You might think, why I am talking to you after all this time, but there's something I want to tell you, Ayanokouji-senpai. There's a special exam that only a limited number of 1st year students have been informed about. You already know about this, right? "

It seemed like Kushida hadn't received any explanation beforehand, and she listened to Yagami with a dumbfounded expression. This limited special exam was, of course, the one where the person who got me expelled would receive a bounty of 20 million points. From his tone it seemed like he had first hand knowledge of this fact, instead of having a surface level understanding from a rumour. I decided to find out his stance regarding this, and listened further.

Neither confirming nor denying, I simply waited for Yagami to continue, and he nodded his head, in understanding.

"In April, I received a notification about this. However, since I wasn't interested in getting paid for setting people up, I decided not to participate."

It's true, Yagami hadn't done anything to me. Though, it wouldn't have been surprising if he had paid a little attention to me upon learning about the bounty, but it seemed as if he hadn't been aware of my existence until recently.

"Why are you telling me now?"

"I recently heard that Housen-kun had failed in his first attempt. However, Ayanokouji-senpai's left hand was injured in the process. I wouldn't have been surprised if he did something inhumane but this was beyond my expectations."

"Well, I won't deny it."

Kushida's gaze alternated between me and Yagami, listening attentively. She was trying to understand something she didn't quite get. If this continued, Yagami would be talking endlessly.

"There's one more... reason why I decided to tell you this."

Looks like there was another reason why Yagami didn't tell me earlier.

"For the sake of protecting the first year students, I'm going to be a complete bystander. However, if you don't do anything about it, Ayanokouji-senpai... depending on the situation there's a possibility that the situation will also affect your classmate, Kushida-senpai. That's why I'm going to tell you everything I know here."

Kushida raised her left hand in embarrassment upon hearing that, and asked.

"I have no idea what you guys are talking about..."

"Can I continue to talk like this?"

"I've got no right to stop you."

Yagami asked her to come with him because he seemed to be worried about her.

Even if I had stopped him from saying it here, Yagami would have told her later without me present.

"Then I'll start from the beginning so Ayanokouji-senpai can fully understand. It all started when I was contacted by President Nagumo of the student council. He instructed that one or two representatives from each class would secretly gather in the student council room. Actually, we were summoned there shortly after entering the school."

From Yagami, I got the keyword "student council."

"The first year students there were Takahashi Osamu-kun and Ishigami Kyou-kun from Class A, me from Class B, Utomiya Riku-kun from Class C, and Housen Kazuomi-kun and Nanase Tsubasa-san from Class D. A total of 6 students."

If what he said was true, it was valuable information. Those two people from Class 1-C weren't simply striking conversation with me. What was most intriguing though, was that Amasawa's name didn't appear on that list.

"The special exam was to get the 2nd year student Ayanokouji-senpai expelled from the school."

"Eh?! To get Ayanokouji-kun expelled?"

Yagami nodded at the surprised Kushida and continued.

From Kushida's expression, I could make out that she didn't have any foreknowledge on this matter.

"The deadline was the beginning of the 2nd semester, and you could use any means. In addition, we weren't allowed to tell anyone about the special exam. However, since Utomiya and I were the only participants from our classes, we were allowed to tell one person in our classes about it to make it fair, but I didn't tell anyone. Utomiya might have told someone though."

In other words, 6 or 7 people from their grade knew about this special exam.

"The student council president Nagumo-senpai told the six of us that he'll give 20 million points to the student who got him expelled."

"Th-that's a lot of points... I-is that sort of thing allowed?"

The exam was a surprise to Kushida who heard about it. Until now, I've been wondering how much I should trust Yagami, but he didn't seem to be lying. Nevertheless, if I found out he was lying, our present and any future relationship we might have would be finished. If Class 2-D suffered losses, Kushida would be affected as well.

"It's no wonder that you're surprised, Kushida-senpai. Back in April, we didn't have a deep understanding about the school, but now it's very clear. This is an unusual special exam. That is what I've judged it to be, and that's why I arranged to meet you here."

After explaining to a certain extent, Yagami took a deep breath, and brought his cup to his mouth.

After learning about the 20 million points bounty on my head, Kushida asked Yagami a question.

"Isn't it a bit strange that the student council president is conducting this special exam on his own...?"

"Yes. I too think the problem lies in the expression. We are calling it a special test, but it would be easier to understand if you think of it as a challenge that President Nagumo made up on his own and gave to the first year students."

Nagumo might be involved in this. Investigating this was one of Horikita's goals. However, just when I thought he wouldn't easily reveal his involvement in this, it was leaked by someone unexpected.

"Wh-why is it Ayanokouji-kun? Are there no other students apart from him?"

"As far as I know, it's only Ayanokouji-senpai. As for why it's him, I don't think there's a specific reason behind that. President Nagumo said that the student was selected at random from the 2nd years'. It was a simple game of chance, 1 in 157."

For Yagami, who didn't know Nagumo's background, this was not something he could understand.

He didn't even doubt that it was a random selection. Of course, the chances of me being randomly selected wasn't zero. Although judging from the current situation, that was impossible.

However, would Nagumo be prepared to spend 20 million just to get me expelled? From our interactions so far, I didn't think he was someone that would do something going to such lengths as that. No, actually, he would do anything once he decided on it, but, his evaluation of me shouldn't be so high.

"Even if it's the student council president conducting this special exam on his own, how was he able to prepare 20 million points?."

I prodded Yagami in order to explore any further possibilities that remained.

"Yes. Although it might not sound good... Could it be a lie, a joke? I really can't believe he prepared 20 million points for an exam like this."

Even for Kushida, 20 million points was a huge amount.

Even if a student council president offered that kind of money, it would still be suspicious.

"It really is a lot of money. I now know just how difficult it is to save up that many points. However, when I first entered the school, he was the student council president from the 3rd year, and a member of Class A, therefore he seemed more trustworthy than the average student. Above all, I held the naive perception that he could've easily accumulated those many points."

Even though the amount of points had decreased this year, all first years were still given 80,000 points when they entered the school. The points would again be given to the students every month. The dormitories were well equipped and clean, and there was a shopping mall that was almost exclusive to students. There were shops everywhere. It was like a secluded paradise. Last year, we had that same feeling of affluence for a short while.

"In fact, I've already confirmed with my own eyes that he has 20 million points."



It wasn't surprising that a person like Nagumo would have that many points.

"But wouldn't you feel a little disagreeable about participating in a special exam that wasn't officially recognized by the school?"

"Apart from the disagreeable content of the exam itself, there's nothing else unpleasant about it. I think that other than me, all the other students welcomed it. It's being treated as a legitimate special exam."

"I've never heard of a student council president issuing a special exam before."

"No, it's not because we trust the president of the student council that we're participating in the exam."

"Eh...?"

"When the student council president announced the exam, the acting director was also present."

That was the root cause, the existence of Tsukishiro.

It was now confirmed that Tsukishiro and Nagumo were the ones behind the 20 million points.

"Under that situation, it's only natural for one to accept it as a special exam without any qualms, right?"

"If the acting director was present... Yeah, that would be the case."

A special exam to get a student expelled. Just hearing about it would raise all kinds of suspicions.

However, the presence of the acting director dispelled all those suspicions.

"That's all the information I have about this matter."

"Although I'm grateful that you told me about this, it might be dangerous for you."

What he said today wouldn't do Yagami any good.

"Yagami-kun, will you be alright? If this conversation is exposed..."

"It's fine, Kushida-senpai. I didn't hear about any punishment for talking about this to anyone."

Yagami smiled without a worry.

"Plus I'm already prepared to be hated by the 1st years, because I'm going to have to face the other classes sooner or later."

It seemed like he was ready to take them on. Yagami Takuya of Class 1-B was a more defensively minded fighter, but depending on the situation, he was also the type to preemptively strike as a self defense measure.

Though it was unclear how much Yagami understood his current situation. There were many students huddled in one corner of the shop. One of them, a female student, kept on looking here from time to time. Since she was right behind Yagami, he probably didn't notice her.

It was Class C's Sakurako Tsubaki.

As soon as we started talking, she had appeared at the store, and managed to secure a good lookout position in the crowded store.

And then she took out her phone, and seemed to be talking to somebody over it.

Was her purpose me... Or was it Yagami who was amiably chatting with me? Either way, she now knows that I've been in contact with Yagami. Whether it be by chance or choice, this was not a favorable situation for Yagami. It would be hard to escape the watchful eyes in the narrow confines of the school. Not to mention if one person wasn't sufficient they had an entire class to back them up in their surveillance. This was proof that a battle among the 1st years was unfolding.

"Please be careful, Ayanokouji-senpai. It's entirely possible that there might be other students who broke the rules, to tell others, just like I am doing right now."

"Taking that into consideration, who do you think I should watch out for?"

"Yeah. If you think about it, Housen-kun of Class 1-D is the one you should watch for. He's a troublesome opponent who doesn't care about the rules, and uses extreme tactics to achieve his goals."

As I expected, even the first years knew how dangerous an individual Housen was.

"But if I'm only going to designate one person—"

Yagami, while saying that, hesitated a little.

"Forget it, we should stop here."

"Eh? Why? I'm curious."

Yagami smiled bitterly and said.

"I feel like this isn't something I should be telling you senpais. If I list the names of who to watch out for, they'll of course be marked by the senpais. While I think that is important for you to know, I don't think it's fair to them if I tell you, although I already marked Housen-kun."

It's true, that if he mentioned who in what class was dangerous, Kushida and I would take suitable precautions.

We would also warn our classmates to prepare accordingly.

Yagami believed that as competitors, we should fight fairly.

"Although, I'm not entirely sure yet. I am guessing that he too might be dangerous."

"I'll try to investigate in the next special exam. Once I'm sure that he's a threat, I'll tell you, Ayanokouji-senpai."

Looks like he would need to confirm for himself how dangerous that individual was before telling us.

"Be careful, Yagami-kun."

"Yeah. Also... after the exam on the uninhabited island is over, can I meet you? I'd like to talk to you, Kushida-senpai."

"Ye-yeah... Sure, about what...?"

Kushida obscurely agreed to it, but, even if I was a bit slow, I still noticed it.

The way Yagami looked at Kushida was different from the way one would normally look at their senpai.

"In any case, your information was very helpful, Yagami. Thank you."

"No problem. I felt bad that you were the only one suffering, Ayanokouji-senpai."

"I also have to thank you too, Yagami-kun, thank you very much."

"You saying that, is more than enough for me. If Ayanokouji-senpai drops out of the school, it's going to be very hard on your class, Kushida-senpai. I really want you to graduate from Class A."

There weren't many 1st years who could keep me engaged for this long.

Yagami who did that looked to be nothing more than an ordinary honor student.

I often think of the student from the White Room, and after meeting various students, he was the most natural of all the 1st years I've met so far. He never asked me for anything in particular, on the contrary, he has never hesitated to provide me with useful information.

Of course, that doesn't rule him out, but if he was from the White Room, he was an opponent I wouldn't want to face.

Can a person who grew up in that facility become so natural in such a short period of time?

Anyway, let's make the most out of the information Yagami gave me.

"There are even more people now. So I'll be going first."

"You have plans?"

"No, I just want to stay out of the other 1st years sights"

It was the right thing to do, although it's too late now. I thanked him once again, as Yagami left.

After that, I stayed there with Kushida.

"You've got a good kouhai in him, Kushida."

"Yeah... But it's wasted on me. This wasn't the kind of development I wanted."

With that, Kushida wiped the edge of her cup with her index finger.

Although she didn't say anything, it was obvious what she was thinking.

If they had graduated from the same junior high, he would have known about her past.

"He also knows, Yagami-kun."

Kushida simply told me what I wanted to know.

"Is that ok? Telling me something like that."

"It doesn't make a difference either way."

"In other words—"



"I'll have to get rid of him as soon as possible. Yagami-kun, that is."

There was a strange sort of determination in her eyes.

She looked like she admired Yagami, but in reality, she still treated him as her enemy?

I suppose she would never look kindly upon someone who knew her past.

"It would be harder to eliminate an underclassman compared to Horikita and I."

"That only depends on the method."

It sounded like she already had a plan.

"The more arrogant you are about your own excellence, the more boring you are. Horikita-san and you are no exception to this."

"Didn't you agree to a ceasefire?"

"Only for now."

I had never let my guard down against her from the start, but from the look on her face I could see that she was to fight me no matter the odds.

"But since I kept losing to you, I will keep quiet for 'now'."

After that, she pushed her chair out, and prepared to leave.

"See you later, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Yeah."

Since there was no reason to urge her to stay, I simply watched as she left.

I realized that Kushida was once again up to something sinister beneath the surface of her charming exterior.

#### Part 4

After Kushida and Yagami left, I stopped by the convenience store on my way back.

I wanted to bring a little something for when I met with Keisei and the others later.

I also wanted to give the person who had been tailing me a chance to contact me.

So I decided to buy some snacks and drinks.

"Umm..."

I heard a long, drawn-out voice.

As I was about to pay, a girl from Class 1-C who was standing behind me called out to me. She had only bought a lollipop, probably to bump into me under the guise of 'buying something'.



"Hello Tsubaki. What can I do for you?"

I asked without mentioning what happened at the cafe.

"I'd like to talk to you about something. Could you wait outside for me?"

She looked a little deflated and paid for the candy in her hand.

It was true that it wouldn't be easy to talk to her in front of the cash register, so I waited outside the store.

After waiting for a bit, I didn't notice any signs of her coming out, so I turned around and saw that she was talking to someone on her phone.

Keeping someone waiting like that, how brazen of her.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Tsubaki peeled off the wrapper with her slim fingers, and walked over in the direction of the dormitory.

"So, what did you want to say?"

"The purpose for this meeting with you, Ayanokouji-senpai, was to tell you something."

What was it that she wanted to tell me?

I thought she'd say it right away, but she just licked her lollipop and didn't say anything.

Instead of being interested in me it seemed like she was expecting someone to appear.

"Is it Utomiya?"

As I spoke the name of the student I could think of, Tsubaki stopped licking her lollipop.

"Looks like you guessed it."

"He said he'd be right over."

The person she was talking to on the phone at the cafe was her classmate, Utomiya, after all.

As soon as Tsubaki said that, Utomiya came this way.

After he saw me, he nodded slightly.

"Sorry. For talking to you under these circumstances."

"What did you want to say?"

Was it about Yagami, or the special exam?

"It's about Housen Kazuomi."

But from his mouth came the name of the student I wasn't expecting.

"Ayanokouji-senpai. In the April special exam, you teamed up with Housen-kun."

Tsubaki was looking for a 2nd year to partner up with.

She had asked me, but I had turned her down.

"I never would've thought that you and Housen had arranged to cooperate with each other beforehand."

"What's so surprising about that?"

"By now you must know that Class 1-D never cooperates with anyone. Even for this island exam their strategy was to keep us waiting till the very end

Everybody knew by now that there was nothing to gain in this exam by isolating themselves from the other classes.

However, Housen didn't seem to be shaken by this fact, and had maintained his unyielding attitude.

"So what?"

"We want to take Housen by surprise on the uninhabited island exam."

His originally polite tone became sharp, as he tightly clenched his lips.

"However, neither the contents nor the complete rules of the exams have been made clear to us"

"Well... That's true, there's no guarantee that we'll be allowed to attack or ambush the other groups. However, since it's confirmed that we'll be competing with each other, then we should be able to plan something in advance."

There was no problem with that line of thought.

It's a sure thing that the groups will fight each other.



"Housen doesn't have many private points right now. In other words, if he withdraws from the exam. Even as a first year student who gets a lighter penalty, he won't be able to pay for his relief."

In which case, Housen Kazuomi would have to drop out from Class 1-D.

"Are you trying to force Housen out of the school?"

"Yes. Right, that's it."

Although he forgot to use honorific language, Utomiya replied without hesitation.

"Can you tell me the reason for this?"

"In Class C, a boy named Hatano was expelled from the school. I think Housen had something to do with it."

If he could give out names, he must have gathered sufficient evidence.

"So this is revenge?"

"Of course, I'd be lying if I said I didn't hate him. Nonetheless, what's most important is to prevent another person from being expelled."

"Yes. Thanks to you, our class lost 100 points."

Tsubaki put the candy in her mouth and mumbled that.

"I guess I know the reason now, but what does it have to do with me?"

"Housen hasn't formed any alliances with people outside his class. However, he has formed a partnership with you, Ayanokouji-senpai."

So that's what he thought Housen's weakness was.

From Utomiya's attitude, it really did seem like he wanted to obliterate Housen.

Tsubaki didn't seem to possess such an attitude, but she would probably help Utomiya.

If that hadn't been the case, she wouldn't have helped Utomiya contact me.

"Please lend me your hand."

"I can't give you an answer when we don't even know what's going to be on the exam."

"Then, could you keep this in mind? We're willing to pay you a large sum of points if you're able to get Housen expelled from this school."

He offered to buy my cooperation, but I had little reason to accept his offer.

"Did you ever consider that I might be Housen's comrade? Since we worked together it's only natural to assume that we have some sort of relationship. Don't you think I might just tell him what you told me right now?"

In any case, he had unguardedly revealed too much of his plans.

"That."

At that moment, Utomiya turned his attention to Tsubaki for the first time.

The lollipop was getting smaller, and Tsubaki had a lonely look on her face.

She kept staring at the lollipop. I don't know if she noticed that the two of us were looking at her.

After a short while, she said.

"Didn't you get that injury on your left hand after you fought with Housen?"

She licked the lollipop with the top of her tongue and said that.

"What makes you think that?"

"Because we were also aiming for the 20 million point bounty."

She admitted this without hesitation.

"I see. You're also participants in that special test, huh? That's why you previously approached me as if you were looking for a partner."

Even though Yagami had already informed me on this matter, I pretended not to know about it.

On the other hand, Tsubaki also didn't mention my contact with Yagami.

"That's right."

"But, even if I had partnered up with Tsubaki, you still wouldn't have been able to force me out of the school."

While it's true that I would've been expelled had Tsubaki given up on the exam, but so would she.

"We can't answer that."

Up till now, I've thought that Utomiya was the one who came up with the idea.

As things stand now, it doesn't seem to be that way.

"I apologize for that. We've already given up on the bounty."

"Why is that?"

"If we get you expelled, news of that'll spread throughout the school. We'll be enemies with the 2nd year Class D. Them hating the people who got their classmate expelled is to be expected."

Utomiya only realised this after his friend Hatano had been forced to drop out due to Housen's actions.

"Then wouldn't it be the same if Housen was expelled?"

"No. The reason for that is because all the Class 1-D students are afraid of Housen. Rather, there're a lot of students who wish that he be expelled."

If you weren't worried about being hated by the others, you could do whatever you wanted.

"Anyway, remember. Please remember this. The only thing we care about is defeating Housen."

After emphasizing that part again, Utomiya and Tsubaki left, walking in the direction of the dormitory.

Although I've met them twice by now, I still couldn't figure out 1st year Class-C.

Also, there's no telling if this had something to do with the White Room student.

For the time being, I'll stay vigilant, and keep an eye out for Housen.

Horikita had already joined the student council, but even after that, she couldn't provide me with any new information.

Nagumo's own opinions aside, the student council operated smoothly.

On the weekend a situation arose, it was a week before the deadline for the formation of the small groups.

It all started when I was called out by the Vice President, Kiriya.

Kiriya had been trying to stop Nagumo's rampage by supporting Horikita Manabu, the student council president who graduated last year, but the situation hadn't improved, and time was running out.

Maybe he had already given up.

That was what I thought, but now he suddenly wanted to meet me.

Although, why did he call me out in broad daylight on a weekday after school?

If he wanted to keep this a secret from Nagumo, it wouldn't have been surprising if he chose to meet late at night or early in the morning.

Being prudent would have been the right thing to do here.

However, I agreed to his proposal without any contention

After school, I went to Keyaki mall to meet up with Kiriya.

"You're here."

"What does the Vice President want with me?"

"Don't be in such a hurry to get this done with, it's going to take some time today."

Saying that, Kiriya led me away.

"The large scale uninhabited island exam is coming up soon, are you prepared?"

I thought he wanted to talk to me about the student council, so I was surprised when he started talking about the special exam.

"I've done everything I can. How about you?"



"I've formed a group of 3 without anyone from Class A."

In other words, he gave up on trying to fight Class A with his class alone, thus reducing the points his class would receive if they won.

For the 3rd year, the difference in Class Points with Class A was much greater than in the 2nd year. If there was any possibility left of reversing this situation, it was to get the higher ranks in the exam through your class alone.

"I know what you must be thinking, if our Class 3-B wanted to reach Class A, then it's a must to win first place with a team with only our class. Not only that, we would have to continue to win the following special exams by a landslide. However, that's not realistic."

If miracles like these happened ever so often, they wouldn't have been in their position in the first place

"I wanted to personally battle Nagumo in this special exam."

"Personally battle, huh."

"It's been a long time since we lost the battle with Nagumo and fell into Class B. After which, Nagumo became the student council president, and took control over the entire 3rd year, and eventually the entire school. You could say that the battle as classes have already been decided."

"I've been thinking the same thing."

The reason why most of the 3rd years followed Nagumo was because they gave up on their plans of reaching Class A.

"But personally, I don't think I'm weaker than Nagumo."

The Class 3-B student, Kiriya, had received high evaluations on the OAA. With all his stats above B+, it was understandable that he was confident in his ability. However, Nagumo's overall strength was even higher than his, so you could say that Nagumo's boisterous attitude was in line with his strength.

Nevertheless, the OAA doesn't reflect everything. Not only is it hard to quantify into values such as adaptability and intelligence of students who haven't exerted their abilities to their fullest, but there are also students with certain talents that just won't be reflected by the OAA.

If Kiriya thought he could take Nagumo on a one on one fight, he probably had some sort of plan to win already.

"You can form a big group of up to 6 people regardless of class. If I can select all the necessary talent to win—I don't think we'll lose to Nagumo."

Although they were in a different year, it was a double sided special exam wherein he could not only fight students among his year but also from the other years as well.

This exam was one of the few opportunities left for Kiriya.

"I understand where you're going with this, however, this isn't something worth deliberately telling me right?"

I didn't think there was any benefit in him telling me that.

"I don't want you to get in my way."

"I'm not interested in your duel with the President anyway."

"I know that, but what I'm trying to say is, I don't want to be distracted by the outside."

"Outside?"

"I'm referring to Horikita Suzune, who just joined the student council."

"I see. It looks like she's being treated as a nuisance, However I want to at least tell you that I sent Horikita Suzune to the student council on the wish of her brother, the former student council president."

Maybe this kind of thing didn't matter to Kiriya anymore.

To be sure, I asked him outright.

"There's already no point to it. He's only got a few months left as Student Council president. If we could do something starting from now, it wouldn't be to take his presidency, but rather to settle a personal dispute with him."

"If that's what you want, it's fine with me."

It's not surprising that he wanted them to have a fair fight.

The question was, what did it have to do with me?

"You wanted Horikita Manabu's sister to join the student council to monitor Nagumo, right?"

"I'd be lying if I said it wasn't, but it was mostly for another reason. Just like Horikita said in front of Chairman Nagumo, it was to follow in her brother's footsteps."

"That means you won't get in Nagumo's way, right?"

"Unless Horikita thinks Nagumo's an obstacle."

"That won't work. Forget all thoughts about dealing with Nagumo. It'll only lead to unnecessary fights."

He withdrew what he had once said, and it was as if everything had come full circle.

It meant nothing to me in the beginning, but now I had a desire to personally witness Nagumo in action. If Horikita judged Nagumo's actions to be wrong, I was afraid she might face him directly. There was nothing I could do about that, so being told not to do exactly that wasn't surprising.

"I'll remember what you said, Vice President."

I took his advice and gave him a proper reply.

Kiriyama showed a look of displeasure, probably because of my half hearted reply.

"To put it politely, don't do anything."

"I mean, I understand that."

"Then, you swear you won't do anything. Can I interpret it like that?"

"How you interpret it is your choice, but I didn't say anything."

As the conversation continued, Kiriya grew impatient.

"Nagumo was more or less aware of what I'd been doing with Horikita-senpai. But since I'd been following his orders, he remained calm and simply observed what happened. Horikita-senpai's sister joining the student council was annoying enough, so if you don't stop meddling in this—"

"Are you in trouble, Vice President?"

"...Yeah."

So that's why he called me out, to specifically tell me this. To make it seem as if he was worried about us.

However, the truth of the matter was, he was protecting himself.

Of course, this wasn't a bad thing.

I didn't want to interfere in the relationship between Nagumo and Kiriya, in which the winner and the loser had already been decided.

"Nagumo's idea, the one in which anyone can graduate from Class A. Don't you want that?"

"Well..."

It was the policy of the former student council president Horikita Manabu to continue on with the school's premise of winning by class.

No, I should say that this was the school's policy, until last year.

However, the current 3rd years had no chance to win against the Class 3-A led by Nagumo.

In fact, Kiriya seems to have resigned himself to the fact that he would graduate from Class B.

However, if he followed Nagumo's 'individual strength' policy, his position would certainly change.

If Kiriya was strong enough by himself, he may be able to move up to Class A.

Although he said he wanted to compete with Nagumo in the uninhabited island exam, in the end, he's just trying to gain private points in order to join the top class.

He was just saying it in a polite way so that Horikita and I wouldn't get in his way.

In reality, he wouldn't act like he would send a challenge to Nagumo.

"Is it really that strange... Wanting to graduate from Class A."

It really was nothing strange, but Kiriya continued.

In order to protect his pride.

"What's the point in graduating from a class other than Class A, if you're in this school? I won't go down the same road as those who have talent but have given up fighting. I will never sink with Class B, which is full of strange and incompetent people."

If Manabu-senpai had heard those words, he would be disheartened.

Or rather, did he know about this weakness of Kiriya from the start?

"Anyway, you should have understood what I want to say by now."



"I understand. When Horikita joined the student council, she was supposed to be introduced to the other members later on, but you came early, Vice President, and that was to make sure she wouldn't get in your way."

"Say whatever you want-"

"Kiryama."

While we were talking, a voice came from nearby.

Although Kiriyama's name was called, he didn't react immediately.

"Kiryama. Can you not hear me?"

Once again, but this time the voice grew louder.

"Speak of the devil..."

After saying that to himself, he reluctantly turned towards the direction of the voice.

The girl who was sitting on the bench was a 3rd year student.

She crossed her legs and put her open hands on the back of the bench, in a relaxed manner.



Comparing this with the face, name, and various abilities shown in the OAA.

Class 3-B, Kiryuuin-- right?

"What do you want from me?"

Faced with his own classmate, Kiriama's disgruntled expression didn't change.

It seemed like the two of them didn't get along well.

"Fufu. You're with an interesting underclassman, so I said hello."

Kiryuuin said that, and then turned her attention to me.

"Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, right? I heard you became famous after a perfect score on a difficult math test."

"It's none of your business, Kiryuuin."

Before I could speak, Kiriya raised his voice a little and said that.

In order to keep some distance from Kiryuuin, Kiriya took a large step forward to leave.

"What are you doing, Ayanokouji? We're leaving."

Kiriya said to me, who didn't move.

"You won't get anything from being with a man like that, you know?"

I was caught between two 3rd years.

Whose opinion was the right one to listen to?

To be honest, I didn't want to listen to either of them.

"Ayanokouji's the one who should decide that, right? Kiriya, can't you leave any quicker?"

Kiryuuin made fun of him while maintaining her sitting posture.

"Why don't we talk about something meaningful?"

"...!!"

Seems like instead of being taken lightly, what Kiriya didn't like was her interference at the last moment.

"You can ignore that woman."

He intensified his tone, and warned me.

"She's a third year just like you, Vice President. So I can't just ignore her."

"...This girl is Kiryuuin, a student of Class B and my classmate."

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

"She's just a good student, but Kiryuuin doesn't have anyone supporting her, unlike Nagumo. She doesn't even have a single friend."

So that was why Kiriama said that ignoring her wouldn't cause any trouble.

"Don't praise me like that, you're making me blush!"

It wasn't meant to be a compliment at all, but Kiryuuin laughed boldly.

"She's a lot like Kouenji from your year. All her words and actions, if you take her seriously, you'll just be wasting your time."

He used an interesting person to compare her to.

In a way, Kouenji Rokusuke was someone who had a unique personality, and if you were similar to him, you would be pretty strange too.

While I was interested, I also thought that this had nothing to do with me.

However, Kiryuuin's Academic and Physical Abilities were both rated A+.

She was the only student who had two A+ evaluations in the school, male or female.

Her Social Contribution was a C+, which wasn't that low, her only defect was Adaptability, in which she got a D.

If we simply looked at grades, you could say that she's the best in the school.

"What's wrong? Aren't you coming?"

"Are you calling for me?"

"If you don't come, I'll go. But is that okay with Kiriya?"

"... It's because of this person, that I'm in Class B."

Kiriyama said in a low voice.

"Couldn't you oppose Nagumo if you had outstanding classmates?"

"I told you that she's the same as Kouenji, didn't I? She's already hopeless as a person. In these 3 years, she didn't contribute at all to the class, except for her own grades. She always acts alone. Even though she lives among us, she's an alien in the class."

It was true that even that she had maintained her excellence in the OAA, I had never heard her name from other people's mouths. If she had been someone Nagumo or Manabu-senpai would pay attention to, it wouldn't have been strange to hear about her.

"Thanks for the compliments, Kiriyama."

"Huh!?"

Kiryuuin, who got up from the bench, whispered in Kiriyama's ear

She was surprisingly tall. Over 170 centimetres? You could tell just by looking at her that she was well built. There was actually a student like this in the 3rd year? I recalled the conversation I just had with Kiriyama.

There was no way he was going to sink with Class B which was filled with these kinds of 'strange' and 'incompetent' people.

This Kiryuuin was probably the strange person he referred to.

"Quickly say what you have to."

"Of course, I'll do that. Once you're gone that is, Kiriya."

"...Do whatever you want. I'm leaving."

It seemed like he didn't want to be with Kiryuuin, so Kiriya started to take his leave.

"Don't forget what I just said, Ayanokouji. Depending on the situation, I'll become your enemy as well."

I received a warning from the Vice President.

By now, I would have gone back, but this time's opponent was Class 3-B's Kiryuuin.

"What are we doing, standing up? Why don't we sit down?"



"Ah..."

Kiryuuin invited me to sit on the bench.

I hope I'll be released soon.

"So, what did you want to tell me?"

"Anything is fine. It's enough as long as I can figure out what sort of person you are.

"Figure out? Vice President Kiriya said that you don't contribute to the class, Kiryuin-senpai. That means you're not interested in what happens to your classmates right?"

"Being interested and cooperating are 2 completely different things, aren't they? There are some interesting people in my class, and sometimes I talk to them just like I am talking to you now."

I see. That's true.

"I'm not interested in the system of aiming for Class A of this school. Although the biggest selling point of the school is that you can go to whatever university you want

and find employment wherever you want, I believe I can achieve whatever I want with my own abilities. I simply chose to come to this school on a whim."

From her manner of speaking, she did indeed seem very similar to Koenji.

Having an extremely high opinion of herself.

Besides, that can be justified by the fact that she had an A+ in both Academic and Physical Ability.

"Would you have chosen this place if you knew before you came here that the structure of this school is centered around cooperation?"

"That's not the case. I like this school. I like it because I've never been dissatisfied with my school life so far. The point system is also very pleasant."

Koenji also seemed to like this school, and enjoyed all of its benefits to the maxt.

There's no need to cling onto the goal of Class A if you could achieve anything you want by your own abilities after graduation.

"It seems that you are fine with being hated by the rest."

"Other people's evaluations, they don't matter to me."

Kiryuuin gave a straightforward reply accompanied with strange laughter

"I wanted to ask you something, but instead you're the one asking the questions."

As if switching from defence to offence, Kiryuuin asked me a question.

"It's about time you told me about yourself."

"Why me? There are many students who excel in their studies."

"It's intuition. My instincts tell me that the person in front of me is no ordinary person."

Trusting her instincts with no basis at all.

If it wasn't for the fact that I knew they were alike, I might have mistaken her for Kouenji.

"Are you planning to get first place in the uninhabited island exam?"

"There's no student who doesn't want to be first. Except maybe, for people like you, Kiryuuin-senpai."

"Letting aside first place, I'm also one of the people who is aiming for a top spot. If I get a high position, I can get private points. I'm the type to spend whatever I have, so I'm always short of money."

Class Points and Protection Points were of secondary importance to her.

At the end of the day, Kiryuuin would only take the exam for her sake and for the sake of the private points alone.

"Nagumo and Kiriama will obviously aim for 1st place, and it seems that there are some competent underclassmen, right? The upcoming special exam will determine the first place at the school."

"That does seem to be the case."

What was needed was not limited to just academic and physical ability.

If it was a battle where you had to fight with everything you've got, then what she said was true.

"Whether my interest in you disappears or not, it all depends on what you do in the uninhabited island exam."

"On the contrary, I hope that your interest in me disappears."

"I see. You say some interesting things, underclassman. I'm looking forward to fighting you, Ayanokouji."

With that, Kiryuuin waved me away as if shooing away a stray animal.

"I'll take my leave then."

Although I've met with a strange 3rd year, one thing is for certain.

If I wanted to secure a top position in the next special exam, I would have to defeat Kiryuuin.

And it might prove to be even more troublesome than defeating Nagumo and Kiriyama.

## Part 6

After Ayanokouji left, Kiryuuin remained where she was.

It was her daily habit to spend her time in leisure.

In her vision, there suddenly appeared the swaying blonde hair that she had become accustomed to seeing.

Next to him stood Kiriyaama, the vice president of the student council, who had just left.

"Hey hey, the loyal dog came back with his master eh?"

"What...?"

"If you're getting mad at this, then that means that you know what I'm talking about. Right now, no one should know who's the loyal dog and who's the owner, as I don't remember declaring who was who. I'm simply stating from the perspective of an outsider who doesn't know anything. Why? Because the one who left and as returned is you, Kiriyaama, and so that fits the image of a loyal dog."

Kiryuuin said this once again to the approaching Kiriyaama, and Nagumo who was standing by.

"This woman's a real pain in the ass..."

"You've got a dirty mouth, Kiriya, it doesn't suit the image of a serious vice president."

"Nagumo, you're wasting your time on this woman. You know that, right?"

"I agree with that. So can the two of you disappear from my sight right now? It's a waste of my precious time."

"Who the hell do you think you are? You're the one-"

"Kiryuuin, please don't mock my beloved student council member."

Nagumo tapped Kiriya on the shoulder and interrupted him. He forced Kiriya to calm down, and stood in front of Kiryuin.

"A beloved comrade? I don't feel any sort of affection from you in what you just said."

"That's just your imagination."

"Well. What does the student council president want from me? I don't think there's much more to say."

"If possible, I too don't want to stay here for longer than I have to."

With that, Nagumo forcibly sat down beside Kiryuuin.

"You're beautiful but charmless, and I don't have much interest in charmless women."

"I have charm. It's just that I haven't met a man who could draw it out yet."

"If there's a man who can bring out the charming side of you, I'd like to meet him."

"Me too. But putting aside your personal tastes, why am I not considered attractive by the others?"

"Women with too high an ability are hard to deal with. Unfortunately, they're also the type of women I don't like."

"I see, if that's the case then I'll never be able to meet your standards. If being excellent is the reason why I haven't found a boyfriend, then I can only accept reality."

After enjoying the meaningless banter with Kiryuuin, Nagumo turned to the subject.



"I heard something from Kiriya. You're not interested in either Horikita-senpai or me, but you're interested in Ayanokouji. I was surprised when I heard that."

"Is that why you have come to see me? The student council president has too much time on his hands."

"I've finished my administrative work, so there's a lot of free time."

"You seem to have misunderstood something. I'm not a person who doesn't care about other people, Nagumo. I talk to people I'm interested in. There was a time when I was interested in you and Horikita Manabu."

Saying that, Kiryuin gently stroked the ends of Nagumo's bangs.

"Your hair is well maintained. I know you take even better care of it than I do, a woman. I'm sure you're extremely popular, student council president. How's your love life been in these past 3 years?"

"Someone who has never been with a man before, can understand the fundamentals of love?"

"It's true that I've never been in a relationship, but that's nothing to be ashamed of. Rather, I should say that it has raised my value?"

"Like always, your way of thinking is rather strange."

A meaningless conversation between them started up again, but Nagumo immediately returned to the topic at hand.

"So... Ayanokouji? Is he someone worth keeping an eye on?"

"He's a cute underclassman who pays good lip service, but that's all."

"That's it? So does that mean you don't care?"

"I'll leave it on hold for now. We had a face to face talk, but I wasn't able to grasp his true motives. Although you can't really call that an ability, he was at least more interesting than you, the student council president, who I lost my interest in, after the first time we met."

"You're the only one in the 3rd year who can say such disrespectful things to me."

Then Nagumo brought his mouth close to Kiryuuin's mouth and whispered.

"If you think you're better than me, then I'll just have to show you your place, alright?"

Nagumo challenged her to the uninhabited island exam.

"The moment you lose, you can't take it back. However, it seems you've misunderstood something, student council president. I don't have the leadership skills that you or Horikita Manabu possessed. I'm no good at making friends either, in fact I've never had someone who I could consider a friend, let alone a close one. You know that, right?"

Nagumo moved his mouth away from her ear, bored.

"However, if we're talking about other factors, it's different."

Although he had moved his mouth away from her ear, the distance between their faces was less than 40 centimetres.

Kiryuuin gazed at Nagumo with her sharp eyes.

"Are you saying I'm inferior to you in some aspects?"

"Well well, can you really say that there's definitely nothing in which you're inferior to me at?"

"I have given you several chances to prove that, but till now you haven't done anything, and as a result ended up in Class B."

Up till now, Nagumo had competed with Kiriya's class many times in the past special exams.

However, Kiryuin never cooperated, and they eventually fell from Class A to Class B.

"Certainly, if you only look at the results, they only consist of defeats."

Kiriya simply stared at Kiryuin, who was merrily talking, but didn't interfere with their conversation.

"Well, I also know that you're not the type of person who cares much about being in either Class A or B."

That marked the end of their conversation, and Nagumo stood up.

"Sorry for being a nuisance, Kiryuin. Enjoy the remainder of your school life."

Nagumo left with those words, and prepared to leave.

"Although I said I would put Ayanokouji Kiyotaka's evaluation at hold, I think he's an interesting student."

"What?"

"That was why you came to me, to know my evaluation of him, right?"

One of the reasons for approaching her was to find out what Kiryuuin thought about Ayanokouji.

"Interesting? I think his personality is far from it."

Kiryuuin laughed, as she saw that the fish had eaten the bait.

"There's a saying, that a predator doesn't reveal his fangs, right? He seems to have gotten a perfect score in a difficult test."

"There are people who hate being in the limelight and hide their talents. I've defeated all of them, and they weren't very interesting."

After he said that, Nagumo turned his attention to Kiriya, who was waiting for him.

"If I had to say, it's his aura. I feel that he has a different aura from you and Horikita Manabu."

"How abstract."

"Then why don't you test him?"

"Of course, that's what I'm thinking of doing. In the next uninhabited island exam, I might be able to witness his true power."

"You seem to be bored ever since Horikita Manabu left. So this underclassmen should be a good playmate for you, eh? If you're really serious, then you'll definitely get 1st place in the upcoming exam."

"Of course I'll get 1st place. Or maybe it'll be Kiriya, who's been dying to fight me. But right now, I still need more groups, right? I'll give you this role, Kiriyuuin. If necessary, I'll even help you find comrades."

And now, he finally spoke about the main reason he contacted Kiriyuuin.

Kiriyuuin laughed, as if she accepted it.

"I see. So you came here to ask for my help?"

"The underclassmen would want to get 3rd place or something, but I'm not that generous."

"You have a lot of pieces on the chessboard right? You don't have to rely on me."

"So you're not interested?"

"The top 50% is enough for me. Sorry that you had to come all this way for nothing."

Nagumo seemed to already know that would be her answer, and turned around.

"That's just how you are. We're both 3rd years, but it seemed to be a waste of time to try to talk to you like that."

Nagumo who had whetted his appetite from his talk with Kiryuuin, walked back towards Kiriama

"Since you came all the way here, I'll give you some tips."

"You to me? Sorry, but I don't need any advice from someone below me."

"With that logic, nobody can give you any advice".

Nagumo made fun of him, and then Kiryuuin, who was behind him, continued talking.

"Then listen as if this were a monologue. You should look at what's going on in front of you, instead of playing with your underclassmen. If you pay too much attention to those behind you, you'll get badly hurt."

"What a boring monologue."

It was a waste of time to remain there any longer, so Nagumo left.

## Chapter – 5

### **An Invitation**

#### **Intro**

As the prelude of the Uninhabited Island Special exam came to an end, skirmishes flared up from place to place, However these were but the final remnants of what was an extremely tense period. With only one week left, the group formation stage was entering its climax. By this point, more than 90% of the students at the school were in small groups of 2 or 3, and now their fates were bound together. Ishizaki, Matsushita, and the others who had invited me to join their groups had gradually given up on trying to do so. After all, the later you formed a group, the more danger you'd be in.

I wonder what the remaining 10% will decide to do by next Friday. While I was pondering upon that, I received an email. It was a little after 9:30 AM on a Saturday morning, and the sender was Ishizaki from Class 2-B. I've been in touch with him a lot lately, but this time, the content was different from what I usually received from him. He asked me to come to the cafe as Ryuen was calling me. The wording of the email didn't make it seem like a request, so I guess they weren't giving me a choice in the matter..

Of course, I could have turned him down, but then they would hold Ishizaki responsible for that. Although I had plans to hang out with the Ayanokouji Group today, they were thankfully for around 1:00pm, so this probably wouldn't affect that. So I got ready, and 15 minutes later, I was on my way to Keyaki mall.



15 minutes would be enough to get there on time. As the group formation stage was just about coming to a close, it seemed like Ryuen was breaking the silence he had maintained and was finally making his move.

As of now, Ryuen hasn't formed a group with anyone. It is possible that he would invite me to his group, but I don't think it was likely. Following this line of thought, I'm interested in what he would say beside that.

On my way to the Keyaki mall, I ran into Kanzaki, who was probably on his way back from the convenience store.

Two 2-liter plastic bottles could be seen in his plastic bag.

"Going to Keyaki mall at this time?"

"I won't have any time to relax after the exam starts, after all."

Since I had time to spare, I went up to him to talk.

"It seems like most of the people in Class D have formed groups, but you're still on your own?"

"Unlike the others, I don't have many friends, so."

I was hoping to exchange a few jokes and have a light conversation, but Kanzaki remained serious.

"You and Horikita, are both of you going to act as reinforcements for your class's groups? After all, excellent students could leave their mark in any group during the exam."

Recently, as Kanzaki's opinion of me rose, he also became more wary of me. Therefore, to him that must've seemed like the only possibility,

"At least for now. You're still solo, Kanzaki, so that must mean you're performing that role as well."

Class C's Kanzaki was the same. He hadn't teamed up with anyone yet.

"Ayanokouji, Ichinose seems to trust you a lot, but can 'we' really trust you?"

"If I said you could trust me, would you, Kanzaki?"

"I'd consider it, at least."

The bottles chilled the air around them and water droplets condensed on them.

The summer heat of over 30 degrees mercilessly came down upon us.

“Although we’ve broken off the alliance, I don’t consider Ichinose to be an enemy.”

I told Kanzaki seriously. That wasn’t a lie.

“That statement leaves a lot of room for interpretation. Are you saying you don’t consider Class C to be an enemy?”

I thought I’d be able to sneak that past him with that, but Kanzaki’s guard was higher than I’d expected.

“Kanzaki, what do you want from me?”

He seemed different than his usual self, almost like he was trying to push me into something.

If I saw the direction he was trying to lead the conversation, I could get an idea of what he wanted.

“Are you trying to get some sort of statement from me and have Ichinose to listen to it?”

“You... Ichinose...no, we underestimated your perceptiveness. When we first met, I had this weird feeling, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. Finally, I can clearly see what it was. You’re the reason Class D is making such great progress.”

“Who knows?”

“I’m simply going to come out and ask you for help. Ichinose trusts you a lot. That is why I want you to tell her yourself: the way she is right now, she isn’t good enough.”

A drop of water from the plastic bag fell to the ground as he closed the distance between us.

“So you’re expecting that to change the way Ichinose thinks?”

“That’s right.”

“Sorry, but I can’t help you. I’d like to keep seeing her own way of dealing with things.”

“So you want to see us, your enemy, fall?”

“I can’t fault you for reading too deeply into it, but...”

I thought about it for a moment. At this stage, What fate awaited Ichinose was anyone’s guess. However, when she’s fallen so far the next fall would surely be her last...

Just for a second, I was conflicted as to whether or not I should tell Kanzaki what I was thinking. However, I immediately stopped myself. Doing such an unnecessary thing I hadn't accounted for wouldn't improve the situation.

Rather, it would only end up contaminating them.

"Well, fundamentally speaking, one has to care of their own class by themselves. Isn't that right?"

"...Yeah. I might have been too childish."

Kanzaki bowed his head to me, as if he was regretting his actions.

"I was going to come up with a solution on my own. But I thought there was a way to fix the problem without doing that, that there was an easy way out, so I tried to take it."

Kanzaki walked back to his dormitory after saying that.

As he was running out of options, he must've become desperate. But, as they say, a cornered rat can even bite the cat.

In the next special exam, Kanzaki will also stand in our way as a formidable opponent.

## **Part 1**

I arrived at the cafe at Keyaki mall a little ahead of the appointed time. As I was paying for my drink at the counter, two guys who wouldn't usually be together came up to me.

One of them was Ryuen, who had called me, and the other one was...

"You said there was someone else, were you talking about Ayanokouji?"

Kohei Katsuragi of Class 2-A looked at me with a stiff expression.

I wouldn't go so far as to say that they were like oil and water, but the two men in front of me were definitely not on great terms with each other.

"What kind of meeting is this supposed to be, anyway?"

"What, do you want to stand while we talk? Sit down."

Ryuen was smiling suspiciously. Following his instructions I took an empty seat.

The atmosphere was peculiar, it was like nothing I had ever experienced before.

"You never had the vibe of an ordinary student, Ayanokouji, but that was quite the trick you hid up your sleeve. Getting a perfect score on that test!"

Katsuragi, who hadn't even talked to me once since the beginning of the 2nd year, suddenly got down to business.

"Kuku, don't admire him too much, Katsuragi— that's in the past."

"The past? You ought to be careful when an unexpectedly strong enemy appears. You've gotten too cocky after defeating Ichinose's Class B."

"Fuck off. Ichinose was off sinking on her own, she was never even on my radar."

Sure enough, this unexpected combination of people immediately built up a sinister atmosphere.

"...So? Tell me why you called me."

Katsuragi's words confirmed that Ryuen was the host of this meeting, and so I waited with him for Ryuen to speak.

"What's the hurry? Just chill man!"

"There's no way I can chill. if people see me with you, I'll be in trouble."

Katsuragi was concerned about the people around him, so it wasn't surprising that he urged Ryuen to get to the point.

Even though it was the morning of a day off, there were still a lot of students around.

I was sure that our classmates would be shocked to see us together.

"What is Class A aiming for in the next exam?"

"What do you mean, aiming for? I'm sure everyone is aiming for the same thing."

"Are you aiming to monopolize the class points? Or is it something else? I've checked the group composition using the OAA, and while you guys seem to have formed groups with Class C and D, Kitou seems to be alone. And then, no matter how you spin it, Ichinose, Shibata and Sakayanagi being in a group together smells fishy. Are you working together?"

I was also interested in that. In addition to the three people Ryuen named, Class A's Hashimoto, and Kamuro, had formed a group with one of Class C's best students, Ninomiya.

And then, the “More People” special card that Asakura was supposed to have, was now with Hashimoto from Class A. This couldn’t be a mere coincidence.

“You’re free to interpret it however you want, but I cannot confirm anything.”

“I don’t want any of that diplomatic crap, I want just straight answers.”

“Then, let me make this simple for you. I’m not going to tell you anything about this, you bastard.” Katsuragi explicitly declared.

Even though Katsuragi and Sakayanagi were rivals in their class, he would never reveal their plans to Ryuen, who was their enemy.

“Only on the day of the exam shall we know how Sakayanagi will act, and no one will know before she says so. If you want to know despite this, you should go ask her directly.”

“Oh, so you don’t know just because she doesn’t trust you?”

“Well, that might be true.”

Like Ryuen said, Katsuragi didn’t necessarily know the situation Class A was in. He was perhaps the only one in Class A who wasn’t a member of the Sakayanagi faction, and so was their enemy. It was a well-known fact that didn’t need to be mentioned.

Anyway, all of this was just a preamble.

“This is really sad, Katsuragi. This time last year, I considered you a worthy opponent in my strategies. However not a single trace of that person remains. It looks like it’s the end of the road for the loser of the faction war, eh?”

“Didn’t you also lose to Ishizaki that one time?”

Katsuragi retorted. Ryuen was laughing throughout.

“Don’t you want to crawl back to the top again? That Totsuka who was holding you back, he is gone now, right?”

Katsuragi suddenly slammed his right fist onto the table. Because Yahiko admired him so much, he couldn’t hide his anger any longer.

“If you wanted to make me angry, then you’ve succeeded, Ryuen. Are you satisfied now?”

“What, you still can’t let those emotions out? I’m a little relieved.”

Ryuen clapped his hands thrice, and then said to Katsuragi.

“Don’t you think it’ll be an interesting development if we manage to get Sakayanagi expelled from the next special exam?”

“What?!”

“If that girl isn’t here, then Class-A will cease to have a leader. That way, you’ll be able to return to your position as leader once again.”

“I don’t know what you’re planning to do, but that’s impossible. Even if you trap her on the island, she has plenty of private points for relief. Also if by chance, something does incapacitate her, she still has protection points to fall back on.”

It was extremely difficult to get Sakayanagi, who had both enough private and protection points, expelled.

“That’s true, if you want her gone, you’ll have to stab her at least twice. Well, getting her expelled in the next exam was a joke. The objective for the uninhabited island exam isn’t to kick your enemies down, but to climb up.”

I could see Ryuen gradually steer the conversation to the main topic of the meeting.



"The reward for getting 1st to 3rd place is enough to get within shooting distance of Class A, but the rules seem to be a bit troublesome. So, I wanted to prepare in advance."

"Is this why you called me and Ayanokouji here?"

"Exactly."

No matter what the strategy was, I didn't think Katsuragi would easily agree to it. Although I think Katsuragi didn't consider Sakayanagi favourably at least, if he made an enemy of her, he would be striking at his own class. Maybe it would've worked at the start of the leadership struggle, but now it would only have a negative impact.

"Even so, Ichinose really did agree to team up with that woman. Did you guys butter her up well, or was it because she's so incompetent that she thought that was all she could do? Right?"

"I don't know. And if Sakayanagi heard that question, she'd ask you the same thing. Not many people would like being on your team. You're a delinquent, after all."

Instead of betraying Sakayanagi, Katsuragi stood up for her with his reply.

"In that case, everyone here's that kind of delinquent."

The three of us hadn't formed a group with anyone yet, and were working alone.

But why did he try to incite Katsuragi? It was obvious that Katsuragi wouldn't betray Sakayanagi easily, no matter how much he tried to incite him.

Or... was it to confirm that he wouldn't betray Sakayanagi?

"Good for you, Katsuragi. Obnoxiously righteous as always. Not bad."

"Flattering me won't work, Ryuen."

Ryuen finally decided to get down to business, and straightened his posture.

"The most important thing about this special exam is to not lose any points from the 2nd year. I don't want the 1st and 3rd years filling their pockets with my money. For that, we need to at least form an alliance, right? If you rely only on your own class, you'll lack combat power."

At the time when the group formations stage was coming to an end, Ryuen was proposing that we work together.

"If the small fry in Class B were added into this group, then I'd be better off fighting alone, but if I can draw in some firepower from elsewhere, then it'd be a different story."



He looked at Katsuragi with an evil smile.

“No way, are you asking me to work with you?”

“Not just you. Ayanokouji as well, who’s spaced out over there just listening to us talk.”

He then turned his attention to me.

“... me too?”

“Why would I call you here if you weren’t.”

I thought this was so unlikely, but he’s seriously asking me to help!

“I refuse. Although Class A would get the rewards too, I don’t want to be on a team with someone like you.”

“What a rash decision. You’ve gotta hear me out till the end.”

“That’s not necessary. But– Why did you call Ayanokouji? I want to know that first.”

“Why are you asking?”

“It was surprising that he got a perfect score in math in the special exam at the end of April. I agree that he has a high ability in academics. But can you really say that he’s the right person to choose if you want to win?”

Although Katsuragi immediately rejected the proposal to collaborate, he expressed his doubts on Ryuen’s strategy.

He seemed to be unable to accept it, because this strategy was formulated with me in mind.

“You think I came up with a half-assed strategy?”

“That’s right. If you get Ayanokouji in, it’ll reduce the class point reward to one thirds each. Since you’re inviting me from Class A anyway, wouldn’t it be better to invite Kitou to the group? Besides, if we need three classes, Kanzaki from Class C is still alone, and he should’ve priority over Ayanokouji.”

Katsuragi acted as an advisor, recommending suitable candidates.

“Someone who doesn’t know about him wouldn’t understand, but I made the right choice. Right, Ayanokouji?”

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I echoed Katsuragi, and shrugged as if to say I didn't know why I'd been called.

"Stop with that poor acting. You're the man who beat me and shut me up."

Ryuuen said that with nary a consideration for my preferences about that matter.

Although it could be considered a joke, in this situation, Katsuragi didn't seem to think so.

"To shut you up?... Is that true?"

He turned to Ryuuen and I to confirm if it was the truth.

"Ah, I got my ass handed to me. Thanks to that, I almost decided to quit school."

When he heard this, Katsuragi started connecting the dots.

If he connected it with the fact that Ryuuen left the limelight at a certain point, it would be easy for him to imagine it.

"Come on, admit it, Ayanokouji. Even if you continue to hide it from Katsuragi like that, I'll just keep talking, yeah?"

Saying all these unnecessary things, it's almost as if he was threatening me.

"Even if I do admit it, do you think I'll help you?"

"Well, like with Katsuragi, it won't be that simple."

Katsuragi, who was listening to us, sighed.

"No, I can't accept this after all. I can't believe that Ayanokouji beat you. Coming back to what I said earlier, if you have three classes working together, even if you come in first place, you'll only get an average of 100 points. The gap between you and Class A will be impossible to close."

Katsuragi strongly questioned the importance of this group's existence.

"Yeah yeah, completely forgot about that. As an advisor, you're certainly qualified."

Ryuuen flashed a grin as he said that and turned his attention to Katsuragi again.

Even in this situation, Ryuuen maintained his frivolous attitude.

"I see, proposing to join forces with three classes inefficiently, and saying complete nonsense like Ayanokouji beating you, it seems like you didn't intend to negotiate seriously from the beginning."

Katsuragi, who still thought that Ryuen was joking, prepared to leave his seat.

"A serious negotiation? You knew that was impossible from the start, didn't you? But you still came. Were you asked to spy for Class A?"

Katsuragi agreed to a meeting that he could have refused.

But indeed, there must have been a reason behind it.

"You're a dead man, and you're looking for a chance to come back to life. Am I right?"

Totsuka Yahiko, a great admirer of Katsuragi, was expelled from the school because of Sakayanagi.

And now, Ryuen was trying to find out if Katsuragi had forgiven Sakayanagi for doing so.

"Whether or not that's true, it has nothing to do with you."

"Since you're already here, hear me out to the end."

"No matter what you say, there's no chance of me working with you. It's true that I have a semi-antagonistic relationship with Sakayanagi. However, I don't want to trouble my classmates. I don't want to work with you."

Hearing Katsuragi's words, Ryuen clapped his hands happily again.

Looks like he was waiting for Katsuragi to say these words all along.

"Don't want to cause trouble for others? Since last year's uninhabited island exam, you guys in Class A have been diligently transferring money to me every month because of that contract you made with me, did you forget that?"

Katsuragi, still standing, shifted his attention to Ryuen once again.

"It was a fair contract, we got 200 points from your class, and in return Class-A pays off the loan. All of my actions were only to lead Class-A along a better path."

"Sure, if you only look at the numbers. However, what about the psychological impact that your class suffers every month? Why should all of you have to share your private points with us for so long?"

Humans were surprisingly greedy creatures. Even if they had agreed to pay in advance, they would still feel dissatisfied with their purchase. Month after month, Ryuen continued to squeeze 20,000 points from every student in Class A. Even if there were one less person now, the total amount of private points taken from their entire class was still 780,000. That was 9.36 million points a year. That would have been fine if the recipient was an ally of sorts, but continuously paying tribute to the man who posed the greatest threat to their position was something they wouldn't be very happy about. And finally, the contract wasn't signed by Sakayanagi, their current leader, but by Katsuragi, who had receded into the shadows by now.

"It doesn't feel good, does it, Katsuragi? Losing, and not being able to get revenge."

"So... So what!?"

Katsuragi got angry again, and it looked as if he was about to grab Ryuen.

As he had found what he wanted in those eyes, Ryuen said:

"Come to Class B, Katsuragi."

Such an extremely bold invitation by Ryuen.

Katsuragi forgot his anger for a second as he contemplated Ryuen's sudden proposal.

"Are you crazy? You're asking me to come to Class B?"

"Of course, we'll pay for the points you don't have."

"Even if you have the necessary points, why should I come to Class B? You think I would give up my place in Class A?"

"I'll soon defeat Sakayanagi, and then the entire Class A will fall. In other words, remaining in Class A is worthless, right?"

Without Sakayanagi, their head, it would be difficult for Class A to continue fighting on the front lines.

"How much do you have on hand?"

"... About 1.8 million points."

"What, you've been saving up after all! Even if you're rotten, you're still in Class A, eh?"

It's true, it was still far from the 20 million points needed. Even with the monthly remittances from the school and the money collected from Class A, it only added up to 800,000 points filling

Ryuuen's wallet every month. It would be really weird if he had even 10 million points on hand right now.

Knowing that he would be rebuffed, he took out a piece of paper and put it on the table.

"You've seen this before, yeah? It's the contract I signed with you last year."

"... yes."

"After negotiating with Sakayanagi, I'm giving this thing up for 5 million points."

Although it was quite high, if you simply calculated the amount he would be paid until graduation, it was around 10 million points. Moreover, their psychological burden of constantly giving away their points to Ryuuen would be eliminated. No matter how you looked at it, it was a bad deal for Ryuuen.

Of course, if he were to sell the contract for an immediate reimbursement albeit half the original value, Sakayanagi would be able to predict what Ryuuen would do with the money. In the case of this exam, it would be to make the best team, or to collect stronger cards.

However, Sakayanagi accepted such a favourable proposal despite knowing the risks.

If I were Sakayanagi, I would have agreed to Ryuuen's proposal as well.

"Did you tell her that the points would be used for stealing me?"

"Don't tell me that you think Sakayanagi would reject the proposal if I said that?"

"... No, it's Sakayanagi, she'd accept it."

Katsuragi didn't think Sakayanagi would reject a proposal which had nothing but benefits for them.

"You're not going to get a chance like this again, Katsuragi."

He would use money from nullifying the contract that bound Katsuragi, to steal him away.

In other words, it's paying a huge sum of 20 million points to Katsuragi.

And it would allow Katsuragi to fight against Sakayanagi openly.

"Why... Would you go that far for someone like me?"

“Heh, Katsuragi, you have a surprisingly low opinion of yourself. Though, to be honest, you’re not going cheap.”

In the end, the only thing Ryuen wanted to do was to beat Class A. Even if Sakayanagi was defeated and expelled, it was still not a good thing for Katsuragi to remain there. If Katsuragi, who valued defense, returned to his position as a leader, Class A would inevitably become a sturdy fortress.

However, if Katsuragi left first, and Sakayanagi was expelled later, Class A would collapse.

That’s why Ryuen was willing to pay as much as it takes.

In addition to that, Katsuragi also had high individual ability. According to the OAA, Katsuragi would be the top student in Class B.

“The 5 million for nullifying the contract plus your current balance. The remaining points have been collected from the class. I’ve forced them into poverty to welcome you to our class!”

Between May till the end of July alone, 39 people can accumulate nearly 6.5 million private points. The remainder would be about 200,000 private points per student. Of course, Class B’s funds would be exhausted for a short time, but if they could get a top student, it’d be worth it. Ryuen took out another contract which he had prepared in advance. On it, the use of the 20 million points provided was written, as well as the arrangements for Katsuragi’s transfer to Class B.

“Come on, sign it. Using 20 million points to change classes requires several conditions. You can’t force a person to change classes. In the end, the person must agree, and then use his or her funds to transfer to any class of their choosing.”

The contract was to prevent Katsuragi from taking this huge sum of money and using it for other purposes.

Well, even if Katsuragi really used this much money for whatever he liked, he would be suspected of fraud by the school.

In other words, the purpose of this contract was not to prevent Katsuragi from doing anything dishonest.

Instead, it was a contract to keep him from changing his mind later on.

“You seem to be serious.”

“It all worked out, right, Katsuragi? You’ve been on your own until now, which makes it easier to invite you into our class.”

If Katsuragi had grouped up with someone, this wouldn't have happened.

"This is your fate. Accept it."

After remaining quiet for a while, Katsuragi sat back down on his chair, as though he had thought it through.

Katsuragi had buried his desire for vengeance against Sakayanagi in his heart.

Ryuuen brilliantly exploited this, and successfully brought him into his ranks. Thus, Katsuragi came under his banner. One thing was for sure, this would be of great benefit to Ryuuen's class. The gap with Class A had indeed been narrowed.

Katsuragi slowly signed the contract.

"Although I don't really care that you brought me into your ranks, what exactly are you looking for? You won't mind it if I speak my mind?"

"Suit yourself. Your stubborn opinions might come in handy sometimes."

That was what Ryuuen said after receiving the signed contract. This was the first time in the history of this school that an individual had moved to another class. However, instead of moving up to Class A, they went down to Class B. You could say it was a coincidence that these two circumstances overlapped. The first was that it was possible only because Ryuuen ruled his class like a dictator, and could get their points with a single command. The second was that there was a person who was isolated in Class A, and was disgruntled and vengeful towards the leader. For them, if there's something to be worried about, it would be the fact that they would be fighting for their lives in the uninhabited island exam. Since, the number of students who could afford the luxury of paying the penalty were limited.

"Hey, Ayanokouji. What are you doing?"

"Eh?"

Ryuuen asked me with a baffled expression, as I poured water into the remaining one-fifth of the coffee.

"Nothing. I was just wondering what it would taste like if I suddenly diluted the coffee 3 or 4 times the normal amount."

After bluntly answering the question, both Ryuuen and Katsuragi looked even more bewildered than they did before.

"...You're a strange one, Ayanokouji."

Katsuragi said that with a disgusted look on his face.

“So, what are you going to do with Ayanokouji? If you include a student from Class D in the group, the rewards you’ll get will be split in two-thirds.”

“No one said anything about him joining the group.”

“Then, what do we need from him?”

“Why, it’s the Trial card he received.”

Ryuen mentioned the card that had been given to me.

“Sell it to me.”

I thought he would request me to cooperate with him, but that was what this was about.

“You just bought Katsuragi, so I’m sure your funding situation isn’t so good. Can you prepare enough money?”

“I’ll be able to get 500,000 points or so. That should be enough.”

Indeed, this was the only chance I’ve got to sell the Trial card. Although I can’t say it’s a good deal, at least I can get some money for Kei.

“I have one condition. Make a student in your class that has a Half Off card exchange their card with one of our students that has the Free Ride card. If you accept that, I’ll sell the trial card to you.”

If she couldn’t form a big group of 6, and if Kei was hit with the penalty of expulsion with a group of 3 students, she could still limit the points she would have to pay for relief to 1 million using the Half Off card. Being able to definitively keep her safe was a big deal.

“Kuku, I guess it’s settled then. Half Off card, eh? It just so happens that Katsuragi has it, right?”

“I won’t have much money anyway. There would be no point in holding on to the Half Off card.”

So Katsuragi had been assigned the Half Off card.

If Ryuen has the Trial card and gets first place, he can get 450 Class Points at once.

With that Class B’s Class Points would also break the 1000 point barrier.

## Part 2



Soon, it was July 16th, the deadline for the formation of small groups.

As I was doing my morning routine, I received a phone call from Ishizaki.

“Yo, Ayanokouji. Morning.”

“It sure is rare for you to call me.”

“Today’s the last day for forming small groups, right? I have something important to talk to you about.”

“Is it about Nishino? Last I checked, she hadn’t formed a group.”

I hadn’t checked the OAA this morning though. Did the situation change?

“In the end, she couldn’t find anyone in her class to team up with, so she asked Ichinose to help her. Now, Tsube from Class C will help her out.”

Ah, Hitomi Tsube from Class 2-C. She was an excellent student with more than a B in both Academic and Physical Ability.

“That’s great.”

“Yeah. That means almost all of us have formed a group of 2 or more people. Except...”

There was a student in Class B who hadn’t formed a group yet.

“Ibuki, right?”

“Yeah. Ibuki’s on her own. Is there anyone who would group up with her?”

“It’s risky to take the special exam by yourself. I understand how you feel.”

I could tell from the way Ishizaki spoke that he had tried to persuade her many times, but had failed.

“Give me some time. I think I have an idea.”

“Seriously? Sorry about dumping this on you so early in the morning!”

I told Ishizaki that I would call him later, and then hung up.

Then I decided to try and contact someone who might group up with Ibuki.

Fortunately, that person hadn't left the dormitory yet, so I decided to meet her in the lobby.

In the elevator after mine was Horikita, the person I was waiting to meet.

Horikita was also one of the few students who, even now, didn't seem like they were about to group.

"What are you going to do about your group?"

"It's too late to bring that up. Anyway, I'm not going to group up with anyone this time. If you consider that the maximum number of people in a group is 6, it's not a bad idea to go alone."

"I know you're doing that so you can act as the situation demands. But what if you get sick and are eliminated? If you can't pay the incredibly high penalty, you'll be expelled."

I know I don't need to go out of my way to remind her of that, but.

"I am aware that I'll have to bear that amount of risk. Isn't that why you're not in a group as well?"

"But, my risks and your risks are different."

"What's the difference?"

"You had a problem with your health during the uninhabited island exam last year."

"I can't believe you're bringing up something which happened a year ago. Anyone can get sick."

"Yeah. However, you also took a break in the winter due to a fever. That makes it twice in one year."

"You just happened to spend the year without taking a leave of absence. Do you think that means you won't get sick this time?"

"In terms of taking care of myself, I'm more confident than you are."

When faced with the fact that I had perfect attendance, she had to accept this.

"I see. It's true that I'm not as good as you at taking care of myself. I admit that. But even if that's the case, making it out as something to be worried about—"

Horikita looked into my eyes. Her tone had started to heat up earlier, so she calmed herself down.

"It's enough that you know. I had no intention of opposing you."

One must thoroughly take care of their health.

If she was strongly aware of that, then it was fine.

"But even so, it's dangerous to go alone."

"Yeah."

"In our class, only you, I, and Koenji haven't formed a group yet, us three. The rest of our classmates have formed a small group of at least two people. It's safer to form a group of two, if possible."

"You and Koenji are the only ones left in the class. That means there's no way to form a group anymore."

"That's only in our class."

"Are there any girls left who haven't formed a group?"

"Ah, there's one person I can think of."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Ibuki from Class 2-B. Didn't you check the OAA?"

"Well, last I checked I did notice that she was alone."

"Ishizaki is worried because Ibuki doesn't have anyone to group up with. How about grouping up with her for the special exam, Horikita?"

"Me and Ibuki?"

"If it's two girls, you can merge with any other small group later. Why don't we just hear them out?"

"That's true, having some kind of insurance would be better... All right, I'll hear her out."

Maybe she just couldn't ignore this, and so, promised to meet with Ibuki.

I contacted Ishizaki and asked him to meet me during the lunch break.

### **Part 3**

During the lunch break, I took Horikita to where I was supposed to meet Ishizaki.

“Hey, Ayanokouji! Over here!”

Ishizaki was practically hopping as he arrived, and when he saw me from afar he waved his hand.

Next to him was Ibuki, who was staring at me with her arm folded in displeasure.

“Did she agree to this?”

“From the look on her face, I’m not sure.”

Looks like she was in a bad mood after hearing the plans of forming a group.

I guess Ishizaki brought her here without explaining the situation in much detail.

“Hurry up and come over!”

Ishizaki exuded the enthusiasm of a bunny.

“You seem to be close friends.”

Horikita was slightly creeped out by Ishizaki’s attitude.

“He’s a nice guy.”

“Even so, I wouldn’t get too close to him.”

He was similar to Sudou in terms of enthusiasm, but Ishizaki was different in his own way.

“What’s going on? Why are Ayanokouji and Horikita here?”

Ah, so she wasn’t told beforehand.

Horikita and I looked at each other. It wasn’t smart to let Ishizaki do the talking here.

“Actually, there’s something we wanted to discuss, so I asked Ishizaki to call you, Ibuki.”

I had no choice, so I started to explain on the spot.

“And?”

"I heard that in the next special exam, you're going to go compete by yourself?"

"That's my choice."

She replied curtly, as if there was no room for discussion.

"I've told you a few times, that it's better to group up."

"I don't need it."

"Well, you say that but the fact is there's no one who wants to team up with you."

Ishizaki just had to say something. Was he trying to help her or get in her way?

I turned to him, and remained silent.

"Huh? What's wrong, Ayanokouji?"

But... Ishizaki didn't understand my intentions, and questioned me instead.

"It's nothing. By the way, Horikita here is the same as Ibuki, she hasn't teamed up with anyone yet."

"So?"

"Next exam, if you don't form a group, you'll be at a disadvantage. Even if it's not three people, if at least the two of you form a group, then even in the worst case scenario, if one of you gets eliminated, you'll be able to continue."

She should now understand what I meant.

"And there's not much time left before the deadline."

"Don't tell me you want me to group up with Horikita?"

"Well, that's about right."

"Ha? Who are you to say that about me?"

"Apart from your physical ability... You're not much good at anything else."

"Hey, you too, don't say whatever you want."

Ibuki impetuously drew close.

Then she stared at Ishizaki, who was standing behind her with an absent-minded look on his face.

“You too, you want me to group up with Horikita to help them out, don’t you?”

“I didn’t know it would be Horikita, but wouldn’t it be great if you formed a group?”

“I already hate this guy a lot, but my hatred for Horikita is even higher than that.”

‘This guy’, I think she was referring to me. That was polite. Using her finger to directly point at the person in front of her.

“Ayanokouji, she doesn’t seem to like you very much.”

“I didn’t even realize it. Although, she seems to hate you even more than me.”

“I’m honored.”

Ibuki seemed stung by Horikita and I whispering to each other, and didn’t bother hiding her displeasure.

“I don’t know if Horikita asked you or whatever the reason, but there’s no way I’m going to team up with that girl.”

It seemed like she really had a grudge against Horikita.

She stubbornly refused to listen to what I had to say.

“Ah, but I don’t remember saying I wanted to be in a group with you.”

Observing Ibuki’s attitude, Horikita attempted to provoke her.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“Looks like you’ve got things mixed up. You’ve been left behind because nobody wanted to be with you, and I didn’t group up with anyone because I wanted to fight alone. Although we’re both lone wolves, our situations are not the same.”







Horikita replied, almost astonished. However, it lit a fire in Ibuki, and she said:

“I’m also on my own because I want to be. Anyway, you say you want to go it alone, that’s perfect. It’s a challenge, Horikita!”

She shifted her gaze from me to Horikita.

“Can I ask you something? Why do you want to fight me? It’s true that we competed at the uninhabited island exam and during the sports festival, but that wasn’t anything special right?”

“You’re the only one who thinks that.”

As far as I know, Ibuki beat Horikita in their fight on the uninhabited island, but Horikita won in the 100 meter race at the sports festival.

One win, one loss. Though it’s hard to say that they were at their best. Horikita had a high fever during the uninhabited island exam, so that was a big disadvantage for her while during the sports festival Ibuki was so fixated on Horikita that she lost her pace in the sports festival. In other words, there was no way to determine who was better.

Even on the rooftop, after I beat both Ryuen and Ibuki, she still challenged me again later on.

In short, she’s the kind of person who can’t accept anything until she knows for sure who was the stronger one.

This time, she wanted to compete against Horikita in the uninhabited island exam through survival.

If you think about it that way, there was no way that Ibuki and Horikita would be able to work together.

“It seems like this was a waste of time.”

“Wait. Do you accept? Or no?”

“I am going in alone, but I’m not choosing to work alone throughout. When the special exams start, I’ll merge with another group if necessary.”

If it had been a one-on-one match it would be possible to decide the winner, but now it wouldn’t be a fair fight.

“Lame!”

“Lameness Isn’t a reason to change the way I take the test.”

Letting Ibuki know that she was wasting her energy, Horikita rebuffed her.

“If you insist on fighting alone, then even if I form a group, try not to lose. If you win, then I’ll recognise you a bit.”

“...Not better.”

Looks like negotiations seem to have broken down as it was impossible for Horikita and Ibuki to team up.

However, provoking her until the end would definitely have strengthened Ibuki’s resolve to fight on her own. I softly apologized to Ishizaki, and then went back to the classroom with Horikita.

“You knew from the start that Ibuki wouldn’t be able to accept it, right? You’re too kind.”

“I wanted to provoke her into doing something reckless in order to disqualify her.”

Horikita wasn’t being honest with herself, but this kind of answer felt very much like her.

## Epilogue

### Calm Before The Storm

#### Intro

The end of the first semester had come much sooner than I had anticipated.

We had to move on to our next objective as soon as possible.

It's been a year since we last left school and headed for the port, where we boarded a large passenger ship to some unknown deserted island. This time not even a moment of respite was given, and tomorrow morning, the special exams would be announced to start. The students, who were told to gather in the classroom for a brief explanation, went to their classes, waiting for their homeroom teacher to show up. Meanwhile, there was a brief checklist on the screen with reminders like, "Is there anything you have forgotten?"

You were allowed to bring a change of underwear for up to a week, which was necessary to maintain hygiene. Cell phones were required, but they'd probably be confiscated at the start of the exam. Even if you were allowed to bring one, there wouldn't be a signal on the island, so it'd just be extra baggage. They were probably there for paying your penalty or buying items on the ship.

While waiting for the sound of the bell to signify the start, Keisei, who seemed to be once again checking to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, came to my seat with a grim expression on his face.

"Honestly, surviving on an uninhabited island isn't something very good at. You might as well ask me to catch a cloud."

"It's no wonder, given it's so far from the norm."

"But it's even harder on the girls, so I can't really complain."

Unlike boys, there are some predicaments unique to girls, so this kind of exam would be even more difficult for them.

Of course, the school had done their best to take it into account but that didn't make the hard part of the exam any easier.

"Although we're competing in different groups, I still want to do what I can to help out."

Although it was a special exam he wasn't comfortable with, Keisei was determined to do everything he could to protect his comrades.

"Yeah. There should be some way we can cooperate, so I'll lend a hand when the time comes."

I promised to help them as much as I could.

"But, are you alright going alone? If you get sick, it's over. If by any chance you receive the penalty, you'd have to pay 6 million points... It'd all be over in an instant."

"My perfect attendance record at least until now is one of the few things that I'm proud of."

“You’re starting to sound a bit sarcastic lately, you know?”

Keisei, who was laughing, returned to his seat. Shortly after, the bell rang to announce a new battle, and the 39 members of Class 2-D took their seats.

As she entered the classroom, Chabashira’s natural expression turned serious, and the atmosphere grew heavy.

“It’s the start of summer vacation today, but you guys look like you’re having a tough time. Well, I suppose that can’t be helped.”

Chabashira activated the screen and her tablet.

“Then we’ll start with the final check. If you’re not feeling well now, you have to report it.”

Confirmation of personal belongings and physical condition. After that, the schedule and necessary items were displayed again. Fortunately, there were no sick students in Class 2-D, so everything went by smoothly. Koeunji was obedient, which was to be expected of a student who chose to fight alone instead of in a group.

“No problems, that’s great.”

Chabashira turned off the monitor a few minutes later, after confirming all the necessary things before leaving for the exam.

Then, to get everyone’s attention, she gently tapped her hand once on the lectern.

“This is not your first time taking a special exam. You have been fighting in this school for more than a year, and have overcome all manner of hardships. Nonetheless, this special exam will not be easy to pass.”

It was advice from Chabashira, or you could say it was a sort of warning.

The teacher’s advice to our Class 2-D is that we should never get complacent.

“It’s inevitable that this exam will be harder than anything else you’ve faced before.”

Chabashira intently looked at the students, as if she were trying to imprint each student’s face onto her mind.

“I’ve only got one wish for all of you. If you can, don’t let a single one of your classmates disappear, and return to this classroom once again.”

Chabashira hoped that this exam wouldn’t be a one way ticket for us.

“We’ll gather in the court in 10 minutes for a roll call. Remember to go to the bathroom first, if you need to.”

Since we didn’t have much time, the students left in a hurry.

When Akito and the group gathered around my seat near the entrance, I stood up with my luggage.

Almost at the same time, Kouenji stood up and spoke to one of the students instead of the hallway.

“Can I talk to you for a minute, okay? Horikita girl.”

It was a rare behavior that attracted not only mine, but also the attention of the students who remained in the classroom.

“It’s rare for you to come to talk to me of your own volition.”

It seems Horikita felt the same.

“There’s something I’d like to talk about regarding the special exam that’s about to begin.”

“Oh my, you finally feel like helping us, right?”

“Let’s just say that you’re half right.”

Horikita looked suspicious upon hearing Kouenji’s unexpected words.

I knew very well that Kouenji wasn’t the type to help others that easily.

“What’s your objective? Can you tell me the other half of what you mean to say?”

“The class points for the top three groups. You have an EXTREME DESIRE for them, right?”

“Of course. Depending on how many points we can get, the order of the classes could change by a great magnitude.”

“Then let me make a suggestion, alright? If I get a good result on the uninhabited island exam, I want you to promise me full FREEDOM.”

The class went silent for a moment, due to Kouenji’s inconceivable statement.

Although it had a condition, he expressed his intention to seriously participate in the special exam.

“Promise you full freedom... That’s an unexpected proposal. Allowing you to continue and do as you please, as you did before, right?”

“Exactement! Not only should I be allowed that, but you should also work hard to remove every obstacle in my way like a dray horse, you know?”

So he’s saying, for example, like last year’s Class Vote, if a special exam was held in the future to expel students not needed in the class, she’d have to protect Kouenji unconditionally.

“That’s not something I can easily agree to. Everyone else in the class probably feels the same” If you were in this class, helping out was the minimum obligation..

It wouldn’t be easy to obtain permission to simply watch on like a spectator.

“Consider it to be an advance payment before graduation.”

He’d make a contribution to the class for the next special exam, and from there on he’d do whatever he wanted, this was the sort of deal he wanted.

“Looks like you too can feel the crisis looming over your head. Your classmates won’t just forgive your carefree speech and antics forever. If a special exam like the class vote is held again, you’d be made into their scapegoat.”

Even for the weirdo Kouenji, avoiding a crisis would be difficult depending upon the exam’s contents.

“There’s no need for such drastic proposals. Can’t you just be like everyone else?”

Naturally, Horikita kicked away and rejected Kouenji’s proposal.

But even if she rejected it now, Kouenji wouldn’t have helped us in the future special exams anyway.

If he does, it’d only be when he was cornered.

If that was the case right now, getting him to give his all only on this exam was certainly an option, but...

“Sorry Kouenji-kun, I put too much value on your talent to let you do “just alright” on this exam and be a spectator later on. It just doesn’t sit right with me.”

After taking various factors into account, Horikita came to this decision.

“I see. In other words, negotiations have broken down, right?”

“—Not exactly. If I can add some conditions to it, it'd be an acceptable proposal.”

Although she might have rejected it, Horikita seemed to have other ideas.

“A vague answer like getting a good result won't do. The school has prepared a reward for the group that finishes in 1st place in this exam. If you get first place on your own, that might be reason enough for us to consider this an advance payment till graduation.”

If Kouenji, who wasn't in a group with anyone, won alone, he'd receive 300 class points. It was probably enough to pay for the total contribution he would have been expected to make before graduation. Nonetheless, taking 1st place among over 100 groups wouldn't be easy, even for Kouenji.

“I see, I see. Certainly, you seem like you will be satisfied if I get 1st place by myself, riiight?”  
Kouenji laughed loudly at this good deal.

“No problem, let's consider this a done deal!”

“No, that's not enough.”

Kouenji made a gesture as if he was going to accept this ridiculous proposal, but Horikita immediately added that it wasn't enough yet.

“I haven't finished telling you my conditions yet. I'll have to work with you because of your big talk, but if we don't get first place in the end, it's a problem for us too.”

“In other words?”

“If you don't get first place, then you will have to help the class in the future, such as the next special exam, and get results. You have to make this promise to me.”

At this moment, I could clearly hear Keisei's breathing next to me, as he watched the entire spectacle unfold. You could call this a beautifully added condition. If by any chance Kouenji came in first place, it would be fine. Even if he didn't come in first, he'd have to contribute to the next special exam as an additional condition. No matter what happened, Class D had nothing to lose.

Now it was up to Kouenji to decide if he'd accept the additional condition...

“I see that you've given a confident ORDER, Horikita girl.”

“If you agree to the aforementioned conditions, I'll accept your proposal.”

“Then it's a deal. Horikita girl, please don't forget the conditions I mentioned.”

Even if there was an additional condition, Kouenji expressed that he wouldn't refuse them.

"Do you really plan to win first place by yourself?"

"After all, there is nothing I can't dooooo."

Even though Horikita had such an insane condition, Kouenji confidently accepted it, which surprised her.

"Then, since we've finished talking. I'll be taking my leave."

Kouenji seemed to be satisfied with the agreement reached in the negotiation and left the classroom.

No one spoke to Kouenji, and only watched him leave.

"I have no idea how serious Kouenji will get this time..."

"Well, that's true."

"But this is a rare opportunity. I have managed to get him to promise us his future commitment in the end."

Although I honestly didn't think you could trust him, this was an unprecedented development.

In order for him to live a carefree school life, Kouenji needed corresponding backup. If he continued to do whatever he wanted like before, he would fall down in priority of the students that should be protected. Even if he didn't say anything this time, he'd be forced to take countermeasures at some point down the line.

However, if Horikita, the leader of Class D, acknowledged his plan, it would be a different story.

"If he actually could get a rank in the top spots, it would be great, we could surpass the other classes like that."

Horikita said, turning her attention to me.

"We come in first, and Kouenji comes in 2nd or 3rd. If we can do that, our class will gain a huge advantage, and we'll be able to redeem ourselves after falling behind up to now."

If you did some simple calculations, if Class 2-D gained 400, or 500 Class Points, the total Class Points we have would reach 700-800 in total, and that would be enough to take us to Class B in one go.

And on top of that, Kouenji would have to leave his mark in the next special exam as well...



“Well, there’s one part that I’m uncomfortable with. I can never anticipate what Kouenji is going to do.”

Whether it be academic or physical ability, if you talk about whether he is fulfilling his true potential or not, he probably isn’t. The only thing that’s certain is that he’s extraordinarily talented.

“That’s true, but to easily take the top spot is a completely different matter altogether.”

The fierce competitors and representatives of the other classes, Sakayanagi, Ichinose, and Ryuen, were also aiming for that very same goal.

Of course, that wasn’t all. From what I’ve gathered till now, there was the up and coming group of the first years consisting of Housen and Amasawa. Then there were the elites of the 3rd year—Nagumo, Kiriya, and Kiyuu. All of whom were aiming for first place.

Although I haven’t actually said it aloud till now, I’m going in this exam with the goal of getting a high spot for myself.

Who was going to make their throne on top of the hill in 2 weeks time?

And who would be leaving the school?

Our long summer was about to begin.

## **Part 1**

“We’re in late July already. It’s certainly getting hotter, right?”

Tsukishiro mumbled as he looked down at the numerous large busses entering the school.

“Yes, you are right.”

A first year student replied back without any emotions behind those words.

Tsukishiro didn’t face them and continued talking.

“Please, are you done with your analysis yet? Prolonging it anymore won’t help you.”

“You’re saying I should— expel Ayanokouji Kiyotaka?”

“Is that too much for you?”

"It's confirmed that he isn't an easy opponent to beat. No, it's something we've known from the very beginning."

"I'll cooperate as much as I can. That being said, I can't possibly provide any more support than this."

Hearing this, the student remembered how Tsukishiro was pressuring them forward with this plan.

"You mean you've been forced to be unreasonable?"

"Yes. I've been quite unreasonable with pressuring for an increase in the budget for this special exam. More importantly, I've also been forced to silence the school authorities about the strict rules I placed for the exam, after all."

"So it will be difficult to continue as the temporary chairman?"

"Probably. The allegations against Chairman Sakayanagi should have cleared by now. I can see my role here ending soon. That's why I've prepared some splendid fireworks for the end. I want you to expel Ayanokouji Kiyotaka by any means necessary, is that clear?"

"—Yes. I won't hesitate anymore."

"That's good to hear. In that case, you're free to go berserk during this...special exam. Once everything is taken care of, you will also return to your previous life. We will both return to the 'place' we are supposed to be."

A girl's left hand was tightly clenched upon hearing this as if it were brimming with natural power. Tsukishiro gently smiled upon seeing that from his side view.

"I'm expecting great things from you— Nanase Tsubasa-san."



## Short Stories

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## Afterword

Dear readers, first of all, I would like to apologize for the delayed release. Because of the current circumstances, people can't go out much, and that has led to my daughter's kindergarten being closed. In addition to that, my wife's long term health isn't good, and our second child was recently born. All these things coincided with each other, so I gave priority to supporting my family rather than writing.

Thanks to everyone's collective efforts, everything's started to calm down, and so the time I spent writing gradually increased.

Then I realized once again that because I was in the midst of this remarkable period of time, I could not forget the many people who look forward to my work as their source of entertainment. I will definitely find a way to fill the hole left by the delay in the release of the 2nd volume. For now, please wait for a bit.

Thus and so, I'm Kinugasa Shougo. Is everyone still full of energy? I'm ravaged right now.

Because of the stuff that has happened, I'm tired, and I have accumulated a great deal of dissatisfaction.

In the past, when I had time to spare, my heart got frustrated with my work with the pen, but this time, I experienced the opposite. I cried out from the bottom of my heart, "Please let me write!" Once again, I realize that being able to work when I didn't have time should really be appreciated.

While the world is in chaos at the moment, there are some small blessings as well. For example, as the days of not going out continue, many restaurants have started selling bento boxes. When business is back to normal, I'd like to visit a few restaurants that prepare good food.

On a side note, the 2nd volume of the 2nd year on sale now is a prelude, and the 3rd volume is a continuation of that. I basically write one special exam per volume, but this isn't the case this time.

Each year's groups are fighting seriously to achieve victory, that alone would make the book much longer. This volume, more than any other, feels like there's "more to come", and in that sense, I want to get the next volume to you as soon as possible.

I'd like to publish 2 more this year. Will I be able to do it or not...

Please keep an eye on this kind of information from time to time.

Don't expect too much of me, yeah?