

WELCOME TO THE
CLASSROOM
OF THE **ELITE**

2

衣笠彰梧
KINUGASA SYOUGO
トモセ ユンサク
TOMOSEHUNSAKU

2nd
YEAR
ARC



ZEROBOOKS



TRANSLATIONS



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ようこそ**実力至上主義の教室へ** **2**年生編 衣笠彰梧 × トモセシユンサク

Welcome to the Classroom of the Second-year

石崎大地

龍園を慕う、2年Bクラスの荒くれもの。自ら目の当たりはし、以来、綾小路の強さを信頼している。

小宮叶音

2年Bクラスでバスケット部所属。かつて暴力事件をでっちあげ須藤を嵌めようとしたことも。

西野武子

2年Bクラスの女子生徒。龍園に対し反発するなど胆の座った一面がある。







「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」

「O A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。テシるだろう？」

全く褒めていないのに、鬼龍院は不敵に笑う。



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Welcome to the Classroom of the Second-year

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— PROLOGUE —

Monologue of the White Room Student

The Advanced Nurturing High School. Inside the first-year classroom of a particular school building.

Even so, the lessons conducted here involve laughably low-grade material. Students of the same age struggle with problems that I just can't find to stifle a yawn at. I formed an amusing illusion of being the sole adult among a herd of children.

While wasting my time at this meaningless place, I constantly think of a person that sends shivers down my spine. This feeling stems from the "hatred" that erupts from the depths of my heart, reminding me of the time I used to be around that person, in *that* place. I tighten the grip of my right hand, which held a pen.

Kiyotaka Ayanokouji.

When I try to recall the first time where I heard that name, it was difficult to remember the exact date. However, there's no doubt that it had been engraved in my memory for as long as I can remember.

Not one person from the White Room wouldn't know of that name. Why is that so?

Because he was better than everyone else. Because no one with

a right mind would cross paths with that 4th generation student Kiyotaka Ayanokouji.

And as a result, Kiyotaka Ayanokouji would become the perfect example for anything. He was the only student who had such an impact on the White Room.

I wonder, were those of us one generation below him affected the most? That guy always did well even in the toughest of curriculums, and it stays true here.

He continued to achieve outstanding results in his next year. He continued to prove that he is a superior genius above anyone else.

I myself had been above my peers. Among the 5th generation students, I was the best—continually churning out results that bested everyone else.

However, ... I was never praised for being a genius. The reason for this is beyond logical explanation. Those relentless words that come out of the instructors' mouths are all the same:

“Kiyotaka Ayanokouji was much more amazing than you a year ago.”

No matter how hard I try, or how good I am, I couldn't begin to compare.

They just forced me to catch up with that god-like being, which was borderline impossible. Some even started to “worship” Kiyotaka Ayanokouji, as if he were some sort of deity.

It's such a pity. These people, who have been educated to be the best of the best, have abandoned their hopes of being number one. Those were the ones who couldn't survive until the end of the White Room, and eventually fell flat on their noses, unable to get the last laugh.

But I wasn't weak. I didn't worship that person, as there was just no way such a human as Kiyotaka Ayanokouji exists; doubts started to form inside me, thinking he was merely a fictional

character created to inspire us to do better.

One day, an instructor took me into a tour room used by outsiders. Even though it was through a glass panel, I've confirmed the existence of Kiyotaka Ayanokouji for the first time with my very own eyes.

I had no idea what was to come—but the results he showed were beyond incredible. I could still remember the shiver that went down my spine without knowing it at that time.

Though, if you were to ask me if that shiver was because I felt like I've witnessed God, I would strongly deny it.

It wasn't right. The sight of God would've made me feel something else. I didn't want to "worship" him. No, it was different.

That feeling... it was "hatred." Yes—hatred was the feeling that made me tremble.

I was only able to succeed in surviving the White Room because of that hatred.

However, "worship" and "hatred"—those are just personal thoughts and emotions. For the organizers of the White Room, the students are secondary.

The White Room was set up with the ultimate goal to educate and mass-produce extraordinary people. That's what the White Room is all about.

Whether it's me or Kiyotaka Ayanokouji, as long as that person's successful, it doesn't matter.

That's why—failures like me are completely worthless.

In conclusion, if Kiyotaka Ayanokouji is chosen as the model of success, then the purpose of learning would be lost.

A failure, who is worthless, will only end up as useless in the end—no different from those who dropped out.

I don't want to admit that. No matter what kind of measures are

needed to be taken, I must prove that “Kiyotaka Ayanokouji” is not the best. I must make the White Room organizers acknowledge that blood, sweat and tears is the true evidence to success.

Just then, the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity suddenly came.

Thanks to Kiyotaka Ayanokouji breaking his orders and not returning to the reopening White Room, I had the opportunity to come into contact with Kiyotaka Ayanokouji, whom I had never met before.

Oh my *God*.

There it was—the once-in-a-lifetime chance to bury that face once and for all. For that purpose, it would be better to throw common sense out of the window. I’ll use whatever means in my disposal to achieve success.

In other words, even if it kills me—even if it gets *bloody*—there is only one solution to beating that person who I scorn most above all.

— CHAPTER ONE —

The Changing School Life

Present. That day, class 2-D was experiencing a strange situation that has never happened before.

Teruhiko Yukimura looked at the entrance to the classroom repeatedly, his right foot shaking as impatience slowly consumed him.

“Will you calm down? It’s been less than five minutes since Kiyopon went out. He was called by the teacher, remember? I think it will take a while,” said Haruka Hasebe, a classmate and a close friend of Yukimura.

Airi Sakura and Akito Miyake are also present, accompanying Yukimura just as Hasebe has.

“I’m calm... Don’t worry.”

Yukimura answered in a restless hurry, his pants sliding against each other as his feet-tapping became more and more fervent.

As soon as school was over, he had tried to talk to Ayanokouji but was pushed aside by the presence of Horikita. After that, Horikita had informed him that Ayanokouji was called by Chabashira-sensei, and now he waited for Ayanokouji’s return in the classroom.

Sighing as if she’d given up, Hasebe gazed out the window.

Since she knows that Yukimura isn't usually the type to listen, she quickly realized that there was no point in convincing him to calm down any further.

The classroom of class D had a heavy atmosphere.

Hasebe thought that the sky in May, in which spring has arrived, is really clear. Contradictorily, she wonders why her class is in such a situation.

A special exam was held in April, in which first-years and second-years had to partner up with each other. Kiyotaka Ayanokouji, a friend of Hasebe's, had somehow gotten a perfect score in Mathematics, out of the five subjects in the test.

If it were a regular exam, then it wouldn't be unusual to see a student getting a perfect score. Students who regularly achieve those, such as Yukimura, are usually highly academic.

Of course, sometimes, a unique external force gets a perfect score. It could be the result of studying hard, or merely a nice coincidence that the scope of the exam had been narrowed down to their revised topics.

However, the anomaly this time seems to differ quite a bit from past surprise candidates.

Of course, Hasebe also noticed the miracle, though not as clearly as Yukimura. The only perfect score to appear in this exam—regardless of the special exam or subject—was Ayanokouji.

It couldn't be possible that he achieved that through rigorous studying and a bit of luck.

It's only been six minutes. As a friend, Hasebe couldn't just ignore the problem and leave Yukimura in that restless state, so she thought about bringing up a completely different topic, but she couldn't shake off that feeling of unease either.

The main reason was that she thought this would distract

Yukimura, even by a little, but Hasebe herself wanted to know what was so great about the perfect score Ayanokouji got in the special exam to the point of rousing Yukimura up so much.

“Was it actually that hard of a problem?”

When Hasebe asked her question, Yukimura didn’t hesitate to answer.

“It’s not just difficult. During the test, I didn’t understand the meaning of that problem at all. After the test was over, I tried to analyse the question as far as I could remember, but that one problem is far outside the scope of what we’re supposed to learn in high school. In other words, it’s a problem that’s supposed to be unsolvable.”

“It’s unreasonable that it was out of our education level’s range.”

“It certainly is unreasonable. That’s why the score of all my subjects dropped dramatically. However, there were a lot of low-difficulty problems as well, as Chabashira-sensei said, along with a bit of unexpectedly difficult problems thrown in. In other words, the test was adjusted to be impossible to obtain a perfect score, but not a low score either.”

“Because of the easy problems, no students dropped out. It was a great help to the class.”

Hasebe was more than happy about that, but for Yukimura, it was a trivial matter...

“Ayanokouji got a perfect score, which is supposed to be impossible. I think I’m witnessing magic at work here.”

Yukimura’s anger was shown from the fact that he called his friend by their surname, instead of their agreed-upon first-name.

“It’s amazing that Kiyotaka can solve such a problem.”

Sakura said with a wide smile, trying to change the heavy atmosphere surrounding the group. However, it seemed to have

been counterproductive, as Yukimura's expression stiffened.

"I've been at the top of the class in terms of academic ability for a year. On top of that, I'm surprised at the result since I thought no one could solve it."

A lot of classmates were now listening to Yukimura's remarks.

"I can see it on the tablet. Is there any other perfect score in this class? No. In fact, you can look further by checking the other classes. Try and look around the whole of the second-year students."

Yukimura pointed out his evidence, showing that not even Sakayanagi nor Ichinose obtained a perfect score in any subject. By manipulating his tablet, it was possible to check the results of the students in other classes as well.

"I didn't notice that. Why can you see the results of other classes?" Surprised, Shinohara took the tablet and looked at it strangely.

"Come on. Is it because the OAA was introduced? For whatever reason, I have no choice but to have all my test scores be disclosed publicly."

"Wow, that's the worst. My scores will be known by everyone now."

Kei Karuizawa, the leader of the girls in the class, screamed.

"Maybe Ayanokouji-kun was just a math genius? Sometimes, a hero might show up and solve a murder case in those drama shows or something, right?"

Yukimura was confused by Karuizawa's remark, in the sense that she couldn't read the atmosphere of the place, though different from Sakura's usual daze.

"If so, why is it that his past test scores weren't perfect as well? If he is able to solve the questions on this test, then why didn't he get a perfect score or something near that in prior tests?"

Yukimura replied sharply.

“Is that really even a question? He could’ve just studied really hard on spring break to achieve such a score.”

Karuizawa’s response, which was slightly out of topic, provoked Yukimura with a tinge of frustration.

“It’s not something that can be learned in such a short period of time. Even if he had some sort of super-efficient learning scheme, it wouldn’t be able to explain the fact that such a question, which is completely out of the scope of high school students, could be solved by him. You wouldn’t know that. Don’t dip your opinions into stuff you don’t know about.”

Karuizawa was irritated by Yukimura’s snide reply, her head slowly approaching the boiling point.

“Tch. How pitiful do you need to be to take your anger out on me?”

“Yeah, so you think taking it out on Karuizawa-san is funny, huh?”

Maezono came to Karuizawa’s aid. Now with a new ally behind her back, Karuizawa started to poke at Yukimura’s argument again.

“I’m not saying that I’m a genius or anything, but couldn’t it just be that Yukimura didn’t understand the question? Maybe the question wasn’t actually that hard, and you just weren’t able to solve it.”

Karuizawa said it herself, but she knew it sounded completely preposterous. However, she thinks that it is necessary to put on a front here, so that her attitude doesn’t shake.

Although the argument involved only Yukimura and Karuizawa, the surrounding students also started to get heat up. Doubts were rising as to the authenticity Ayanokouji’s perfect score in Math.

“Don’t you remember? Neither Sakayanagi nor Ichinose could

obtain a perfect score.”

“So what? Maybe he just coincidentally knew the solution to the question.”

“Didn’t I just say—”

By now, Yukimura had already surpassed his boiling point, to the point where he became speechless. To suppress his rage, he tried to organize his thoughts as he continued to speak.

“I mean... Like, he’s... Maybe he was just really good at math.”

“Uh-huh? So what’s the problem here? You’re just repeating what I said just now. Didn’t I say he might’ve been a math genius?”

“That’s not the point. If that’s the case, then—”

“Ah, sorry for interrupting you guys... I just had something in mind, but I don’t know if I should say it or not...”

The conversation took an unexpected turn with Minami Setsuya’s appearance.

“Ayanokouji getting a perfect score is certainly an anomaly, and I honestly think there’s nothing strange about Yukimura’s arguments. It’s just that we’re a bit too quick on our toes to assume he’s a math genius, right? After all, he’d never gotten high scores in any subject at all before, let alone perfect scores.”

That claim was to calm Yukimura down, but now doubts of a different direction started to form.

“That’s why I was wondering. Did Ayanokouji perchance use some sort of shady tactic?”

The idea of “Ayanokouji is a math genius” was widespread in the minds of the listening students, but a new conflicting opinion had come up.

“What if he didn’t achieve that using his own abilities?”

“It’s definitely possible. He could’ve seen the answers of the test beforehand. Remember that time back in our first year? There was a test that had the same problems as a previous one!”

Kanji Ike said aloud the moment he remembered it.

A year ago, one of their classmates somehow got their hands on some past question papers from a third-year student. The test was indeed difficult, but anyone could get a high score if they could memorize the answers to each problem.

“But, assuming that the questions were the same as those in the past, wouldn’t it be weird for him to not share it with us? It’s also weird that the other classes didn’t notice it as well.”

Listening to Ike’s statement, Miyamoto calmly pointed out a few holes as well.

“Then... it could’ve been a backdoor method, like knowing the answers to the questions in advance...? Cheating, perhaps?”

“Cheat? How would that be possible?”

Shinohara asked after hearing Ike’s statement.

“He could’ve hacked the school’s computers and stolen the answers from there, or something! Isn’t that possible?”

“That is too far-fetched...”

Yukimura’s head was throbbing with pain by now in the face of the mess, that is, his class. Yet, on a whim, it was because of this chaotic speculation that made time flow unknowingly quickly.

The heated discussion focused on the possibility that Ayanokouji didn’t use his own abilities to achieve such a score, using a different method to get it instead. Considering that he had never scored anything so high before, the conversation taking such a turn would be inevitable.

But the one to change the course of the discussion yet again was Ken Sudou, who before was silently following the conversation. Standing tall and ominous, he instantly captured the attention of the entire class.

“You seem to be quite giddy about it, but there’s no evidence leading towards Ayanokouji actually cheating. Don’t jump to

conclusions when the person in question isn't even here.”

His words were reasonable, but the fact that those words had come out of Sudou's mouth surprised everyone. Even Ike, who was close to Sudou, didn't find it funny.

“What do you mean, Ken? Don't tell me you're siding with Ayanokouji?”

“That's not what I mean. How could he have gotten the answer sheet so easily? I just thought that it's more likely he got a perfect score with his own abilities.”

The latter half of his argument wasn't as direct, but he still managed to express his opinion either way.

“If we're talking ability-wise, his academic evaluation on the OAA was lower than mine, right? There's just no way he could've gotten a perfect score without pulling off some shady methods!”

Miyamoto, who had checked the new OAA data after school, said as if he had made his mind up on the fact that Ayanokouji had in fact cheated.

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

“Isn't it just as Sudou-kun said? After all, Sudou-kun's academic ability surpassed Miyamoto-kun's.”

Kei's retort embarrassed Miyamoto.

One year ago, labelling Sudou as the worst student in the entire year wouldn't be an exaggeration. But now, after the OAA has been updated, his academic ability had suddenly climbed up to 54. It was merely one point above Miyamoto's 53, but the fact still remains.

“W-Well, that's because Sudou was studying really hard! I'll acknowledge his growth, but... in Ayanokouji's case, that would be too much growth! Too much!”

“There could be a possibility that he's holding back, just like Kouenji!”

With that final pivoting point from Karuizawa, the idea of Ayanokouji being a math genius resurfaced. It seems like the conversation had come full circle, and is heading towards an even worse direction.

“Wouldn’t that be even worse? Doesn’t that mean he hasn’t been contributing to the class when he clearly could’ve? All those class points we could’ve stolen, if not for him holding back!”

If he was really hiding his strength, then there wouldn’t have been a good reason to do so, as Ike said. Sudou and Ike were good friends, but this argument may just end up creating an internal strife between their circle.

However, a third-party approached right in time, sensing that this wouldn’t be good if it was dragged out any longer.

“Come on, guys, let’s all calm our heads a little. We won’t be going anywhere with this much heat in the discussion, will we?”

At the moment when the class’ atmosphere was at its worst, Yousuke Hirata stepped in and halted the arguing. Hirata, who usually takes the lead in unifying the class, kept his silence until the very last moment this time. He decided to wait until he was sure of what the class was considering before acting.

He spoke to Sudou first, gently as he went.

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

“Eh? Oh yeah! That’s right.”

Sudou turns to face Hirata, as if reality has suddenly been slammed into him.

“I know this speculation isn’t the best, but there are many uncertainties. I don’t think it’s a good idea to have this speculation interfere with your club activities. It may just be one tardy, but what are you going to say to your club instructor when you’re there?”

Hirata decided that reducing the number of people left in the class was of utmost priority.

With Sudou remembering that he had club activities to participate in, everyone gradually calmed down and came to their senses as well.

With the introduction of the OAA, the number of students who are concerned about their grades has increased dramatically, and Sudou is among them.

Sudou took his bag and darted for the door, but just before he exited, he took a peek at Horikita's back, who did not utter a single word amidst the tumultuous discussion, then left the classroom quietly.

Following that, other students who belong to clubs also followed in Sudou's wake, leaving one by one.

“I'll get going now. Sorry for not saying anything, Keisei.”

Miyake, a member of the Ayanokouji Group, needed to finish his preparations for the archery club, so he had no choice but to leave the classroom, which had a disturbing atmosphere.

Although the other students who did not have club activities tried to return home, more than half of them still remained in the classroom.

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We of class 2-D have just finished the first special examination of our second year in this school.

My left hand had been injured due to the problem involving Housen, but at least I succeeded in eliminating the risk of expulsion. The wound may take some time to heal, but it can't be helped.

After leaving the reception room under the guise of being seen

off by Tsukishiro, I sighed lightly as the door behind me closes.

With the closure of this exam, the daily lives of the carefree students are finally back. Such an idealistic situation is becoming less and less prominent as changes in this school start to take place.

In the first place, the overall environment of this school has begun to move away from everyday life. A strange evolution of the story in which the students can only do so much as to tilt their heads, such being called by the president to have a conversation.

Even though I thought so, I've given up on the pretext of reality where I become completely helpless. I was able to escape to this school, but I can't help but say that I'm stuck here now. The only way to be released from this cage is to drop out.

“Seems like your conversation is finished.”

“Very well so.”

Chabashira-sensei, who was waiting a little bit away from the reception room, stood there as usual. I was a little disappointed to see her, but I tried not to show it.

Director Tsukishiro is currently unaware of the situation right now. He is still oblivious to me working with the teachers of class 2-D and 2-A, Chabashira-sensei and Mashima-sensei respectively.

At the meantime, it would be nothing less than peculiar to have Chabashira-sensei waiting for me after being called by Tsukishiro. It would be normal to think that Chabashira-sensei was only here under the role of my homeroom teacher, but the possibility of Tsukishiro putting two and two together still stands.

That's why I desperately wanted to leave without being contacted by Chabashira-sensei here.

From the standpoint of an ordinary teacher-and-student relationship, it would be an unnatural act to remain and wait. Chabashira-sensei wouldn't have been here if the situation was less chaotic. She may have been influenced by the perfect score that I

got in Math, which revealed part of my true ability to my classmates.

I don't care if I stood out or not, but this is an incredibly sloppy act on Chabashira-sensei's part. However, if there is one point to defend here, it is her indifference towards the director's reputation.

That Tsukishiro is not ordinary whatsoever. Chabashira-sensei is well aware that my father is responsible for Tsukishiro's placement as the director of this school. She may not know the whole backstory, but she should understand that who we're facing isn't normal.

I'll have to leave this place as soon as possible, so I proceeded to walk swiftly.

"From today onwards, you're going to be a little celebrity."

Chabashira opened her mouth as she followed behind.

"I'm not particularly happy about it, but it was a necessary measure to be taken."

"Setting aside the situation involving students from other classes, what do you suppose you'll be saying to your classmates? You've been acting as a student who doesn't stand out this whole time. Naturally, if you obtain such a score in a test that difficult, you won't be easily let off the hook by your classmates. Have you thought about any countermeasures?"

As I begin to ponder my options, I remembered that I left my bag in the classroom, so I have no choice but to go there after this.

"There's really nothing I can do to stop this, is there? I suppose I'll start by heading to my classroom."

"That will be difficult. Prepare to be attacked by a barrage of oncoming questions."

"I know. Shall we part ways here? I think I'll attract even more attention walking alone with you."

As if saying "I know, I know," Chabashira-sensei walked away

and headed for the faculty office. She tried not to show it, but I can clearly sense that she was happy. It seems that Chabashira-sensei, the teacher most distant towards her students, may just be the one closest to them after all.

That poker face of hers wouldn't have been seen through by a normal student, but... it's amusing from my standpoint. There stands an advantage to gain by the fact that she is an easy person to handle, but currently, she's merely an obstacle.

I judged that it would be useless to devote my resources to Chabashira-sensei any further, so I decided to forget about her. Then, I took out my phone and tried to call Horikita, but it went unanswered. Same goes for the short message I sent her—she didn't read it at all.

“Can't help it, huh?”

Horikita would've been the perfect help for solving this problem, but it seems like she's ignoring my pleas.

Excuses ran through my head, from getting past year exam questions, to being a math Olympiad and all. A small explanation would suffice. I wanted to do it as lightly as possible, but it seems the only choice I have is to tackle this situation head-on.

As I walked on, the classroom of class 2-D became visible. I wonder, what would the classroom look like after witnessing me obtaining a perfect score in mathematics? As always, I hope that all of the students in my class have already gone home.

With such hopes, I reached my classroom, though all colours seem to fade when I saw the situation.

It took me about 30 minutes to get back here after being called by Tsukishiro. Usually, most students would've already left the school grounds. However, the classroom I'm facing is experiencing the opposite case.

Of course, those who had club activities weren't present, but a

large amount of students still remained. They're most likely here because of *that*, I thought. It was blatantly obvious from the blazing fires in everyone's eyes and the intensely heavy atmosphere.

Among the students, the figure of Horikita who did not answer my phone call was also present. Apparently, the situation is affecting Horikita more than I thought.

A student approached me as I entered, giving me no time to utter my sarcastic thanks to Horikita for being so helpful. That person turns out to be Keisei, one among my friends in the Ayanokouji Group.

In contrast to Chabashira-sensei, who had a joyful expression on her face, the expression of Keisei looked somewhat irritated.

“Ah, Keisei, sorry I couldn't talk to you before.”

Keisei wanted to talk to me above all things right after school ended. So, first things first, I apologized to him because of Horikita's appearance obstructing our conversation.

“It's fine. Do you have time now? I can't wait any longer for your answers.”

Haruka and Airi, who are also in the Ayanokouji Group, approached me as well, standing close by. Akito's probably not here because of the club activities I mentioned earlier.

Quite a few students listened earnestly to what was happening between us.

“You... What can you say about your 100 points in the math test? I went through the OAA and checked all the second-years, but neither Ichinose nor Sakayanagi got a perfect score. You're the only person to have such a score in our whole year.”

Normally, you wouldn't feel such animosity towards other people getting a good score in a test. But this test is different. The more qualified students would understand the extraordinariness of obtaining full marks in this test.

It seems that even the students who do not have the academic ability to understand such a feat got the gist of it from their surroundings too.

“About that—”

I stole a glance at Horikita, sitting at the front of the classroom, implying that I needed her aid.

“Yes, I think I’ll explain that.”

Horikita should’ve been on her way home by now, but she must’ve decided to stay after seeing the number of lingering students in the classroom. An accurate decision. In order to draw the eyes of all the students, she bothered to stand up and walk towards me.

“I’m asking Kiyotaka, not you.”

Keisei aggressively spat at Horikita’s presence as an outsider to the conversation.

“Yes, I’m aware of that, but Yukimura-kun, I believe I have the right to answer your question.”

“...What do you mean?”

All the attention was now focused on Horikita.

“How exactly did Ayanokouji get that perfect score, one that not even you nor I, nor the entire second-year student body could obtain? Don’t you feel that it’s strange?”

Horikita asked with sincerity, but the question was unanimous, to say the least.

“Agh... I’m honestly confused. I mentioned earlier that the last problem at the end of the test was unsolvable, right? Yet how did Kiyotaka solve it as if it was nothing? I just don’t understand.”

Immediately after the test finished, I remember some people in the class who were surprised. High-performing students, including Keisei and Yousuke, discussed the highly technical problems. It was also a topic that reached the Ayanokouji group, and I remember

that I wasn't answering if I could or couldn't solve it.

“Kiyotaka knew that the problem was unsolvable. Even so, Kiyotaka didn't reveal that he could solve it. Isn't it weird? That he knew the answer to a problem nobody else knows? I can't stop myself from thinking that, maybe... maybe he cheated?”

Horikita's expression became cloudy after hearing Keisei's remarks. The latter turned away in humiliation, but Horikita stopped him.

“It's not a reasonless doubt. If I was a student who didn't know anything better, I'm sure I would've accused Ayanokouji-kun of cheating like Yukimura-kun. However, the situation is different here.”

After taking a deep breath, Horikita briefly glanced at her classmates, who were paying close attention by now.

“I was planning to tell this to everyone at a later date when everyone's present, but to resolve this mystery of Ayanokouji's perfect math score, we'll have to go back to the beginning of last year's spring.”

It was last year's spring, just after we entered this school for the very first time.

“Our seats have changed by now, but back then Ayanokouji-kun and I were seated next to each other. It was by coincidence from talking to him that I found out he was really good at studying... even more so than me.”

“Kiyotaka is better than Horikita? Wait a minute. I remember seeing Kiyotaka's score being completely average. I'm not trying to sound bad here, but his OAA evaluation last year stood in the middle of the class, at a grade of C. What's the logic behind that?”

Horikita was not impressed by the deep plunge from Keisei, who likes to look back on the past and hold on to it tightly.

“Of course. My strategy was already set in motion after the first

test ended.”

As she was saying so, Horikita walked away from me and headed for the teacher’s podium at the front of the class. Perhaps it was to divert the attention from me.

I was supposed to only get a helping hand, but Horikita showed much more aid than I’d imagined.

“He had the ability to get a perfect score in mathematics from the very beginning. I knew it earlier than everyone else, so I came up with a little strategy.”

“...A little strategy?”

To be honest, Keisei might not just have one question in mind. He could be wondering how I acquired that much knowledge. But for the time being, Horikita kept talking about something else to dispel those thoughts.

She focused on how she hid my abilities, slowly turning away the thought of how I even achieved such heights in the first place.

“In the April of last year, the students of class D were fooled by the large amount of money that was transferred to us. I’m ashamed to say that I was among them. So, to test my doubts about this school, I asked Ayanokouji-kun to do something.

“I asked him to keep his test scores to a certain degree. To manipulate his score to the point of reaching an academic ability of grade C.”

My academic ability has never been noticeable since. Horikita explained that my seemingly average scores were due to a strategy that she had created without faltering.

Of course, some people may find it strange if they look back a year ago. At that time, Horikita didn’t seem the type to get along with others, though she still noticed my high academic ability.

However, it was a long time ago for many—a memory stretching to a year ago. Even if it happened to be a memorable

event, the memory wouldn't be so vivid.

Few students can remember it like yesterday. It would've been a clear memory if such a thing had happened.

Of course, it's not easy for those with a strong sense of distrust to digest this information, such as Keisei. In order to not let Horikita escape, he pursued in asking around the holes in her story.

"I can't believe it... If you had any doubts about the school's structure, getting higher scores in exams from the beginning would've given the class a bigger advantage.

"If he can get such high scores easily, then it wouldn't be strange if his academic ability was evaluated at an A or A+. Even if it was from one person, our class points would've risen moderately."

Keisei is basically saying he doesn't understand the benefits of holding back.

"That would be true if I'm only chasing after class points. However, if he had used his full potential from the very beginning, what do you think would happen to Ayanokouji-kun now? What sort of future would be in store for him?"

In response to Keisei's distrustful feelings, Horkita challenged him with solid arguments without wavering. The words she uttered had no stagnations—no hesitation—as if they had been planned beforehand.

"What sort of future would be in store for him...?"

Horikita then began to explain the meaning of her argument.

"As you said, Yukimura-kun, assuming that Ayanokouji-kun has been using his full potential since April, I'm sure Sakayanagisan, Ichinose-san and Ryuuken-kun would've known his name in a month's time.

"At least for math, he'll be the best student in our year. If such an opponent is left alone, they will surely become a large obstacle for the other classes. It wouldn't be hard to imagine someone would

move to eliminate him by now.”

“So, you’re saying he could be targeted?”

“Yes. It’s a given in this school. For example’s sake, let’s use the class poll exam, a test to forcibly expel someone from school. In fact, Ayanokouji-kun was targeted by Sakayanagi-san in this exam.

“He was at risk of being expelled by her. It just so happened that he was used as a dummy—a scapegoat—for her actual plan, but the possibility of him getting expelled still stands.”

Horikita presumed that I may have been the one to drop out of school instead of Yamauchi, depending on the situation.

“No, that isn’t very probable. If he had been serious from the start, he wouldn’t even be used as a dummy. He wouldn’t be at risk of being dropped out if he was more proactive.”

“Who knows? Perhaps Yamauchi would’ve gotten the better treatment because he wouldn’t have been expelled, and Sakayanagi-san might’ve planned a more complicated and cautious strategy. That’s from my point of view, at least.”

Keisei couldn’t continue on with this argument because it was too improbable. The same thing would happen if another exam is used as an example.

“If that’s so, then why reveal it now? If he was pretending to be an average student, but then suddenly reveal his true potential, wouldn’t that draw the same amount of attention if he had gone all-out from the start?”

He was claiming that revealing my true abilities now and back then wouldn’t be any different. It’ll still draw attention regardless of the timing.

However, Horikita seems to have already assumed Keisei would ask this and planned beforehand, so no panic was evident in her.

“Not exactly. There is a big difference between showing his full

abilities from a year ago and showing it now. Unlike last year, the unity of class-D has taken a leap, and every one of us has grown somewhat. We're better at making decisions and protecting each other now."

If you look back at yourself from a year ago, you will definitely find change, whether it's for the better or the worse.

"And it's not just for Ayanokouji-kun. For example, yes... Sudou-kun would be an easy example. He was a closed-minded student at this very time a year ago and was considered to be the worst student aside from physical ability.

"He used to only be good at sports, but what about now? Combined with his high physical ability, his overall OAA evaluation as of May has even surpassed even yours, Yukimura-kun."

Keisei used to be above Sudou back in April, but the tides turned after this examination was over. The fact that the OAA's evaluations are so easy to comprehend made it the perfect arguing point.

"Yukimura-kun, let me ask you this: At the start of our first year here, did you or I have the will to save Sudou?"

The students back then didn't show much enthusiasm in protecting Sudou. However, if I were to fall into a predicament then, would Keisei still work with the whole class to devise a strategy in order to protect me?

"And look at the present: Even if someone tries to launch an attack at Ayanokouji-kun, we can cooperate and protect him. That's why I decided to finally reveal Ayanokouji-kun's true abilities, in order to start raising our class' overall performance."

Some students began to be convinced that this was the case. Even then, more than half of the listeners still had some doubts.

That's only natural. No matter what Horikita says, she can't

please everyone. Because this situation has went through quite a few phases prior, such as lies and breakdowns, those doubts won't clear so easily.

Of course, that doesn't mean we can't hold the high ground with an iron spear. With an extra boost, the direction of this story might change even further.

After noticing that most of the attention is directed towards Horikita, I took a glance at Yousuke. He was also facing the direction of where Horikita stood, but sometimes he pretended to look around. Then, out of some perfect coincidence, our gazes locked onto each other.

Like other classmates, there are many things that Yousuke cannot teach. If this was another student, then doubts and questions might've still formed when facing such a problem; but for Yousuke, this isn't a problem at all.

His only priority is to understand the situation organize the peace between his classmates. As the role of a leader, that's what he's supposed to do. Yousuke should be able to read the situation even without someone explaining it to him.

"I understand the motive behind your conservative strategy, Horikita-san, but only a little. I have a question: Is mathematics Ayanokouji's only strong suit?"

"I can't answer that right now."

Horikita calmly replied to Keisei.

"Another point: Even if Kiyotaka had or had not shown his true abilities, either way it still stands that he's hiding the full 'truth.' Other classes will think of him as a nuisance."

"That's—"

"I see. I fully understand what Horikita-san is implying here."

Behind Keisei, who was trying not to get heated, a new support has arrived in the form of Yousuke, who was silently watching this

situation unfold the whole time. He slowly walked beside Horikita.

“I didn’t join the conversation because I couldn’t understand it for a long time, but I finally get the picture now. Certainly, to someone outside of our class, they would want to creep around and try to gather as much information as possible.

“However, if our very own classmates don’t even know anything, then the information wouldn’t be leaked at all. In a sense, we’re intentionally playing dumb, so as to not reveal any unnecessary information.”

Yousuke filled in the gaps in the discussion, all the while supplementing it with useful analogies so it can be easily understood.

Horikita, who decided that Yousuke was on her side, nodded to keep the pace going.

“Yes. If you’re planning ahead for the future, then you should gather as much useful information as possible. To counter that, it would be best for our own cards to stay unknown. Even at this moment, there might be students eavesdropping outside the classroom. It’s not hard to imagine that in this school.”

Everyone’s line of sight was now suddenly directed at the corridor outside.

‘Is this person named Ayanokouji actually good at math?’

‘I wonder how dangerous this Ayanokouji is to our class...’

By intermingling her words with Yousuke’s remarks, Horikita’s story forms a sort of thick cloud to block away any of those eavesdropping students.

“Isn’t Horikita-sen really amazing? I’m a little impressed~”

At that, Karuizawa also joined in.

“Hey, Shinohara-san, don’t you think so too?”

Karuizawa turned to her friend, Shinohara, asking for her opinion. Her aim for doing this was to direct all the attention

towards Horikita and divert their focus away from my true abilities.

I didn't give her any signals or instructions to do so like Yousuke, but she seemed to understand the situation and executed her role as the leader of this class' girls perfectly.

"Yeah, that's right. It seems like Horikita-san has been talking to Ayanokouji-kun for a long time now. Her strategy was definitely made to look out for the whole class."

Horikita didn't have much contact with anyone else other than me when we first entered this school. That could also function as a plus in this area. I think this revelation gives Horikita's story a certain amount of credibility.

This is the exquisite power of Yousuke and Kei as leaders of the class: they can change the psychology of the whole class effectively and force it to move in whatever direction they desire.

"A strategy that hides one's true ability... Certainly, the other classes will be quite surprised to hear this one."

That's definitely not an exception to the amount of revelations happening so far.

"I don't exactly understand everything about this school, but I thought it would be a wise move to have a bit of insurance. Fortunately—and perhaps *unfortunately*—Ayanokouji-kun is not very good at communicating. I think he didn't want to stand out, so I decided that hiding his ability would be the best move."

Horikita said that it was a strategy planned from having our thoughts aligning. She told this to remove any extra suspicions of manipulating me.

"That's the story of Ayanokouji-kun's perfect math score. This is as much as I can say."

Horikita brilliantly survived to the end of this irreversible situation. The students may not form any doubts in their minds now.

“For the time being, I think it’s better to end the story here. We don’t know who’s listening to us, as Horikita-san said.”

Yousuke concluded the conversation by showing the disadvantages of continuing any further. The smarter student, the more questions they’ll have in their head; however, they’ll also see that dragging this on will only result in more problems in the future.

The proof for this was Keisei—who had been asking questions for a long time—now remaining silent. It can be said that the suspicions surrounding me was successfully dispelled to some extent in this discussion.

Moreover, Horikita’s aid went beyond my expectations—it made my options more flexible in the future. It’s great that I can now show more of my true abilities, and using Horikita’s groundwork, I can just say I’ve been hiding them this whole time. I’m incredibly grateful to her for doing this without any prior meetings.

2

The classroom was slowly cleared. Students scattered off late after school as the numbers thinned.

I would like to thank Horikita and Yousuke later. Perhaps Horikita was aware of this, as she stood up and left before anyone else. Yousuke also walked out while chatting with Kei and some other girls.

I also walked out into the corridor with my bag in hand, so as to not rouse up any more confusion by staying behind. That’s the end of the story... but nothing’s ever that simple.

It was sufficient enough for the class to understand the main

points, but this situation involves a personal issue. Someone may try to pry into the story further if I don't leave any time soon.

Several students immediately follow me as I left. Needless to say, it was one of the members of the Ayanokouji Group. Those footsteps approaching from behind are particularly powerful and loud. Even without looking back, I already knew it was Keisei with his frustrated stomps.

I pretended not to notice it and kept walking, but I was eventually called out.

“Kiyotaka.”

At the calling of my name, I slowly halted my steps.

When I turned and looked back, I saw the stiff expressions the three wore on their faces.

“Isn't it cruel to just leave and go home without speaking a word to us?”

Haruka, the backbone of our group, said with a strong tone.

The trio's formation, which consisted of Keisei in the front, with Haruka and Airi behind wearing worried expressions on their face.

The first to strike was Keisei. He looked furious, mouth opening before I could even take a breath.

“Why didn't you tell me this plan before? Even if it was to hide information, as Horikita-san said, why couldn't you at least tell us? Don't you trust us?”

While convinced of the story's content, Keisei still looked somewhat unsatisfied. That is only natural. In all seriousness, it was like trampling over all of Keisei's feelings, from those times he so kindly taught those lessons to me. The guilt only compounded further from those worried faces of Haruka and Airi, which understood everything.

It would've been easy if I were to push the responsibility onto Horikita. However, I just can't bring myself to do that. Not after

what she'd done for me.

No—is such a sentimental way of thinking necessary? I should be thinking about the future here.

Keisei certainly has high academic ability, but he isn't a blunt person either. He can read situations just as well as the next person. For that, if I don't face him directly, a heavy load will continue to burden his spirit. This could be fatal to our class' future.

“I *do* trust you—don't get me wrong—but I decided that keeping the information hidden would be best for the future. You know, I wanted to tell you this for a long time now—since we're friends—but I forced myself to hold on and keep silent. It wasn't easy.”

I'll tell them that it was a completely voluntary decision, without pushing any responsibilities to anyone. Although his anger was seeping out, Keisei had no choice but to abate his emotions when he heard my words.

“I completely understand your frustration, Keisei. You're the most respectable person in the group, even being kind enough to help all of us, including me, study. I'm sorry.”

No one would feel very good if the person they're teaching turns out to be better than them. Haruka and Airi would have had a similar feeling.

While listening to my apology on the sidelines, Haruka chose to keep her mouth shut. This is probably because Keisei decided that it was something he should think about and digest by himself.

“To be honest, I'm still angry. If you didn't need my lessons, then you could've said so from the start. You should've said those questions weren't much of a problem for you.”

“You're right.”

If I was honest from the start, there wouldn't have been a conflict happening between us. It was only natural that I wanted to

tell them from the beginning. I felt guilty for wasting Keisei's efforts.

“And according to Horikita, you're not going to be the same anymore, aren't you? If you can't even tell me what you're capable of, then I can't trust you anymore.”

Keisei continued to harbor doubts. What kind of knowledge do I know and don't know? As a teacher, it would be unpleasant to have such an eerie existence nearby.

“It would be a lie if I said I didn't want to leave this group.”

“Yukimuu, you're really saying that?”

Haruka, who has been silent before, opened her mouth with concern.

“Oh, it's true. Before listening to Horkita's explanation, I was already planning to leave the group, since I couldn't trust Kiyotaka anymore. However... my thoughts conflicted.

“I've been in this group for a long time. It's not like Kiyotaka is a bad person either. He was only doing so for the sake of the whole class, and it makes sense he wouldn't want to tell anyone about it. I can understand that he's not the best at communicating, too—he probably couldn't say it out loud.”

With both fists balled up tightly, Keisei answered truthfully.

“It's just that... You know... I need some time to organize my thoughts.”

His words were weighed with genuine sincerity, and he even sighed.

“It's not a hidden fact anymore. I just want to say that it's okay for you to hide your abilities. Unlike Kouenji, you aren't holding back the class. No—I don't have the right to complain, nor does anybody else. If I continue to blame you like this, it'll only get worse.”

Keisei may want to complain the most out of anyone, but he

chose to swallow that dissatisfaction and digest it as best as he can. It's for the better of the Ayanokouji Group, and for his classmates as well.

“Even though I couldn't suppress my emotions, I won't regret it. For the time being, I will acknowledge that your abilities are genuine. I'll still continue to teach... but you'll have to do that as well now. Is that alright?”

In these circumstances where friendly relationships are being resolved, I am grateful for such a suggestion to arise. There wasn't any reason for me to refuse, so I nodded with all honesty and responded:

“Thank you, Keisei.”

I genuinely wanted to convey my gratitude to him.

After witnessing our exchange, Airi mustered up her courage and spoke for the first time.

“W-What about... a reconciliation handshake, or something...?”

In response to Airi's suggestion, Haruka agreed with much enthusiasm.

“Nice! A reconciliation handshake!”

Keisei shook his head vigorously as to refuse such a suggestion. The heavy atmosphere around us quickly dispersed.

“N-No! That's embarrassing!”

Haruka quickly grabbed Keisei's right hand, who was outright refusing to perform such an act. She also grabbed my right hand at almost the same time.

“Come on, reconciliation!”

Saying so, she forcibly bounded both our hands together and forced us to shake. Since our hands weren't actually holding, it was more like we're having our hands touch each other's as it went up and down.

“I’ll keep forcing it until you do an actual handshake!”

“F-Fine!”

Perhaps Keisei thought that it’s more embarrassing to have our hands touching instead of actually shaking hands, so he yielded to Haruka’s will.

And by shaking hands with each other, our argument was settled.

“I’m fine with this, but Akito doesn’t know anything yet, right?”

“Everything’s settled now, apart from Miyatchi. I think he’ll accept Kiyopon as well, don’t you think?”

“...True.”

“Finally, we’re back to how we used to be. Feels like a load has been taken off our weight, huh?”

Airi agreed with Haruka with mere eye contact.

“Ah, maybe Kiyopon’s a celebrity now...”

As if she had remembered something important, Haruka stared at me silently with a startled look. We all waited for her to continue talking, but there was no sign of it anywhere.

“What’s wrong? Haruka-chan?”

Airi worriedly called out to Haruka, who was stiff and unmoving. Then, she began to move again, as if some magic had been sucked out of her body earlier.

“A-Ah—um... It’s—No, it’s nothing. A-Anyway, since you’re a celebrity now, it’ll be harder from now on.”

“Don’t you think your perfect score was overkill? The second highest score belongs to Sakayanagi, who scored 91 points.”

That sudden awareness of my overly high score made by Keisei gave me another worry.

“Sakayanagi-san got similar scores on all her subjects, right?”

Airi recalled the scores she saw.

91 points in mathematics for Sakayanagi. What’s more, all of

her other subjects had similar scores too. Considering the difficulty of this test, there's not doubt that Sakayanagi is smart.

Aside from me, she may just as well be the next strongest person in our school year. More importantly, she didn't grow up in a special environment like the White Room. She must've had superior genes to begin with, to be able to reach that level of genius without special training.

"I knew she was smart, but it seems that the OAA has proved her to be beyond my expectations."

Keisei willingly acknowledged Sakayanagi's potential with a tinge of regret. His scores are undoubtedly high, but Sakayanagi even surpasses his.

She may have held back a little, or started studying not long ago. Either way, it's safe to say that she'll be a troublesome opponent to defeat.

"To celebrate the reconciliation, why not go to Keyaki Mall with Miyatchi once his club activities are over?"

None of us refused Haruka's proposal.

3

In front of Keyaki Mall, where we decided to meet at 7 p.m.

I was a bit early and decided to quietly wait for my friends' arrival. As the person who caused all the commotion today, I decided not to let everyone wait for me and came early.

"Maybe this is *too* early?"

The time just barely passed 6:30 p.m.

Even so, waiting isn't a problem for me. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that patience is one of my special traits. By

waiting, I have the time to drift into my thoughts.

However, even if I was spiritually enlightened after my thirty minutes of waiting, the expense of wasted time is still annoying.

It would be strange to see me standing alone. The attention will soon be centered on me as the test results have been disclosed to all years except for third-years. The curiosity that this situation might spark in my juniors might continue for a while.

I stood there for a while, but was distracted when my phone buzzed. Taking it out, it seems that Airi from the Ayanokouji Group has reported that she is leaving the dormitories now. The other four people marked it as ‘read.’

“Ayanokouji-kun, are you meeting up with someone?”

I didn’t notice the presence(s) in front of me since I was looking down at my cell phone, but turns out it was Ichinose who called out at me.

Kanzaki, a classmate of Ichinose, was also there. Even though the mall’s grounds boast quite a vast site, the places that students actually use is extremely limited. It’s only natural to bump into a few acquaintances here and there.

“I’m having dinner with my friends later. What about you?”

It wasn’t something I needed to hide, so I answered truthfully.

“Ah, we’re doing something similar too, right, Kanzaki-kun?”

“Yes.”

Kanzaki’s answer was short. His line of sight was directed more towards Ichinose than me.

‘Something similar,’ she said. Could there be a reason she’s being vague?

“Speaking of which, I saw the test results. Your perfect score in mathematics was amazing! I couldn’t get a perfect score in any of the subjects.”

“As far as the OAA said last year, it didn’t seem like you had

the ability to get a perfect score.”

In contrast to Ichinose’s words, Kanzaki didn’t hide his discontent as he asked away.

“I have certain circumstances. I decided to hide my true ability in mathematics after consulting a classmate.”

Ichinose and Kanzaki understood to some extent just by my short explanation. My reasoning was arbitrarily short and straight-to-the-point, supplementing only the important points. That’s usually enough to convince someone, but Kanzaki’s eyes didn’t seem satisfied at all.

“So you were hiding your true abilities all along? It seems like you’re a more problematic person than I thought.”

“Kanzaki-kun, you shouldn’t say that! It’s only natural that each class has their own ideas and strategies.”

Kanzaki took Ichinose’s point and nodded.

“You’re right—it’s not like he’s using dirty tricks like Ryuen. But there are some things I don’t like. As Ichinose knows, it’s not easy to score fully with such hard problems on the test. And then he claims he’s following the orders of his classmate.”

Ichinose then sharply cuts him off.

“Ayanokouji-kun is not an enemy.”

Ichinose expressed a fair bit of dissatisfaction towards Kanzaki’s hostile attitude. It’s certainly unusual for Kanzaki to act like this, but if I were to choose who is correctly dealing with this situation right now, I’d pick Kanzaki’s cautious attitude.

“Our alliance from now on is dissolved. Class 2-D is unquestionably our enemy now.”

“That’s... but you don’t have to fight so unnecessarily!”

“I’m not fighting. However, it’s crucial for me to know my opponent’s true potential.”

“It’s true that Ayanokouji-kun hid the fact that he was good at

mathematics, but...”

Kanzaki took a step and approached me closely.

“What about the others? Is it only math? No, that’s not all of it. What other abilities are you hiding? Was it also an order for you to hide your speed back in last year’s sports festival? Class B... No, the worst thing for Class C is what other skills he’s hiding.”

“But there is a limit to test scores. No matter how good you are, you can only get up to 100 points per subject, and A+ is the highest evaluation you can get. I think the difference between Ayanokouji-kun’s score and Sakayanagi-san’s score, which is just below his, is relatively small.”

In fact, the point difference between me and Sakayanagi in mathematics is only 9 points. Even if such a difference occurs in all five subjects, the total difference would only amount to 45. Ichinose explains that it’s not a big threat.

“Class C still has a higher overall score. The points that Ayanokouji-kun has racked up will be evened out by the whole class.”

“It may be true that written tests have a cap limit, but...”

“Let’s stop this already, Kanzaki-kun. You know it’s something we shouldn’t be talking about in this place, right?”

Ichinose, who has always been a pacifist, fears that if he keeps on arguing in front of such a populated mall, it will no doubt create a fuss.

“Certainly, I seem to be losing my cool.”

Kanzaki decided that nothing will be gained by arguing in this place.

“I’ll go first.”

With those words, Kanzaki left Ichinose behind and quickly disappeared into the mall. We quietly watched his back as he went.

“I’m sorry. Kanzaki-kun doesn’t seem to like this situation.”

Class B has now fallen to Class C. It's no wonder that Kanzaki would want to use different methods now. In contrast, Ichinose still shows her kindness, even in such predicaments. It's safe to say that Kanzaki is starting to think kindness should be abandoned.

“Am I wrong...?”

Ichinose could not fully understand Kanzaki's motives. I can understand her since I'm trying to figure him out as well, but if we were to press ahead without knowing anything, it would be a difference of heaven and earth.

“Do you still remember what I've said before?”

“Yeah. I'll continue to push forward with my classmates.”

“There may be some students who want to start moving by themselves in the future, like Kanzaki. Or maybe, some students are unsatisfied with Ichinose, but they keep the dissatisfaction to themselves.

“Maybe someone will betray the class. It won't be strange for such situations to occur now. The class 1-B that was safely protected by Ichinose does not exist anymore.”

Those words are more distinct to Ichinose than any other student in class 2-C.

“I want you to continue to fight, giving priority to your friends and protecting them no matter what happens in the future.”

“Okay, I'll definitely protect my classmates. If the time comes where someone in my class is forced to disappear, I think I'll be the first to do so.”

Ichinose will surely sacrifice herself—it was not a bluff. Bearing the responsibility of the whole class and volunteering to drop out of school before anyone else is not an easy task.

“I'm relieved to hear your decision—but, I have one complaint.”

“Complaint...?”

Ichinose, who inclined her head a little, wonders what might that

be.

“I will never allow you to leave this school.”

Ichinose needs to remember the most important thing above all:

It is extremely important for Ichinose to continue forward this year without stopping.

I stared into Ichinose’s eyes, planting a fire that will burn by my will in her eyes.

Darkness will not consume her.

It will be a light that never fades.

If there is a possibility of that light moving in the wrong direction, I’ll be the one to guide it back on its track.

“Oh, y-yeah... definitely... I-I’ll... I’ll definitely remain here.”

As Ichinose looked up at me, she was somewhat embarrassed and her voice was muffled.

“Y-You’re really amazing, Ayanokouji-kun... To get a perfect score in such a difficult math test...”

Averting her gaze as if to change the topic, she said slowly.

“I may be a person whose only merit is maths.”

“But it’s still amazing, since you have more than one weapon that nobody else can beat.”

“So are you, Ichinose-san. You certainly have an unbeatable weapon as well.”

“I hope so...”

However, there is a problem bearing upon her weapon: there stands no one to control such a thing.

But that doesn’t mean she isn’t blessed with classmates surrounding her. Due to the disadvantages of her weapon, it’s Ichinose’s kindness that kills the individuality of her classmates.

“I should get going now. We’re standing out here, and above all, it won’t be good if I keep Kanzaki-kun waiting.”

I nodded lightly and saw off Ichinose, who by now has her back

turned towards me.

I figured it's about time someone sent a message, so I checked my cell phone again.

“What were you talking about with Ichinose-san?”

Haruka appeared from a distance and spoke to me. Around her, Akito, Keisei and Airi were all looking at me as well. Apparently, the other members have already arrived while I was talking with Ichinose.

“It was about my perfect score in mathematics.”

“No wonder. The more knowledge that person holds, the more interest other people will have.”

Immediately after my explanation—which should be concrete enough—Keisei was quickly convinced.

However, Haruka seems to feel a little different.

I didn't want to pursue that point deeper than necessary, so I immediately returned to my usual style.

Tomorrow will be the start of Golden Week, which is May 2nd. The students can spend their holidays in carefree manners, as they have successfully passed the special exam.

4

Golden Week passed in an instant, and school life has begun yet again. The scenery is the same as usual, but the days are starting to change little by little.

“Yo!”

It was Sudou who first met me near the shoebox storage of the school on the morning after the holidays. It was just a meeting with a fellow classmate, but I can't help but feel like this is part of the

changing everyday life.

“Looks like there were some problems the other day. You okay now?”

“I’m fine—I spend Golden Week without much change.”

“I see. But the holidays passed so quickly.”

With Sudou abreast, we headed for the classroom together. Sudou left for club activities the other day when Horikita explained my ‘circumstances,’ but it seems Ike and Hondou already told him everything.

“So it was Suzune’s strategy to hide your abilities.”

I nodded lightly to express my agreement, though Sudou merely thinned his lips and looked away from me, towards the front.

“You two have been on good terms ever since we entered this school. I can understand now.”

“We didn’t get along well. Rather, I think I was keeping my distance from her.”

“Is that so? I’m sorry, but it doesn’t look that way to me.”

Maybe Sudou is saying so because he sees Horikita through a filter called ‘opposite sex.’ If I were to point it out, he’s not going to listen to it anyway, so I didn’t comment on that.

“I heard from Yousuke. He said you were defending me.”

“Nah, I was just telling them the facts.”

“Fact or not, you didn’t know the truth then, though.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but I did it on my own volition.”

Sudou looked a little angry as the tips of his mouth sharpened.

“Seems like you were keeping your math genius status a secret, but is it also a secret that you’re really strong?”

For Sudou, strength seems to be more important than math.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

I tried to sound ignorant, but Sudou isn’t the type of person to

let it go that easily.

“Don’t play dumb—I knew because I fought against Housen. His strength was real. His movements were faster than anyone I’ve fought against before, too.”

Sudou said that his skin crawled when he thought of it.

“It was the first time I’ve been scared of fighting. Even now, his hysteric face is burned into my mind.”

As Sudou said so, he used his fingers to massage his forehead.

“You may think it’s scary, but to me, it looked like you were fighting bravely for Horikita.”

“I didn’t have a choice there. He’s got a few screws loose on his head, that Housen. I *had* to fight him.”

I won’t deny that. Housen’s attachment to violence was quite unusually fond.

“But Sudou, didn’t you have a chance of winning?”

The other day, Sudou was defeated by Housen because he was grabbed by the neck. In a situation where he had to face such a powerful opponent up front, all the while protecting Horikita, it resulted in a few holes being exposed in his defense.

As a result, Sudou was severely wounded and the fight ended in his loss.

“Who knows... even if we fought seriously, I doubt I could beat him.”

Sudou isn’t weak. The only redeeming trait of Sudou’s—his physical ability—is what makes him strong. He’s not the only one who can fight.

Horikita’s older brother, who had the knowledge of martial arts; and Albert, who was blessed with a strong body when he was born. Even against Housen, these people wouldn’t win indefinitely.

“Anyway, let’s move on. My circumstances aren’t anything interesting.”

Here, Sudou looked at me with piercing eyes.

“You... you stopped that monster like you were evenly matched. That’s right—weren’t you going toe-to-toe against him?”

I am merely a tad stronger than an average person. However, such words won’t be able to reach Sudou.

Compounding that revelation onto my perfect mathematics score, I wouldn’t sound believable anymore. And because Horikita and I ‘get along,’ some other things may be revealed as well.

“Did it actually look that way, or was it just a misunderstanding from your part?”

“I saw it.”

Sudou grabbed my right biceps, squeezing it several times to feel my muscles.

“Last year, I felt the same when I saw you in the pool. Your body is masculine, yet you don’t belong in any clubs. It’s hard to see when you’re dressed, but those muscles can’t be hidden when you’re shirtless... There’s no way to build such muscles without considerable training.”

It’s impossible to lie about this to Sudou, since he’s been training his body for a while now. I can’t just make up a story where I one day happened to have such a body. Not only can you see it, you can also physically touch it, with the truth all easily spilled out.

“Oh, yes. My grip strength was about 60 back in the sports festival.”

Sudou begins to remember the events of last year.

“I thought it was pretty scary at that time... Your hand has been stabbed now, but do you know your actual grip strength?”

“I don’t know. I really have no clue.”

“You don’t know?”

“No. I don’t remember doing any proper measurements of my grip strength.”

“You really don’t know? I’ve done it a few times in both elementary school and junior high school since it’s like a physical measurement.”

I genuinely don’t remember. In the White Room, of course, physical examinations were done regularly. Perhaps those measurements were abnormally high compared to normal people.

However, they were only known to the instructors. They didn’t bother telling the students individually about the numbers. Plus, the students weren’t interested in those ever-changing numbers either.

Those measurements can fluctuate greatly.

Although I am working on maintaining my physical body as a daily routine, my physical abilities are likely to decline faster now that I’m not in a specialized training area like the White Room.

I wondered if Sudou, who was looking at my eyes, actually believed me.

“At that time, I heard that a grip strength of about 60 was the average for high school first-years, so I adjusted the numbers accordingly. I tried not to stand out as much as possible.”

I remember being a little surprised to know that my supposedly ‘average’ grip strength was actually above average.

“You’d be so amazing if you showed your true strength.”

An inquisitive spirit that includes feelings like envy and jealousy.

“How much...”

The answer and perspective will change depending on what you use as a standard.

I thought for a while, but—

“—No, don’t answer that. Forget about it for now.”

Sudou withdrew his question. If I told him about my true background, it wouldn’t be a story that anyone can understand.

In the first place, it’s not something that can be expressed in a

single word.

“It won’t matter how good you are if I don’t see it with my own eyes.”

He let go of my arm. Sudou seems to have digested the information similarly to Keisei.

“But I understand that you’re a ridiculous guy. Seriously ridiculous, Ayanokouji.”

“Are you upset that I kept silent about it?”

“At first, I wondered about it. I could understand Yukimura’s feelings. I thought it was a bit terrible, but it would in fact be better to hide your abilities as an extra card to play.

“But hey. I don’t know how you feel. I don’t think I’d like to stand out so much, too. I think I can somewhat understand you.”

Sudou tells me something much different than what I expected.

“It would be a lie if I said it doesn’t bother me, but I’ll work hard and grow. It doesn’t what other people think. I decided to have that policy.”

Face yourself, not face others.

I told him that it would be most beneficial to me if he’d kept quiet.

“And no matter how awesome you are, I’m still better at basketball.”

For the first time today, Sudou laughed boldly. He wouldn’t know if I’m actually any good or not, but he still said it confidently.

Even so, that is an unmistakable fact. The result would be clear in one or two matches. I have no chance of winning.

“That’s why I’ll always play basketball.”

“Please refrain from insulting me—I’m sorry I can’t shoot a ball through a single hoop.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! I don’t know anymore.”

It’s easy for a person to open their mind if they have at least one

superior aspect.

“I don’t usually talk about that Housen incident. It felt like I was being spun around that day, but I called out to you because I wanted to say that.”

“Really?”

I was very grateful for Sudou’s kind consideration.

“Oh yes, this is the only time I’ve talked about that Housen situation... is it okay to end it here?”

“If you can promise me.”

“Don’t you think I would tell other people about the fight with Housen?”

It may be inevitable that the topic will come up in the flow of this story. Originally, even if Sudou witnessed it, he could still be silent to some extent.

Of course, I was thinking of stopping him from coming with Horikita and I just in case, but when I saw Sudou’s eyes on that night and right after I got a perfect score in mathematics, I could get a rough idea...

“If I were Sudou, I would have worked hard. I would have asked Horikita to refrain from using certain words.”

“...For me before?”

“As you can see from the overall strength of your OAA, in terms of growth, you are the top in class D. I stopped to reconsider my judgement about the whole situation. You’ve improved a lot.”

Judgement after analyzing a student named Ken Sudou.

If there was a student like Ike or Hondou here, the story would be different.

“There’s nothing else to be said.”

Sudou takes a deep breath as if he was amazed or impressed by something.

“I’m completely satisfied. I won’t feel bad even if you beat me.”

Saying that, Sudou came closer to me.

“I’d like to hear about your relationship with Suzune.”

“We’re not dating.”

I emphasized my point by keeping a distance from his overly-close face and covering it up with an open response.

“...Oh.”

Sudou, who seemed to have listened to my words, looked away.

“So that’s that. I’m not saying that she’s not allowed to go out with anyone. Suzune... whether it’s me or Ayanokouji, or some other guy, it’s her freedom. However, if you do hide the fact that there’s more to it than what you said, I won’t forgive you.”

“Okay, I see. If there is such a thing, I will report to you immediately. Is that alright?”

“Good. No, don’t...! Actually, it’s fine.”

Sudou paused for a bit, as he was finished with what he wanted to hear and say.

“It seems cold as a friend of Haruki’s, but I’m glad you didn’t get expelled from the class poll. You’re definitely a must-have in order to aim for class A.”

Saying that, Sudou headed to the classroom a little swifter.

Was it a consideration that I didn’t reveal what we talked about to other people?

“Aim for class A...”

I wonder if a day will come when Sudou finally receives such an evaluation like me.

However, everyone in the class has their own good respects. Sudou will definitely be an important person for the class.

— CHAPTER TWO —

The Flowing Passage of Time

The ever-unfolding events of April is finally over, and it's already been two weeks since we've entered May.

As always, the White Room student showed no signs of making a move.

It seems that he has left the control of Tsukishiro, but what on earth is he thinking? Anyways, there's nothing to complain about if I can just spend my days peacefully in this school.

In the morning around the middle of May, I was meeting in the lobby with Horikita.

A few weeks ago, I was the centre of attention among my classmates. But now, my classmates continued on with their daily lives without sparing me a single glance.

Of course, it seems that there were many students who had internal thoughts about my perfect score, but for the time being, it has ended.

While waiting for Horikita, I opened the updated OAA again.

The system in which the results are reflected monthly updated.

Although I got a perfect score in mathematics, the total score of my 5 subjects is 386 points overall. As a result, the academic ability evaluation landed at A-, which is slightly higher than expected in

the overall evaluation. A few other first-years received the same evaluation as me.

2-D Ayanokuoji Kiyotaka.

2nd Year Evaluation:

Academic Ability A- (81)

Physical Ability B- (61)

Critical Thinking Ability D+ (40)

Social Contribution B (68)

Overall Evaluation B- (62)

Horikita, Kitayama, Mii-chan and other students who received an A rank according to their academic ability last year continued to maintain their A rank. Perhaps a student with a total score of more than 400 is supposed to get a grade A or higher.

Overall, the results of improvement are clearly shown in the OAA, but as I said the other day, Sudou will still be the first candidate for the most growth. Even if you compared his improvement to all the second-year students, Sudo's performance improvement is remarkable.

2-D Ken Sudou

2nd Year Evaluation:

Academic Ability C (54)

Physical Ability A+ (96)

Critical Thinking Ability C- (42)

Social Contributions C+ (60)

Overall Evaluation B- (63)

Considering that the result of his overall evaluation in the 1st year was only a total of 47, it was an amazing stretch.

The evaluation which had been helped by the protrusion of the physical ability turned around completely.

Although it is only the OAA evaluation, it still retains a higher overall strength than Akito and Keisei.

In the future, if he can improve his academic ability and social contribution even further, he may be able to compete with those like Yousuke and Kushida. He's a student with outstanding talent and has more room to grow.

However, the evaluation resets every month, but regarding his thinking ability and social contribution in the first year ... It was pretty low. Just because his grades have changed, that doesn't mean his friendship and communication skills will grow. That said, if Sudo started to take studying even more seriously for a month, no... for six months from now, in the very least his social contribution value should rise to a fairly high level.

In addition to Sudo, a few other students are also more comprehensive than they were during their first years. Most of them are due to the leap of students who have low thinking ability and/or social contribution.

"I've kept you waiting."

Just before the promised time, Horikita came down.

"I didn't wait long."

We didn't need to talk in the lobby, so we decided to walk towards the school building.

It's easier to talk outside because it can go smoothly without interruptions or eavesdroppers.

"Thank you again. Thanks to Horikita's quick-witted talk, I didn't get that much attention from my class. I have the impression that other classes are being disseminated in a similar way."

The vigilance from other classes will increase, but honestly there wouldn't be much of an issue.

A-class Sakayanagi has known me from a long time ago, and Ryuen knows that my limit isn't just mathematics because I have defeated him directly before. And I'm sure Ichinose knows that I'm not normal by any means.

"It's okay. I just thought it would be a plus for our class in the future. If you talked about cutting corners again without my permission, you'll bring shame upon the class, wouldn't you? By the way, what were you going to do if I wasn't there?"

"What's the matter?"

"That was a shame, but in the end, I would have talked about a similar development."

It was one of my strategies. If she wasn't there at that moment, I was going to have to explain a similar story. Horikita seemed to have guessed it without me explaining it verbally.

"I would have lent you this strategy."

"I make it a rule to borrow it quietly."

Horikita turns to look at my left hand.

"Is your left-hand injury okay?"

"It's sloppy. It'll still take time to recover, but since it's not my dominant hand, the impact is not that great."

"It would be fine, but... have you been in contact with Housen?"

"No, nothing. I once walked pass Housen and Nanase, but I didn't talk to them."

Both of our eyes turned to look at each other, but neither of us spoke out.

"Even if there's no apology, I wonder if you're aware that you've done something wrong."

"I don't know. I don't think it was that way."

"Both of them?"

"That's right."

The boldness of doing a large-scale trick... It hasn't even been

a month since they entered the school. And yet they still pulled that large-scale trick.

“Is it true that the first-years will get 20 million points if you drop you out?”

“I don’t know for sure at the moment, but they wouldn’t do anything like that without such a big reward.”

“... That’s true.”

It is unlikely that they will be in vain by taking the risk of expelling me on purpose.

The special test was most likely created for the white room student to take action.

“It will become clear sooner or later whether if it is true or not”

“But that’s not a good development. It’s unreasonable, but if it was a special test, all 4 classes should have known about this special test no?”

“I’ve been telling Nanase. I told them to pay attention to all the classes. If so, at the very least in the 3 remaining classes, at least 3 more people would have known about the test.”

“Amasawa from A class...She has little benefit from having partnered up with Sudou, but there is no doubt that she was working with Housen, yes?”

I nodded lightly. The first-year class A Ichika Amasawa is one of the people that about the 20 million points special test with almost certainty. The remaining students from year 1 B and year 1 C who knew about this test is still unknown.

“They are the only ones in the process of moving you out of school right now?”

“Yes, as far as I noticed”

“If that’s the case, it’s a little strange... Housen-kun isn’t the type that is liked among the first-year students. Did they overlook the fact that 20 million points are a large amount of money? I don’t

think he'll share it with other students who cooperated with him if they did succeed in getting you expelled.”

At least that's what I would care about. However, it is difficult to narrow down the reason they worked with him.

Do you think that Housen and Nanase did not want me to drop out?

Or did they not intend to participate in this special exam from the beginning?

Or maybe they didn't trust the exam in the first place.

Horikita, who was walking next to me, was not able to answer that point.

So I tried changing the direction of my approach.

“Why do you think there is no sign of sharing information among all first graders?”

I decided to ask Horikita for her opinion, since she looked like she was going to say something anyways.

“If they were told that there was a special test to expel Kiyotaka Ayanokouji to the entire first grade, it wouldn't take long for not only first graders but also second graders and third graders to hear. It would become quite a problem. Once we know about such an unreasonable special test, our class naturally protests, so that's why they try to limit the test to only a few students. Am I right?”

It's definitely the right answer. And she may notice more in the depth of her correct answer.

“Did this school really allowed such an unreasonable special test?”

“That's right. I checked with our homeroom teacher Chabashira-sensei, but she knew nothing about this special test.”

I haven't really confirmed it, but I'm sure it hasn't been announced to the other teachers yet.

“There are two main things that can be thought of from there.

One is if the story of Nanase or Koizumi is a lie in the first place. And There was no special test that would cause me to get expelled. As I said, it's hard to imagine doing such a risky imitation without the reward, so I can erase this.”

“Yeah.”

“I can't deny the fact the test could be set up by some of the first-year students as a game, but I don't think they can get into that kind of relationship that fast since they've only just entered the school and there's no relationship of trust or anything similar. But, the probability is low because the first-grader who hosted this game surely must have the ability to pay 20 million points and have to gain the trust of all the first graders who participated in this test.”

In the midst of reasoning, Horikita said a single sentence that is...

“—Student Council President.”

The words that leaked out of her mouth are surprisingly stuck in this situation.

“No way, I wonder if Student Council President Nagumo is involved in this matter?”

“I don't know. But I'm sure he wouldn't like it, so it's nostalgic for him to prepare 20 million dollars and allow this test to happen. What kind of person would waste 20 million points to get a single student expelled and It's strange to use the first-year students when they don't even know what they are capable of yet.”

If he really wanted to use somebody's help to expel me, it's better to use the 3rd graders who are already used to the school rules. “But it may not be irrelevant.”

There is no proof to deny that he was not involved in any way.

If he has the title of student council president, he will most likely not doubt even the first graders.

“You may have bought jealousy towards the student council

president. The student council president Nagumo was concerned about my brother, only cared about Ayanokouji. He may have had complex feelings like me. It wouldn't be strange if he had it."

If there was, it would only create problems for me.

"It's not exactly the right thing to say right now, but the main reason that I called out to you today is that. I'll go to the student council room after school. I'll meet the student council president Nagumo and ask for a student council entry."

"Oh, I see."

There was a lot of twists and turns, but could this move the matter of Nagumo, which had been a regret for Manabu?

"But if Nagumo the student council president doesn't approve, will you take responsibility?"

"As I said before, the student council president is in a stance that will not refuse you to join the student council."

".... That's right"

At that time, it was Horikita Manabu, who had just graduated from school and it was very emotional for Horikita, but she seemed to remember the content of the story. Although she said that Nagumo wouldn't refuse her to join the student council. Of course, that's not the only reason. Horikita is Manabu's younger sister, whom he has pursued forever. It is unthinkable to think that he will neglect that precious entity.

"Why did you want me to join the student council...you said that it was just to let me monitor the student council president, but it's not enough just to keep an eye on him, right?"

After joining the student council, she asked for instructions on what to do next.

"I think you've already noticed it, but your big brother and Nagumo have completely different ways of thinking. Because they value tradition, they didn't like the reform of Nagumo. He told me

before leaving. To maintain this school's traditions. He doesn't want that framework to change."

"He's definitely doing the opposite of what the current student council is trying to do."

"But I haven't made a decision as to which is right for me. What I'm sure about right now is that I want to see the reforms that Nagumo is trying to do."

Right. The idea of wanting to study the reforms of Nagumo is not wrong, and Nagumo's way of thinking is not wrong either.

"So you don't want me to do anything concrete?"

"Yeah."

"But why did you recommend me to the student council? If you're thinking about it like that, I don't have to be in the student council to monitor it in the first place?"

"If Nagumo steers in the wrong direction, it will be necessary to stop him."

And the person who should do that is Suzune Horikita, the sister of Horikita Manabu, not me.

Of course, because of the one-sided imposition, the name of a test results was brought up.

"There are some things I don't like, but I think it's convenient."

He may still be related to the prize money for the special test that Horikita herself said earlier.

Entering the student council should certainly increase your chances of getting information.

"I am not in a position to ask since I lost the bet, but I wonder if I can ask you to join me

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'd like to show you the evidence of the direct consultation with the student council president Nagumo."

In the unlikely event, if she is unable to join the student council,

she wants to use it as proof that she is not lying.

“If Nagumo the student council president is involved in the prize money in the special test, he may show some sort of reaction.”

Certainly there may be clues about 20 million private points as the prize money for the special test.

“Okay, then after school?”

With such an appointment with Horikita, we started our day today.

1

After school, we both walked towards the student council room.

“Did you make an appointment?”

There is no guarantee that Nagumo will be in the student council room if we suddenly visited.

“Of course. I was able to arrange a meeting with President Nagumo via the help of Chabashira-sensei. It’s fine. That’s why I slipped the meeting into today. Though, perhaps it was a good idea to join the student council today. My motivation to join the Student Council went up a little.”

“Is it because of the prize bounty?”

“Yes. If the student council, who must be absolutely neutral, is secretly causing unfairness towards the D class of the second-years... It would be a huge problem.”

Horikita’s face, which I secretly confirmed from the side, gave me a sense of determination.

“It’s good to be motivated, but don’t get over-inspired. There’s no certainty that Nagumo is involved. Even if he was involved, his not a person you can take on straightforwardly opponent.”

He wouldn't obediently answer your questions.

"Of course, I'm not going to do anything careless until I'm certain."

I feel relieved as she seems to have a strong sense of self-control on herself even if the situation gets out of hand.

Soon after, we arrived in front of the student council room and opened the door.

"Pardon the intrusion."

When I stepped into the student council room, Nagumo was sitting on the student council president's seat.

With his legs crossed, he greeted Horikita as if he was a king.

There was no sense of incongruity in the atmosphere, and it was good timing to visit the student council president room.

Besides, I felt more leeway coming from Nagumo than usual. That was likely because the impact of the existence of Manabu Horikita, the only one equal or greater to Nagumo, has disappeared.

There was also Vice-president Kiriyama standing near the wall.

Kiriyama first moved to Horikita after looking at me once.

"Do you have business with the student council?"

"Yes. Thank you for your time."

Kiriyama urged Horikita and me to sit down, and we obediently obeyed his instructions.

"Don't worry, I'm relatively free right now."

Even with me in front of him, the expression Nagumo had since the moment we entered the room has not changed.

If she had a slight change in her feelings that would make her want to back down right now, I wouldn't be surprised.

"So what did you come here to talk about? You didn't just come here to have a friendly chat with me, did you?"

It was Nagumo that seemed to welcome her, but Horikita cut straight to the main topic.

“I think the time is precious, so I’m going to get straight to the point. I would like to join the student council.”

Horikita’s clear voice echoes in the student council room.

Upon hearing this, both members of the student council responded in a similar manner.

Surprised feelings, different from acceptance and rejection.

“You want to join the student council?”

In response to the remarks from Horikita, Nagumo’s expression changed from being surprised to an expression of him anticipating this.

“How would it turn out if I don’t say yes?”

“In other words, you don’t accept?”

“No, I practically don’t refuse anyone that wants to join. If there’s a person who wants to join the student council, I will let him or her in as long as there is space available. I am not interested in the reason for my choice. I’m free to do what I want.”

Unlike the cautious Manabu, it is a cloudy way of thinking that welcomes every student to the student council.

“But you’re special, Suzune Horikita. I’ll only accept on one condition for u to enter the student council.”

“What is the condition?”

“Why did you want to join the student council at this timing?”

Did he felt discomfort towards me who was sitting next to Horikita?

No, Nagumo is not the type to worry about small things.

He just wanted to know why the younger sister of the ex-student council president wanted to join the student council.

Of course, she wouldn’t say that she lost the bet with me.

To be honest, I just want to join the student council. That’s it.

She will never be able to win trust from Nagumo.

“I had a feud with my brother. I joined this school to get out of

that feud. However, me and my brother's relationship did not change even after he entered the university."

Nagumo listened to Horikita's words, she was speaking slowly but in a clear tone.

"I couldn't have accepted me for not growing up at all. In the end, I had a year when I couldn't even talk satisfactorily with my brother until he was about to graduate."

Therefore, Horikita seems to have Housen to convey her past honestly in words.

"So, did u both have a reconciliation?"

"Yes, we did. Although it was last minute, we were able to reconcile. So I was interested in the student council where my brother dedicated his school life to for the first time. I've come a long way, but I decided that I wanted to follow the path my brother took."

Originally Horikita didn't want to join the student council.

In other words, if all of this was asked whether it was true or false, the answer would be false.

Still, by concealing it with many truths, it clouded the eyes that distinguish the authenticity of Nagumo's innocent expression.

"Is that the road your brother took? What a good story."

On the contrary, Nagumo showed a slight caution towards Horikita because his eyes were distinguishingly clouded.

"In other words, do you think you're willing to become the student council president in the future?"

Her answer here will not strike Nagumo's heart anyway.

Her answer would give a bad impression if she tried to tell a simple lie so lying here would prove to be pointless.

"Yes. I'm going to be the student council president, as I told you that I want to follow the path my brother took."

Horikita dared to challenge herself with this high hurdle.

And I don't think there was a single lie in what she said.

It seems that she decided to follow the trail of Manabu since he was the student council president.

"I see. But for the past year, Honami Ichinose has been working hard as a board member of the student council. Do you understand that it may be too late for you to be the student council president?"

"I don't think it's a distance that I can't turn around."

She answered faster and more powerfully than her previous statements.

Even though they don't look very similar, she is still younger sister of the ex-student council president Horikita Manabu after all.

Kiriyama, who has been silent up to this point, said so towards Nagumo.

"It's a bit of a pain to call you Horikita. I may have called said it several times, but starting today I'll call you Suzune is that alright?"

"Please do as you please."

"The current student council was in trouble because there were no student council officers in the second grade other than Honami."

Nagumo, who heard the true reason she wanted to join the student council from Horikita by asking questions directly, agreed to let her join the student council.

He got out of his seat, and walked up to Horikita and reached out his left hand to Horikita, who was also standing up

His left hand which was put out intentionally, was grabbed by Horikita and gripped tightly.

"Welcome to the student council. From today, don't hesitate to work as an officer, Suzune."

"Of course."

"I congratulate you on joining the student council and I'm going to tell you something interesting. It's true that all the student

council presidents always graduate in class A. Remember that and aim for greater heights.”



It was words that blasted Horikita who was content with the current D class.

“Don’t worry. I have no intention of graduating outside of Class A. You’re going to prove that it’s not just your words, and show it to me, right?”

Saying that, the handshake which continued on for a quite a while ended.

“I’m Ikuto Kiriyama. The Vice-president of the student council.”

“Thank you very much.”

She shook hands with Kiriyama and greeted him, and officially became a member of the student council

From here onwards, Horikita will be able to look at the way Nagumo does things with her own eyes.

A merit-based school system that gives priority to individuals.

How will you take on this system that has been removed from what you are trying to protect? It’s okay to say that I can no longer ask about the prize money. I did not get any clues about the prize money in particular either, so I’d like to find the right timing to leave.

While I was thinking of a way to get out...

“Are you going to join the student council, too? Ayanokouji-kun.”

“What do you mean, Nagumo. Why would you invite him into the student council as well?”

Kiriyama wondered if Nagumo’s proposal was unusual.

“It’s not strange. Ayanokouji is a student that Horikita-senpai put his eyes on. There is no reason to not ask him to join. And in the special exam the other day, it looks like only one person has gotten a perfect score.”

Saying that, Nagumo seemed to have turned his consciousness

to me for the first time here.

And I know that I have already perceived the information that was open to the first and second graders.

“I’ll refrain from doing so. I’m not interested in the student council.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

As soon as I said that, I immediately lost myself.

But what I thought about came back to me again.

“Ayanokouji.”

My name is called, and the room was filled with silence as Nagumo and I stared at each other.

“The work of the student council is more than I expected. But it’s about time for me to settle down. From summer onwards, I’d like to start spending time with my kouhais.”

“What does that mean?”

Even if this doesn’t make him stop pursuing me, I’ll force him to.

“I’ll play along for now, so look forward to it in the future.”

This is not a declaration of war.

The strong guides the weak.

“Sakayanagi, Ichinose and Ryuen may cry if I fought them.”

When I answered that, the consciousness of Nagumo was completely removed from me.

“By the way, Kiriyama. How did you get to Horikita to join us?”

“...What?”

“Last time, when the two first-year students wanted to join the student council, you didn’t attend. However, this time you showed up when Suzune Horikita asked me to meet. Isn’t it strange?”

At the end of the discussion, Nagumo asked Kiriyama.

As we were about to go home. At the very end, Nagumo made a sudden remark that cuts off the flow of the conversation so far.

Of course, I have no idea why Kiriyama was present at this place, but Kiriyama was clearly upset.

“I was just worried about Horikita’s younger sister. Is something the matter?”

Although Kiriyama replied with that his calmness was not repaired and his voice was slightly audible.

Perhaps it was interesting, Nagumo smiled happily.

“No, I don’t care. Don’t worry.”

Nagumo did not go too deep, as the reaction alone Kiriyama gave was sufficient enough.

“Then, Suzune, immediately, but I would like to introduce the other members of the student council other than Kiriyama as well. Will you stay here?”

“I understand”

There’s no reason to stay here any longer since I already refused to join the student council.

I left Horikita, Nagumo and left the room.

2

Leaving the student council room, I headed to the front door on foot.

Because Kiriyama was a person who was only in the student council to watch Nagumo. He supported Manabu and planned a method to counter Nagumo and contacted me when I was in the first grade. He probably thought that Horikita, the younger sister of Manabu, was trying to take some kind of action when he was about to give up on pursuing Nagumo and was aware of the sign that she would enter the student council.

However, the battle between Nagumo and Kiriyaama has already been settled as far as today's situation is concerned.

It probably makes him feel that there is a big difference that he can no longer overturn.

Well, if Kiriyaama hasn't given up yet, something will happen eventually

“All right.”

I myself decided there was no point in spending anymore time there.

I decided to head straight back and slowly digest this for the rest of the day. I took out my cell phone and checked the time.

“If you don't have any plans today... Can I go to your room to hang out?”

I didn't mind watching the interaction at the student council, but I received a message from Kei.

It's been more than 30 minutes since it was sent, but she could still be waiting because the message wasn't cancelled and there's no text to follow.

I didn't have any particular plans after this, so I decided to reply.

Even though we say we're dating, we haven't really shown it yet.

There's very limited places that we can be alone without anyone finding out about our relationship.

That said, the dormitory is not always safe. Once seen, it could be a decisive hit to our relationship.

At that time, it would just be divisible to each other.

I gave a short reply.

“Ok.”

“Can I go now?”

Such a message flies in succession. I'm going home, so I said she can come after about 20 minutes. All that's left is for her to

come to my room as usual without getting caught.

Even if someone is on the same floor, Kei should be able to come up with an excuse to some extent.

It takes about 10 minutes to get back to the dormitory. I kept the door open as it was, I lightly cleaned the room to kill time, and I heard three intense knocks.

Kei and I have set some signs of secret meetings. Basically, they use chimes for communication, but in the case of an emergency, they are asked to knock three times. Because it is a dormitory where students come and go so students would be opening and closing their doors. So we agreed to use these chimes.

And in a hurry, admitting to enter the room with this signal in such a dangerous situation.

“I’m coming in!”

In a panic, Kei replies so while diving into the room.

And when she pressed the door strongly and closed it, she exhaled to calm herself down.

“I saw the elevator stopped on the fourth floor, so I was in a hurry! My heart was racing...” Kei placed a hand on her chest.

It’s hard to get through in the hallway, so it’s normal for her to be in a hurry.

“It’s impossible to hide this relationship forever.”

“I know that, but...”

I put Kei’s shoes in the shoe closet.

Then locked the front door just in case, and I also used a U-shaped lock for extra measures.

This way, even if someone visited, I can usher them to go home without causing a fuss.

However, it is a little unnatural to use U-shaped locks in the evening.

But it’s better than letting them enter the room carelessly and

seeing me alone with Kei.

If it's urgent, I can just come up with an excuse.

For example, asking them to wait outside, because the room is messy, and I'll come out right away.

After leaving with the guests, Kei can quietly leave the room.

"Ha.... I'm relieved."

Kei, who sat on the bed, said so and patted her chest.

"That's good."

Especially in the evening, most students usually come home in a rush.

However, inviting her during midnight is riskier. Although there are fewer people coming in and going out of their rooms, it'll be a big problem if they saw a girl entering my room during midnight.

In that case, while in the daytime during the holidays, the excuse still stands and the evening on weekdays are good as well.

Even if our relationship is found out by students, we can prove that we are in a healthy relationship.

"Would you like something to drink?"

When I call out to Kei who has just regained her composure, she rushes from the living room to the kitchen.

"I'll do it."

"Why? You don't need to do this."

"Your left hand is injured and it'll be hard for you. I'll boil the water."

She seems to have offered it due to the concern for my injury.

"Then I'd like to leave it to you, but..."

"Yes, yes. I'm going to make tea, but what do you want to drink?"

"Then, the same as Kei."

I was going to match it with the idea of lightening the burden on Kei even a little, but it looked counterproductive because she

looked dissatisfied.

“You don’t trust me?”

“...Then I’ll have a cup of coffee.”

“Leave it to me. I’m sure it was on this shelf, wasn’t it?”

Saying that, Kei opens the cupboard in the kitchen.

She noticed my glance and instructed me to wait in the living room.

It was troublesome to make her angry, so I decided to watch her quietly and wait.

“That’s right. I was going to talk to you about this when I entered your room, but Kiyotaka’s responsibility is quite big, isn’t it?”

When I picked up the TV remote control, such words flew at me from the kitchen all of a sudden.

“I got a perfect score in math earlier, so it’ll be a bigger problem if our relationship gets exposed right now.”

If that’s what she thinks, then it’s fine.

Certainly, if Kei and I were to expose our relationship right now, there is a high possibility that it will make me stand out...

“What would happen if I said to everyone that we were dating right now...?”

“Then the same situation as before continue on for a while.”

“It can’t be helped if that happens... Somehow, it would seem like I would have dated you only for status’ sake.”

“Is it wrong to go out with me because of my status?”

“Well, I’m not saying it’s a bad thing, but... For example, going out with a girl who looks cute is a good status for a boy, isn’t it? Isn’t it a little cruel not to ask for it?”

“Of course, there are various tastes in appearances, and there is no absolute one.”

“Still, I’m still pretty much learning what it means to be dating.”

I gave a slightly negative opinion about the status purpose, but there was no reply. When I was wondering how to continue the argument, Kei looked like she was in deep thought.

“Oh. Then, am I cute?”

Apparently, she wasn't thinking about a rebuttal.

It seems she was thinking about the part where I was talking about preferences.

“Why would I want to go out with someone who's not cute?”

Kei, who had her lips pursed, let her gaze swim away, which had previously been matched with mine.

The hot water in the pot began to boil.

It's not only about appearance that makes a person who they are. For example, personality, body shape, voice and gesture, family and education. Various factors come to fold when it comes to love.

“Ah... I also think that you're super handsome too, Kiyotaka.”

I didn't ask for the same answer, but Kei said so and pulled herself into the kitchen.

While listening to the sound of the boiling hot water being poured into a cup, I turned on the TV without giving it much thought.

Soon after, Kei returned with a proud face and put a cup of coffee on the table. Kei's drink was supposed to be black tea, but for some reason it turned into a café au lait.

“Thank you.”

“You're very welcome.”

We spread the textbooks of the 1st grade on the desk.

The notebooks and the pens are prepared, and the situation quickly turned into one of studying.

Even if an unexpected situation happens, we can use the excuse of us both studying together. If possible, I would not want that kind of development to occur.

From the moment Kei entered my room until now, everything was based on the strategy Amasawa has developed.

After that, we spent time talking about random things.

Starting from today and going back a few days to what happened in our lives.

Who we met during Golden Week, and what kind of TV shows we were watching.

We wasted our time together, while looking at some pictures Kei took.

We discussed various topics together, long or short, sometimes even changing topics immediately.

The two of us seemed to be unnecessarily wasting our time together. But this isn't such a bad thing.

An indoor date with Kei who's showing various faces; sometimes laughing, sometimes getting angry at me and showing me all kind of expressions.

Eventually, as the topics we could talk about decreased, our casual chit-chat slowly died down, and a silence took over us.

Changing the atmosphere we had earlier in the room, we both began to feel something.

I'm beginning to notice something.

No, not just something.

I already know the answer to it.

The feeling of wanting to touch her, of showing affection. These feelings slowly increased within me.

But I never said anything.

Our eyes were staring at each other as if we were communicating through our eyes alone.

But it's never easy to take a step forward.

No matter how much you try to read through the other person, the risk is still very high.

Although it may seem like both parties were in agreement, that may not necessarily be the case. You need to consider the possibilities at hand.

If I were rejected in this situation, the negative feelings within me may gush out like a storm.

Even so....

I was still trying to catch Kei's gaze which she was trying to run away from.

Could it be? Between us... Our feelings collide with one another.

Soon, as if Kei has given up on running away, she stopped looking away.

The longer the time freezes or stagnates, the more we would feel its slow passage...

We gradually shortened the distance between the two of us, bringing our cheeks near each other.

We finally reached the distance where we could feel each other's breaths and the warmth of our skins.

From Kei's breath, I could smell the scent of coffee and milk.

In two seconds... no, *one second*, our lips will touch—

—*Ding dong.*

The time together between the two of us were gradually ruined by the door ringing.

I didn't even manage to touch the thin layer of skin on her lips. My consciousness, which was about to dissipate and drift away, slowly brought me back to reality.

"Oh... eh... the front door?"

Kei's cheeks, which she moved away from me in a hurry, were dyed bright red, but there was no time to look at them. That's

because there's a visitor by my front door and not at the lobby.

The intercom also clearly showed the notification that it's a call from the entrance. Unlike the lobby, it doesn't have a camera so you wouldn't be able to tell who is visiting.

I could have stayed away from the door and use absence as an excuse to ignore the doorbell, but if Kei was seen entering the room by the person currently at my front door, I would be labelled as a bad person.

I decided it would be a good idea to know who visited and know their purpose of visiting my room.

“Wait.”

“Mmph.”

With a somewhat tense look on her face, Kei nodded. Based on the previous interaction with Amasawa, Kei's shoes are already in the shoe closet, so at first glance it would seem as if I was the only one in the room.

However, this method doesn't always bring merit.

It'll be best for me to answer at the front door, but if they ask to come in, it will surely be suspicious that I had to lock it. This suspicion might still arise despite putting away the shoes and hiding Kei away.

Just in case, I answered the front door with the U-shaped lock attached.

If it's like this, it won't be possible for the visitor to confirm whose shoes it is even if the other party looked at it, so it won't raise their suspicions.

I can also buy time by coming up with an excuse as to why I was locking the shoe closet.

On top of that, I can use this strategy again in the near future or move to the other person's room from here.

But who came to visit my room directly?

Was it Horikita or was it one of the boys? With such an inseparable prediction, I looked through the peep hole and saw the perpetrator.

The first thing that jumped into my field of vision was her red hair.

“Senpai~!”

It was a sweet voice.

It’s as if she knew I was looking through the peephole.

“It’s me!”

The voice coming through the door was definitely sure that we were in the room.

A girl smiling and dressed in plain clothes.

She didn’t have anything particular in her hands and looked empty-handed.

I slowly opened the door.

It was the first year A-class Ichika Amasawa that I have not met since the end of April.

She was unexpected visitor because she did not tell me she was visiting beforehand.

I thought that Amasawa would maintain a certain distance from me now that she was caught being involved in the incident a few weeks ago by taking the same knife that I bought out of my room for Housen.

However, Amasawa who appeared in front of me again like this did not show any signs of hesitation.

No way, does she think that I haven’t found out she was involved in the incident?

No, when Housen’s plan was triggered, Amasawa’s involvement was almost certain.

“How did you get into the dorm?”

“I happened to meet another senpai when he was coming back,

so I just went in the elevator with him. I was trying to surprise you.”

The intercom in the lobby would tell you who was visiting your room. But instead, she used another student’s arrival to enter.

“So why are you here?”

“I wondered if your hand injury is okay. I was worried and came to see you.”

I wonder if Amasawa, who was showing her wisdom towards me, is not aware of her involvement in the incident.

Rather, she was not showing any hints of her involvement in the incident.



Amasawa moved her right hand, and touched the U-shaped lock with her index finger.

“Can you take this off?”

Laughing like a little devil, her gaze confirms the shoes at my front door.

Did she look at the U-shaped lock by coincidence and predicted that someone was already inside, or...?

“It’s already evening, so why don’t we do this tomorrow? It’ll be a problem if I raised my juniors to come to their seniors’ rooms without any business.”

If she really did only come to see what was the condition of my hand, she can come visit another time.

However, Amasawa did not move from the place.

She brought her left hand to her lips and made a gesture as if she was thinking.

“It looks like you’re free right now, so can you make me some rice?”

In order to change the subject, Amasawa changed the direction of the topic at hand.

“I have the right to demand you to do it. You haven’t forgotten how I teamed up with Sudou-senpai, have you?”

I predicted that she would ask me to do this.

If so, this will just move accordingly to my plan.

“I’m sorry, I’m out of ingredients right now. There’s nothing in the fridge for me to cook with.”

“Eh. Is that so? Please prepare and store up more food~”

Amasawa complained, though her face clearly showed she wasn’t too troubled by it.

“If you really want me to do this today, can you wait for me to get ready so we can go shopping together?”

The date with Kei was over, but I can’t put out the extra tea.

I don't want to give her any information on letting her come to my room very often.

“Well, it's too bad you don't have any ingredients. It's such a shame~”

Amasawa laughed devilishly.

“Don't close the door, ok?”

Saying that, Amasawa disappeared from my sight.

A plastic bag which seemed to have been put on the floor on the corridor was lifted with her left hand, and given to me through the gap. When I saw through the peephole attached to the door, I confirmed that she was empty-handed. Even if it had been placed near her foot, it would have been reflected even if it was hard to see on the lens.

She seems to have placed the plastic bag containing the food in a position which cannot be seen by me.

I could not escape this time; she has read through my moves.

The excuse for me having not enough food is completely countered by the bag of groceries she brought.

I knew that Amasawa's head was sharp, but it's more than I imagined it to be.

“Now that you're in this situation, shouldn't you just admit this lie?”

I lied to her saying that because I just can't get in the mood today.

There were a number of measures that I took through experience with Amasawa, but the first person to try it out was Amasawa herself.

However, it doesn't matter if Amasawa is convinced.

I am confident that this excuse would work for other students, but Amasawa knows about Kei and I.

“Did you lie because you didn't want me to enter your room?”

In less than a second of silence, Amasawa went further to keep me from escaping.

If this happens to be, then it's no coincidence that Amasawa came to visit me today at this time.

“Is it because of Kei?”

“Why do you think so?”

After all, Kei visiting my room today was an act of conviction.

She was probably being watched by Amasawa when she was coming to my room.

“I've been watching. And It's been a while since Karuizawa returned to the dorm.”

Amasawa spoke of the facts to support my theory. After secretly confirming that Kei had entered the room, she probably went to buy some ingredients afterwards. She seems to have developed a strategy with the risk of exposing my lies.

“Did you not like hiding her shoes and making her look like she wasn't there?”

“I haven't told anyone about our relationship yet. I hid it from other students just in case.”

“Oh, you're finally going to admit it? Well, I don't know why you want to hide it, but I already know, so you don't have to lie to me about it, do you?”

It seems that she was dissatisfied with the fact that I was trying to hide this fact from her, and she showed a slightly disappointed face.

“For the time being, I kept it a secret for good intentions, but... I wonder if I'll spill it soon.”

Amasawa might have also researched that we are not going out openly.

Otherwise, it cannot be used as blackmailing material. In other words, this conversation is also in the form of a negotiation.

If I refuse here, there's a risk that Amasawa will expose our relationship.

It's not a good idea to let Amasawa leak out information about our relationship considering the future.

The reason being that we've chosen to only show our relationship at the very last minute. This will be the only way for me to come up with another idea. I, who was devoted to this strategy, admits defeat.

"Wait a minute. I'll remove the lock."

"Ok."

Amasawa answered obediently. As soon as I close the door, I sent a glance towards Kei who was in my room and her face showed that she was anxious. With my strategies having been exposed, I have no choice but to accept my lost and stand here. I removed the U-shaped lock and welcomed Amasawa.

Amasawa smiled at Kei, who's face could be seen from the front door, as she matched Kei's line of sight.

On the other hand, Kei stood up and looked like she was about to crush a worm.

"It's not good, you know. A young boy and a young girl staying together in a locked room, all alone with each other."

Amasawa, who was filled with spirit, said that as she took off her shoes.

"I can't really deny that fact. There aren't a lot of couples going out."

"Well, that's right. I feel uncomfortable when I look at them."

I want to show her the basis of our healthy relationship, but just a while ago we almost kissed due to the atmosphere in the room, I can't really deny the facts that Amasawa is saying.

As soon as she entered the living room, she kept an eye on the bed.

“There’s no disturbance of your clothes. The bed doesn’t seem to be roused, and it looks like nothing happened.”

“Of course! We are in a healthy relationship!”

With the appearance of Amasawa, Kei who was blushing and proud earlier, is now angry and mind-wringed.

This anger will include a bit of impatience. She must have heard that if Amasawa’s mood was offended, our relationship would be exposed.

“Impure sexual intercourse... I thought you two were doing something naughty.”

It was a somewhat confusing conversation, but Amasawa says that as she stepped in the room further.

Moreover, not to me, but to Kei.

Her voice choked unintentionally, and Kei who was always one step ahead was blushing.

She showed a face that contained distorted emotions about what Amasawa was talking about.

Amasawa looks like she’s been exploring the room from beginning to end, and re-checking it every time.

She was probably trying to collect information from Kei after understanding that she didn’t find out about anything from the room.

I couldn’t put any more burden on Kei, so I decided to interrupt.

“Sexual intercourse among students is prohibited by school regulations.”

The aim was to try calming down the heart of the disturbed Kei by trying to respond calmly.

However, Amasawa did not show any signs of flinching even after receiving these words from me.

“Aren’t the school rules just for decoration? There are couples in school who are flirting with each other every day. I went to a

convenience store earlier and bought contraceptives. When I was trying to buy it, the clerk saw it but didn't care. Well, if a young man runs out of control eventually with everything banned... wouldn't it be a problem if he eventually made a girl pregnant?"

Saying that, Amasawa took the contraceptive pills out of the vinyl with her left hand and placed it on the table.

It seems that she actually purchased it and proved it to us.

Certainly, if this kind of product existed, some students will use this as an advantage to do sexual intercourse and may lead to the path of pregnancy.

It seems to be a tacit rule that the school side prohibits it from doing so publicly, but since it's not, some students will not be caught having sexual intercourse.

Kei already lost her words completely, and Amasawa and I looked at the contraceptives as our eyes wandered.

"This is a present from me... But in this case, I'll apologize, I guess..."

"I don't remember asking for an apology."

"Again. I'm sure you know I'm involved in that injury of yours, right? I cooperated with Kazuomi-kun."

She said something like that with no fear at all.

She confessed without me having to make her admit it.

"Oh, Is that so?"

Kei, who was listening to the story, was involuntarily bemused.

Right now, I'd like Kei to refrain from making unnecessary remarks.

With one surprised remark, she will pass on information to the other party which is Amasawa.

She will be able to judge about how much content and who I talked about this incident to.

"Ayanokouji-senpai, I think you've misunderstood me."

“Misunderstood?”

“I mean, I’m not the enemy of Ayanokouji-senpai.”

“I’m telling you this because you seem to be aware of it, but I’m only telling the truth.”

“Ah? Because I got involved with Kazuomi-kun?”

If Amasawa hadn’t come into contact with me, this incident would have been different.

It would be weak for him to take responsibility for his strategy. It would have ended up as self-suicide.

No, it seems that Housen himself was thinking about a similar strategy, but in any case, there is no doubt that Amasawa was the one involved in establishing that strategy.

“I think I can guess what you senpais’ are thinking about right now. I added a possibility to Kazuomi-kun’s idea of expelling Ayanokouji-senpai to raise the percentage of success. However, I’m not your enemy.”

“I don’t remember being so highly evaluated.”

“I wonder if that’s right. I don’t think so.”

Kei was stunned, but when she heard the conversation between me and Amasawa, she regained some of her cool.

“Hey, wait a minute. Someone tried to get Kiyotaka to drop out? What do you mean?”

It was fortunate to know that I have been able to remove any doubts about my left hand, but I have not told the details to anybody.

“Heeeeee~”

When she saw the reaction of such a panicked Kei, Amasawa smiled with interest.

“Ayanokouji-senpai, why didn’t you tell her? Then, what about the 20 million private points as the prize money?”

“What...What? 20 million?”

“I was sure you’ve already told this story to Karuizawa since I looked into your relationship. I think it’s a good idea to ask your boyfriend about the details later. Right? Senpai.”

Since it has already been revealed, I wouldn’t have any other choice but to explain the details of the incident.

“Me and Kazuomi-kun tried to use a knife to force Ayanokouji-senpai to drop out. Senpai noticed that it was from when we went shopping together, wasn’t it?”

With how much Amasawa has spoken up till now, I started to change my mind.

“I’ve only seen those kitchen utensils for the first time in this school. However, there was no hesitation in Amasawa’s movements when you were buying a knife. Moreover, after checking with the store clerk later on, I found out that someone else tried to buy the same knife. That’s why I was able to prevent Kazuomi-kun’s self-injury by letting him hurt me instead, right?”

I arrived at that answer, followed by the traces of Amasawa.

However, despite the traces being easily erasable, they weren’t done so.

When I got to that conclusion and prevented Housen’s strategy, I intentionally let him hurt me.

Certainly, if Amasawa had performed more perfectly, things would have been different.

“How very, very sweet of you.”

“I just thought it would be a shame for you to be expelled from school with no apparent reason.”

I wonder if it was normal for a first-year student to be this smart.

Or is it just Ichika Amasawa?

I would be convinced if she were to say she was the “White Room Student,” but by thinking about what she said earlier, this would be false.

However, if that is the case, she is basically telling us everything. What is the merit of her telling us her identity now?

Or did she refine her talent in a place that has nothing to do with the White Room, just like Sakayanagi?

In any case, I decided to increase my cautiousness around Amasawa.

“Oh, I’m thirsty. I’d like to have a cup of coffee.”

As if asking for something, Amasawa demanded for a drink with a croaky voice.

When Kei heard her voice and attitude towards her, she puts on a face that blatantly showed her dislike towards her.

“Can you make coffee for Amasawa?”

“Eh, why?!”

“If you don’t want to, I can do it. Please keep Amasawa company in the meantime.”

“...I’ll make it.”

It was a choice between choosing the role that will be entertaining the guest or the role that will be brewing the coffee. It seems she have chosen the latter.

Amasawa placed an order on Kei as she gets up and heads to the kitchen.

“I’d like sugar and milk, as well.”

“Yes, yes!”

Amazawa gave further instructions to Kei, who accepted it while pouting her cheeks furiously.

“Don’t put trash or sewage in it just because you don’t like me, ok?”

“I’m not gonna do that!”

Amasawa laughs pleasantly and continued to make Kei mad with her remarks. An unmistakable little devil...No, she might be just be a devil, minus the “little” prefix.

Only the two of us were left in the room, after Kei went to the kitchen to brew the coffee. Amasawa looked at the textbooks and notebooks that were placed on the table.

“Ah, it’s a topic that I’ve recently learned.”

“That’s what it looks like to you.”

There’s no point in repairing the situation when she already suspected everything we were up to from the beginning.

“Let’s see, what conventions were adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in 1972?”

Amasawa looked at the problem, took hold of a mechanical pencil with her left hand and wrote “World Heritage Treaty” neatly on the blank notebook.

“Correct answer~”

Amasawa answered the question herself and applauded.

“Hey, don’t write anything in my notebook without my permission!”

Kei, who was concerned about the situation, looked at Amasawa and warned her, who had written in her notebook without permission.

“Isn’t it fine? I was just helping you a little bit.”

“No it’s not!”

Kei got angry and withdrew herself back to the kitchen.

“Senpai’s girlfriend... Is kind of angry.”

She whispered that to my ears, but it would be a huge problem if Kei were to see this.

Our figures were somehow not seen, and Kei returned with the coffee in the cup without concealing her bad mood. She served it with chitin, sugar and milk.

“Here you go!”

“Thank you very much, Karuizawa-senpai~”

Amasawa said that as she smiled.

But instead of trying to drink the coffee Kei brewed, she stood up.

“Well then, it looks like I’ve already given you an apology, so I think I’ll go home now. Please feel free to use the ingredients I bought.”

The purpose she came was completed, and Amasawa turned her back to us.

“What? You weren’t even going to drink the coffee?! And yet you asked me to brew it for you?!”

“If I asked you whether you wanted me to stay or not, what would be your answer?”

“...Well, that’s... I want you to leave.”

“Isn’t that right? That’s why I’m going to leave.”

It seems she made Kei brew her coffee to purposely make her mad.

That’s what I’m afraid of.

She quickly stood up and walked away, with a soft wind trailing behind as she went past.

When Amasawa left, the room was once again filled with silence.

However, the sweet atmosphere from the room before had left as the atmosphere began to flood with heaviness.

“Kiyotaka, just who is that girl!”

“I want to know that as well.”

“...I’m really angry right now!”

It was over and I felt that there was no need to continue this conversation about Amasawa.

So, I tried changing the direction of the topic.

“Explain to me what this 20 million private points as prize money is about? Is it related to Kiyotaka’s left hand getting hurt?”

I didn’t mean to keep it a secret from her.

This was because I didn't want to waste Kei's time with such a meaningless thing.

I wasn't even able to say that.

And so, I decided to explain the whole incident to Kei.

— CHAPTER THREE —

Premonition of a Fierce Battle as Summer Approaches

The middle of June approaches. Since the special examination was held at the end of April, no new special examinations have been conducted since, and school life went back to normal. I lost track of the measures being taken by the White Room Student assigned to expel me.

The only out-of-ordinary thing that happened was the one time Amasawa visited, though there were no immediate signs of her inquiring me to drop out then.

With her visit having completely interrupted and ruined the moment between Kei and I, we never kissed nor found an opportunity to bring that situation back up again. Even though the atmosphere between the two of us continues to improve, there also continues to be an invisible wall standing between us.

Even if I wanted to get rid of that impenetrable wall, it wouldn't be something to worry about too extensively. With the passage of time, Kei will lower that wall herself, and the next steps will come naturally. Even from the perspective of trying to promote Kei's growth, taking these methods can prove to be much more effective.

The season is steadily heading towards summer, with every passing day feeling too fulfilling for mere high school students.

The temperature outside begins to gradually rise, but the temperature remains average like on any other year. On clear days, the temperature could even start reaching 30 degrees or so. We are truly beginning to reach the turning point between spring and summer.

When you have been spending time living a normal life at school for a long time, there is one specific conversation that you often overhear.

A topic revolving around love, but not a romantic one—a question of which season one likes the most. A topic which would initially seem dull ends up being a surprisingly deep and interesting one.

Even for people who were born and raised in the same place as one another can have different “favorites” among the four seasons.

I’ve experienced all four seasons in my time at this school, so I was expecting to be met with another hot season as before. I decided that I like summer the most.

Perhaps because of that, the clear, blue sky seems to be clearer, bluer, and undoubtedly more beautiful this time around.

“Good morning, Ayanokouji-senpai”

I continued to look at the beautiful sky above and walk without being aware of what was going on around me. Her voice reached me, but I didn’t mind it for a while.

—The person who that voice originates from is Tsubasa Nanase, a first-year class D student.

She seems to be going to the school on her own, and there doesn’t seem to be any friends with her.

“Oh, good morning.”

Did she happen to be walking in front and looked back only to notice me? Or had she been waiting for me this whole time?

“Is there something in the sky?”

I didn't realize that Nanase was there in front of me because I was finding the motionless sky to be something more captivating than her, or anything else around me for that matter. But after her voice formed this question, I did eventually follow it and reached her, setting the sky aside for a while.

“Nothing. I was just looking at it.”

“Looking at the sky... were you...?”

Nanase lined up next to me as we walked towards the school and followed my gaze up.

The sky was clearer this season. There was not a single cloud to be seen.

“Great weather, huh?”

“It really is. Apart from that, it's been a while, hasn't it?”

Although we had met in passing once, it had been a long time since the two of us had had a proper conversation like this.

“Yes. I haven't seen you for about a month and a half.”

Nanase had a plan to drop me out of school by colluding with Housen. As with Amasawa, it's no wonder that I feel usually uncomfortable with them.

“I really regret having done all those things to you, Ayanokouji-senpai.”

Nanase said while keeping her eyes on the sky above.

It seems like she thought about things more thoroughly than I had imagined her to have.

“Are you holding a grudge? Towards me, I mean?”

“I can't find any reason to hold a grudge. We were in the special examination, right? It was an unavoidable outcome. Besides, Nanase, you were also candid with me.”

Although Nanase had been a member of Housen's group, she had rashly taken a leap forward without even thinking about the danger that could have followed.

I remember that she had wanted to deal with Housen before he turned to his hostility.

"Um, is that special exam over already? I didn't hear anything about it ending."

"No, it will continue. It will drag on until the start of the second semester."

—Will there even be a special exam for a while? Even if that were to happen, I feel a little more troubled by the fact that Nanase and Housen have been silent for the past month and a half.

"Are you worried that I didn't come into contact with you?"

"I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't troubled by it. I'd been worried that you've been planning something behind the scenes."

"I was convinced the last time that even if I took certain measures, it wouldn't be an easy task. And now that the purpose of my actions have been revealed, it will be more uncomfortable to meet with Ayanokouji-senpai in our daily lives."

"We can only wait for another exam involving both grades again, I guess. What about your partner-in-crime?"

"I think it's known by some students that something had been done by Housen-kun."

"Due to the failure of Housen, you decided that you couldn't move carelessly anymore?"

"I don't know if it would be enough to compensate for your left hand."

Among the first graders, Kazuomi Housen is one of the students who has been attracting the most attention, which is both good and bad.

It may have been due to some kind of luck that this same Housen

became the first to take action.

The question is who knows about this special exam?

It would be easy to ask Nanase about this, although...

I've considered doing that several times, but have ultimately given up and turned around. Even if I were to ask a question, Nanase will not answer.

The remaining three classes are still keeping their secrets and hiding themselves to make it harder to understand their true identities. You can't expect your competition to maintain a level playing field anyway. Nanase merely acknowledged the existence of the special test and eliminated the disadvantage of D class.

"You have my gratitude for having helped me."

The silence that came after this stuck with us for a while. I took this as an indication that she understood.

I'm going to make the rest of the way to school with her anyway, so I decided to change the topic to something completely different.

"It looks like you've become quite accustomed to school."

It seems that things like their innocent outlook on things are lacking as they've integrated into the school.

"Yes. I think that my classmates—including myself—have become a bit more tolerant of unexpected situations. I don't know how much the upperclassmen know, but us first-year students had a second special exam at the end of May."

Just as there are internal conflicts within the second-year students, there are internal conflicts within the first-year students too.

"I didn't ask anyone directly, but I've heard of it here and there. It seems like there were some dropouts."

I heard from the second-year students that someone had dropped out because of the special examination.

"As expected from Ayanokouji-senpai. You already know about

the one boy who dropped out of class 1-C?”

That student has completely disappeared from the OAA list.

He was a student with an academic ability of grade A, but took some kind of penalty regardless.

“Where there is a dropout, there are rumors.”

“In this school, the friends who had been laughing with you a day before can be mercilessly lost. It reminded me that I need to spend my time in school in a way so as to not to regret it.”

Although it is still a fire on the other side of the river, I don’t know when that time will come to the first year D class.

[T/N: Fire on the other side of the river is an idiom saying it isn’t their problem yet as “the fire hasn’t reached their side of the land.”]

It is very important to have a firm grasp on the cold reality like Nanase does.

But I don’t know anything about the class points of other grades.

For that reason, if we’re to talk about who wins and who loses, then I won’t have any prior information.

“What were the results of the special exam for D-class?”

“Last time we came last. This time was 3rd place. Unfortunately, the result was not the best. However, this time the battle with the upper A and B classes felt much closer, so the difference in class points was quite small.”

A class and B class seem to feel a stronger solidarity and foundation underlying them.

On the other hand, the reason why C class must have sunk to the bottom was probably thanks to the dropout.

“Hasn’t Housen matured a little bit by now? Or is he—”

“I would be lying if I said he didn’t have any problematic behaviors, but he wasn’t involved with the dropout this time. It seems like Housen-kun is obsessed about Ayanokouji-senpai, after all.”

Nanase, who had been looking at the sky the whole time, finally looked towards me with a bitter smile.

“I think it might have been the result of sheer brute force, but I think he has become a little more mature thanks to Ayanokouji-senpai. Do you also think that Housen-kun’s strong emotions, which were aimed only towards the first-year students before, are also directed towards the second-year students now? He keeps asking to “have a go at the second-years as soon as possible.” I’m relieved to hear that.”

—That’s certainly something to be relieved about for the first-year students. From the few times that mine and Housen’s gazes met, he definitely felt like someone that would want an immediate go at taking on the second-years like that.

“Eventually, we may get to the point where the second-years will have to fight against the first-year students.”

I subconsciously touch my injured hand once.

If Nagumo’s policy is followed, the days of inter-year competition will not be far away.

“I will live a school life without regrets.”

“That’s good.”

Just as Nanase said, the friends who had been laughing together can inevitably disappear the next day.

It’s simply a school in which something like that can happen.

That’s why we have to spend every single one of our days without letting even one day pass by listlessly.

Every passing day will never come back, only to indefinitely stay as a relic of our past.

“But that also goes for you, Ayanokouji-senpai. Make sure to live a school life without any regrets, please.”

Nanase said this as if to suggest that the rest of my life in school may be cut short in the near future.

But the eyes I saw on her face possessed a firm will.

“Of course, I’ll make it something I won’t regret.”

To this, Nanase nodded with a boldly as if finally satisfied.

“With that, if you’ll excuse me...”

With the school building close to us, Nanase bowed and said goodbye.

1

Considering that the first-year students took the second special exam at the end of May, it wouldn’t be a big deal for the second-year students to have their special exam revealed to them at any moment. At that time, I would have to be ready.

And as if to test that preparedness, an unusual homeroom began.

“It looks like everybody is here today. That’s good.”

Chabashira-sensei-sensei, who just finished taking attendance, started operating the tablet in order to display an image on the monitor.

She prepared everything quickly, and when the screen switched to a pure white, she turned to the students.

“My relationship with you guys is only growing as we speak, I suppose.”

A new special examination begins.

Everyone clings heavily to each and every word of Chabashira-sensei, waiting attentively for her next statement.

Chabashira-sensei chuckles amidst the silence after having attracted the attention of most of the students.

“It’s true that we’ll be talking about special exams later, but we’ll keep that excitement on hold for a while. Let’s save it for

later. First, let's talk about summer vacation.”

With that said, Chabashira-sensei dropped her line of sight onto the tablet laying in front of her. Then, an image is projected onto the monitor.

What the first picture displayed was of a luxury cruise ship.

We, D-Class, are already familiar with a similar ship.

“I will first inform you about your incoming summer vacation”

Instantly, the students looking at one other seemed to express their joy through some innocent words.

However, a different memory is imprinted within us deeply, which is associated with the combination of a ship and vacation.

This school isn't always sunshine and roses. As this fact deeply-embedded within us is being recalled, the pictures on the monitor shifts from the exterior of the ship to its interior. The schedule is displayed as well.

“From the 4th of August to the 11th of August, you can enjoy your summer vacation freely on this luxury cruise liner. You can enjoy theatrical plays and luxurious meals. No special exams will be held onboard.”

In other words, a pure, ordinary summer vacation is ascertained for about a week.

The students who had strong suspicions about the cruise ship vacation awaiting us seemed to loosen up a bit.

However, the easing of our minds vanished at the same time the video blacks out.

It's as if the depths of the dark monitor were poison to our eyes.

“But in order to fully enjoy this cruise, the next special test must be completed successfully.”

The students quickly and simultaneously snap back to reality after Chabashira-sensei made them feel dreamy for a little while.

The process of having one's spirits lifted up only to be dropped

back down tends to hurt more than having one's spirits dropped right away.

But instead of sulking, everybody is immediately turning their gears to step up against the reality facing them. They are preparing to accept the conditions and this new test head on.

“It seems like you are all learning as you are expected to be.”

Chabashira-sensei smiled convincingly, impressed at how far the class had come.

She didn't bring up the contents of the vacation first out of mere meanness.

I wondered if she wanted to prove that D class now is different from the class one year ago.

It's because we are learning to strengthen ourselves through a series of repeated trials.

“When does the special exam begin?”

Wasting no time, the question is fired off by Horikita sitting in the center seat.

“It would have normally begun between today and tomorrow; that tends to be the case, normally. But this time, unfortunately, it's a little while into the future—the next special examination will take place in the summer break.”

A special exam using summer vacation at the end of the semester?

What worries me is that it is too early, even if we are told about it in advance. What does the announcement mean, even though it's still more than a month ahead?

Anyway, if you look at the flow so far, there is one special exam that comes to the minds of the students even if they try to suppress it from their memories. Perhaps the moment when everybody's thoughts seemed to agree, the words were embodied through Chabashira-sensei.

“You will participate in the “Uninhabited Island Survival” and compete with each other.”

The uninhabited island survival special exam. The interclass competitions held during the first-year students’ summer vacations. These are all things firmly imprinted on our minds. A special test that uses rules such as competing with each class to use as many class points as possible, guessing who is the class leader, and acquiring points by occupying bases.

“Are we going to do that this year as well...?”

Keisei, who usually listens to the explanation of the special exam quietly, muttered.

It was hard for the D-class students to separate into conflicting groups of boys and girls as a result of the unrest that had settled onto them; they would have to compete together whether they liked it or not.

“Everyone remembers last year’s Deserted Island Survival Exam, but what’s happening this year is unlike any other. It will be tougher than any special exam. And, of course, it also means that the amount of private points to be awarded will be extremely large.”

—In last year’s desert island survival, we were free to compete using whatever means we wanted. If you want to stick to just winning, you need to make thorough savings, and if you throw away winning, you are allowed to spend points relatively freely. Moreover, even if severe warnings such as expulsion and suspension were given to us, it was necessary to violate important rules.

It will be harsh and tough, but how will this year’s special examination be different compared to last year’s?

I’m sure Chabashira-sensei will give us the answer to that question whether we wait patiently for it or not.

“First of all, let’s start with the schedule in detail. You won’t

have to take notes at this point in time because you can download and check it on your devices later.” Chabashira-sensei reminded us as the monitor lit up to the special examination’s schedule being projected onto it.

July 19th: Gather on the grounds and depart by bus. Board a passenger ship from the port and start travelling.

July 20th: The special examination officially begins. The examination will be explained, the necessary materials will be delivered, etc.

August 3rd: Special exam ends. Rankings are announced onboard. Rewards* will be paid accordingly.
(*August’s share of private points will be paid after taking into account the results of the uninhabited island test)

August 4th: Free cruising on board all day.

August 11th: Arrive at the port. Return to school and be dismissed.

The closing ceremony to announce the end of the first semester will be on Friday, the 16th. The schedule was that we would depart on the trip three days after this.

Moreover, it’s clear that the special examination period will be twice as long as the previous one—extending to 2 weeks.

“Sensei, won’t that mean summer vacation will get, like, super shortened if we follow that schedule? What’s gonna, like, even happen?”

The question was shot out by Nishimura as if it were an arrow flying straight towards Chabashira-sensei. Summer vacation generally lasts for about 40 days, but even if you were to count the time we are going to spend onboard as part of that “summer vacation”, you’d only be left with about 24 days. It’s no wonder that there are going to be students that would complain.

“Unfortunately, there is no compensation. Summer vacation being shortened this year is a fact.”

Chabashira-sensei addresses this arrow that Nishimura had fired directly.

The school had accepted the students’ complaints without any hesitation.

Of course, a little booing was inevitable.

For many students, holidays are more valuable than the days that they spend studying at school.

“However, you should accept the opportunity of spending a week on a luxury cruise ship as a sort of “compensation” for your lost days of summer vacation. As I’ve said in the past, the time you’ll be spending on the cruise will be blissful. You’ll be able to enjoy it as a break.”

It seems like that’s the best one could’ve done to slightly dampen the blow.

Last year, we also got to cruise on a luxury liner... but at that time we couldn’t enjoy it for long. I remember that after the desert island survival examination was over, I still felt like we were being chased by retrospective concerns of the special examination despite it already having been over.

The outside world is fresh and exciting for us—the ones with

lives being restricted to the school grounds. It can be said that it would be the best summer vacation to be able to live a life different from our usual ones. Whether that be on a cruise or not. Even the students who were complaining displayed a level of understanding of that fact. If you become unsatisfied, you become unable to move forward.

Unlike last year, there will also be some private points to go all out with, to some extent. This was for the sake of making sure that you won't feel uncomfortable on board. That would take some stress off the students' shoulders.

"Now let's move on to the main topic. Between this and last year's uninhabited island survival test, the biggest difference can be said to be the one regarding "scale." In addition to the two-week test period, the uninhabited island that will be used for this will be significantly larger than before."

A sky-view of the uninhabited island and the boundless expanse of sea surrounding it is projected onto the monitor.

"And, besides that, it will not be conducted between students of your grade level; it will be conducted amongst students of all grade levels."

In other words, it will be performed on a scale exceeding the previous special examination in a variety of ways.

"The number of opponents participating in the competition will be larger than all of you have ever seen in any other special examination."

This is a problematic development. A survival test involving all grades?

Moreover, one's opponents will not be limited to students of their same grade level. This, particularly, was the most surprising part.

"That's just... aren't the first-years at a clear disadvantage? And

the third-years... won't they be at a complete advantage?"

The question came from Hirata, someone who had a clear hatred for inequality. If it was going to be an exam involving teaming up with students from other grade levels, everyone would have been on equal footing. But this time, it didn't seem like that was going to be the case. If so, the age-dependent difference in physical abilities and experience will end up creating a considerable disparity between the students' abilities across all three grade levels.

"I know what you mean. But something like a test that's 100% fair is something that's impossible in all situations. Even if you looked only at the second-year students, there is almost an entire year's difference between the late-birth students and early-birth ones. Are you saying those two are fighting on the same terms?"

In other words, there are even situations where a single year of difference in grade level carries a handicap of nearly two years when it comes to students' ages.

"If there is a need for advice from the first-year students, their upperclassmen will be obliged to answer as their upperclassmen. But, at the end of the day, it is up to the individual to give them advice or not. Likewise, you can also ask for a third-year student's opinion."

It seems like you can help the other students as much as you want, but that would be the same as sending salt to the enemy.

[T/N: Sending salt to the enemy means helping someone despite them being opposed to you.]

"There are some handicaps given to you depending on the grade you're in. But basically, everyone will be fighting on equal footing. When it comes to how the few disparities between grades will be "filled in," the lower your grade level, the higher the potential will be for the rewards that you'll be receiving. In other words, the

penalty that you'll end up having to deal with will be compensated by the fact that the size of your reward will adapt to take that penalty into account."

The higher your grade level, the smaller your reward and the bigger your penalty. It seems to be similar to the special exam held in April of this year where we had to partner up with first-years. The penalty for taking the same exam differs between the two grades: the first-years only had their monthly transfers of private points halted, while the second-years had to drop out.

"Let's move on with that in mind. Next, I will explain the new rules for the uninhabited island survival exam."

Immediately upon hearing these words, every single student directed their attention to the front of the classroom, as if to confront the information about to be given.

"Today, we won't be revealing all the rules just yet."

We quietly listen to the instructions given and watch the image projected onto the monitor change.

The word "Group" occupied the entire screen—written in massive, bold letters—and immediately captured the attention of all of the students.

"Before we move on to learn about the exact rules for this uninhabited island survival exam, it will be necessary to first understand how the group dynamics are structured."

The prelude to this special examination is likely going to take longer than ever.

And this fact seems to simply add to the gravity of the uninhabited island survival that awaits us ahead.

"In the next special exam—the uninhabited island survival—you will be allowed to work in a large group of up to 6 people, and we are going to be employing rules that will allow you to cooperate within them. It will be possible to form these groups with students

in any class as long as they are in the same grade level as yourselves. That is something that you will need to keep in mind.”

“But that’s just... the entirety of the second-year student body will be allies...?”

Horikita’s soliloquy—which saw all people as enemies except for those from our class—echoed in the room.

Although this soliloquy should have reached the ears of Chabashira-sensei, she continued talking without responding to it.

“For about four weeks from today—until Friday, July 16th—second-year students will be given the right to choose up to two students to form a small group of up to three people. This will be the basis of the large group. However, the rule I mentioned previously still stands: the members you partner with must be students of the same grade level. This is a rule that you still cannot bypass.”

So she means that she wouldn’t mind us working with other students from the second-year, be it A class or C class.

It seems that a small group of up to 4 people will be allowed for the first-year students while the third-years were in the same scenario as us—only being able to form a small group of up to 3 people. This may be one of the numerous handicaps that were prepared to fill in the disparities between grade levels. All of this was clearly displayed on the monitor for us to see.

At this rate, it may also be possible for all the classes to cooperate and form one, strongest group to compete with. If you could form an ideal group, you would naturally gain a higher chance to win. Rather, if the other grades also formed groups with the best selection of people, it will end up being *necessary* for each class to collude and compete in this way.

“And next are the requirements for the distribution of boys and girls. In the case of mixed gender groups, it is necessary that girls

occupy more than two-thirds of each group.”

Is it not possible to have a group of two boys and one girl or one boy and one girl?

The possible group combinations are displayed on the monitor:

- Boys:
1 boy only; 2 boys only; 3 boys only
- Girls:
1 girl only; 2 girls only; 3 girls only
- Mixed:
1 boy & 2 girls

It could solely be one of these 7 patterns. The combinations of “two boys & one girl” and “one boy & one girl” could not form a group and will be rejected.

“What if you don’t create a group... or if you can’t?”

“As shown in the list that can be combined, a single person can form a group of just themselves. The merit decreases that way, but there are no problems with that. The next special test can be done regardless of the number of groups participating. People who want to compete on their own are allowed regardless of gender.”

Despite the large number of people that will be competing, will it still be possible for a single person to compete in the special test without any problems?

“Some students may think that working alone is more comfortable, but it is safer to have a large number of people in the group. In other words, simply having a large number of people will prove to be advantageous, and there are benefits that are also available. We recommend that you don’t choose the option of competing solo.

I thought it would be good if a single person could easily

compete, but the reality is that students who could not form a group would have to be tested while placed into a disadvantageous position. With this becoming clear, it was like the minimum requirement for all students was internally set to be forming a group of three.

“But, at the same time, there is a caveat to creating a complete group. Once it is established, its members will be unable to move to different groups for any reason whatsoever.”

It seems that they will be stuck as one another’s allies until the very end of the special examination.

“It sounds like you can’t change groups, but you can create a large group of up to 6 people at some point during the special examination. Though, you can only create a small group containing a maximum of 3 people right now. When will that be possible? I wonder.”

This question from Hirata is directed towards Chabashira-sensei.

“Yeah, that’s an important point. When the special exam begins, the formation of small groups will be banned; two groups of three, three groups of two, or six independent groups will have to combine. However, similar conditions for forming a group exist for that process as well. Groups containing 4 or more members will have to ensure that the portion of girl members must be 50% or more.”

It seems that the requirements will be reduced from at least two-thirds to at least one-half of the group as girls. With these restrictions, it may even seem like a strategy to keep one’s group limited to only one or two people.

“If you ask me, at this point some students might think that it would be better to form a group after the special examination started, but that will not be as straightforward as you’d think.

Groups will be allowed to form freely, but the difficulty with hoping to form a large group during the duration of the examination will be very high. There will be many cases where you won't even create a group of up to 6 people even if you wanted."

It seems that there was going to be no merit to being a small number, but considering the risk that you may have to survive the uninhabited island survival all by yourself for the whole duration, forming at least a three-person group at this stage may be better after all. Will it be safe to leave it for when the examination actually begins?

40 students in each class for all grades without considering dropouts. Each class has 4 classes, so 160 students per grade. Since it has been stated that it will be possible to form a group of up to 6 people, this exam will have a minimum of 81 groups in all grades. There seems to be no guarantee that a group of 6 will be formed in the first place, however; a group containing only three may compete in some cases.

"I know that you may find me telling you to form a small group puzzling. You can't narrow down the people you need unless you know what the exam is."

Everyone knew that that was something that they had considered already. Chabashira-sensei continued.

"I can't just give away what the next special exam will be, but I'll just touch on the skills that you may need for it."

After saying that, Chabashira-sensei looked at the firmly-seated, intently-listening students.

"In last year's desert island survival, there were many students who felt uneasy because they were unable to show their potential. However, it will be necessary to realize that "all abilities" will be necessary for this year's examination. Physical ability, mental ability, communication ability. There is great potential to utilize the

abilities that each of you are individually good at besides even if they are not what I have just listed.”

You can't just be good at your studies or good at sports.

It means forming relationships with students that are good at the things you aren't will be advantageous.

Uninhabited island survival. There is no limit to the number of things that you could learn in preparation. But the same could not be said about the number of connections that you would need to form with your knowledge when thrown into these situations.

For example, when a rule is created that food will not be received unless a problem is answered correctly.

It could be possible for a group formed solely on physical strength to be defeated immediately.

“It's important that students who are close to each other work together, but it is highly possible that the overall strength of the group will directly shape the results of the special exam. It is advised that you consider the right person in the right place.”

There is simply a high probability that the students who have high overall strength will work together to gain the highest advantage over others.

However, choosing a “good student,” as Chabashira-sensei says, is one of the best things to spend the most time thinking about.

Since you don't know what the contents of the test are, there is a good possibility that a team's cooperation ability may have the biggest say in the final results.

“I said that the larger the number of people you have, the more advantageous it will be, but the main reason for this is not the fact that 6 heads are better than 1, but rather because there are rules that the test will adopt that may encourage having more teammates. Let's compare a situation where Hirata has chosen to participate in the special examination alone to a situation in which he has formed

a three-person group with Sudou and Hondou.”

After she typed something onto the tablet, the monitor switched and the two scenarios were visualized. Hirata’s name on its own on the left, and Hirata’s name with Sudou and Hondou on the right—all written in blue.

“Let’s assume that during the special exam, Hirata was unable to continue because of some accident that prevented him from continuing. His “group” of 1 would be disqualified immediately as a penalty.”

Hirata’s lone name turns red on the left, indicating disqualification.

“On the other hand, what happens if Hirata retires halfway as a part of his group of three?”

Hirata’s name turned red again, but the other two remained blue.

“Hirata, who was disqualified, will be returned to the ship, but the other two will be allowed to continue participating in the special examination without any issues. If the group continues on to eventually win first place, Hirata will naturally continue to be considered a part of that group. He will be allowed to stand at the top of the podium along with his teammates.”

It’s completely fine if the group survives even if an individual drops out?

That just means that any number of people below 6 in a group is nothing but a disadvantage.

“No matter how many people are forced to drop out of the examination on the way, the group will function smoothly until the very last one. If you’d like to think of it as such, you could say that each member of a group will be like an extra life or opportunity to continue on.”

So that’s it. It has already been determined that the importance of being in a large group will be massive.

No matter how talented a student is, accidents like injuries and illnesses are, ultimately, common occurrences.

In order to reduce the risks that accompany those accidents, the formation of a group of 6 people will be indispensable for winning.

“If that’s enough to teach you about the importance of groups in the special examination this time, I will now move on to tell you more about the rewards that will come from it.”

For the first time, the lasting impacts that this uninhabited island survival will have on the class will be revealed.

○ Rewards

1st Place

300 class points; 1 million private points; 1 protection point

2nd Place

200 class points; 500,000 private points

3rd Place

100 class points; 250,000 private points

All Groups in the Top 50% (including the top 3)

50,000 private points

All Groups in the Top 70% (including the top 3)

10,000 private points

* Class points earned by the top 3 groups will be paid for by the lowest 3 groups in the same grade.

** Class points will be evenly distributed by the number of classes in a group regardless of the number of people from each class.

The point rewards displayed on the monitor were quite expensive in terms of both class points and private points. Even making it to third place at the end of the examination will have enormous implications. But, more importantly, there was a strange and suspicious note beneath the rewards listed.

“This will be the list of rewards available this time. Inevitably, you will have to form a group with students of the same grade level as you, which ultimately ends up being a battle between grade levels. However, the impact of rewards and penalties will be “for each group.” In other words, if a group only consisting of students from D-class takes 1st place, the 1st place rewards will all be awarded to D-class. Conversely, if a group consisting of members from 4 different classes takes 1st place, it will be equally distributed across 4 classes. If you can form a group that collects the strongest students from each class, the win rate may increase, but each class will receive less class points, in the end.”

Even if there is a difference in the number of people from each class, all 300 points will be shared equally among the 4 classes.

Then, the difference in class points will not change when you take 1st place. No, we can only form a group of up to 3 people in this period, so we won't not be able to mix all four classes in the first place. With this, it would end up being impossible to have an ideal discussion.

“To add onto that, the enormous total of 600 class points that will be awarded to the top 3 groups are to be collected evenly from the grades spread out in the bottom 3 groups. If the group in first place is a second-year group and the lowest rank is in a first-year group, class points will be collected evenly from each first-year class. In this way, different grade-levels will also be compared.”

Would that imply a significant possibility that this exam could

develop into a competition against the other grade levels?

“Next, I will explain the situation where the upper and lower groups to be compared happen to be in the same grade. In this case, the classes involved will be taken into account a bit more. The classes in the lowest group will lose 100 points, the group second-to-last will lose 66 points, and the group third-to-last will lose 33 points. These will be the class points that will be awarded to the winning classes. If you achieve 1st place with a group consisting of members from a single class, you can get 300 points, sure. But, at the same time, if you also sink to the lowest rank, 100 points will be deducted and, despite the reward of 300, you will really only be gaining a net profit of 200 points.”

75 points per class will be awarded to a group of 4 classes if they achieve 1st place. No matter how many times you gain first or second or third place, if a group including students from the same class as yourself sinks down to the bottom, you may lose money after all.

“If the number of class points collected from the losing teams is less than the reward promised, the rest will also be compensated by the school. This also applies when collecting these rewards from other grades as well.”

Even if the losing class doesn't have enough class points to pay, it seems that the winning classes' rewards will be guaranteed.

“Also, if a group of 4 classes takes the lower ranks, the class points paid will be slightly reduced. The lowest rank will be 75 points, the second lowest rank will be 50 points, and the third lowest rank will be 25 points. It's an equal burden.”

Is it like a little bonus for being an exam that makes cooperation a little difficult?

“And penalties will naturally be given to the groups that sink to the bottom. Class points will obviously be collected based on the

results of who the bottom three groups end up being as I mentioned, but it wouldn't be enough to just leave their penalty at that. Students belonging to the bottom five groups will be dropped out of school."

The students involuntarily gasped at the thought of that.

5 groups; a maximum of 30 people could have expulsion forced onto them.

"If, for example, only students from the second-year D-class are included in the group of students dropping out...

"...in the worst case, we'll end up with 9 people. But that's unlikely. Should you be penalized, you can save yourself by paying 6 million private points. This amount will be divided by the number of people in each group. Therefore, a group of 6 people will only need to pay 1 million private points each to prevent that from happening."

Even in the unlikely event that our class' students become the targets of the penalty, it seems that there will still be a way to prevent our class from meeting this fate.

"Because private points cannot be lent or borrowed after the test starts, you'll have to check the conditions of your private point arsenal before boarding the ship."

Is doing this before the special exam necessary because the option of helping each other will no longer be available later?

"I think there will be some students who couldn't afford this even with the help of their group in the case that they receive this penalty. But what happens if one person does not have enough balance?"

"Don't worry about that. Even if 5 out of 6 people are short on money, the sixth member—if he or she has enough—will be saved by paying their portion of 1 million private points."

It seems that if you are in a group of more than one person, you won't have to worry about being dragged down.

“With that, does everybody understand?”

The hand raised belonged to Horikita, sitting immediately in front of Chabashira-sensei.

“The rule is that if you work with other classes, the rewards will be shared evenly. Doesn’t this mean we will end up choosing only our own classmates to form a group with?”

Horikita suggested that it may be meaningless to divide points across multiple classes even if choosing members from other classes gives you a better chance at winning.

“If you decide that there is no merit, you may choose to assemble with only your classmates. That’s it.”

Chabashira-sensei responded, prompting everyone to think about what to do for themselves.

There is no surefire way to answer this problem. However, one thing is clear: if you try to monopolize rewards and create groups with only members from the same class as yourself, the remaining, jumbled groups may struggle, and, as a result, you may end up forcing these weaker groups to form.

You may force groups to form that may have a higher chance of dropping out... On the other hand, if the number of classes that your group consists of increases, the net rewards gained will decrease, but it will be easier for more capable groups to form besides your own; the risk of receiving a penalty will be inhibited. Of course, this creates yet another risk.

Creating groups for this uninhabited island survival special examination...

This is a summary of the information Chabashira-sensei has given us so far:

- Up to 2 weeks will be spent surviving on an uninhabited island

- A variety of abilities will be required; it will be advantageous for a team's total capability to be high, but intermember cohesion is something that cannot be ignored.

- Special rewards such as class points, private points, and protect points will be given to the top three groups (however, class points will be equally divided by the number of classes these top groups consist of)

- A minimum of 1 person, upwards to a maximum of 6, will be allowed to form a group. The larger the number, the better.

(Group ranking is determined by the person who dropped out last per group.)

- Lower-ranking groups may be penalized and forced to drop out

- A small group (up to 3 people) can be freely formed before the end of the school year according to the rules

- It will not be easy to form large groups when the test begins

Although this is roughly what the test will be like, it is not possible to fully grasp the true nature of this examination with just this information.

“It was a complicated explanation up to this point, but there is still a lot more to explain.”

After taking a break, Chabashira-sensei moves on with the following explanation:

“Let's see...”

The image on the monitor changes once again to display 8 items.

List of Basic Cards:

Preceding Usable points at the beginning of the exam

- is multiplied by 1.5x.
- Add Doubles the private point reward that the owner of this card receives
- Halve Halves the private points that will have to be paid by the owner of the card in the case of a penalization.
- Piggyback Obtain an additional half of the private points rewarded to the group *specified* by this owner of this card at the beginning of the exam
(Effect disappears if the owner joins the group they specified.)
- Insurance If the owner of this card is disqualified from the exam due to poor health, they will receive a day to recover before rejoining the fray
(Disqualification from cheating is exempt from the effects of this card.)

List of Special Cards:

- Increase The owner of this card may join a group of 6 to form a group of **7**
(Effective immediately after the start of the exam; does not factor in the gender ratio of the group.)

- Invalid Nullifies all points that have to be paid in the case of a penalization
(Only reflected to the individual student possessing this card.)
- Trial Multiplies *class points* rewards by 1.5x
However, if the owner of this card is unable to enter the top 30% groups in the final rankings, the owner's *whole group* will be penalized
(The school will compensate for the increased reward.)

“Wh-What is this?”

“These are items that will be given to each individual that will each affect the uninhabited island survival special examination. It has some impact on it, but that’s not to say that it will completely render the exam pointless. Each one’s effects are explained in their descriptions. You should be able to understand most of them at first glance.”

There are 8 types lined up—including cards that are specialized for special examinations and cards that are specialized for simply protecting yourself. While the latter may be useful for protecting oneself, the reception for those may be mixed because, at first glance, they seem to be accepting and preparing for their owners’ defeat.

The trickiest one, however, will be the “Trial Card”, which is the only item on the list potentially possessing disadvantages for their users. If you can use it well, it has more potential than any one

of the other rewards. But it is not a simple process to cut into the top 30%.

“Each student randomly obtains one of these eight types. They will be distributed to everyone tomorrow morning. These obtained cards can be transferred or traded with students from *only* the same grade level as yourselves until special examination officially starts. You can see what you have in the OAA

“Moreover, you can sell your own card to any student who wants to buy it. You can collect multiple cards for yourselves too, through whatever means necessary. However, effects do not stack up. Meaning that, if you have two cards of the same cards, then only one will take effect. The other will be useless.”

Card outline and rules

- Both basic and special cards can be traded as long as it stays within one’s grade level
- Trading within the class is impossible, and once a card has its owner changed, it cannot be traded again
- The effects of cards do not stack up even if you use multiple of that same type

In summary, that means that it *is* possible for a single user to have up to 7 cards active simultaneously.

Then again, some of the cards can have negative and/or positive impacts on its user, so it may not necessarily be wise. In the end, no matter what means you employ to compete in the exam, only effective means will achieve results.

“Additionally, there are only three sets of each special cards handed out in each grade, and this will be done randomly. Therefore, it may be possible for a single class to be lucky enough to possess all three special cards for themselves. That’s all.”

The explanation of rewards and penalties. The explanation of the uninhabited island test.

And the explanation of distributed “items” that were to be known as “cards.”

We had finished listening to the overview for the uninhabited island survival special exam.

“Some people may not understand everything just from this explanation, so the special examination manual will be automatically distributed to your devices by lunch break. This way, you’ll be able to check it when you get the time.”

Chabashira-sensei concluded after finishing her explanation of the special examination. The school bell sounds and prompts the end of the first period.

“This examination will be about taking your time to slowly think about what kind of group dynamic you’re going to aim for. You have time. Use it.”

Leaving some advice, Chabashira-sensei left the classroom. The students gathered together immediately.

Meanwhile, Kouenji, who sits on my left—past one vacant seat—got up and tried to immediately leave the classroom and go to the hall. It seemed to just be something that Kouenji would do normally, but his pace is more rushed than usual.

I felt uncomfortable with what I was observing of Kouenji’s behavior and decided to follow him.

To avoid being noticed, I try to eliminate the sound of my footsteps and hide my presence as much as possible. However, there’s not much I can do here as the corridor doesn’t have an infinite amount of obstacles to hide myself with like on an uninhabited island.

But ordinary people don’t usually live their lives while being aware of everything around them, much less being followed. Even

if an amateur follows an amateur, they won't be noticed through their half-baked efforts.

After a while, Kouenji turned a corner, and I got close enough to listen in on his conversation with none other than Chabashira-sensei.

I held my breath at the corner and quietly listened to their conversation.

“So what do you need?”

“I think there was a key explanation that you didn't give me, sensei.”

Chabashira-sensei waited for Kouenji to finish his question as she seemed to face him patiently.

“A key explanation?”

“What will happen if the person who took the special exam alone is sick on the first day?”

“What do you think will happen?”

I could not see her, but Chabashira-sensei seemed to laugh cheerfully.

“You retired last year due to feigned illness. Unfortunately, it won't work this year. You'll be penalized without having any special exceptions taken for you—you'll be paying the 6 million points, in other words. That will not be something under your control.”

“Hah, yes, that's exactly what I was wondering about. I'm afraid I won't have money to be carelessly spending every evening then.”

It seemed like Kouenji was still planning to retire in this uninhabited island exam.

There seems to be no way to escape the deserted island survival challenge this time.

“Well, in that case, what are you going to do? Are you going to grasp all of your freedom and just drop out?”

“Well, what are you going to do about it? No matter what you say or do, I’m not going to listen, sensei.”

—Kouenji expressed that he was satisfied with Chabashira-sensei’s answer, thus she began to leave. I heard her footsteps gradually fading, all the way until I couldn’t hear them anymore.

Kouenji will start moving soon. In that case, wouldn’t overstaying my welcome be unnecessary?

I decided to leave the place without making any noise.

But—

“On a side note, who has been quietly following behind me and eavesdropping on me this whole time?”

I could feel Kouenji turning back to face my direction with his gaze fixated onto me: the one who had been quietly tailing and watching him.

“If you would like to come out and show yourself or not, you are free to choose now.”

It didn’t feel like his words had been whimsically thrown out. It truly felt like an animal gazing back at and speaking to me...

Although I could have gone back to the classroom without showing myself, I decided to reveal myself obediently.

“Ayanokouji-boy. What could I help you with?”

He didn’t seem to be surprised at all and quickly accepted that it had been me.

Though his attitude wasn’t one that suggested he knew all along the identity of the person quietly trailing him. It was more like it wouldn’t have made any difference to him to know who it had been.

“Horikita told me to keep an eye on you. She wanted to ‘know the motives behind Kouenji’s behavior,’ or so she said.”

“Hm.”

Kouenji, who was looking at me like I was a highly-valued product on display in a chic store, slowly walked towards me.

“You seem quite skilled in hiding your intent by claiming so. But neither the intent to tell the truth nor to lie can be detected from you, Ayanokouji-boy. If it is coming from someone like you, I’m not the kind of person who would believe a word you say.”

“You never really seem like the type of human being that would trust anyone, frankly.”

“Ha-ha-ha. You’re completely right about that. I never really do choose to trust anybody that isn’t myself. Rather, would it be more accurate to say that I choose not to be interested instead?”

Kouenji, who has made almost all the way to where I was standing, stopped just one step in front of me.

“Would it not be safe to say that it is the same for you, Ayanokouji-boy?”

—Kouenji left the classroom without changing his facial expression when I got a perfect score in mathematics.

Since then, I didn’t even think about asking anyone for details about it afterwards.

I couldn’t figure out what parts of anything that Kouenji said was a lie and what parts weren’t.

“How do you plan on approaching the next special exam?”

“Let’s see... I’ll give you a consultation, but could you elect to place me in your group?”

I was wondering how to respond, but I finally understand now. That’s what it was.

If he could form a ‘group’ with at least one other person, Kouenji would be able to immediately retire at the beginning of the special examination.

“Sorry about this, but I’ll have to refuse. I can’t afford to form a group with even a single person who will be sure to retire immediately.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Is that so? Well, in that case, it can’t be helped.”

“But will approaching the exam like that be completely fine? Even if you do find a group willing to put you in somewhere, in the end you will be leaving the misfortune of withdrawal to them.”

“If I retire without doing anything, you are correct in that that will come to be the case.”

Kouenji continued making the steps that he had stopped taking and passed by me.

“Well, I will be taking my sweet time in considering how I’ll survive until the time for the special examination actually approaches.”

After saying these last few words, Kouenji went back to the classroom ahead of me.

2

“A special test on an uninhabited island for the second year in a row. I wasn’t expecting this...”

“It feels like there’s still some information we’re not being given yet.”

When I returned to the classroom, the discussions that the announcement of a special examination usually brought about had already started.

It seems that the situation is being organized by Yousuke, who had gathered everybody near the seats in the front row where Horikita sits.

Kouenji also returned to his seat, seemingly captivated by his own reflection in his favorite hand mirror.

“This time, the most important point to take note of is that you can form a group with anyone in the same grade, subject to certain

conditions.”

There is no doubt that this was a new rule never before seen in the special examinations so far.

In the first place, a rule like this being announced for the special examination was subverting any and all expectations we had.

“But won’t the class points will be distributed when you win? Sudou said it was going to be a mess so I understand the theory, but teaming up with other classes leaves a bad taste, nevertheless.”

Exactly. It is quite natural for Sudou to bring up that aspect of the special examination; this special examination is going to be a battle between grade levels as much as it is going to be a battle between individual classes. The most efficient method of approaching an examination like this is going to be by having your group consist of only classmates, in the first place.

Even so, the school has prepared some interesting rules.

It becomes easier to aim for larger rewards if you choose to form a group with a large number of people regardless of what classes they’re in. But, at the same time, dispersing the risks by grouping with your “opponents” will seem to leave a bad taste. Low risk low return. On the other hand, if your group is formed by narrowing your scope to only the people in the same class as yourself, it could instead become an opportunity for high risk and high return.

The most ideal option would be to form two groups of 3 people each from the same class and have these groups join up to form a bigger one.

However, Chabashira-sensei did say that organizing larger groups will not be easy once the special examination actually begins. If there is no guarantee that you will be able to form these groups freely, the damage following that failure will be great.

However, it is also a fact that this special examination will give each student tremendous destructive power. If students from a

single class dominate the top three groups, a total of 600 class points could be gained. If D-class manages to achieve this from the second-years, it would be a one-way express ticket taking its students directly to B-class.

“But I think we’ll be able to make up for the human resources that our own class doesn’t necessarily have available. And if we make a group with just our class... What if other classes begin to collude behind our backs? In that case, only the D-class may end up sinking down.”

Needless to say, it will be ideal for only students from D-class to dominate.

If one class chooses to fight alone, there is a risk that the other three may begin to work together. At the end of the day, if you lose, it becomes nothing but high-risk low return.

“Even if you can’t just win, early withdrawal carries the risk of having to drop out. In other words, unless you have a lot of confidence... There is no reason to give up the opportunity to form a group of 6 with other classes if you truly wanted to win.”

This special examination—which will lead classes to view one another as both friends and enemies—is likely to be something that has never been seen before.

Based on that, will it prove to be an important strategy to form combined groups with students from other classes immediately for that single purpose? But there will be no guarantee that all of the other classes will be thinking to approach the examination this way. After all, even if you come to the conclusion that there will be no advantage in only forming groups within your own class, it would also be quite normal for a class to think that they could outclass the other classes for the potential of gaining that large number of class points. The lower the class, the more this mode of thinking may be picked up.

Therefore, the main premise for letting students start their groups before the test began would be to let them decide how they wanted to approach the examination.

“Sakayanagi-san, Ryuuen-kun, and Ichinose-san, how do you suppose they’ll approach the competition?”

To determine what they will do, Horikita spread her ideas across the whole class starting with Yousuke.

“I think A-class, which will be acting on their own, will not run into any issues if the classes are mixed. No matter which group wins, there will be no problems for them as long their class points are not reduced. On the other hand, for the lower three classes—including us—we will just want to close that gap however and to whatever degree possible.”

“So how about forming an alliance within these 3 classes? If they are only a distance away from A-class, even B-class may be willing to work with us in the D-class.”

A good idea was brought up by Sudou while he was listening.

The idea of having the lower three classes collude to target A-class through the means of establishing them as the common enemy.

“That’s to say that the enemy of our enemy is our friend. The idea of trying to isolate A-class is not bad. Ichinose-san probably has a good chance to accompany this proposal.”

“But if we make a proposal to isolate the A-class, we must consider backlash in the form of the resentment we may suffer from afterwards. Considering Sakayanagi-san’s personality, she will probably devote many resources to the lowest D-class.”

Normally, she should focus on kicking down the second-place B-class.

However, as Yousuke says, Sakayanagi tends to persistently continue to pursue the prey that she has set her sights on once.

“I think we need to quietly restrict and choke the upper classes as much as we possibly can.”

“Even if our three classes compete in unison, it would be best if the ones to bring this idea up first isn’t us.”

They consider having a different representative take the place of Sakayanagi for waging this kind of a battle against A-class.

It is definitely something that is easier said than done.

The troublesome thing about this special examination is that not everything will be settled through discussions within the class.

No matter how heated the discussion may be, nothing will be able to move it forward. If you don’t know or understand what B-class and C-class are actually thinking, you can’t execute your intentions in unison and you may end up with nothing but an empty theory.

That being said, it won’t be easy nor simple for the three classes to just rig the examination like this in the first place.

Aside from Ichinose, it is unlikely that Ryuen will respond to this idea positively.

That and the fact that if Sakayanagi detects this information, she will naturally take action.

“It’s going to be a difficult decision...”

There is plenty of time—at least a month—to create a group, but if you take too long, other students will get a headstart over you on forming groups one after the other. You won’t have much time to prepare.

“If there was somehow a similar suggestion from another class about this, it would really save our lives, but...”

The D-class students desperately racked their brains.

“The question of how you’ll make groups is a pain in itself...”

There will still be more work to be done besides just forming an important group for yourself.

Work involving the existence of those cards with their various effects. Tomorrow morning, a special gift will be given to all students one by one, and transfer between classmates will not be possible. Moreover, once a card is transferred, the transfer will have been set in stone and therefore never returned to you. In other words, the only way to do this was to participate in pure trades with students from other classes or to obtain cards by buying or selling them.

“It seems likely that tomorrow is the day everyone will begin to move.”

“That will probably be it. Groups will be assembling the most effective set of cards for themselves and that will be just as significant of a point to pay attention to.”

Today was the day when the opportunity to start forming groups was given to us.

Naturally, the movements of each party involved—including D-class—will only increase from here on out.

3

After school, the devices belonging to each student classified as an honor student (through academic or physical means) began ringing all at once. Horikita approached me while watching the situation go down.

“It sounds like they’re starting to move. It’s natural to try and hoard all the talented students to yourself.”

No matter what your class’ policy is, no one will lose after starting temporary holding.

“Are you also being called by anybody, Horikita?”

“I don’t know.”

“Thought so. There were very few people who know your contact information anyway.”

“Although I’m aware of that, I probably don’t have the right personality, as ashamed as I am to admit that. So I was wondering if you were receiving calls by now, Ayanokouji-kun: a math-savvy person. Is your phone quiet?”

Since I was prompted to do so, I decided to take a look at my cell phone. It hadn’t been ringing for the time being.

“Unfortunately, the battery is dead. I haven’t charged it in the last couple of days.”

“If you don’t use your cell phone often, you’ll charge it less often.”

I want to deny that as it was not the case, but it wasn’t like she was wrong. If you didn’t use it too often, you end up neglecting the fact that you had to charge it.

“Shouldn’t our classmates be paying more attention to various things? Carelessly forming a group will end up causing many difficulties later on.”

“Even though I explained it, I eventually gave the instructions clearly. I’ve sent it to everyone as plain text. It seems that you didn’t see it with your phone switched off.”

So she said and turned her mobile screen to show me what her message had looked like.

- Don’t confirm your groups until the discussion within D-class has come to a conclusion
- If it is absolutely necessary to quickly decide on a group, contact Horikita first

Horikita seemed to have minimized the number of rules that she

set in anticipation of this.

“It’s not something that we can necessarily enforce; it’s ultimately up to the discretion of the individual.”

It is certainly an individual’s decision whether to join a group or not. Personal compatibility and dropping out of school were things out of our control. Even if the four classes worked together in unison, there could not be an ideal combination to give everybody a happy ending.

In that sense, we can only give advice.

I always carry a portable charger, so I plugged my phone in to recharge it as I stood up from my seat.

And there were clearly a few students in the classroom who seemed to have been eavesdropping on us.

“Aren’t you in contact with Ichinose? It’s no wonder that there is a plan to cooperate with others in our grade level.”

“I don’t think we’ve reached out to anybody as of yet. Neither A nor B classes have come out with any suggestions yet. If you wanted to unite the entirety of the second-year, what do you think you would have done at this stage? You should think of trying to communicate with each other.”

If groups are formed freely, it will become difficult to cooperate. The fact that we aren’t having discussions in the first place is, in effect, an argument to say that there will ultimately be some competition even within second-year students. Horikita should also be working if she intends to search for some kind of hope in cooperating with the other classes.

Horikita followed me, showing no particular dissatisfaction with standing up.

Apparently, the conversation is still going to continue.

She takes me outside to the hallway, making sure no one is around, before talking to me.

“The next uninhabited island test... will you be able to get first place alone?”

“Don’t be foolish. The only thing I know about the special exam is that it will take place on an uninhabited island.”

“If you scored that highly in mathematics, I thought a group wouldn’t be necessary.”

What kind of reason is that? I didn’t say anything but that was probably because I had nothing to say.

“If only a group consisting of D-class students takes 1st place, it could end up being very beneficial for D-class. You can have the first and third-year students take 2nd and 3rd place. It would be better than having other second-year classes take them instead. “

Easier said than done.

“If that happens, it would make it easier for us to organize other groups in order to avoid expulsion.”

If you work towards making a strong group to win with, a weak group will inevitably be made in the process.

“Not everyone can pay private points to avoid dropping out.”

“Yes. Because of that, I want to collect as many private points as possible to help the more problematic students, but with this method I wouldn’t be able to do anything if the student who lent these points ends up being the one to receive the penalty.”

There is nothing more innocent than trying to help others and falling down as a result.

“If you don’t like that, you’ll have no choice but to ask the students who have a surplus of points.”

While that may be true, the number of students who could lend points in that case would be quite limited.

“There’s a way to get rid of potential school dropouts, but no one wants to do it.”

“Are you suggesting that they immediately retire in the

beginning of the exam?”

Apparently, Horikita has already noticed the little hole in this test. According to the rules, only the 5 groups who retire first are forced to drop out. Then, if you prepare 5 groups that will serve as a foundation for the others and have them retire on purpose, you will not have to worry about any other student dropping out.

However, in order to be able to do this, it will be necessary to prepare a total of 30 million private points, and in doing this, the class which has the bottom 3 groups will have their **class points** sucked up by the classes in the top 3 groups.

If we were to use this method, it will be an unavoidable loss to those sacrificial groups, which will cause the losing class to have little to no chances left of catching up. The reason why the top 3 groups and the bottom 3 groups are tied together is thought to be the prevention of cheating using such ways.

“Somehow, it looks like we’ll have to try to survive on our own, after all.”

“It’s exactly that. Could you let me ask for your assistance once again?”

Horikita, who had stopped walking at this point, asked me.

“If it’s something that I could help you with.”

“That will be plenty. Thank you”

Apparently, Horikita had to return to the classroom to discuss something.

I decided to head to the entrance after seeing Horikita walking back.

I was walking in the corridor, making my way to the entrance when suddenly...

“Yo!”

I was in the middle of staring at the pitch-black screen of my device as I tried to power it on when Ishizaki Daichi—a second-year B-class student—called out to me. He has a broad smile on his face. Had something good happened?

“When I tried to contact you, you didn’t respond, so I came to meet you directly.”

“My bad, my phone was switched off.”

“That’s fine! In any case, could I borrow you for a bit?”

“Are you trying to mug me?”

“That’s an interesting joke. Is there anyone in this school who could?”

Ishizaki jokingly returned.

“Do you have somewhere to be?”

“No, I was just about to leave.”

“I thought so! Then there shouldn’t be a problem!”

Ishizaki, who beckoned with a large smile and a loud voice, began to walk.

If I just ignored him and left, I’d be able to lose him in no time.

But even if I did that, it would only attract me attention in the long-term.

I had time, so I decided to follow Ishizaki.

Turning the corner, however, I suddenly found myself facing a large wall that I didn’t remember being there before.

—No, that’s not what it was. It was Yamada: one of Ishizaki’s classmates. Yamada Albert.

This man—wearing a pair of daunting sunglasses and an equally daunting atmosphere around him—placed his right hand onto my shoulder.

“Hey.”

“...Hey.”

I don't understand the situation well, so I mirrored his greeting in English, but what in the world is going on?

The mugging idea—which was supposed to be a joke—suddenly didn't feel far-fetched at all.

“Hello, Ayanokouji.”

The giant Albert (that I've mistaken as a giant wall) is accompanied by the figure of Hiyori.

“This is a rare combination.”

“Maybe so.”

I was wondering if I was going to see Ryuen among their throng, but it seems that idea is not happening any time soon.

“What are you doing standing around? Let's get moving.”

“Moving...? Where?”



“Yeah... Well, about that, we didn’t really think about it.”

Ishizaki, who laughed a little shamefully, rubbed his nose with the index finger of his left hand.

“I have a bad feeling about this; can I go home?”

No matter what, I wasn’t expecting a good development. So I tried asking for permission to withdraw.

“What’s the big deal? You’re free, aren’t you? We aren’t just going to let you off.”

“You’re not going to... what?”

Albert stepped up behind me and used his colossal physical strength to grab a hold of me. Hiyori pulled in my other arm and, all of a sudden, I was stuck between these two.

“I’m sorry, Ayanokouji-kun. I can’t let you get away.”

“Huh...?”

Finally, the joke that I was going to be mugged became a reality. ...speaking of which, I should probably just forget about that joke...

In any case, it seemed that these three were going to be ‘borrowing’ me after all.

“We’re looking a little suspicious here. Let’s change locations, Ishizaki-kun.”

“Sure, but where are we going?”

“Well... what about Ishizaki-kun’s room?”

A casual suggestion from Hiyori.

“Eh, my room? N-No, that’s a bit...! That’s not happening!”

Ishizaki immediately refused as if he was in a hurry to prevent his room from becoming their destination.

“What’s the matter? Is there an issue of some kind?”

“W-Well, there are a few things, here and there. This is all so sudden...”

“If the room is a little messy, we wouldn’t mind! Don’t you

agree?”

Albert, who Hiyori had turned to for the question, slowly nodded.

...He understand that... He understands Japanese, right?

I'm sure he's been taking his exams and attending his classes, so I was sure he understood the language, but I wanted to hear his Japanese at least once.

“Um, yeah, that's what it is, but... It's not a little messy, it's very, very messy! There's almost no space to walk in! Sorry about that!”

“Ah, do not worry yourself over that. I would be happy to help clean everything if you wanted.”

“No, no! There's no way I could force a girl to clean up the tissues and all!”

A portion of the mess is unintentionally disclosed.

“Tissues and all...? What could you mean by that?”

Hiyori wondered what exactly was wrong and leaned her head curiously.

“Ah! Anyhow, my room is a bit...! R-Right! Why don't we go to Albert's room?!”

Ishizaki diverted the situation while trying to figure a way out of his predicament.

“Yeah! If it's Albert's room, that would also be fine right?!”

Ishizaki continued suggesting this as his last hope towards escaping.

“OK.”

Albert's reply was brief. Just as I expected, he did understand Japanese.

Albert started to move while maintaining his grasp on me.

“But... you're taking me just as I am?”

“There are no problems! Yamada-kun is plenty strong.”

No, that's not what I was asking about...

—Rather, I thought I'd look strange, but...

"It's alright. In a way, your strength is kind of an appeal, too."

That said, Hiyori smiled gently as usual, and started walking to lead the way.

"Oh, I see! Leave it to Shiina! Good idea! Good idea!"

Exactly what are these three planning on doing to me, dragging me along like this?

With these doubts occupying my mind, I was taken into the direction of the dormitory.

5

It's my first time visiting Albert's room.

His body is much bigger than ours, but the room layout and construction are naturally the same.

The room was only differently coordinated, but then again, it was a little peculiar.

A large, star-spangled flag and the Japanese flag were spread out on display in the center of the room. Not only that, but the national flags of countless countries, including China, Italy, and South Africa were displayed all over the room in smaller sizes. They weren't just printed out on paper, but rather on neat pieces of cloth to the extent that one could feel the passion in them.

"Albert is a flag-maniac. You're surprised, aren't you?"

Ishizaki explained in a calm manner and I wondered if he had been to Albert's room many times in the past.

"I suppose so."

When he finally released me, Albert properly asked me to take

a seat.

After confirming that the four of us were seated, I immediately decided to determine their purpose.

“So... What do you three want?”

The three of them looked at each other.

For some reason, they showed a happy, overjoyed face.

Ishizaki, for my sake, finally explained:

“To put it simply, and this is my idea... Let’s team up for the next special test!”

One of my forecasts had been regarding the special test.

“Team up... What exactly? Give me the details.”

“That’s it.”

“No, that’s not it. Who am I specifically working with?”

There were four people in the room. One person will end up overflowing if we decide to team up. In fact, since Hiyori—a girl—wouldn’t be allowed to negotiate joining a team with a male majority, I would be forced to team up with Albert and Ishizaki. But that’s not something I can understand unless they told me what they really meant.

“Well, it’s not like it really matters who you team up with. Whether it’s me, Albert, or even Shiina. In any case, it’s a matter of you teaming up with absolutely anyone in B-class.”

What an unpredictably bold proposal.

In a way, because it was Ishizaki asking me that I found myself able to openly suggest.

“So, it wouldn’t matter as long as I’m forming a group with class 2-B students?”

“Oh, and when the exam starts, it would be perfect to merge with a group of three B-Class members for all 6 slots. Five B-Class students and Ayanokouji as the sixth aiming for first place.”

I’m almost overwhelmed by the *wonderful* proposal, but I think

it's crucial to speak calmly.

"Hiyori... Did you explain the rules of the special examination to Ishizaki properly?"

"No?"

The response that she hadn't done so came right back at me.

"It's something that I really only need 5 seconds or so to explain, so I decided to just let the momentum of the conversation build itself up and explain as it goes."

Was it fine? ...No, I don't think so.

It's true that in 5 seconds or so, something unexpected was cast towards me.

"I have a number of questions, but to narrow them down to two..... No, I'll try to narrow them down to three. After the special examination begins, there's no guarantee that we could easily merge with the groups we initially plan to form."

In fact, the teacher in charge had already informed our class that it was not going to be easy.

If there are two answers, "let's assemble" and "let's do so", there is no point in forcing a group of up to three people at this stage. Rather, it becomes a disadvantage.

If you could just get together with a conversation as simple as "Let's team up." and "Sure." —there would be no point in forcing students to form groups of three at this stage. It would be a demerit.

It's because there will be difficulty in making decisions during the group merging process that we have been given freedom over the matter now.

"Is that so?"

Ishizaki, who had no idea about this at all, bowed curiously and asked for an answer.

"This is what I've come up with after putting all of the explanations of the special examination in order. In some cases, it

will be necessary to merge into groups that had not been considered initially.”

“What does that mean? I don’t get it.”

“There’s a possibility that there will be some sort of requirement for groups to merge together during the examination.”

“What do you mean?”

If you still don’t get it, just give it up.

“The details are still unknown. But judging by the school side of its explanation, it certainly won’t be that simple.”

“However, should those conditions allow it, do you suppose you will be open to form a team like that?”

“Well, just because you say that...”

“Then it’s fine, isn’t it? Now then, as I said, let’s begin preparations for the exam.”

I somewhat respect that he’s able to be this simple-minded.

Hiyori also seems to be listening intently to Ishizaki’s proposal.

“Well, you can’t really help worrying about the things you don’t understand.”

Is it correct to say that this aloofness is one of Daichi Ishizaki’s charms?

“Then, let’s see... My second question.”

I don’t think they’ll be able to understand the first point, so I’ll move on.

“Who else did you call? Or who else are you going to call?”

“I don’t want to speak to anybody else nor am I going to. Right?”

The other two nodded back in response.

“Then I’m the only one you’ve reached out to. Why?”

“That’s the way it is. I see you as an equal to Ryuuen... No, I think you’re an even better man than Ryuuen now. Your fighting ability is crazy good, and Ryuuen even endorsed your ability to

think on your feet. Besides, you did the ridiculous thing that was getting a full score on the spring exam. A man who can win at will, taking a special examination. You don't need to ask me why."

"He may sound like he's patronizing you, Ayanokouji. But my opinion is the same."

Albert nodded quickly, without hesitating.

I said I'll ask three questions, but for a potential fourth, I wanted to ask how much Albert could understand and speak Japanese. I don't know if I've ever seen him in a classroom scene, but I think he's learning Japanese...

I won't deny that they're trying to hook me in here, but...

"Then, third... What's in it for me? If you assume that I've been surrounded by you B-class students and that I'll agree simply because of your higher ranks, that'll be the end of it."

Even if the number of class points awarded will be equal, each students' own private points will give birth to an even bigger gap.

"What's with that? You won't be in it just to lose. When we move up to A-class, we'll pay you 20 million private points and let you into the class, yeah?"

Ishizaki, who answered with a confident air, continued.

"In other words, you can help us reach A-class, and you'll even be able to join A-class. After that there will be a 50% chance to be able to graduate safely in A-class."

It was proposed with a smile of no better sense.

If all 4 classes were equally likely to be promoted to A-class, the odds would be 2/4 or 50%, but, in reality, that's not the case. Each class has a different level of strength, so it is difficult to come up with an exact estimate.

Of course, helping shift classes around would certainly be advantageous in the long-run.

"Don't you agree, Shiina and Yamada?"

“Yes, of course we do.”

“Yes.”

The two of them, understanding that they had been blown away by Ishizaki’s proposal, had a good time continuing to ride on that path. In the first place, if I accepted this messy proposal, to some extent, we couldn’t help but be unable to touch upon some of the important parts. I couldn’t help but continue to ask questions after the third.

“Was it Ryuen who decided to invite me? Or was your own decision, Ishizaki?”

Ishizaki, who had been responding as if taking the conversation lightly, let his expression change for the first time.

“It’s my own decision. Ryuen knows nothing.”

Apparently, Ishizaki had decided this on his own volition.

I had expected as much, but he has really done something reckless.

However, the fact that Ibuki—who had the image of always acting with Ishizaki—isn’t here is suggesting that he is being honest.

It seems that Ishizaki’s lone supporters are Albert and Hiyori.

“What do you think would happen if Ryuen found out about this?”

“I don’t want to think about that! I can’t think about that! Nonetheless... I will be prepared for it.”

Despite being a little nervous, Ishizaki enthusiastically suggested.

“And it’s not a problem to work with other classes according to the rules. There’s nothing odd about me considering asking for Ayanokouji’s help in the matter.”

That is true. Ryuen is not entitled to complain to Ishizaki unless he has formed a policy about group dynamics within his

class.

“The key to this special exam isn’t taking the class points that other second-year students possess. It goes without saying that you have to aim for a position even higher than that. Ayanokouji-kun will be a necessity for this.”

“That’s how it is.”

“For the time being, there is still a lot to worry about... I know what you mean.”

“Then will you join us?”

“I don’t feel this invitation is bad, but at this stage I can’t say yes.”

“Why?”

“Ayanokouji-kun probably has some circumstances in his class hindering him from doing so, isn’t that so?”

Though Hiyori—who was supporting Ishizaki’s plan—is probably aware of why I had refused.

“Moreover, I think the conditions that we have offered to Ayanokouji-kun are weak.”

“Weak...? Isn’t 20 million points plenty?”

“That’s not it. Of course, I would have been shocked if you had only offered that amount of money. But you will have only transferred that amount for the sake of helping him move classes, isn’t that so?”

“Well, that is true. I couldn’t only give you 20 million for the sake of letting you move classes and stop there...”

If you were willing to entirely spend the money that Ishizaki and his team were going to give you, of course, a position in A-class will be ascertained. Ishizaki and his team can’t reinforce themselves by welcoming me along the way.

“Moreover, Ishizaki said he wouldn’t mind if I worked with Ayanokouji-kun as long as he was with B-class students, but that’s

also a problem. The uninhabited island survival exam is not a personal game. If you're really looking to achieve greater heights, you need to be able to increase your chance of winning by colluding with more powerful members."

Therefore, Hiyori's strict warnings, which had generally only been used to listen to his proposal previously, began to be fired off one after another.

With each shot, Ishizaki got more and more anxious.

"I-Is that so? W-Well, who would that be?"

"If I had to come up with a group now... Let's see... I wonder if it could be Ryuen-kun, Kaneda-kun, and Ayanokouji-kun. If not Kaneda-kun, then maybe Yamada-kun could take his place, but Ryuen-kun would most likely have to be included."

He displays one of the best leaderships (or dictatorships) in school, and he has the courage to play tricks that may be close to being considered foul play. Only one person from his class had remained on the island on last year's uninhabited island examination: Ryuen—who had both the physical and mental capabilities to hide on the island without being noticed by anyone. He wasn't one to easily be passed up. The others were Kaneda, the class' top in terms of academic ability, or Albert, the most powerful.

If you wanted to be sure in maximizing the chance of winning, you would have to choose two of the three.

"Don't be crazy! You think Ryuen would agree with my plan!?"

"I don't think I'm going to say it twice."

"I thought so!"

"Kaneda won't take part in this careless strategy, setting Ryuen aside."

"Then what should we do?"

“I don’t think there is anything that we could do. At least as of now.”

“Ugh... That’s a problem...”

Although Ishizaki tried to press his hands onto his temples to try and come up with some wisdom, naturally, there was no revolutionary idea.

“For today, we should be satisfied that Ishizaki-kun and us were able to put forth our ideas.”

For some reason, it was clear that Hiyori had been simply humoring Ishizaki up until now.

I had already decided that it was important to show my intention to form a group because I knew I could not form a group otherwise.

It felt like Albert also understood how flawed the proposal had been, so he gently hit Ishizaki’s shoulder.

“...I get it. In the meantime, we’ll leave it here...”

Although he was reluctant, Ishizaki seemed to have been convinced by their words.

“I don’t know if your decision will ultimately meet my expectations, but I’ll let you consider it.”

At this stage, I decided that it would be best to leave it at that too.

But I’m not going to form a group with anyone just yet.

Part of the reason was the White Room Students that may be hiding among the first-year students along with Tsukishiro.

The end of the first semester is drawing near.

At this rate, a sly White Room Student won’t be able to lay low for much longer.

Perhaps the next special test will be the final battle between Tsukishiro and I.

In other words, it could lead to an inexplicable attack of some kind.

If I were to form a group, its members could get swept up into such a situation.

It would be the least I could do in terms of etiquette to be the only being forced to drop out in case of an emergency.

Once again, I confirmed this thought to myself.

6

The morning of the next day.

After I got ready for school, I opened my cell phone.

I've received a notice from my school in my personal email.

And it contained an item marked "Trial" next to it.

"No way did I get a special card..."

Just when I had thought that I was starting to get less conspicuous after getting full marks on the math test, this here came. It is likely that I will return to being conspicuous for carrying this double-edged sword of an item that was the Trial card. It could be safer and more desirable to trade with students who may need this card, but a Trial card couldn't be easily traded with other classes as it could only be considered *somewhat* strong. If the group of people I traded the card with get something massive out of it, I'll also be responsible for that.

There is a possibility that Tsukishiro has played a hand in the matter to get me to drop out, but considering that the card can be transferred, it would have been too weak a strategy to force me into making that decision. It would be more natural to interpret it as a simple coincidence. There are two other special cards that exist, but it seemed that the "Increase" card had been handed over to C-class' Mako Asakura, and the "Invalid" card to A-class' Koharu Yano. It

was fortunate that these were so well separated.

I left the dorm a little earlier than usual, thinking about how to act after this.

Then, I waited for the elevator and hopped on with Shinohara.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

We’re classmates, but we’re not particularly close, so there’s no more conversation. We only exchange brief greetings and descend to the lobby.

The time we were alone was short. When we reached the first floor, I held the open button and let Shinohara exit first.

In the lobby, Ike seemed to be walking quite slowly as he looked restlessly towards us who had just gotten off the elevator.

I was wondering if he was waiting for Sudou, but it seemed like that was not the case.

After a brief greeting with Shinohara as she crossed the lobby, he saw Shinohara off, but he soon began following after her.

For some reason, I decided to slow down and keep a distance so that I wouldn’t interfere.

“Ah, Shinohara.”

“What?”

When they went outside, the conversation between Ike and Shinohara was carried away by the wind, but I could still hear it, even if barely.

“You know, it’s just that, regarding the groups for the next uninhabited island test... Have you already discussed it with someone?”

“Not really up until now. What’s the matter?”

“Nothing really, I was only asking.”

“Oh, what about you? You’re probably going to go with Sudou-kun or Hondou-kun, huh?”

“What’s the matter? I think I’d be able to have fun with it if it’s them.”

“I suppose—”

She laughed heartily, but Ike wasn’t doing so at all.

He seemed to have something to say, and was trying hard to figure out how.

“But even if you leave a man alone, he’d be able to make it somehow... his spirit is his power, and if it’s a guy then he’d have plenty of that, don’t you think?”

“Hmm...?”

Shinohara had a bit of a cold reaction, but I don’t think she wasn’t enjoying talking to Ike.

“How do I put it? I’m saying if someone needs help, then you should help them. That’s why, if I’m in trouble, hypothetically... may I join a group with you?”

“What’s with that? You don’t sound like you normally do. Did something bad happen?”

“You saw it last year, didn’t you? I’m a boy scout, and I’m good at that kind of stuff that the exam will be involving.”

If he makes the most out of the skills he has, he could appeal to Shinohara.

But the main thing was that there was another reason why he wanted to join Shinohara.

“Well, let’s see... Do you want to be in the same group as me?”

“Bah! What do you mean by such a strange thing? Hey, you’re the one who’s about to leave school, aren’t you? That’s why I’m kind enough to sacrifice myself and protect you.”

Ike... he’s a bit *too* honest, to the point of saying some words that may upset others.

“What? What do you mean by sacrifice? I didn’t ask you!”

Of course, Shinohara would not be willing to let him join the

group if he asked in that way.

The mood begins to turn grim.

“Ah, Ike-kun. May I ask you something?”

In a heavy atmosphere, Kushida came running from behind and spoke to Ike.

At that moment, Ike takes its eyes off Shinohara and waves his hands excitedly.

“What is it, what is it?! I definitely have free time on my hands now!”

Then Ike left Shinohara and rushed towards Kushida.

Shinohara watched the situation unfold with cold eyes.

“Actually, I heard from Kobashi-kun from C-class that he wanted to invite you to the group. I think he’s at school now, but did you want to talk about it?”

“Seriously?! I’ll go! I’ll go right now!”

Ike, who heard of this at a girl’s request, got very excited.

“Oh, but I thought you were talking to Shinohara... Is it fine?”

The one Kushida was worried about is Shinohara.

“Ah, no, don’t even worry about Shinohara, she was just pestering me!”

“That’s my line...”

She bought Ike’s words and sold it right back to him. It was mainly Ike’s fault to begin with, but he ignorantly and arrogantly began to skip along with Kushida.

Shinohara stops to see them leaving, looking awfully lonely.

I catch up with Shinohara soon after and walk past her.

How do I put it? Ike didn’t seem notice himself being in the wrong for being so ecstatic.

He was just feeling happy to have been invited by a girl, but I felt that he was missing a big part of it.

“Satsuki.”

All of a sudden, I heard a student's voice call Shinohara by her first name from behind, and I turned around a little.

“Ah, Komiya-kun... Good morning.”

When I tried to think of who it may be, I thought of Kyougo Komiya: a second-year, B-class student.

“What's the matter? Are you crying?”

“Eh? W-Why?”

“Nothing, your eyes were just a little red.”

“Oh, was it showing? I just got some trash in my eyes... O-Ow, it still hurts.”

While acting out such a performance, Shinohara told herself to hide her feelings.

“More importantly, I asked Sudou-kun, and he said he might become a regular.”

“Oh, finally.”

“He's always practiced late, and if it didn't pay off, it would have been for nothing.”

The distance between Shinohara—who had stopped to talk; and I, who continued to walk—widened, and eventually I couldn't hear her voice anymore.

7

“You're still in the thick of disaster, aren't you? Who would have thought that you'd get the Trial card?”

Horikita, who had just arrived at school said this as soon as she arrived in the classroom.

“I was thinking about it and suffering from the thoughts of exactly that earlier this morning.”

“It would have been nice if you could trade freely within the class. The challenge card will never be accepted by students who are not confident of winning. Conversely, there is also a reason not to trade it with students who *are* confident of winning.”

The card that Horikita drew was ‘Halving.’ This card could be useful in the event of a penalty, but it is not effective for the students who aim much higher.

“Now that you have been placed into this situation, you will have no choice but to try and place in the top 30%, if possible.”

“It’s like you’re talking to a stranger. Couldn’t you at least worry a little about your classmate?”

“Of course I would help you if you really wanted to depend on me.”

Horikita has started becoming more and more full of herself, or rather, it’s like her livened spirit is getting harder to handle.

What are you supposed to do when you see provocative eyes edging you to do something, accompanied by words conveying the exact opposite message?

“I’m afraid I might give it away if I find someone willing to take it.”

“You are free to choose. I hope we can easily find someone like that. The Trial card affects not only the owner, but the entire group that the owner belongs to. Using it is a big risk.”

It’s good to have it explained warily, but from her phrasing it just sounds like simple disdain.

“It’s easy to tell that you’re treating it with a certain distaste.”

“Perhaps.”

“I’m often bullied by you, so I’m repaying the debt.”

“I don’t remember bullying you.”

The Trial card is a nuisance, but it also has a small charm to it. Clearly, it was to be expected that not as many students are going

to be willing to form a group with me anymore. It is also necessary to take into account the fact that an uninhabited island examination could be approached with this card all by myself in the worst case.

“If it’s you, I’m sure you would be fine on your own, isn’t that so?”

You can rely on Horikita, the leader of the class, but there will always be other students needing help from her. It would be best to keep her burden as light as possible.

“Well, I’ll try.”

She told me to do my best on my own, and then took her seat. As I’m searching to figure out who had what card, a loud voice sounded from Ike, who had made it to the classroom late.

“What? You... You’ve found a partner!?”

“Is that bad?”

Apparently, Shinohara had decided to form a group while Ike wasn’t looking.

And her partner is probably—

“But I just invited you! B-Besides, it’s forbidden to move without Horikita’s permission!”

“I haven’t officially confirmed anything as of yet, but I’m going to do that later today.”

“You...”

“Rather than who invited me, who was it that stuck out his nose and ignored me?”

“N-No, that’s not what happened! I refused the proposal for you!”

“You refused? Ah, you’re so annoying. As expected from the lowest of scum.”

“You’re already in a group... Who did you even decide to work with?”

“Not like it would matter to you.”

“It’s not like it matters, no, but... it’s not a big deal for it to pique my interest, is it?”

“It’s Komiya-kun from B class. I was invited to join his group right after the special exams started yesterday.”

It was Komiya after all. One of them must have called out to the other as they were going to school together.

“Huh? Komiya? Komiya, as in that flirty basketball guy? No... be serious here. That’s impossible.”

Somewhere along the lines of “Shinohara will definitely form a group with me.”

—Ike probably held that kind of arrogant thought within himself.

“It’s not like he’s ‘flirty’ or anything. Besides, we’re having a meeting at a cafe after school.”

Saying that, Shinohara turned away from Ike and heads toward the other students who were listening to her in the classroom. It was probably just seen as one of their usual fights or an event extending from something similar.

Then, after school ended, Shinohara left the classroom as quickly as she had claimed she would.

Ike quietly watched Shinohara leave, but he immediately left after her with determination in his eyes. It was as if he had made up his mind to do something.

“May I have a moment?”

After Ike leaves, Yousuke, who had been watching the scene, comes to talk to me.

I don’t know if it’s something he doesn’t want others to hear, but he wants to talk to me in the corridor, so I follow him out.

“About Ike-kun... I don’t think it’s fine to just leave him alone.”

“Right. It’s obvious that Ike’s knowledge and experience will be useful in the uninhabited island test, despite his conceited nature.

There's a risk that Shinohara's one incident could ruin his potential."

"Yeah. The way things were going, I'm worried about what would happen if he sees Shinohara-san and Komiya-kun's discussion."

I can understand Yousuke's apprehensions.

It's not a good time to get in trouble with B-class.

"I'd like to go see how things are going, but if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you to come with me. I don't think Ike really likes me, is all."

If I had to pick between him liking me and not liking me, he probably didn't like me either.

However, it's no surprise to see that Yousuke feels uncomfortable.

"Shinohara-san said she had a meeting with Komiya-kun at the cafe, right?"

"Yeah. Let's go check the situation out just in case."

"Sure."

I decide to head to the cafe at Keyaki Mall with Yousuke.

On the way there, we talk a little bit about forming groups.

"I wanted to recommend a plan where all the second-year students cooperated to fight against the first and third-year students, but the other classes didn't seem like they were going to be open to doing that. It's not impossible to have a group of sophomores working together to make sure no one gets expelled, but discussions preceding it might be a bit messy."

As I discussed yesterday with Horikita, you can make sure that no one from your school drops out of school by intentionally losing. But the grades that did that would inevitably suffer great damage. That said, it's not very realistic to expect all grades to uphold that burden together.

That's why, after an entire day, no student had come forward to suggest this idealistic plan.

"We have no choice but to build groups that we won't come to regret."

"That's true..."

"On your end, you've probably been invited to join quite a few people already, haven't you?"

There's no way he wouldn't be approached. He was Yousuke: someone popular with both men and women that also possessed perfect abilities.

"For me, I'd like to pick two guys in D class. It's not so much a matter of trying to finish higher, but of trying to avoid getting penalized."

If you're going to protect someone, you're going to protect the students in D-class, not the students in other classes, obviously. If a student is skilled or popular enough, they will have no problem finding those willing to team up with them, but when it comes to the lower-level students of the class, they will not be able to expect others to team up with them to simply help them.

"Will Sakura-san be okay?"

Yousuke is concerned for Airi, who may be the most unskilled in whichever group she joins.

"At the moment, Akito and Haruka are in the process of forming a group."

"Miyake-kun has good motor skills, and the balance of the group doesn't seem to be too bad."

Although Keisei hasn't shown any signs of teaming up, he has received several scouts from other classes for his intellect. If you find a student who can cover the physical aspect of the team, after inviting Keisei, you will be in good shape.

However, while catching up with Ike, another problem came up.

And that was the presence of someone who has been following *us*. A person who had taken every precaution not to be spotted in the past but was prepared to be spotted this time. Ike heads straight for Keyaki Mall. Ike, Yousuke, and the person following them. It was like a double tail. It's not something that is particularly hard to ignore, but it was something that could continue if left unnoticed.

When we were approaching Keyaki Mall, I stopped once.

"I'm sorry, Yousuke. Can you go ahead of me?"

"What's up?"

"I just remembered I've got some business I need to take care of. I'll catch up in ten minutes or so."

"Okay. I'll call you on your phone if I need anything else."

Without asking me for details, Yousuke disappears into Keyaki Mall.

It was about time that I stopped here, because as soon as I did, the person that had been following us approached.

It was our classmate, Chiaki Matsushita.

"You're not surprised. Did you notice that I was following you from the beginning?"

"The surprise just doesn't show on my face."

Was this the first time since spring break that Matsushita and I had spoken alone?

No, I just hadn't spoken to her since that period of time in general.

"What did you talk about with Hirata-kun? Was it about Ike-kun? In regards to the upcoming uninhabited island trials?"

—Matsushita, who walked up next to me, faced up as she waited for my response.

"Does that have anything to do with you?"

“I guess it has more to do with ‘us’ than it does with just me. Ayanokouji-kun is so important for us to be able to move up to A class.”

She’s talking me up to be pretty important, but I’m still not sure what the purpose of this is.



Knowing how quick-witted Matsushita is, I'm sure she's aware that a little flattery won't get her anywhere.

But I don't think that this meeting is completely meaningless.

"Don't be alarmed. I only contacted you today because I had something to tell you earlier in the day."

"Go ahead."

"The Trial Card is an item with a very powerful ability. But it's difficult to handle. If you're in trouble, I'd like to help you out, Ayanokouji-kun. What do you think?"

Aside from my own thoughts and speculations, I had a feeling that what she was trying to say was that she was going to help me because I was an ally. Despite that, when I open my mouth to speak, I flash a slightly lost face.

"Will you not give me an answer unless I give it to you straight?"

I'm not trying to be mean, but I didn't want to talk too much about it in public. Because now that it was after school, I began to see a lot of students around us. It's not like Matsushita hasn't noticed that. She doesn't wait for me to answer before she starts talking.

"Since you need to stay on top to avoid the card's penalty, it will be hard to find someone to group with, will it not? So, if you need help, I thought you could count on me."

After spelling it out more clearly, she added another important detail she forgot to include:

"Of course, I'll follow Ayanokoji-kun's instructions for everything during the exam."

That's what she wanted to tell me after coming all the way here.

"I'm honestly happy that you're willing to cooperate, but if we don't make it into the top thirty percent, you'll be penalized. Do you realize that you'll be facing that risk, Matsushita?"

“I know. That’s why I think it’s even more important for us to cooperate in helping you.”

I don’t think Matsushita has any bad intentions. But the essence of her first priority lied elsewhere.

I turn my attention to Matsushita as she’s walking beside me, suppressing my desire to rush towards Yousuke.

“Have you decided that you have the best chance of survival if you’re in a group with me?”

Normally, one would expect that the group possessing the Trial card will simply have the highest dropout rate. Nevertheless, Matsushita has offered to help, despite the risks. That can’t be interpreted as good intentions alone.

“...You caught my intentions, didn’t you?”

Matsushita narrowed her eyes and laughed, raising the white flag early.

“I don’t think it will be difficult for Ayanokouji to end up as one of the top groups. Even if you don’t make it to the podium, you’re almost certain to make it into the 30%. It’s riskier to join a group that is deciding on who to include based on friendships.”

This was Matsushita’s true intention. She chose me after weighing the odds she expected to have with other students.

“I was afraid that Ayanokoji-kun would already be ‘sold out.’”

‘Talk to them early on.’ —In other words, it’s easier to evaluate one’s intentions if you’re expecting them to have a scheme at hand.

I appreciate that, but I didn’t intend to reach any conclusions here in the first place.

This is not Matsushita’s fault; it would have been the same no matter who it had been.

“At the very least, I won’t be forming any groups for at least a month.”

“So you’re just gonna sit on the fence and wait it out?”

“I’d like to see how the other classes move.”

She gives the most obvious justification.

But what I care about is different from what most students care about.

The special test on the uninhabited island requires extensive preparation.

The fact that Tsukishiro will not be involved in this event will be unthinkable.

It has already been a month and a half since the last special test, but there has been no significant movements.

We are getting farther and farther away from the eye-opening plan drop me out of school by the end of April.

The gears get thrown out of form by the actions of White Room Students.

It could be said that some action will be taken at the stage of forming groups—which could already be called a ‘battle’ by some.

Even Matsushita is unable to understand how dangerous it can be. Even if she steps into the crossfire, it won’t be enough.

“I don’t think I’ll get a finalized response from you here. I understand. Please just think about it.”

Perhaps it’s because she doesn’t have any intention of chasing me very far, she quickly waves her hand to gesture goodbye.

“Oh, yeah. Here’s my personal contact information.”

She hands me a piece of paper with her ID written on it, as if he had prepared it beforehand.

“Well then, I’ve said all I wanted to say.”

Wasting no time and speeding up the conversation, Matsushita turn on her heels and walked off to head to the dormitory.

“I don’t particularly bad bad about having more female contacts, sure, but...”

Whether or not I would be able to live up to Matsushita’s

expectations is something we'll just have to wait and see.

I decided to go and meet up with Yousuke at Keyaki Mall afterwards.

“How's the situation?”

“It doesn't sound like the worst thing that could have happened, but...”

Following Yosuke's gaze, my eyes were led to Shinohara and Komiya who were chatting happily at a cafe.

A distance away from them, I also spotted Ike's back. His shoulders were slouched and he was clearly disheartened, but he continued to stare at them quietly.

“What should we do?”

“For starters, there's no sign of him plunging into the situation any time soon; we'll just have to wait and see what happens. We definitely won't solve anything by calling out to Ike sloppily.”

Yousuke nodded in agreement.

“For now, we should try to aim for Komiya. There's no way to make a move without understanding his intentions for having invited Shinohara to join his group.”

“Meanwhile, I'll figure out who'll be the next best candidate after Shinohara for being Ike-kun's partner, in case they don't team up.”

“I'll count on you.”

We agreed to split up and accumulate some information together.

8

After parting ways with Yousuke, I called Ishizaki, someone from

Komiya's class.

He was still in school, so I quickly walked back.

“Oh! You want to work with us, after all?!”

He had a huge smile on his face and is all over me as soon as I make it back.

“I'm still thinking about that. I'm sorry, but that's not what I'm here for right now.”

When I said this, Ishizaki looked a little disappointed, but quickly switched back to a smile.

“What the hell, what do you want to talk to me about, then?”

As I was about to start discussing the matter with him right away, I turned my attention to a girl approaching Ishizaki: Takeko Nishino, a 2nd year B class student.

“Oh, was the business that you had to do is consulting Ayanokouji-kun?”

“Hey, hey, I told you not to follow me, didn't I? Sorry, Ayanokouji.”

Ishizaki apologized and urged Nishino to go to Keyaki Mall first, but Nishino didn't listen. Instead, she approached me.

“You're good friends with Ishizaki, aren't you? That's a little unexpected.”

Nishino gives me an observant look as she calls out her classmate Ishizaki.

“You... listen to what people are saying! That's why you keep getting left out of others' groups!”

“Left out?”

“No, it's just that she's currently isolated in the class, and... we're having a little trouble.”

“Isolated? It's not like I'm in any trouble or anything.”

Speaking of being alone, someone else with the tendency of being a lone wolf that I could think of is Ibuki. And when it comes

to Nishino, she also seems to be one of those kinds of people.

“In any case, just go away, okay?”

“Nope.”

“N-Nope...? You’re so... I’m sorry, Ayanokouji. Give me a minute, I’ll get rid of this girl.”

“I’m curious as to why Ishizaki is meeting with Ayanokouji-kun in secret.”

I’ve never talked to Nishino, but she seems to be the type of person who doesn’t hesitate to say what she thinks.

It’s true that this type of person tends to make a lot of enemies. However, it’s natural to wonder why Ishizaki and I might be meeting alone.

Generally, it’s not a good idea to just turn away people without telling them anything. Based on that, I decided I was going to tell Nishino what exactly I had wanted to consult Ishizaki about.

“We were in the same group in last year’s mixed training camp and got to know each other there.”

First of all, I made sure to lay the groundwork, and then I went straight to the point.

“I contacted Ishizaki because I wanted to talk to him a bit about Komiya from B-class. It’s not a story I’d want to share with too many people, so I decided to meet up in secret like this.”

“About Komiya-kun? What about him?”

I’m not trying to throw Komiya under the bus. With that in mind, I explained the reason.

“I heard he promised to form a group with Shinohara from our class. Did you know about that?”

“That’s a new one. What’s the relevance of that?”

It wasn’t necessarily strange for someone to try to team up with students from other classes.

It’s natural for Ishizaki to be confused by such a thing.

“Where’s the problem in that?”

“It’s in the fact that Shinohara is not the type of person who can play an active role in the uninhabited island exams. Our class was just a little worried about whether we were going to have problems working with Komiya. What kind of a person is he?”

“He’s just a regular, good guy, you know? He’s pretty good with his hands and is on the basketball team. On top of that, he’s physically fit, too.”

“Yeah?” he prompted Nishino. She nodded in response, agreeing with him.

“I heard he wanted to join a group with her, but there’s a chance they’re going out with each other. Do you think they’ll follow through?”

“I wonder...”

“You wouldn’t figure anything out by asking Ishizaki. You don’t really understand anything about love, do you?”

“Shut it! You wouldn’t understand either, would you?”

“At least more than you. It doesn’t mean they’re going out, but I’m sure Komiya-kun likes Shinohara-san, right?”

“Eh, seriously, Shinohara? He likes her? Well, I believe he said something about liking a girl from another class... but my memory of him saying it is vague.”

Ishizaki also had an idea, or at least that’s what he claimed.

If you’re looking to form a group, of course you’d look for certain factors in your partners.

Physical ability, intellectual capability, social affinity. Or even romantic feelings among others. If—as Nishino claims he does—Komiya has a fondness for Shinohara, then it’s no wonder that those feelings would have turned into a request to form a group together.

“But why do you care about that?”

“I saw the two of them together this morning. Komiya called Shinohara by her first name, and they seem very familiar with each other. I thought it might be possible.”

“Huh...? Wait... Could it be that, Ayanokouji... do you like Shinohara?”

“No.”

Immediate denial. But Ishizaki seems to have flipped one of his switches on and is grinning happily.

“Is that so? You never struck me as a person who freely chooses who he likes, as have I... I see, I see. It makes sense now.”

“I just said no, but...”

“No need to hide it from me. It’ll stay between you and your brother right here.”

No, I don’t think we ever really got *that* close in the last exam...

It’s true that, in these days, the things we know about each other are better than the more half-baked things we know about other classmates, but...

“But I think you’d have a better shot at a cute and cuddly kind of girl.”

At this rate, misunderstood rumors could spread.

If that happens, the relationship between Ike and Shinohara might become even more strained.

“It’s Ike. A classmate. Ike is the one concerned about Shinohara.”

“Oh? What, it wasn’t you, Ayanokouji?”

“That’s what I was trying to say...”

“As I understand it, though, romance isn’t something that other people should butt into.”

“Exactly. It’ll be going too far if you overstep your boundaries in the situation, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Essentially, yes. But for our class, it’ll be a bit hard to ignore

the situation. Ike's abilities are vital to D-class, you know.”

The more their relationship gets strained, the more it threatens to spiral out of control in a problematic direction.

It could end up being an unfavorable development for the approaching deserted island test—something that tests the limits of one's skill more than anything. Nevertheless, this situation is of no benefit to B-class, either. It'll be more like sending salt to the enemy from their perspective. Otherwise, it wouldn't generally be something they would want to help with.

That's what I had thought, but...

“Oh... Well, if you need, I could lend you a hand. What would you like me to do?”

Ishizaki wasn't put off by the request and offered to help regardless.

“Wait, Ishizaki, are you serious? You're Komiya's best friend, aren't you?”

“But that doesn't mean I can just leave Ayanokouji all alone when he's right in front of me.”

“No, you have to let it go. I know you're close, but we're enemies, after all.”

“Yesterday's enemy is tomorrow's friend.”

I seem to be his friend today, but I just let it go and listen to what he had to say.

“Thanks, but you don't want me to ask you for anything in return, do you?”

“In return? I'm not making any demands. It's normal to help your friends if they're in trouble.”

Ishizaki isn't someone who can tell compelling lies. He seems to be telling the truth in saying that he is willing to help for free.

I'm grateful, but the fact that he's good friends with Komiya means that I can't force him to do anything unreasonable.

If I tried to get him to separate Komiya and Shinohara, it would be frowned upon, especially by Nishino.

“In that case, well... Can you try to get Komiya’s feelings out of him?”

“Just for making sure that he really likes Shinohara, right?”

“Of course. Just for the sake of getting a bird’s eye view on the situation.”

“Of course, of course. But how could we find that out? Do you have any ideas?”

When Ishizaki was at a loss for words, Nishino continued where he left off.

“You saw the two of them having fun, didn’t you, Ayanokouji-kun? If that’s the case, why not pretend that Ishizaki witnessed it and use that to find out if they’re together? As an unattractive man, it’ll seem pretty ordinary for you to feel like your friends beat you to it, wouldn’t it?”

Because of his lack of other choices, Ishizaki immediately adopted Nishino’s idea.

“I-It’s true that the idea behind it kind of hurts when I think about it, but let’s see... O-Okay, I’ll give it a try. But, wait a minute. Club activities are about to start, so...”

Thinking he could probably get through to him, Ishizaki began to call Komiya.

“Ah, Komiya? Sorry to bother you right before your club activities, but... Yeah, I wanted to ask you something. Were you talking to D-class’ Shinohara this morning? ...I thought so. No, it’s just... didn’t we agree to make an alliance of staying single? I was just wondering if you were running away from that...”

Ishizaki asks Komiya, in a more handsome way than we had expected.

“You’re not going out with her? I hope that’s true. If it’s a lie

and I find that out later, there'll be a problem, you know?

Ishizaki confirms that Komiya and Shinohara are not dating and makes an "OK" sign with his right hand.

However, his expression changes slightly.

"What ...seriously...? O-Oh... I see, hmm....."

The information from Ishizaki—who had been leading the conversation in a way that I could understand up until now—suddenly became less coherent.

And I listened intently to what Komiya was saying on the other end of the phone.

"I see... I see, no, I get it. It means that it's finally time for you to become a man, right? I'm rooting for you, of course. Let me know when there's a clear outcome, okay?"

Somehow, judging by the direction of the conversation, I came to understand what Komiya had told Ishizaki.

When we ended the call, Ishizaki looked at me awkwardly.

"That Komiya... He plans on confessing to Shinohara... He said that he's going to carry his plan out on the deserted island."

"I see."

In a group, you'll be together at all times of the day. There will be a lot of good times to make a confession.

"What are you gonna do? Clearly, you can't just stop him from doing that, can you?"

He's right, naturally. Komiya has the legitimate right to confess his feelings to Shinohara.

In the first place, although Ike and Shinohara were interested in one other, neither had taken a step. If they were cut off before the finish line, it would mean that this was their fate. Or, after Komiya had crossed the finish line, Ike might have a chance at making a comeback, but...

"In any case, you helped me out. I'll talk about this with

Horikita. If you're having trouble forming a group for Nishino, please consult with me. I may be able to help you in some way."

"I don't want anything in return, though."

"When we are in trouble, we are one. We can help one other as much as possible."

"Thank you. I know you're going through a lot, but just hang in there."

Ishizaki thanked me and I decided to report the matter to Horikita.

9

That evening, I called Horikita to the cafeteria.

It's difficult to pick up a conversation in the midst of this noisy environment, even if there are students around to listen in.

Ike has feelings for Shinohara, but is unable to take a step forward. Komiya is in love with Shinohara and is on the verge of confessing his feelings to her. I also express my concern that this may affect the next uninhabited island test.

Horikita's reaction to the report is...

"Just let it go."

As I half-expected, this cold response was what she threw back at me.

"You said you wanted to talk to me about it, so if you're wondering what I think we should do... it's not something that someone else would be pry into. Besides, I also appreciate Ike's ability as a Boy Scout. You should be able to make the best arrangement with an absence of personal feelings."

"I don't know. Ike can't seem to stop worrying about Shinohara.

Depending on the situation, he may not be able to perform as well as he did last year. What you're saying is completely reasonable, but it's possible that Shinohara could bother him—dragging the group down.”

“Are you suggesting that love will pose the risk of him dropping out?”

“That's not an impossibility.”

“...Then it'll be tricky. And very silly, at that.”

Horikita sighs wryly as if she wanted to rest her head in her hands for a while.

“It seems that Komiya and Shinohara promised to form a group, but because of your rules, they haven't moved yet. But if they get permission, there's a 90% chance they will form this group together. You're the leader of the D-class now. If you tell them that working with Komiya will be disadvantageous from a strategic point of view, Shinohara can't force you to change your mind.”

“We need to discourage them. But if we just prevent them from forming a group, it may be as simple as changing when to confess to her for Komiya-kun. Depending on the situation, he might do it on the very day I prohibit this.”

“Well, that's not impossible.”

“This is more trouble than it's worth. It's just that it's impossible for us to really follow what's going on regarding the romance in our class.”

“In that case, I think we should do something about it after all.”

“Why don't you just get Ike to confess to her? If Shinohara accepts, Ike will work hard regardless of what group he's in to try not to get expelled, right? On the other hand, if he's rejected, that in itself may give him some peace of mind and possibly allow him to focus on the exam.”

I think the former is true, but I don't know what will happen in

the case of the latter.

There's always the possibility that it'll just make him even more desperate.

But, at this rate, this love story will never come to an end.

Surely, clearing everything up for Ike early on might be the most efficient solution.

"You're good at a lot of things, but when it comes to things like romance, that doesn't seem to be the case."

"I'm learning slowly."

"Clearly... Okay, I'll try to figure it out. In the meantime, we can encourage Ike and Shinohara-san to team up, right?"

Although she was still in the middle of eating, Horikita pulled out her device and started the OAA app.

However, this was where something unexpected happened.

"Unfortunately, it seems like it's already too late."

She slides her phone across the table and I look at her screen. On the OAA I could see a list of formed groups, and it seems that Shinohara and Komiya had already solidified their decision of forming a group together. The third member of this group was B-class' Kinoshita Minori.

"When it comes to Ike, it looks like we're going to need to take some measures to keep his motivation in check."

"Let's talk to Yousuke about that. He will probably be the best one for the job."

When it came to forming groups for the survival island test, the path in front of us looks like it'll be a difficult one.

In the evening, an indoor date with Kei—which is starting to become a common thing between us—began.

Today’s topic of conversation begins with Ike and Shinohara parting ways due to a quarrel, and it’s mostly about the formation of groups.

“Well... who will you form a group with for the uninhabited island test, Kiyotaka?”

With a somewhat calculated gesture, Kei looks up and asks this question.

“I don’t plan to team up with anyone at the moment.”

“What? W-Why?”

Kei seems to want to form a group with me, but I don’t think doing that will work to my advantage. More so because it would inhibit my ability to think about Tsukishiro than any lack of her ability.

“I’m not sure if it’s a good idea to have a group. Yet it’s still possible to win by yourself. In fact, the advantage of being able to move around freely without being influenced by others is also an advantage. And depending on the situation, you can ask for help by other groups. If there’s a group that looks like it’s going to be eliminated, you’d be able to go in and cover for it.”

“A person alone is generally more flexible than a person with others...”

Whether you are a boy or a girl, you are allowed to participate alone. This means that for students who hold pride in their versatility, there exists a chance of winning alone.

“If a lone student takes first place, that will ensure a reward of 300 class points.”

“Are you able to do it?”

“What do you think?”

When I asked back, our eyes met, and we stared at each other

for a while before Kei stiffened to think about it.

“I have a feeling that you’re going to take first place super coolly. Eh, but wait a minute. If you did that, it would be even harder for us to reveal that we’re in a relationship!”

Kei suddenly starts to panic as she imagines the future.

“If Kiyotaka wins first place by himself, I would be so happy and overjoyed that I would faint, and I think it would be cool, b-but, ah, I don’t know which result I would like!”

“You’re getting too excited on your own. Don’t worry about it, it’s not that easy to win first place.”

“So you don’t think that you could win either, Kiyotaka?”

“Let’s call it a 50-50 chance.”

“A 50-50 chance is a hell of a bold claim...”

“Anyway, the point is that you shouldn’t be too concerned with who you’ll be grouping up with.”

“What? Isn’t that important, though? If my team loses, I’ll be expelled.”

“Yes, this special exam involves expulsion from school. If you’re in the bottom five groups, you’ll be forced to pay a penalty. But you won’t get to choose who you pair up with.”

“Yeah. That’s why I wanted to team up with you, Kiyotaka... I wanted you to protect me...”

Kei, who had been beating around the bush up until now, directly confesses to me.

“There is a way I can still help you without directly protecting you. It’s about the private points that may be needed for relief.”

“That’s true, but...”

It requires a high amount of private points to save yourself like that. Though, conversely, if you have that many points, you won’t be forcibly dropped out.

“That’s true, but even if you can get a group of six people

together during the exam, you still need a million points to avoid having to drop out, right? I don't have that many."

"What's your current balance?"

"Um... about 240,000 points... I may not seem like it, but I've been saving a lot lately!"

It wasn't like I was trying to attack her by asking her this, though.

Besides, I was in a similar position and I couldn't attack her even if I wanted.

"So you're short 760,000?"

I have about 250,000 available. Even if I gave her all of that, it would still be less than half a million, give or take.

"Kei, the card you have was Piggyback, right?"

"Yeah. How good is that?"

"I wouldn't say it's a good one, to be honest. For better or worse, it's the one item least relevant to you. It's not a card that will add to your efforts or help you when you make a mistake."

You can only bet on the group that you think is likely to win. It could easily be the least useful card.

"...It is, isn't it?"

Kei sighed in dismay, as if she had somehow expected that.

"I'm pretty sure your card was Trial, right? When you win, it's incredibly potent, but if you lose, it's a disastrous card... Oh, of course, I know you'll be perfectly fine, but... I would have liked having something like Halving or Invalid or something more helpful instead."

For a student like Kei, it's not surprising that she would find more value in cards that prevented loss than a card like Trial.

"It's not that there's no hope for Piggyback. There are students who find cards like Halving and Invalid to also be useless. For students like those, Piggyback could be more potent too."

Cards like Preceding and Add wouldn't resonate with students who were fully confident in themselves, but instead, they could hold more value in the hands of middle-tier students who are not sure whether they can win. And since the middle-tier is likely to have the largest number of students, it's easier to find those who may want to trade for them. However, cards like Halving were also highly desirable to some of the middle and lower-tier students because they could serve as a backup plan to them. A card worthless to some can shine like gold for others.

"I'll get the money."

"What? H-How are you going to do that?"

"There are many ways to do it, and one of them is exchanging cards for money."

"But that means you'll have to let go of your Trial card... A-Are you sure?"

"What's more important to me is to make sure you don't drop out."

"O-Oh... T-Thanks..."

Kei blushes when she says that.

After that, we moved on to talk about summer vacation and got fired up, but ultimately held off on making any new progress.

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The students were given until the summer special examination to form a group of up to three students.

However, that wasn't the only thing they were discussing when it came to the topic of the near future.

"It looks like you're here, Ichinose-san."

“Thanks for waiting, Sakayanagi-san.”

It was Friday: the first weekend since they’ve been allowed to start forming groups.

Sakayanagi had contacted Ichinose and called her to the cafe.

“I’m not bothering you by calling you here today, am I? It was a last minute request and I was prepared to be turned down.”

“I wasn’t expecting to be contacted by you, Sakayanagi-san. To be honest, I was a little surprised, but it’s fine with me.”

On this day, Sakayanagi had called out to her on short notice, only an hour before the meeting at the cafe.

If she had been busy and declined the request, it would not have been a surprise.

“I just really wanted to meet and talk with you today, Ichinose-san.”

Sakayanagi lied.

It had initially been one of her strategies for not giving Ichinose any time to think. That was her real intention behind having called her out on such short notice and without warning.

If she had contacted her earlier on, Ichinose would have been given time to wonder about what Sakayanagi could have wanted from her.

In some cases, this might have even prompted her to ask for help from classmates like Kanzaki.

It was to prevent that from happening.

“By the way, why did you accept such an urgent request?”

“Why? Because I didn’t have any other plans for today.”

“No, that can’t be true. I was a little cruel to you in the past, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you admitted that you don’t like me.”

In order to bring down Ichinose, Sakayanagi secretly looked into her past.

She made Ichinose suffer by revealing this past—one she

wouldn't want others to know.

If someone you trust and talk to betrayed you, many would dislike them. And even if they didn't dislike them, they would still distrust them strongly, wanting to keep their distance.

However, Ichinose immediately responded to Sakayanagi's sudden call and did not give the slightest impression that she had a grudge against Sakayanagi.

"Hmm, I don't think that Sakayanagi-san has done anything particularly terrible. It's true that when I think back to what happened in junior high school, of course I think it was embarrassing. But it's not like I asked you to keep my secret, so you don't have to blame yourself for it."

Ichinose says that it was only her own fault for exposing her past in the first place.

"As I thought, Ichinose-san is unmistakably a good person."

"I'm not so sure about that. I don't really know if that's true."

She lightly puffed out her cheeks somewhat embarrassedly. And as if she found it difficult to continue looking at this gentle-looking Sakayanagi, she averted her gaze just once.

"So... What is it that you wanted to talk to me about?"

As they return to the main topic, Ichinose—perhaps feeling a little uncomfortable now—urged Sakayanagi to cut to the chase.

"Well then, I guess I'll move onto the main topic since that's what you want, but be warned; the main topic may be a little uncomfortable for you, Ichinose."

With that kind of a prelude, Ichinose muttered some small, gentle words under her breath.

"Frankly speaking, I feel that if things were to continue as they are, your ability to re-emerge in B-class—let alone the A-class—will be in jeopardy. Would you mind letting me know your thoughts on this matter?"

Without hesitation, Sakayanagi immediately pointed out Ichinose's current situation.

“Ahaha... You're very straightforward...”

With her mind becoming a little blank, Ichinose smiles bitterly and fans herself with her hand.

Daringly, Sakayanagi only smiled a little to show that she was waiting for a response.

“It's true that the situation I'm in isn't a very good one at all.

As of May 1st, the difference in class points between them and B-class—being led by Ryuuen: the one Ichinose lost to—was only 26 points. Since it depended on monthly late absences and many other factors, she thought it would be possible to catch up if there were no other special exams.

In fact, in terms of this year's class points, this fluctuation in class points was through the accumulation of class points from these small, everyday occurrences.

However, once the classes went through changes and Ryuuen's team moved up to B-class, they didn't show any signs of slowing down. Ryuuen's strong will to prevent them from overtaking his class was clearly felt by the others.

Sakayanagi, who is being chased by Ryuuen, sensed this fact without needing anything to be said.

“I'm well aware of who it is that I'm up against.”

“Even if you are, you realize that you won't be able to do anything about it, don't you? It's hard to believe that that noisy Ryuuen-kun's class hasn't been causing trouble lately. If he's caught up with during normal school life, then he has no choice but to get motivated about special exams.”

Ichinose nodded a little. On the other hand, Sakayanagi didn't hesitate to not hold back her response.

“The biggest thing about him is that he is no simple matter. It is

not an exaggeration to say that he is, in a sense, the most difficult opponent for you to fight against, Ichinose. But that's because of the straightforward manner that he competes against his opponents with."

Ichinose, who had faced Ryuen directly in last year's final special exam, understood that well.

He is aggressive, anomalous, and not afraid of foul play.

Meanwhile, Ichinose's true intention is to prevent having to fight him, if possible.

"But I can't avoid him if I want to move up the ladder. It is true that Ryuen-kun is a difficult opponent to fight against, but not because he can easily defeat Sakayanagi-san."

Even though they had had a dispute with their fellow A-class member Katsuragi, A-class unmistakably had a devastating lead on Ryuen's B-class—almost double their points. Even if Ryuen could beat them once or twice, taking first place would be very difficult.

"How about D-class? They are more than 200 points behind, but still have a lot of momentum, right? How confident are you that you won't be overtaken?"

"Horikita's class is making rapid progress. In terms of individual ability, they are as good as any one of the other classes... When I look at it this way, there really isn't much room for error."

"There are some interesting gems in D-class. You're right in thinking this. Hirata-kun and Kushida-san, for example, are very good communicators and well-balanced. There is also Sudou-kun: the only one fit enough to get an A+ in physical ability. Then there's Ayanokouji, who was able to get a perfect score in that difficult math test. There is Kouenji, with his limitless abilities besides being a very dangerous person in general."

By saying this out loud, it becomes easier to realize how deep

the abilities of the second-year D-class' students really go.

“And then there's the leader who brings them together, Horikita-san. She's excellent both academically and physically, and I heard that she finally joined the student council the other day.”

Sakayanagi reaffirmed the situation Ichinose was in.

“I'm sorry to continue being so harsh, but I believe it's only a matter of time before Ichinose's class will be dropped down to D-class.”

“That's the kind of recognition I'm used to. But...”

“Do you really think that you'll be able to magically make it work out through hard work and friendship?”

Ichinose was swallowed up by Sakayanagi's precise words that had been fired off before she even had a chance to speak.

“With such vague and ambiguous ideas, it will be impossible to win. All of the classes have clearly grown in strength over the past year, but I haven't seen any significant growth in your class.”

“That's not... that's just not true. We're all growing.”

“I'm not saying you're not growing. I'm saying you're not *improving*.”

“Sakayanagi-san may not understand, but I don't think I'm going to lose.”

Smiling thinly, Sakayanagi very slightly and slowly shook her head.

“If you look at OAA, it's obvious: if you compare the overall strength from our first year with where we are now, it is unmistakably your class that had the lowest growth among all four classes. I expected you to have at least understood this much, but... maybe you knew and pretended not to... or maybe you were just too afraid to check it...”

Ichinose was forcefully sent back in time to when she had been

alone with Sakayanagi before.

It was like an adult talking to a child.

It was natural to feel belittled—to feel like you were being pushed further and further into a corner.

As Sakayanagi accurately attacked her weaknesses, it was like it had become impossible for her to talk back to her.

“You are a smart student. You will never lose to me in a fair environment. But in an unfair one, you are unable to show your abilities—it’s as if you accept inferiority. Both last time and this time, you will have no choice but to stay silent because of your weaknesses. However, the people you’re dealing with are Ryuenkun and I. And we will bare our fangs fully regardless of whether the environment we battle in is fair or not, do you understand?”

“Well, I guess so.”

Both of them would undoubtedly remain strong-minded regardless of circumstance.

“I think it’s safe to say that there is no chance at all for you right now, Ichinose-san.”

“Did you call me just to tell me this?”

“I wouldn’t waste your precious time off just to harass you; I could do that whenever I wanted.”

Here, Sakayanagi decided to reveal the real motive of having called Ichinose today.

“Would you like to work together, Ichinose-san?”

“What...?”

The unexpected suggestion made Ichinose choke on her words as if she was now being forced to respond to a question that she could never have expected.

“It’s the only way that you will be able to catch up with us in A-class.”

“No, but that’s not...”

“It’s not bad for classes to cooperate with each other. In fact, I thought you had a similar relationship with Horikita in our first year.”

It was to be expected that Sakayanagi would catch wind of Horikita’s and Ichinose’s classes working together in their first year.

“This is just my own imagination, but I believe that you have already terminated your cooperative relationship with Horikita-san and the rest of D-class. Even though they are the lowest ranked, they have accumulated more class points in a year than any other class and are probably going to ride this momentum till the end. In comparison, Ichinose and the rest of your class took a step back and fell to C-class. For Horikita-san and her class, joining forces with Ichinose will no longer have any merits.”

Sakayanagi makes a perfect point, as if she had personally witnessed this exchange between Ichinose and Horikita.

Unable to deny it, Ichinose responds with a half-hearted confession.

“Well... That’s because truces aren’t something that last forever...”

“Yes. In order to maintain a cooperative relationship, ‘certain conditions’ must be met. Because Horikita-san and your classes met those conditions last year, you were able to build a good relationship without needlessly fighting.”

Ichinose gave a small nod in agreement.

“That certain condition was... the difference in class points between your classes.”

In fact, it was precisely because of the gap in class points that Ichinose and Horikita’s classes had stopped being hostile towards one another.

“Although a little reluctantly, there’s enough of a gap between

us in A-class and C-class. I don't think it will be impossible to join forces this way."

"The sad part is that I don't think it's a happy proposition. It implies that our class is insignificant and unworthy of your caution."

"If you don't mind me saying so, you're exactly right."

Sakayanagi slaps the merciless reality on her.

However, she keeps a smile on her face. It's easy to deny it with emotion, but she can't turn her back on the fact that her class is being driven into a corner.

"I don't think Sakayanagi-san has any merits in working with our class."

"No, that's not true. It's true that if you only look at it in terms of overall ability, you're not enough. But, that being said, you also have powerful weapons in your class that no other classes have."

Saying that, Sakayanagi smiles.

"—That is 'trust'. Of course, that is as long as you and the rest of your class can assure that you will never betray us under any conditions. This is a very important factor in forming this truce."

A partner to whom you'll never turn your back on. For that reason alone, it's worth teaming up, is what Sakayanagi was suggesting.

"I'm happy to hear that, but we're also in a situation where we can't keep pretending that we don't care, you know?"

"Even so. I understand that you will be letting loose the weapons that you have built up over the years and grown to trust. If these were to act out and betray us on their own, it would be my fault for misjudging them."

Even if this is a trap set out by Sakayanagi, Ichinose doesn't feel bad about trusting her.

However, she has already factored in that Sakayanagi is a person

who can easily turn her back on anyone.

“Do you mind if I ask you to be more specific?”

“Does that mean you may be considering this opportunity to work with us?”

“Well... yes.”

“In that case, let’s talk.”

Sakayanagi begins to take action to bring Ichinose’s second-year C-class under her wing.

“The next uninhabited island survival test has a somewhat tricky rule. You can only form groups with students of the same grade, and rewards will be distributed equally. This means that even if you can get the best members from each class, there will be no changes in class standings.”

“Right. So, I guess we’ll inevitably have to build winning groups among our own classes.”

“But that doesn’t leave many options. There are some things that cannot be covered by one’s own class alone... But what if we have two classes? It would be a different story if we were free to pick and choose from 79 members.”



“So our classes team up...”

“The gap between A-class and C-class will not be reduced, but we can close in on Ryuuen-kun’s class and as well as widen the gap between D-class.

“But... then we’ll be losing our last chance of catching up with your class.”

“Isn’t your first priority getting back to a stable position for the next two semesters? Even if you refused to cooperate here, you wouldn’t necessarily win. Doesn’t that make a difference?”

“That’s...”

“If you refuse to cooperate here and are defeated by another class, your class would drop straight to D-class. If you lose a lot of class points, you will be in an extremely difficult situation. If that happens, it will become nearly impossible to set your sights on A-class ever again.”

At Sakayanagi’s words, Ichinose fell silent again, unable to retort.

“I think you’re still doubting me. But I don’t think there will be much chances like this left for classes to team up. Neither D-class nor B-class will team up with me because of how dead-set they are on catching up to A-class. In that case, the only possible combination would be for the three classes to team up and challenge A-class to a match. This would make for a strong group.”

No matter how strong A-class is, if B-class and D-class work together, their chances of winning would be reduced.

“I’d be lying if I said that I hadn’t thought about that.”

“Surely. But the strategy of all 3 classes teaming up is unrealistic. Have you or your classmates been approached about this by anybody in the past few days?”

Ichinose lowered her eyes and slowly shook his head from side to side.

“If all 3 classes banded together, the class points being rewarded will have to be distributed. Even if you are able to struggle all the way up to first place, the amount by which you will be able to close the gap by will only be 100 points. If you’re in second place, it will be by 67 points. If you’re in third place, it will only be by 33 points.”

Even if the podium is dominated by this alliance of B, C, and D classes, the gap between the second-years will only be closed by 200 points.

It won’t be particularly insignificant, but the fact that it’s a special examination will mean that dominating the podium will already be difficult in the first place.

“It’s natural to want to close the gap to 300 or 400 points on your own.”

“But if Sakayanagi-san and I team up, then Horikita-san and Ryuuen-kun might also team up... Besides, when we form groups, we will do so including students from both classes, right?”

“Yes. I was actually hoping for such developments to start. In the case that an alliance between the other classes is formed, I suggest we only retaliate with our main force.”

“And... what will this ‘main force’ be?”

“I can’t move around on a deserted island with the condition my body is in as I had done last year. However, I have been allowed to participate. That puts me in a somewhat unique position.”

“Unique position?”

“If a student can’t participate in the test due to illness or other reasons at the start of the test, he or she will be placed in the retirement bracket from the start, right? But I will be allowed to participate under the ‘semi-retired’ status.”

“Semi-retired?”

“My disability prevents me from walking around the island

freely, but I have the right to stay where I started and fight according to the rules, just like you. That means I can answer when asked for my opinion and we can work together to tackle tough challenges. However, if I end up being the last person in my group, that's when the group is eliminated."

"That means you will be able to participate under that particular condition, Sakayanagi?"

Although there would be a need for a way to keep in touch, Ichinose quickly understands that Sakayanagi's intellectual abilities would contribute greatly.

"Now, you will be able to freely choose from these 4 people: Hashimoto-kun, Kitou-kun, Masumi-san, and I—the undisputed main force of A-class. From B-class, I'd say the main force would be Ichinose, Kanzaki-kun, and Shibata-kun."

At the moment, the members who had just been mentioned still had not formed a group with anyone as they waited to see what would happen.

This was a stage before inconvenience for both sides.

"That's right. Considering the physical demands of being on a deserted island, I'm sure of that. But there's no guarantee that these groups will be able to form as they wish when the special examination begins, is there?"

"They've said it could be difficult to join up... but not impossible."

Sakayanagi smiled. It was a sign of confidence that Ichinose would, ultimately, join them no matter what.

"Sakayanagi-san. Can I give you my honest impressions?"

"Of course."

"You don't want the three classes to fight together as much as I think you do, Sakayanagi-san. You're rather afraid of that happening, aren't you?"

“What... do you mean?”

“I think what you said about our potential of being trustworthy allies is true. But your main goal is to avoid a situation where B-class and D-class are chasing down A-class together. It’s true that you get fewer class points for finding a position on the podium, but there’s no guarantee that two of the three of our classes won’t choose to cooperate in the future.”

Ichinose, who had been almost swallowed up by Sakayanagi’s story so far, confronted Sakayanagi with the feelings she had.

“Three classes teaming up to hunt down A-class. If this situation really happens, you’ll surely be in hot waters... Am I wrong about that?”

Sakayanagi showed a bit of surprise at Ichinose’s counterattack, especially after having been defensive thus far.

“It seems I underestimated you a bit, Ichinose-san.”

In this special exam, Sakayanagi wouldn’t even care if either B-class or D-class could win more than 300 class points on their own; the most important thing she had wanted to avoid—as a part of the one and only A-class—was solidarity between the three classes beneath them. She had predicted that there would be more exams like this in the future. If there was someone who could bring the three classes together, it would be Honami Ichinose. That’s why she had decided to be the one to make the first move and place Ichinose under her own watch.

“The proposal to team up with me. Will you accept it? Could I have a direct answer, please?”

After acknowledging this, Sakayanagi asks Ichinose to cooperate with her one last time.

“If you’re willing to join forces with me, I’m willing to place a deposit for three students: a total of three million points for students at a high risk of having to drop out. If a penalty is imposed, you can

use this money to pay for the relief measures. Of course, this could be very helpful for you, Ichinose-san—the person that wouldn't want someone from their class to drop out more than anyone else.

In fear of being rejected, Sakayanagi extends her offer.

“Could you offer me enough for five students? That way, I could feel relieved.”

“That's quite greedy. We were planning to transfer a similar amount of money in the near future, but I guess we could give you a special loan, just this once.”

Class A has been receiving more private points than any other class for over a year. As a result, the amount of money each student had accumulated was unmatched by any other class.

“We have a deal. But I was going to cooperate with you even without your offer of relief money, Sakayanagi-san. Our ultimate goal is, of course, A-class. But as you've said, we have just dropped down to the C-class.”

“Exactly. If were to drop down to D-class here, I am sure your class' morale would drop greatly. I don't want that to happen.”

Ichinose asked Sakayanagi to shake her hand.

“A joint fight between the second-year C-class and the second-year A-class—I accept the proposal.”

They shook each other's hands, finalizing the formidable alliance between their classes.

“Now I will be able to fight without having to worry. It's still very early, but I'd like to ask something of you.”

“We need to start by handing our 'Increase' card to A-class' main force for sake of the highest probability of winning... right?”

Ichinose had already begun formulating the best order of operations to better their chances of their alliance winning.

With the 'Increase' card—of which there was only one in every grade—a group of seven people could be created.

This was also one of the reasons why Sakayanagi wanted to form an alliance with Ichinose.

“It helps that we’re on the same page.”

“But both Ryuuen-kun and Horikita-san will also be formidable opponents.”

It’s not that Sakayanagi was underestimating them.

It wouldn’t be an easy fight for her, considering Ayanokouji had been standing behind Horikita and manipulating his class from the shadows.

It’s just that, now having formed an alliance with Ichinose, she was confident in their ability to win.

“We will take the number one spot. We’re not going to spare the effort needed to achieve that.”

They were the main force: the ones who were going to challenge Ryuuen and Horikita’s classes, as well as the first and third-year students to a battle.

— CHAPTER FOUR —

Battle of the First-years and Third-years

Nearly three months have passed since the new first-years entered the school, and the new students were beginning to understand the state of the Advanced Nurturing High School.

The first graders were also in the midst of building groups for the next big special exam.

However, shortly after the group ban was lifted, something went wrong.

The movement of the students from the first-year D class led by Housen Kazuomi refused to join the other class groups and also refused to trade cards. He asked the other three classes to pay money if they wanted to work together.

Because of this, the other students fell into a situation where they could not form a group without them asking for private points.

There were representatives of each class who had hoped that Kazuomi would change his mind during June, but even today, the first day of July, the situation still did not change.

There were many students from the entire school year that decided to ignore class D, but on the other hand, eight of the first

year B class students including Yagami decided to form groups. Although it is easy to create a group of consisting of only three classes that ignored the D class, competition with the "other grades" also became a problem which is an important part of this special exam.

If this was the first priority, he said that in order to create the best group, it was necessary to select people from all classes. At about the same time, there was also the approval of students who shared the same idea as Yagami, and so the three classes decided to observe the situation until July.

However, due to Kazuomi's ignorance, trying to rig the exam became meaningless.

And today, when the deadline comes, representatives of four classes were supposed to gather to break the situation.

Yagami proposed that the discussions should be held in a simple form, since the discussion will not be confidential. It was agreed that class leaders or people similar to them would come together, but D class did not reply to his invitation.

Yagami from the B class of the first years was the first to show up in the hallway, which was lined up with classrooms of the first grade students. As the organiser, he thought he needed to show up before anyone else.

Not long after that, Riku Utomiya from the first year C class showed up.

"It looks like Yagami is still alone."

"Hey Utomiya-kun. I was wondering if you could join us."

"I'm not one of the class leaders, but the other students didn't want to come. I feel like I don't deserve to be here but I don't mind."

"I guess it's because you're such a reliable student. I saw the OAA updated this month, and your social contribution and the critical thinking ability went up to B."

Saying that, Yagami smiled refreshingly.

Utomiya wrinkled his eyebrows despite being praised.

The physical ability of Yagami is C, and his academic ability is A. His social contributions to B-class, which have been done repeatedly, have increased to A, and with his ability to think quickly and to contribute to society. He is at the forefront of his overall strength.

No one in C class would be pleased in this situation.

“I heard you lost one of your classmates.”

“I didn't expect Hatano-kun to leave school because of the special test. It was such a shame.”

“...Oh.”

Hatano was a valuable student in the first-year C class, a male student with academic ability of A.

However, he resorted to a penalty act that resulted in his immediate expulsion from school if he broke it, which was fatal.

The first graders who had relaxed themselves in this school came to know the harshness of reality again.

However, it has already been a month since Hatano dropped out of school.

Utomiya, who was a classmate of Hatano, had no time to spare.

Now that they have lost one of the best students in the class, they need to achieve solid results in the next special exam.

“It looks like you were on good terms with Hatano.”

“We said we'd join the student council together and liven up the school.”

Utomiya nods lightly and then turned his eyes towards the classroom of first-years D class.”

“Do you think Housen will come?”

Utomiya asked about the sole purpose of this gathering.

“I think it's a 50-50 chance.”

“50-50? You have a lot of faith in Housen. I don’t think he’ll show up.”

“If he doesn’t show up here, we’ll be forced to form a group consisting of only three classes. If that happens, only the D class that is trying to sell themselves for points will be left behind. The winning chance of the first-year D class will disappear.”

“If he think he can rake in private points from us, that's a bad move. This time, it is important to form a smooth group. Second year and third year students are enemies, so we should definitely do so. But Housen rejected it”

The same first year students who are trying to fight each other now have to band together.

“Obviously, but I don't think Housen-kun really wants to do it.”

“I understand that it's a bargain. But it's a bargain with no chance of winning.”

“If you really meant it, if you were playing this bargain, it would be a blessing in disguise. Nah. It means that for us and the rest of the class, Housen-kun isn't that much of a threat.”

“... Yeah.”

Yagami explains that there’s also a chance that Housen is thinking of another strategy.

While the two of them were discussing the matter, a third person has arrived on the scene—

“Oh! Riku and Takuya. I knew it was you guys.”

Loudly waving to them, the one who approached them was Takahashi Osamu, a first-year A-class student.

Although his academic ability is C+, which is oddly low, he is good at communication and is often a center-piece in a discussion. He has many friends in other classes and grades.

“If you're here, Osamu-kun, does that mean that you've been forced to deal with the trouble again?”

“Our leader is the kind of guy who doesn't like trouble. So that's why I'm substituting.”

“Well, it would be better if Osamu came over so the conversation could go more smoothly.”

It didn't have to be a leader to come to this discussion, as Utomiya said.

On the contrary, it was more gratifying for the rest of the class to have a student who was good at conversation to come.

“So all that's left is Housen-kun.”

There are about three minutes left until the meeting time. If he doesn't show up, the three of them will proceed with the conference without hesitation.

“Wouldn't it be better if we teamed up at this stage to isolate the D class and get them early? I'd like to smash it down, that's what I really want to do.”

“They say that the test on a deserted island will ask for factors other than academics, and Class D will only look at the academic part. They're the lowest in this grade, but is close to first in terms of physical ability. They have the potential to play a key role in group building.”

“I know what you mean Riku, my class is pretty frustrated with the situation too. But it's too early to give up on them, don't you think? How can you be sure there won't be future exams like this one where grades cooperate with each other?”

While Utomiya proposed to ignore D-class, Yagami always stood on the side of D class while Takahashi stood neutral.

“If there's a need for cooperation, we can do it in three classes. I'll admit that there's a force that can be used in D class as well, but I'm not so sure that I'd be able to request it even if I had to ask for a good time from Housen. It's about time for an appointment, and I'd like to have the three classes get the conversation together in the

direction of a collusion.”

“It doesn't look like that's going to happen, Riku.”

As if he had anticipated the direction of such a discussion, the man appeared leisurely.

“It looks like you came after all, Housen-kun.”

Housen is greeted by Yagami's smile, and as usual, he approaches with his usual eerily white teeth. Utomiya gives him a light glance, then lets his gaze escape to the window.

“You showed up just in time, Kazuomi.”

Takahashi was not afraid to talk to Housen in a friendly manner. His sentiment was only that they were all friendly.

“Don't call me names like we're familiar. I'll kill you.”

Intimidating Takahashi, Housen turned to Yagami and Utomiya once again.

“Are you ready to pay up?”

“That's a funny joke. There's no point to give you any money.”

“Let's calm down. We can't even discuss it if we're fighting from the start.”

“Well, let's start the discussion when we're all together. The group's—”

“Don't try to mess with me.”

Housen pushed Takahashi by the shoulder, which caused him to fall flat on his butt. Utomiya, who didn't like the action, glared at Housen hard.

“Housen, you need to stop bringing your violence to this place.”

“Oh? Are you going to stand in my way?”

“I'll do it if I have to.”

“Hah, interesting. If you can do it, go ahead and do it.”

Raising his left hand, Takahashi, who was attached to Yagami, panicked as he lets out a scream.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait. I just slipped and fell, so calm down,

Riku.”

“What will you do?”

“Unfortunately, I'm not as nice as Takahashi,”

“Then let's see it.”

A fist was made by Housen and at the same time, Utomiya grabbed his arm.

“Ho...?”

Feeling the strength of the clenched grip, Housen smiles happily. Utomiya's gaze wasn't just a mere pretense, he could also see the determination to fight here if necessary.

Housen thought that it would be interesting to have a fight here, but he reconsidered.

Housen craved to fight the other grades more than anyone else, even though he decided not to do it.

“I think it'll be fun to play with you. But I'll save it for next time.”

“Do you think violence is a game?”

“Of course, because it's fun.”

“It's stupid. But if you want it, I can respond to you here and now instead of saving it for later. But only if you agree to the condition that you never touch my classmates again.”



In the sign of an empathic shot, both sides exchanged their eyes in a way that showed neither of them yielding.

“Oi, oi, what do you mean by that?”

“I know you made Hatano drop out. He wasn't a student who would voluntarily drop out.”

“I think it was just a suicide bomb that resulted in the small fish being expelled.”

“I remember Hatano's face after he decided to leave school. He said he was caught by someone.”

“And you conclude that it's me?”

“Who else is there besides you?”

Although he tried to let go of Housen's arm, the fire in his eyes grew even larger as they talked about Hatano.

“Calm down, both of you. Riku will be at the mercy of Kazuomi if you get into an unintentional brawl or waistband.”

“Takahashi-kun is right. The important thing right now is to focus on the uninhabited island test.”

“Oh, well, I guess we can group with a class from somewhere else for the next special exam.”

The mouth of Housen that was quiet up until now spoke what was in his mind for the first time.

“How did you do it? You've denied any cooperation given from other classes.”

“If I asked you whether or not you wanted to work with me, what would be your answer?”

“You're kidding. Even if you were the last one left, I wouldn't team up with you.”

“That's cold.”

Utomiya slowly releases his hand from Housen's arm.

Yagami, who had been watching him, cuts him off as if he had timed it right.

“Since we're wasting time, why don't we start?”

“Who said I was going to participate in the discussion? Don't try to start it with me around.”

“So what brings you here? Is this just a way to pass the time?”

“What if I said yes?”

“I don't believe you. You're not that stupid.”

Yagami answered Housen with a smile showing no hints of him being scared.

“The survival test on the deserted island is a crazy even for us, but each second and third grader has experienced it once or twice now. Us first-year students have to take the exam at an overwhelming disadvantage.”

“But we also have an advantage, don't we?”

To Takahashi, who was optimistic, Yagami continued the explanation in a soft manner.

“In terms of both academic ability and physical ability, the second year and third year students will still have an advantage because of their age. If we can't work together, we might be preyed upon by the upperclassmen one way or another, you know?”

That's why Yagami emphasized that the cooperation of the four classes.

“Don't pull a lukewarm thing like that, Yagami. I'm confident I can crush them, whether it's second or third graders.”

“Of course, there are some students who are outperforming in terms of individual talent. But there's no hiding the fact that freshmen are inferior when you look at their overall strength. Not everyone is as fortunate as Housen-kun, you know.”

He continued to talk in a soft manner with an attitude of appreciating Housen, as he maintained the conversation without it collapsing.

“So— I thought that we needed to work together as freshmen to

create at least one powerful 'four-person group.' Just as Housenkun said, to bring together the students who can say that they will never lose to the second and third year students."

"So you're saying that we're not competing for class points on this special exam."

"Because of the rules that make cooperation among grades difficult, it is difficult for second-and third-year students who have little time left to accept the loss of opportunities for this special exam. But we still have more than two years left. That's why we should dare to throw away some of our class points."

The gap in class points from A class to D class is still about 300 at most. While Yagami explains that there's no need to panic, Utomiya wrinkles his brow as he thinks differently.

"The benefits of working with other classes are thin. It's a useless act of throwing away class points."

"It's not much of a stretch if the upperclassmen are preying on you."

"The disadvantages even out the advantages if we cooperate."

Utomiya stresses that if it's going to happen after a fight, it's inevitable.

"Wait a minute. I was wondering what Takuya said, but why is it just one group? The top three groups will be getting the class points. Shouldn't it be better to form multiple stronger groups?"

Yagami was quick to answer such questions from Takahashi.

"Of course, you're right. But if you seek to make a lot of strong groups from the beginning, you'll have to balance it out. Our opponents are seniors, not someone who can let us win easily. It's important to make sure you have the strongest group of four to take first place. It seems to be difficult to form groups freely in the competition, and even though the upperclassmen try their best to work together, they can only cooperate with each other in three

classes.”

After hearing Yagami's story, Takahashi guessed his aim.

“As long as we can get the first place, you don't mind throwing out the rest at worst.”

“If we ignored Housen-kun and cooperated with only 3 classes, we could create a strong group, but that is the same way as in other grades. I strongly desire cooperation in 4 classes rather than just choosing strength. It's not just curiosity, because I think it is definitely essential to unite the and fight together as a whole grade. Making a 'small group of up to 4' given only to us in the first year. It's too much to throw away such a valuable advantage.”

If they only have D-class on the sidelines, they will naturally try to interfere with the first place.

If that happens, they will use all kinds of tricks to prevent you from winning.

Yagami said that as long as the four classes can create a complete cooperation system, they should aim for that ideal form.

And once again, Yagami faces Housen.

“I want you to lend me a hand with the understanding that you alone are enough to fight the seniors.”

Yagami complained that they only needed four classes, but Utomiya looked at Housen suspiciously.

He didn't think the man who had refused the discussion for more than two weeks would accept it.

“Fine, I'll cooperate with you.”

However, when he came here, Housen easily accepted Yagami's proposal.

“...What are you planning, Housen?”

“What do you mean? Weren't you guys the one asking for my cooperation?”

“Then let's hear the terms.”

Yagami urges that the change in Housen would be a waste of time.

“Leave two spots for two students from the D class in the strongest four group. This is an absolute requirement.”

“What?”

Utomiya naturally disliked the proposal given by Housen.

“But what if they can't form a group arbitrarily?”

“I told you, it's absolutely indispensable to include students the students from the D-class.

“I see. So if you can't get two of the D-classes to come to you, you're asking for four to clear them.”

“If the strongest group wins, then the reward won't change our class positions, wouldn't it?”

“Don't be silly, Housen.”

“I'm not kidding. If you don't like it, you're out.”

“You...”

Utomiya tried going closer to Housen, who is making insolent demands.

In front of Utomiya, Yagami slipped in front of him to interrupt him.

“Calm down, Utomiya-kun, I'm willing to accept those terms.”

“What do you say we send some salt to Class D?”

“The top priority is for us freshmen to come together. We definitely need to be competitive with the other grades.”

“If you allow yourself to be coerced, Housen will continue to take advantage of you.”

“Then, if we abandon Housen-kun's D-class here and now, will anything change?”

“It's...”

“In this exam, it's important for first-year students to win. Once the exam is over, we will go back to square one.”

“I agree with you, Riku. I know how you feel, but we have to work together for this exam.”

Even though Utomiya has an explicit tongue, he stopped after being persuaded by Yagami and Takahashi.

“No further demands. That's nice, Housen.”

Housen listened to the answer from Utomiya and turned his back.

After saying that, the discussion ended.

“Lastly, there is one more thing that we should do, that is the rewards. Let's fine-tune the cards throughout the grade so that we can unify them to maximize their effect. It's also important that we collect incapacitated students in a group that is likely to sink to the bottom with the half-card. Can you accept that as well, Housen-kun?”

“Do what you want.”

Housen doesn't seem to regret what he said as he left the place.

While the three people stared at Housen's back, Takahashi started talking to Yagami.

“By the way, Takuya, who are you going to take out of B class?”

“I think that at least all of the people in this room are people who can be in the strongest group. But, of course, including Housen-kun. Am I wrong about that?”

Yagami looks at Takahashi, Utomiya and Housen's back with a soft but sharp gaze.

“Even if you acknowledge Housen's abilities, it's wrong to bring him into the fold. He is—”

“Well, let's take the time to decide again on that. Let's just say that it's enough that we have a unified direction here, shall we?”

“...All right”

“If we work together, we can get first place. Let's get there first.”

Upon hearing Yagami's words, Utomiya reluctantly agrees and

the meeting is dissolved.

1

After school the next day, the cafe at Keyaki Mall.

“There’s something about that kind of watch that I don’t like. The ticking and tocking is horrendously annoying.”

Amasawa cursed as she looked at the watch on Housen’s left wrist, who sat in front of her.

“Shut up. Do you know much this watch is worth?”

“It’s value? So it’s some kind of premium brand? Sorry, but I don’t have enough time to learn things that I’m not interested in.”

“Ha, that’s why women are so boring.”

Then he laughs and pats his watch once.

“You’re... well, okay. So what do you want?”

“I called you out for the next uninhabited island test. Team up with me, Amasawa.”

“You want me to help you again. And on an uninhabited island this time. Are you thinking of playing dirty?”

“Oh?”

He wrinkles his brow and glares at Amasawa, but she returned with a fearlessly devilish smile. Slowly lowering her crossed legs, Amasawa spreads them open quietly.

“Do you want to see my underwear? You can peek under the table, okay?”

If he takes up a crawling position, he would be able to see in between Amasawa’s legs, which was wide open. Against such a temptation, Housen placed the elbow of his right arm on the table and leaned forward.

“Do you think I won’t raise my hand at a woman?”

“I don’t think so at all. Don’t worry, I think you’re the type of guy who doesn’t mind hurting anyone.”

“Then don’t give me that crap. It’s a waste of time.”

“A waste of time indeed. Well, let me ask you something. It’s your plan. Why would you ask me to come?”

“Because you don’t hesitate at trying to expel Ayanokouji.”

“Well, some people who know of the bounty prize don’t even bat an eye, while others try to grasp for it; but in the end, all of their tricks are half-hearted. They’re all guys who don’t have the courage to do such a thing. If 20 million points is at stake, then you’d naturally want to take it all for yourself.”

Amasawa said without showing any signs of being offended.

“And what do I get in return for teaming up with you? I’m not cheap, you know.”

A stern voice flies in from behind Amasawa, who asks what he can give her.

“We’re supposed to be equals. I told you that before, didn’t I?”

It was Nanase, who had joined them a little late.

“Equal? You have a pretty face and you say things pretty clearly. I wonder if Housen-kun appreciates the fact that you’re not afraid of things?”

They take their places at the table and the three of them come together.

“I see. So the three of us are the group that Housen-kun thinks of, right? What about the other one?”

“I don’t need it. It’s not going to be second or third years, it’s the three of us who will win the uninhabited island test.”

“You’re very bullish. But it seems like there are a lot of tough guys in the senior class, unlike the freshmen?”

“I don’t care, I’m going to smash them all.”

“Well, even if Housen-kun’s ability is number one... Didn’t us first-years talk about cooperation between the four classes in this grade? You two are the main forces of D class, so the both of you are definitely needed in the first-years strongest group.”

“I’ll be the one to judge that, and I’ll be in charge of the D class. You know what I mean?”

“So you’re proudly sending a small fry to represent your class, right? I’m going to fight in all directions!”

“It depends on what makes you a mainstay. At least students with high academic and physical abilities will be able to help. Besides, if Housen-kun is in the strongest group, it will create some problems.”

“Well, I don’t think we’re going to play together. Maybe it’s safer to take it off in that sense. So, back to the main subject—how much will you give me?”

“I don’t have any money to give. As I said earlier, we will have an equal relationship. Of course, we’ll give you an equal share of the private points that the D class gets more of.”

Nanase asked if she was satisfied with the deal.

“But, you know, it doesn’t mean we’re equal in contribution, does it? I’m confident that I can contribute more than anyone else, no matter if it’s an uninhabited island test or not. It’s going to take a lot of stamina, but can the cute little Nanase-chan follow up?”

“Do you want to try?”

Nanase responded to the challenge with a provocation. Amasawa shifted his gaze once to Housen, and without warning, he reached out his hand to Nanase’s face. It’s the aim of a surprise slap to upset her.

However, Nanase didn’t hesitate to grab the arm that he stretched quickly.

“That’s bold of you, to try it right here.”

“Wow. What, you’re cute *and* foul-mouthed? I love strong girls.”

“You’re not normal like that, either.”

“I don’t know. You can try more, you know?”

One side smiles, the other side has no expression.

The time passed as they explored each other’s strength.

“You, Nanase and I will form a group. Is that okay?”

“I understand that Nanase-chan can move in her own way, but I don’t think it’s an equal relationship with me.”

“Why? Is it because two out of three of our group are in class D?”

“I don’t care about that. It’s like they’re going to even out the private points an individual can get. It’s just... I’ll have to get some extra money for cooperating, you know.”

Saying that, Amasawa clenched her left hand into a fist, then rubbed the belly of her thumb and forefinger together in a gesture that demanded a tip.

“Since you’re trying to buy me, it’s only natural to sell yourself for as high as possible, right?”

“You’ve got a pretty big attitude. Nanase and you, you’ve got more balls than Yagami and Takahashi.”

“You don’t know? Girls are stronger in this day and age.”

“Then I’ll ask you. What do you want besides a group reward?”

“It’s natural to win first place. But that’s not the only thing that’s important—”

Amasawa breaks the gesture with her left hand and brings only her thumb up to her own neck. Then she slowly slides it from the right side to the left.

“All the points you gain by expelling Ayanokouji-senpai from school are mine. That’s the condition to team up.”

“Ha, you’re blowing it out of proportion. That’s not an easy

thing to accept.”

“I wonder if that’s the case. But what if I reject you? If you don’t have a trusted companion other than Nanase-chan, you’ll have a hard time with the special exam, won’t you?”

Housen takes fights in all directions, just like Amasawa does.

Moreover, if the group is selfish while the four classes are trying to cooperate, no other student can help except for Amasawa who is eccentric.

“I’d be even more isolated in class A if I partnered up with Housen-kun. If you don’t get a reasonable return on your investment, it’s only natural that you wouldn’t say yes.”

Housen and Amasawa’s eyes locked onto each other’s.

“Surely you wouldn’t get any extra money for giving me the bounty that got me kicked out of school. But the honor of expelling Ayanokouji-senpai from school will be given entirely to Housen-kun. That’s enough, right?”

“You don’t have to be selfish about it. Considering the future, the first-year A-class can get 20 million points easily...”

“Shut up, Nanase.”

Stopping Nanase’s advice, Housen continues to look into Amasawa’s eyes.

“I’ll give you the prize money.”

“Thank you very much. It’s nice to have a man who’s not stingy.”

After saying that, Amasawa stood up lightly from her chair.

“I’ll see you again during the special exam then.”

As long as the negotiations were settled, there was no need to stay longer, and Amasawa walked away without hesitation.

“Is that really okay?”

“It’s okay.”

“I understand, it’s your decision to make. But are you sure you

can trust Amasawa-san? I think she's the type who doesn't mind betraying her friends."

"Trust? Don't assume that I trust her. I don't trust neither Amasawa nor you."

"So, why did you decide to team up with her?"

"She's not like those scum out there. Just like you, she's got no idea what's down there."

"I see, that may be true. But even so, 20 million is still an unbeatable deal."

"I don't give a shit about a verbal promise. As long as you're clear on the fact that I'm the one who got him expelled, of course I'm the one who's going to transfer the money. I don't care if she cries later."

Housen said that it's a promise he doesn't tend to keep since the very beginning.

"You're a terrible person."

"Ayanokouji and Ryuen, I will crush all of them including the other second and third years. I can't help but feel like I'm drowning in the crazy rules of this school."

Housen seemed as if he was having a lot of fun, as he laughed.

2

July 6. Summer vacation is approaching.

Everyone in the Ayanokouji Group, except Akito, who is heading to his club activities, gathers around my seat near the entrance of the classroom. It's because we have an appointment to meet in Keisei's room not far from now.

"Ayanokouji-kun, can I have a moment?"

As we were all leaving the classroom, I was approached by Kushida, who had followed me out.

“What’s up?”

This is a bit of an unusual form, as the number of times Kushida approaching me has been decreasing in the past few days.

Even if I send my money to her once a month, it’s only exchanging money. There was no need to check if I have deposited it or not by asking me because transferring private points among classmates is common in all classes.

“Actually, there’s a first-year student who wants to meet Ayanokouji-kun... Do you think it’ll be too hard for him now?”

Kushida gives an apologetic look to Haruka and the rest of the group and continues to speak.

“I think it’ll be over in about an hour. And I was asked to set it up.”

“What, Kiyopon, could it be that a girl in junior year is going to confess to you?”

Airi panicked at the words Haruka said.

“What, eh!? Is that true!?”

“If that’s the case, I can’t afford to accept it.”

You can say what you want, and then they give you a disallowance without permission.

“...Is that so?”

I decided to check with Kushida, just to be sure.

“Heh? Uh, well... It’s a boy that wants to meet with you... I’m sorry.”

She comes to apologize for that, showing a troubled look on her face.

No, it’s not something to be apologized for at all.

I’m rather a bit relieved, even though I don’t think that’s true.

“It’s fine, it’s probably best to interact with the first-year

students a little bit, right?”

“That’s right. Our group is especially bad at relationships, so it doesn’t seem to be a bad thing for Kiyotaka to increase his acquaintances within the first-year students.”

Aside from the purpose of the first grade, the two of them said it would be better to show up at least a little. Airi also seems to be relieved that it’s not a confession, but is willing to send me off. If so, there is no particular reason to decline it.

“Alright. What should I do?”

“Thanks! Um, I’ll tell him that Ayanokouji-kun said yes.”

Kushida pulls out her phone and makes a phone call.

“Go ahead and do your business. We’ll meet up with you later.”

After a light exchange like that, I let the Ayanokouji Group go back to the dormitory first.

“I’m sorry.”

Kushida apologized again as she lifted her phone next to her ear as it rang.

“It’s not a big deal. Everyone in the group doesn’t complain about things like that, either.”

Soon after, the call seemed to be connected to someone else who appeared to be a first-year boy.

“Oh, hello? Ayanokouji-kun will meet with you now. Yeah, yeah. Oh, is that so? Then I’ll wait for you here.”

Kushida ended the call, which lasted less than ten seconds.

“It looks like he’s already on his way. It’s not a good idea to pass each other, so I’ll just wait here.”

The first grader who wanted to meet me was already going to the classrooms of the second grade students.

“Even so, it looks like you’ve already made friends with a lot of the first graders.”

“What? It’s July already. I know we had a lot of time to do this,

but...”

“...Certainly.”

It has already been more than three months since the first-year students came to this school. I stared out of the window of the corridor, as the high sun was shining onto the ground.

It was about time the choir club started to sing. For me who has difficulty communicating, even if it was only three months, it was more than enough for Kushida.

“Ayanokouji-kun, you’ve also made friends with students in the first grade, haven’t you?”

I wonder if she’s taken it for granted, but that’s not definitely not true.

“I still have zero people I could call friends.”

“Yeah, right. Well... There’s no need to panic. It’s just the beginning, you know.”

The caring follow-up is somewhat empty. There are certainly a few first-year students that I’ve gotten to talk to. However, the relationship has not developed into a private contact at all.

The subtle atmosphere made the conversation stop.

When I was wondering about what to do with Kushida in the corridor, the first-year students showed up.

“Kushida-senpai.”

The one who emerged from the corner was Takuya Yagami who had been in junior high school with Horikita and Kushida. Kushida smiles when Yagami has the opportunity to dispel the awkward atmosphere.

“You said you wanted to meet Ayanokouji-kun, Yagami-kun.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Ayanokouji-senpai, thank you for taking your time to meet me.”

I had an image in my head of being a first-year student who approached me through Kushida.

“As I recall—you were a first-year B-class.”

“Yes, I’m Takuya Yagami, a first year B-class.”

This is the person called Yagami one of the first-years I saw when there was a commotion before, but ended without talking. It’s the form that we had a conversation for the first time in summer.

We’ve been told that he’s emerging as a leader in the first-year B-class, but to what extent is that force actually I wonder if it has spread. Good-natured and handsome. And coupled with his high academic ability, he seems to be very popular.

“This isn’t a very good place to have a discussion, so how about we go to my room or something? My order for some quality tea just arrived. It takes a bit of time to brew, but it’s very good.”

If you want to, by all means, Yagami will proceed. I don’t usually drink so much tea, so I’m a bit interested in it. Just whether I can be finished within an hour might be a delicate matter.

“Oh, sorry, Yagami-kun. Actually, Ayanokouji-kun is supposed to meet up with his friend after this. Hopefully we can finish within an hour...”

Kushida, sensing that it was going to take some time, followed up quickly.

“I see, it’s fine. Then let’s talk at the cafe in Keyaki Mall.”

Although he looks a little disappointed, Yagami agrees with the situation and accepts it.

“Well then, let’s go, Ayanokouji-kun.”

With a small nod, I decide to head to Keyaki Mall with Kushida and Yagami.

“Speaking of which, the special exam on the uninhabited island will be starting soon. I heard that Kushida-senpai and the others experienced the same kind of special exam last year.”

“Yeah. It was a tough time for me then!”

“Can you tell me what the rules were and what happened? We

first-year students don't have any experience, so I'd like to at least gather some information about it."

"I don't mind that, but... I don't know if it helps, okay? It seems like the rules will be completely different from last year."

"I know that. The third graders also had an uninhabited island test that was different from Kushida-senpai's."

"Oh, by the way, the third-year students also did an uninhabited island test too, right?"

"Like the senpais', they're experiencing it in their freshman year. Traditionally, it seems that you will only do the uninhabited island test once while you are in school—is this year a special case or has it changed from this year?"

Apparently, Yagami has far more information than we do.

"Is it strange? I have information about the third graders."



While I was listening in silence, Yagami said to me like that.

“I joined the student council. When I asked the student council president, Nagumo, about the uninhabited island survival test the year before last, he was kind enough to tell me. At that time, they formed four groups within the class, and they had a total of 12 groups competing against each other.”

The rules are different from our own uninhabited island survival tests.

It’s safe to assume that the same special exam will basically never be given, with a few exceptions.

“There may be some clues in there as to what kind of uninhabited island test the second-year students spent their time on.”

Even if Kushida and I were to hide it from Yagami, it’s obvious that someone else would tell them. There’s no need to carelessly hide it. In fact, there’s no way Kushida wouldn’t answer.

As I expected, she began to explain politely about last year’s uninhabited island survival.

I listened quietly as they talked about it, following them closely.

3

By the time Kushida finished telling Yagami about the uninhabited island survival test that the second graders conducted, the cafe at the Keyaki Mall was right in front of us.

The café was supposed to let us in easily, but we were hit with an unplanned situation.

“It’s very crowded.”

The cafe is full. There were already a few students near the

entrance, waiting for an empty seat.

“How about the café on the second floor? Let’s check it out there.”

“Please wait a moment.”

Yagami holds the phone he took out in his left hand and begins to operate it in some way.

“I just checked with my friend, and it seems the cafe upstairs is just as crowded. Either way, if we have to wait, we’ll just have to wait for two pairs, so why don’t we go this way?”

Apparently, he contacted a friend who was having tea at a café via chat.

A quick decision that did not warrant any waste of time. As soon as we agreed, Yagami noticed a student approaching from behind. He was carefree, grabbing his cell phone, probably to take his turn after another pair if he’s taking it so easy.

Holding a pen in one hand, he wrote his last name and the number of people on the blackboard at the entrance to the cafe in neat handwriting. It was more pronounced compared to the other students’ handwriting above.

“Wow, Yagami-kun, your handwriting is so good~”

It’s not surprising that Kushida, who was watching him write, would praise him so.

Yagami smiles happily as he is praised.

Then, the three of us moved to a few chairs set up as we waited for our turn.

“My grandfather taught me to just clean up my handwriting, even if I couldn’t study.”

“Your Grandpa?”

“Yes. My grandfather is a calligraphy teacher.”

“That’s great. I’m not very good at writing.”

Kushida says so modestly, but as far as I remember seeing her

several times, she's not particularly bad at writing. Even if she doesn't have the refined mastery of Yagami's handwriting, hers was still as beautiful, with the flare of "girlish" and rounded letters—I remember seeing her write before.

Even so, the student named Yagami does not seem to speak highly of his abilities. Although he said he couldn't study, his academic ability on OAA is currently rated as A. An honor student without any sarcasm, his personality is almost the same as Yosuke.

After a while, a table for four people became available, so we took the vacant seat and ordered for some drinks.

"Actually—I know you might think it's a bit late now, but there's something I want to tell Ayanokouji-senpai. The special exams, that are only announced among the few first-year students, you already know that, right?"

Kushida listened to Yagami's story with a strange look on his face, as if she hadn't received any prior explanation. The limited special exam is, of course, the one where 20 million points will be awarded to the person who can successfully expel me from school.

It's probably the special test that is being given. The way Yagami talks about it is that he knows for sure, not to the extent that he has heard rumors about it. But just to be sure, I decided to see how it came out. Waiting for Yagami to continue speaking without affirming or denying, I nodded once in response.

"In April, I had overheard that story. I just wasn't interested in the rewards of getting someone to drop out, so I didn't think of participating in it."

In fact, Yagami has never approached me during the special exam. If he cared about it to some extent, it's not strange for him to keep an eye or two on me. However, I never saw him approaching me even once.

"Why did you decide to talk to me about that this time?"

“I recently heard that Housen-kun made the first move, but it ended in failure. And that he was the cause of the wound on Ayanokouji-senpai’s left hand. I knew he used inhumane tactics, but that was far beyond my imagination.”

“Well, there’s no denying it.”

Kushida was listening to me and Yagami, moving back and forth and listening to try and understand a story she didn’t fully grasp. If left unexplained, Yagami may need to end up talking from start to finish.

“And one more thing... There’s a reason why I decided to talk to senpai.”

But Yagami didn’t want to talk about that other one right away.

“In terms of protecting the first-year students, I was going to stay on the sidelines. However, if I leave it like this, Ayanokouji-senpai... In some cases, I decided that it might cause damage to fellow classmate Kushida-senpai. So I asked her to set up the meeting to tell you everything I know.”

Kushida, who had been listening to the story, raised her left hand apologetically and asked for a question.

“I have no idea what kind of story you’re talking about...”

“Do you mind if we talk like this?”

“I have no right to stop you.”

It seems that Yagami needed my permission first before explaining it to Kushida as he was worried about her. Even if I said no here, Yagami still might explain it to her when I’m not around so there’s no point in refusing.

“Then I’ll explain everything to Kushida-senpai, starting from scratch so that you’ll know everything. It all started with a call from the student council president Nagumo. He decided on one or two representatives from each class and instructed us to meet in secret in the student council room. I was actually called in shortly after I

entered the school.”

The keyword ‘student council’ came out from Yagami’s mouth.

“The first-year students gathered there were Takahashi Osamu-kun and Ishigami Kyo-kun from the first-year A-class, and I was the only one from the first-year B-class. Riku Utomiya-kun from the first-year C-class. And from the first-year D-class, Kazuomi Housen-kun and Tsubasa Nanase-san. There were 6 people in total.”

If it’s true, then this is valuable information. Those two from the first-year C-class didn’t just call out to me by chance. But what worries me the most is that the name of Amasawa which did not come out.

“The content of the special exam is to expel Ayanokouji-senpai, the second-year student, from school.”

“What! Expel Ayanokouji-kun from school?!”

He nodded to Kushida, who was surprised even though she was only whispering, as Yagami continued to talk.

There was no suspicious behavior showing that she knew beforehand as far as the state of Kushida is showing.

“It doesn’t matter what the means are, the deadline is until the second semester begins. Also, we were advised not to tell anyone else about this special exam except the six of us who were there. Me and Utomiya-kun were alone, so I had to choose one from each of my classmates to make sure it was fair. He was allowed to talk about it, but I didn’t tell anyone. There remains the possibility that Utomiya-kun told someone else.”

In other words, at the moment, six or seven first-year students are aware of this special exam.

“Student council president Nagumo-senpai told the six of us that he would pay 20 million points to the student who can expel Ayanokouji-senpai from school.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of money... Is that even acceptable?”

It’s a surprise test content for everyone. The question of how much you can trust Yagami will continue with you, but he does not seem to be lying at present. Rather, if it was a lie, the relationship between Yagami and Kushida would worsen. If the second-year D-class suffers a disadvantage, Kushida will be damaged.

“It’s no wonder that Kushida-senpai is surprised. We didn’t know much about this school when we first entered in April, but now we can clearly see it. It’s an unusual special exam. Because I was able to make that decision, I was able to set this place up.”

After a certain amount of explanation, Yagami brought his cup close to his mouth and took a sip.

Knowing that 20 million points were involved in my expulsion, Kushida asked Yagami a question.

“Isn’t it a bit strange that the student council president is holding a special exam on his own...?”

“That’s right. I think that it’s quite a big problem. It’s an easy-to-understand special exam, but on the other hand, it might be easier to think that the student council president created his own assignment and gave it to the first-year students.”

It was possible that Nagumo was involved in this matter. It also gave Horikita a purpose to explore it. But just when I thought he wasn’t going to give his tail away easily, it leaked out from someone unexpected.

“Why... why Ayanokouji-kun? Aren’t there any other students who are also targeted?”

“As far as I’ve heard, it’s only Ayanokouji-senpai. I don’t think there’s any deep reason for why it’s Ayanokouji-senpai. The student council president, Nagumo, said that it was chosen from among the second-year students at complete random. It’s simply that he was drawn as 1 out of 157 students.”

It was because Yagami doesn't know the background of Nagumo that he cannot understand his purpose of choosing me.

He doesn't even seem to doubt the story that it was decided at random. Of course, it's not impossible that they went to the trouble of preparing a lottery ticket and chose me by chance. It's impossible for such a thing to happen considering the circumstances.

However, would Nagumo go out of his way to prepare a large sum of money, 20 million points, just for expelling a random person such as me? I don't think he's the kind of guy who would do something like that, as long as I've been in contact with him. To be precise, he would use whatever he has at his disposal, but his opinion of me is not that high.

"It was a special exam given by the individual student council president, and he was able to prepare 20 million points as well."

I emphasized that point out to Yagami to explore the possibilities lurking ahead.

"That's right. I hate to say it, but... I think it could be a lie or a bluff. I can't believe there's 20 million points for an exam that I don't understand that well."

Even Kushida, as expected, seemed to have been caught off guard by the huge amount of private points.

Even if the student council president told her that he was suddenly going to pay such an amount, she would normally be suspicious.

"It's certainly quite a large amount of points, isn't it? I can understand now how difficult it is to accumulate that much private points. But at that time, we first-years didn't know any better since we just entered this school, and when you're the third-year and student council president, and also an A-class person. I trust them more than the average student, of course. More than anything else, I had the naive notion that I'd take that much points for granted."

Although the amount dropped a little this year, as much as 80,000 points was distributed to all first graders at the time of admission. It is also transferred monthly. A clean, well-equipped dormitory with Keyaki Mall for students. A fulfilling life. It's like being thrown into a distant world. It's something we experienced last year, which spoiled us so much that our sense of duty was shifted.

"In fact, I was able to confirm with my eyes that he had the 20 million points."

If it's someone like Nagumo, it would be normal for him to be saving a lot of money.

"But didn't you hate the idea of participating in a special exam that wasn't school-approved?"

"Apart from my distaste for the content of the special exams, I didn't have any of those feelings. I think all the students except me welcomed it. They said this was a legitimate special exam."

"I've never heard of a special exam given by the student council president."

"No, we wouldn't have trusted it if only the student council president Nagumo was there to give the special exam."

"Eh...?"

"When the student council president was explaining to us the details of the exam, the acting director was present as a witness of the meeting."

The existence of Tsukishiro, which was likely the most involved, was probably the source of the income.

It is now confirmed that Tsukishiro and Nagumo were involved behind the 20 million points.

"Without a doubt, it's a situation that is not unreasonable to accept as a special test, isn't it?"

"If the acting director is there... Yeah, that's right."

A special exam to expel a student from school. That alone may cause some students to think it's ridiculous and they may be suspicious. But the presence of the acting director drowned out those doubts.

“That’s all the information I have on this matter.”

“Thank you for telling me, but you might be in danger by telling me about this.”

This thankful advice was not beneficial to Yagami.

“Will you be alright, Yagami-kun? If they find out about this, then...”

“It’s okay, Kushida-senpai. And I haven’t been told of any penalties for saying anything else.”

Yagami smiles at the other side of his concern.

“Besides, I’m prepared for an amount of hate among the first-years. Originally, I’m destined to clash with students from other classes sooner or later.”

It seems that his resolution to fight back is well prepared. Takuya Yagami, the first-year B-class student, is basically defending himself exclusively. However, he is probably the type of person who would use the right of preemptive self-defense depending on the situation.

However, it’s unclear to what extent Yagami can see in the situation. In a corner of the cafe, one female student, mixed in with many other students, occasionally turns her gaze towards us. Since her seat is located just on the back side from Yagami, he must have not been aware of her existence.

Sakurako Tsubaki, the first-year C-class student. Not long after we started talking, she appeared in the store and took an excellent position in the crowded café. She was watching us from her seat.

And she’s holding a cell phone in her hand, talking to someone.

What does she need from me... or is it Yagami that she’s

looking out for? Either way, Tsubaki knows that I've made contact with Yagami. Whether it is a coincidence, it may not be a favorable situation for Yagami. It is difficult to escape from the eyes of every student by all means in this narrow site of the school. Even if you can't track a person on your own, just by the class as a whole, you can provide a wide enough network. It was proof that the first graders were fighting.

"Please be careful. Ayanokouji-senpai. It's quite possible that you're breaking the rules like no other and leaking this special test to your friends like me."

"I think it's who Yagami should keep in mind when considering that."

"That's true. If I think about it normally, the presence of Housen-kun from the first-year D-class, he is someone to be wary of. Because opponents who fight without regard to the rules are troublesome."

After all, Housen's presence was considered as a dangerous person even among the same first-year students.

"But if I dare to pick only one person—"

Yagami who tried to continue talking, stopped because he seems to be hesitating to put it into words.

"No, nevermind. I won't say it."

"Eh? What did you want to say? I'm curious."

After giving a little bitter smile, Yagami said so.

"I feel like this wasn't something I would talk to Ayanokouji-senpai, Kushida-senpai and other second-year students about. If I mention the names of the people I'm wary of here, of course the seniors will mark them off. I think that's important, but I don't think it's fair. I'm sorry for what Housen-kun did."

It is true that Kushida and I would be wary if we were told that someone in our class was in danger.

We could tell the class about it and be prepared for it.

“And I’m not sure about that yet. I’m just expecting them to be dangerous somehow.”

Yagami seems to think that even a rival should fight fairly.

“For now, I’ll explore it myself in the next special exam. After that, if I think they’re really a dangerous person, then I’ll tell Ayanokouji-senpai about that.”

Yagami promised to warn us after checking it with his own eyes.

“Be careful, Yagami-kun.”

“Yes, I will. And... Well, I don’t mind after the uninhabited island test is over, but could you give us a moment to meet together, Kushida-senpai? I would like to speak with you, senpai.”

“Uh, yeah. Okay, I wonder why...”

Kushida misinterpreted herself like that, but even I, who is a bit slow on that sort of thing, could somehow guess.

Yagami’s eyes looking at Kushida were different from that of a mere senpai.

“Anyway, Yagami’s information was very helpful. Thank you.”

“It’s okay. I think it would be strange if Ayanokouji-senpai suddenly got expelled without knowing the reason.”

“Let me thank you too, Yagami-kun, thank you so much.”

“It’s enough to say so. But if Ayanokouji-senpai leaves the school, it is inevitable that Kushida-senpai’s class will suffer a great deal of damage. I really want Kushida-senpai to graduate in A Class as well.”

There aren’t many first-year students where I’ve had such long-winded conversations with before.

Among them, Yagami seemed to be the only honor student in the first-year.

I’ve always thought that he might be a white room student and

he was dealing with various student affairs. It doesn't feel unnatural. He hasn't set up anything against me, on the contrary, he gave me information to help.

Of course, it doesn't rule out the possibility. But I'm inclined to do so, because if Yagami was the white room student, I wouldn't want him to be my opponent.

It's doubtful that a person who grew up in that facility could communicate so naturally in a short period of time.

Anyway, for now, I'll be grateful to use the information Yagami gave me.

"Since the number of people has increased, let's end the conversation here. I'll take my leave first."

"Do you have something you need to do?"

"No, I don't want the other first-year students to see us together here."

It should be done though it is too late. I thanked him again and parted with Yagami.

After that, Kushida and I are left here.

"You've got a good junior, Kushida."

"Yeah, but it's a waste of time for me... it didn't go as I expected."

Then she traces the edge of the cup with her index finger.

I won't say anything, but I don't need to think twice about what Kushida is thinking.

It means that if they are from the same middle school, there is a possibility that he knows about Kushida's past.

"Yagami-kun knows."

Kushida gave me a simple answer that I was curious about.

"Are you sure it's ok? For you to tell me that."

"Even if he didn't know, it would be the same thing."

"What do you mean—?"

“Yagami-kun must disappear.”

There was a kind of firm determination in Kushida’s eyes when I saw her muttering and looking at me.

He clearly admires Kushida, but does she still have the perception of being an enemy?

Kushida literally cannot accept anyone that has even a tiny trace of her past.

“It’s harder to get rid of a junior student than it is to get rid of Horikita or me.”

“I guess it depends on how I’ll do it.”

She talks as if she’s already come up with one of her strategies.

“Sometimes the more conceited people who think they’re good at something, the more stunned they actually are. Even Horikita-san and Ayanokouji-kun are no exception to that.”

“Didn’t you have a ceasefire agreement with me?”

“For now.”

I do not intend to feel relieved from the beginning, but Kushida seems to be fully motivated.

“But I’ve lost before, so I’m keeping a low profile ‘for now.’”

After saying that, Kushida stood up from her chair and showed the gesture to leave.

“See you later, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Yeah. See you.”

There’s no reason to stay, so I walked in the opposite direction of Kushida.

What’s new is that Kushida is working on some kind of strategy below the surface.

After parting ways with Kushida and Yagami, I stopped by a convenience store.

I wanted to bring some food to join Keisei and the others.

The other reason for doing this was to give me a chance to come in contact with whoever is stalking me from a distance behind.

I decide to buy a couple of snacks and a water bottle—just a few random choices.

“Um~~”

A prolonged voice.

Tsubaki, the first-year C-class student, calls out to me from behind as I was paying the bill at the reception counter. She had a lollipop in her hand, which was perhaps done so in order to seem like she has the intent of shopping for something.

“Tsubaki, is it? What do you want from me?”

I didn't mention anything about her being at the cafe and I also didn't ask what she was doing there.

“I have something to talk about, so can you wait outside for a moment?”

Looking somewhat distracted, Tsubaki checked the contents of her lollipop.

I certainly can't talk to her in front of the cash register, so I decided to wait outside the convenience store quietly.

I waited for a while, but there was no sign of her coming outside. When I turned around, Tsubaki seemed to be talking to someone on her cell phone, turning her gaze only to me.

That's pretty bold of her to keep someone waiting like that.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Tsubaki walks out while peeling off the lollipop wrapper with her slender fingers.

We started heading to the direction of the student dorms.

“So, what do you want to talk about?”

“There’s something that I wanted to tell you the next time I came across Ayanokouji-senpai.”

What was she trying to convey?

I thought she was going to start talking right away, but Tsubaki just licked her lollipop and didn't try to speak further.

Rather than paying attention to me, her attention is more strongly focused on the front.

“Is it about Utomiya?”

Tsubaki stops licking the lollipop when I mention the name of the sole student on my mind.

“Looks like I hit the bullseye.”

“He said he will be here soon.”

The person I was talking to at the café earlier, her classmate Utomiya.

Not long after, Utomiya is walking towards us, just as Tsubaki had told to me. He lightly bowed and joined us.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to talk to you like this.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

Was it about Yagami? Or is it about the upcoming special examination?

“It's regarding Kazuomi Housen.”

But what came out from his mouth was an unexpected name.

“Ayanokouji-senpai, you were partnered with Housen for the exam at the end of April, right?”

Tsubaki was looking for a second-year partner.

She asked me to become her partner once, but I refused.

“I didn't think you'd partner up with Housen.”

“Is it really that surprising?”

“You already know that class 1-D doesn't accept working together easily. They have continued to show a stubborn attitude

till the end of the preparation for the uninhabited island survival exam.”

Shutting up here won't give him an advantage, and he knows that. Housen seems to have been continuing his bullish attitude without stopping.

“So?”

“We want to crush Housen in the upcoming uninhabited island survival test.”

His polite tone became rough and his lips were pursed.

“But I don't know the specifics yet. I don't even know what the rules are.”

“Well... There's certainly no guarantee that we'll be able to do something about the other group. But as long as we are competing, I'm sure we'll be involved in some way.”

His premonition was correct.

The group vs. group scheme is a definite figure.

“Housen doesn't have a lot of private points right now. In other words, if he retires early, they can't pay for Housen even though the penalty is light for the first-years.”

If that happens, Kazuomi Housen from the first-year D-class will be forced to withdraw from school.

“So you want to force Housen to withdraw from school?”

“Yes... Yes, I do.”

Utomiya replied without hesitation, though his honorific language was uneven.

“Can I ask why?”

“A male student named Hatano has been expelled from the first-year C-class. I have an assumption that Housen was involved in that matter.”

Even though he's only mentioning names, I'm sure he already weeded out some clues that led to Housen being the culprit.

“You want revenge for that?”

“Of course, I would be lying if I said I didn't hold a grudge. But what's important is that no more students should be expelled accidentally.”

“That's right. Thanks to him, our class points have dropped by 100 points.”

Tsubaki muttered boringly as she moved the lollipop into her mouth.

“I understand your feelings, but what does that story have to do with me?”

“Housen doesn't like working together with outsiders. But he partnered up with Ayanokouji-senpai last time.”

That's why they stepped in, as they thought there was an opening to take advantage of Housen.

Utomiya's attitude indicated that he was serious about defeating Housen.

Tsubaki doesn't seem to have that attitude, but she's willing to cooperate with Utomiya.

Otherwise, she wouldn't be the bridge that connects me and Utomiya.

“Please help me.”

“I can't say yes without knowing the details of the exam “

“So, can you at least keep this in mind, please? If you are able to defeat Housen early and expel him from the school... We will pay you a corresponding fee.”

He seems ready to pay for this, but there are a lot of things that are hard to understand.

“Did you not consider the possibility of me being on Housen's side? It might possible since I partnered up with him in the last exam. Did the thought of me telling Housen about this ever crossed your mind?”

Utomiya is telling me a lot of information, and he can't confirm that these words won't be leaked to someone else.

“That's—”

At this point, Utomiya looked at Tsubaki for the first time.

I followed suit and looked at Tsubaki.

The lollipop is starting to shrink and Tsubaki looks somewhat pensive.

She stares at the lollipop, oblivious to the fact that the two of us is focusing our attention on her.

And not long after, she opens his mouth.

“Isn't that injury on your left hand from a dispute with Housenkun?”

He made that statement and licked the candy with the tip of his tongue.

“Why do you think so?”

“The 20 million point bounty—we were going for it too.”

Without taking offense, Tsubaki admitted it.

“I see. So you guys were participants in that special test, too? So you came up to me pretending to be looking for a partner.”

This is information I've already obtained from Yagami, but I pretend not to know about it and respond so.

Tsubaki, on the other hand, also doesn't mention that Yagami and I had been in contact with each other.

“That's what I meant, basically.”

“But if Tsubaki and I were to team up, there wouldn't be a way to expel me without you dropping out as well, would there?”

If she cheats on the exam, she will be able to expel me, but Tsubaki will be expelled at the same time.

“I can't answer that.”

Up to this point, I thought Utomiya was the brains of the operation between these two.

However, when I was looking at the situation, I could see that it was not so.

“I apologize for that. But we've already backed off.”

“Why?”

“Even if I could to expel Ayanokouji-senpai, that would quickly spread throughout the school. It will definitely turn the second-year D-class into our enemy. Because it's only natural to resent the fact that your classmate has been expelled from school.”

Utomiya says they realized this because their friend was at the handiwork of Housen.

“Then wouldn't it be the same if I expelled Housen from school?”

“I don't think that's going to happen, because the first-year D-class students are afraid of Housen. I think there are more classmates who would rather have him gone than let him stay.”

If that's so, then I'll be able to expel Housen without hesitation as there wouldn't be any resentment aimed towards me.

“Anyway, please keep that in mind. We just want to take down Housen.”

Utomiya and Tsubaki reiterate this part and leave for the first-year dormitory.

Due to them meeting with me as a pair this time and the last, the first-year class-C movements seem rather messy to me.

However, their connection to the white room student remains unclear.

For now, I'll be on the lookout, but I'll keep Housen in mind.

Horikita joined the student council, but there was no new information that came in for me afterwards.

Putting aside Nagumo's personal ideas, the management of the student council seems to be quite healthy.

The situation started to change over the weekend, when the group formation was about to finish in another week.

The curtain opens with a call from Kiriyama, the vice president of student council.

Originally, Kiriyama was in support of last year's student council president, Manabu Horikita, who had graduated with the aim of stopping Nagumo's outburst. But in the end, the situation did not get any better, and time has passed without much movement.

I'm sure Kiriyama has given up on the situation.

I thought so, but I didn't expect him to come here and make an appointment with me personally.

However, what was his ulterior motive to summon someone in broad daylight after school on a weekday?

If you want to keep it a secret from Nagumo, he could've chosen a more suitable time, like late at night or early in the morning.

If he intends to be discreet, then he should naturally do so. I didn't bother to point it out here, so I just gave my consent.

Then after school, I walked over to Keyaki Mall to meet up with Kiriyama.

“Looks like you've arrived.”

“What does the vice president want with me?”

“Don't jump to conclusions so quickly, you'll get a little extra time today.”

After saying that, Kiriyama guided me to walk and I started to walk along with him.

“At the end of the month, a large-scale uninhabited island survival special test will begin. Are you prepared for it?”

I thought we were going to talk about student council, but what came up was the topic of special exams.

“I’ll do what I can. How about Vice President Kiriyama?”

“We made a group consisting of three classes, excluding A-class.”

So they avoided a tough battle to close the gap between them and A-Class.

In the third-year, the difference class points between class A and the other classes is larger than in the second-year. If they’re going for the possibility of a comeback, then it’s an absolute requirement to take the top spot in the exam.

“I know what you’re thinking. Taking first place is the only option where we, class 3-B, will be able to get back on track. And our efforts will only sprout further by continuing to win the subsequent special exams by a huge margin. But that’s too unrealistic.”

If the Miracle was going to happen so easily, he wouldn’t be in a predicament from the start.

“I’m hoping to put up a personal fight against Nagumo in this special test.”

“A personal battle?”

“It’s been a long time since we lost the battle with Nagumo and we dropped our class to B. And that guy is now the student council president and is taking control of the entire third-year and the entire school. It’s safe to say that we’re no longer settled as a class.”

“Yes, I think so too.”

“The only reason the majority of third-year students follow Nagumo is because they’ve given up on reaching A class. But for me personally, I don’t think I’m inferior to Nagumo.”

The third-year B-class student named Kiriyama has a high OAA score. Overall is B+ or higher and there is no gap in between. No

wonder he has confidence in himself. However, Miyabi Nagumo is even better than that in terms of overall ability. His bullish attitude so far is commensurate with his abilities.

But it's also true that OAA is not everything. Some students aren't performing to their fullest potential, and their wittiness and inspiration are hard to quantify, as well as the existence of some students that have special talents that inevitably are not able to be reflected in the OAA.

If Kiriya personally believes that he can beat Nagumo, then he has some odds to win.

“We can create a group of up to six students, regardless of class. A good eye for spotting talent is needed to win and the ability to actually bring in that talent—I don't think I'll lose to Nagumo.”

This is a special test with two sides to it that allows you to fight against your grade, but also the other grades.

It seems that this uninhabited island survival is one of the few chances left for Kiriya.

“I understand the story. But that's not something you have to say to me.”

I don't think there's any merit for him to tell me.

“I don't want to be disturbed.”

“If the student council president and vice president fight on an uninhabited island, I'm not interested in that.”

“I know that. What I'm saying is that I don't want to be sidelined by an unnecessary outsider.”

“Unnecessary outsider?”

“I'm talking about Suzune Horikita, who joined the student council.”

“I see. You seem to treat her as an obstacle, but for the time being, I've taken the former student council president's wishes and put his sister Suzune Horikita in the student council.”

Maybe it no longer mattered to Kiriyama.

To confirm that, I decided to ask him directly.

“It's pointless. He has only a few months left as a student council president. The only thing I can do from here on out is to settle our battle as individuals, and not as student council president.”

“If that's what vice president Kiriyama wants, that's fine.”

There's nothing wrong with wanting to settle things on a personal level.

The problem is the connection between this story and me.

“The reason you let Horikita-senpai's sister join the student council is to keep an eye on Nagumo, right?”

“I would lie if I had no purpose for that, but for most of the reasons, as Horikita said in front of the student council president Nagumo, it was to follow the path her brother took.”

“Then you don't want to interfere with Nagumo anymore?”

“As long as Horikita doesn't think Nagumo is a liability.”

“That's not good enough. Drop all thoughts of trying to deal with Nagumo anymore. Any more of this and it will only create useless conflict.”

He wants me to withdraw my previous statement and return to a clean slate.

It's not important to me, but now I just want to see what Nagumo does up close. If Horikita decides that his actions are wrong, she will probably stand up to it. It's funny that he's here to tell me that I shouldn't do that because it seems to be a waste of time.

“I'll keep in mind about what vice president Kiriyama said.”

I've received his advice, and I'll try to keep it contained by responding to that extent.

Perhaps he didn't like such a half-hearted response, but Kiriyama gives me a slightly disapproving look.

“I thought I told you in a roundabout, gentle way not to do

anything.”

“I thought I told you that I understood what you were saying in a roundabout way, too, didn't I?”

“Then you'll swear you won't do anything from here. Can I interpret it that way?”

“You can interpret it as you wish, but I won't say anything.”

Kiriyama, who is always calm, shouted a little while the condition of pushing his arms against the curtain of goodwill continues.

“Nagumo has somehow knew that I was communicating with Horikita-senpai. But now that I'm at Nagumo's obedience, he's still watching me. Just having Horikita-senpai's sister join the student council is an awkward situation, and if she did anything unnecessary—”

“Is vice president Kiriyama in danger?”

“...That's right.”

This is the reason why he called me out to put the nail in the coffin.

In theory, it was out of concern for me.

However, it seems to have come from a desire to protect himself.

Of course, I'm not saying that's a bad thing, nor do I intend to complain about the relationship between Nagumo and Kiriyama, who have already decided on who the winners and losers are.

“Do you still want the chance for anyone to graduate in A-class, as advocated by Nagumo?”

“Huh...”

Former student council president Horikita School's policy is based on winning in class.

No, that was the school's policy until last year. With this, it was impossible to win the third-year A-Class led by Nagumo.

It's almost as if Kiriya is going to graduate as a B-class student.

However, if he follows Nagumo's lead, the situation will be different when it comes to winning based on his individual abilities.

If Kiriya is a reasonably good individual, there's a chance he'll rise to A-class.

He says he wants to play a personal fight with Nagumo in the uninhabited island survival test, but at the end of the day, he just wants to get to the top to rake in the private points.

He just used it as an excuse to not let me or Horikita get in the way.

In fact, it wouldn't even be a challenge for someone like Nagumo.

“Isn't it strange... I want to graduate in A-class.”

It's nothing strange, but Kiriya continues to let his words out.

To protect his own pride.

“What's the point of graduating outside A-class when you enter this school? I don't want to end up the same way as those who had the talent but gave up the fight. I don't want to sink along with the current B-class, which is full of incompetent people and weirdos.”

Would it be a disappointing story for academics to hear?

Or will they say that they knew about Kiriya's weaknesses from the beginning?

“Anyway, you know what I'm trying to say.”

“I understand very well. When Horikita joined the student council, the reason why only the vice president Kiriya was present, while other student council members were introduced later.”

He was worried about me and Horikita saying something out of line.

“Whatever you say...”

“Kiryama.”

During our conversation, a voice came from nearby.

Kiryama didn't try to react right away, despite the fact that his name was called.

“Kiryama. Didn't you hear me?”

Once again, the voice becomes louder than before.

“Speak of the devil...”

He said this to himself and turned in that direction, looking somewhat uncomfortable.

The person sitting on the bench was a third-year girl.

She seemed to be relaxed with her legs crossed, arms outstretched and placed on the back of the bench.

Matching the face, name, and abilities I saw in the OAA—she is a third-year B-class student, Kiryuuin.

“What do you want from me?”

They were supposed to be classmates, but Kiriyama didn't change his expression with a dissatisfied look on his face.

Apparently, the two of them are not very compatible.

“Fufu. It seemed like you were with an interesting junior, so I called out to you.”

Kiryuuin shifts his gaze to me as he says this.

“Kiyotaka Ayanokouji, right? I heard you became famous for getting a perfect score on a difficult math test.”

“It's none of your business, Kiryuuin.”

Before we could speak, Kiriyama said a little hoarsely.

Kiryama tries to forcefully walk away from Kiryuuin, trying to get some distance from her.

“What are you doing, Ayanokouji? Let's go.”

Kiryama calls out to me, but I didn't want to move.

“There's nothing to be gained by spending time with a woman like that, okay?”

I am sandwiched between the two third-year students like a board.

Which opinion is the right one to listen to?

To be honest, I don't want to listen to either of them...

“It's more meaningful than being with you.”

“It will be Ayanokouji who decides that. Kiriyama, would you please get away from me?”

Laughing hysterically, Kiryuuin continues without losing her posture.

“Why don't you have a meaningful conversation with me?”

“...Huh?”

Kiriyama didn't seem to like the fact that he is being treated lightly.

“You can ignore that woman.”

He intensifies his words and warns me so.

“She's a third-year student like vice president Kiriyama, I can't just do that.”

“...She's Kiryuuin, a B-class student like me.”

“I saw it on OAA. She's a highly evaluated student.”

“It's just the grades. But Kiryuuin doesn't have anyone backing her at all like Nagumo does. She's a person who doesn't have any friends.”

So there's nothing to worry about by ignoring her, Kiriyama says.

“Don't praise me like that.”

Even though he didn't praise her at all, Kiryuuin laughed inappropriately.

“If I'm to compare her with someone in your grade, she would be like Kouenji. You're just wasting your time to speaking to such an oddity.”

A comparison was made between someone very unexpected.

Rokusuke Kouenji has a unique personality that can be called one and only in a sense, but what kind of person is she? At first glance, their personalities seem to be similar.

I'm curious, though at the same time, I'd rather not get involved.

However, Kiryuuin's grades are A+ in both academics and physical ability.

The only student in the entire school year to receive an A+ in both of these areas is Kiryuuin, even for males and females combined.

Even in terms of social contribution, it's not low, with a C+, and the only flaw is a D in her ability to think critically.

If you only look at the simple grades, it could be said that she is number one in the school.

“What's up? Why don't you come closer?”

“She's calling us, though?”

“If you're not coming, then I'll have to go myself, but is that really okay with you, Kiriyama?”

“...This kind of thing is why I'm sick of B-class.”

Kiriyama says in a whisper.

“If you had such a good classmate, couldn't you have gone up against Student Council President Nagumo?”

“I told you she's the same problematic case as Kouenji. She's finished as a human being, contributing nothing to our class for three years, except for her own grades. All she does is act alone, and only interferes for her selfish desires. She's a foreigner through and through in our class.”

She certainly holds an outstanding record as far as the OAA is concerned, but I've never heard any third-years mention her before. If she was the kind of person that Nagumo and the graduating Manabu Horikita would be watching, it wouldn't be surprising if she reached my ears.

“Thank you for the kind compliment, Kiriyama.”

“Huh?!”

Kiryuuin, who was standing up from the bench, whispered in Kiriyama's ear.

She was unexpectedly tall. Might she be over 170 centimetres?

From the gracefulness of her movements, it suggests a high level of physical ability.

I didn't know there was a student with this kind of atmosphere in the third-year.

It reminds me of the conversation I had with Kiriyama earlier.

What he said was that he didn't want to sink along with B-class which was full of incompetent people and weirdos.

This Kiryuuin will be someone who fits that weirdo category.

“If you have something to say, then get on with it.”

“Of course I will. But you're in the way, Kiriyama.”

“...Do as you please. I'm going now.”

Kiriyama seemed to have decided to cut it off, as he had no intention of sitting with Kiryuuin.

“Don't forget what I said earlier, Ayanokouji. In some cases, I'll be your enemy, too.”

I received a grateful word from the vice president.

Originally, this would have allowed me to go home, but this time my opponent was in the same third-year B-class, Kiryuuin.

“What's the point of standing around and talking? Why don't we sit on the bench or something?”

“Yeah...”

Saying that, Kiryuuin invites me to the bench.

If possible, I'd like to be released as soon as possible.

“So, what do you want to talk to me about?”

“Whatever. As long as I can study who you are, that's enough.”

“Study me? Vice president Kiriyama said that Kiryuuin-senpai

doesn't contribute to the class. That means you're not interested in what his classmates are doing, right?"

"Taking an interest in something and actually cooperating are different things, aren't they? Some of my classmates were funny people, and sometimes they spoke to me in the same friendly way they do now."

I see. That's certainly true.

"I'm not interested in the system aiming at A-class in this school. The biggest selling point is that if you graduate in A-class, you can go on to university or get a job, but I'm convinced that I can manage with my own ability. It's just a whim that I chose here as a destination."

I can't help but feel something close to Koenji, indeed, in every word.

An overwhelming evaluation of oneself.

And a rating of A+ for academic and physical ability, as if to back it up.

"Would you have chosen this place if you'd known in advance how the system works, which is based on cooperation?"

"That's not true. I like this school. In fact, I've never been dissatisfied with the school so far. And the point system is really pleasant, too."

Koenji seems to like the school itself and he's enjoying himself fully as well.

Students who can do whatever they want on their own after graduation don't have to stick with A-class.

"You seem to be fine with being disliked."

"What other people think of me is something that means nothing."

Kiryuuin replied proudly with a bold smile.

"I was the one asking questions, but it seems all I'm getting is

questions from you.”

This time, just as the offensive and defensive changes, a question flies in from Kiryuuin.

“It's time for you to tell me about yourself.”

“Why me? There are plenty of students who excel academically.”

“Just a hunch. My intuition was telling me that you're not just any normal student passing in front of me.”

If it's her intuition, then there's no evidence to back it up whatsoever.

It completely overlaps with Koenji, who I thought might be similar.

“In the upcoming uninhabited island survival test, are you planning to go for first place?”

“There isn't a student who doesn't want to be first place. Except for people like Kiryuuin-senpai.”

“Aside from first place, I'm one of the people who wants to get to the top. If I get to the top, I get private points. I'm the kind of person who spends all the money I get, and I'm always running out of money.”

Class points and protection points are secondary to her.

It seems that Kiryuuin will only participate because there are private points to be reaped.

“Nagumo, Kiriyama and the others are naturally aiming for first place. The juniors are all reasonably competent in their own right, aren't they? The upcoming special exam is also a battle for first place in the school.”

“It may be true.”

The abilities required are not limited to academic and physical abilities alone.

If it's a battle for overall strength, you can say that's exactly the

case.

“Whether my interest in you fluctuates depends on how you work on the uninhabited island.”

“If I have a choice, then I’d rather not have anyone interested in me.”

“I see, you are a junior who says interesting things. I’m looking forward to fighting you, Ayanokouji.”

With that, Kiryuuin gestured as if she was herding small animals away.

“Well then, please excuse me.”

I had an encounter with a strange third year, but one thing was certain.

If I wanted to get to the top of the next special exam, I would have to defeat this Kiryuuin as well.

And it is her that might be more troublesome of an opponent than Kiriyaama or Nagumo.

6

Even after Ayanokouji left, Kiryuuin continued to stay there.

It was a daily routine for her to spend the day in a relaxed and carefree manner.

A familiar blonde haired-student appears in her view.

Beside him, there was also the student council vice president, Kiriyaama, who had just walked away.

“Oh, take a look. Has the loyal dog came crawling back with its owner now?”

“What...?”

“You’re angry because you’ve learned your lesson, Kiriyaama.

In such circumstances, I don't remember stating which of you is the loyal dog and which is the owner—but that's from the point of view of a third party who doesn't know anything better. Why? Because it was Kiriyama who left and came back, and the only person who fits that description is the loyal dog.”

Kiryuuin turned her words again to Kiriyama, who approached, and to Nagumo, who stood beside him.

“You're a crazy woman...”

“That's not very kind, Kiriyama. It's not a very serious vice president-like thing to say.”

“Nagumo, you're wasting your time getting involved with this woman. You know better.”

“I agree. Now can you both get out of my sight? It's a waste of time.”

“Who do you think you are? To start with you—”

“Kiryuuin, don't hurt my precious fellow student council member.”

Nagumo interrupts Kiriyama's words by tapping him on the shoulder. He then forces Kiriyama to step back and stand in front of Kiryuuin.

“Is he supposed to be an important companion? I don't sense any emotions coming from you.”

“You just feel that way.”

“Well. I wonder what the student council president can do for me? I thought we weren't going to be facing each other again?”

“I wouldn't want to stay long either if I could.”

Saying that, Nagumo forced himself to sit down right next to Kiryuuin.

“You're exquisite, but you lack the charm. I can't be interested in a woman who's charmless.”

“I have charm, you know. But I just can't find someone capable

enough to bring it out of me.”

“I’d like to see if there’s a guy who can get that charm out of you.”

“That’s me too. But aside from your taste, why am I not popular?”

“Women who are too capable are difficult to handle. Unfortunately, I don’t like that kind of woman in my life either.”

“I see, then I’ll never be able to meet your expectations. If being too competent is the reason as to why I’m boyfriend-less, then it makes perfect sense.”

After enjoying a bit of pointless wordplay with Kiryuuin, Nagumo cuts to the chase.

“I heard from Kiriyama. I didn’t think you, who never showed any interest in me or Horikita-senpai, would be interested in Ayanokouji. I was surprised when I heard about it.”

“Did you come all the way out here to find out why? The student council president has a lot of time on his hands.”

“I’ve already finished my business; I’ve got time on my hands now.”

“I think you’ve misunderstood something, too. I’m not someone who’s indifferent to people, Nagumo. I will always speak to people who interests me at least once. You and Horikita Manabu have both taken my interest at some point.”

Saying this, Kiryuuin lightly stroked the tips of Nagumo’s bangs.

“You seem to properly take care of your hair, even more so than me, and I’m a woman! You must be popular, student council president. Has your love life improved over the past three years?”

“You’ve never been with a man before, and you don’t know the ins and outs of love.”

“It’s true that I’ve never been in a relationship, but that’s not

something to be ashamed of. In fact, I guess you could say that it makes me more valuable, doesn't it?"

"You still seem to have the same crazy thoughts."

The bizarre conversation between the two sides began again, but Nagumo quickly got back to the point.

"So how was Ayanokouji? Was he worthy of continued interest?"

"He's a cute junior, so I gave him a bit of lip service, but that's it."

"That's all? So you're not interested anymore."

"I guess I'll hold off for now. He's been facing me and talking to me, but he hasn't let me get a grip on who he really is. That's not to say it's not an ability of his, but it's more enjoyable than a student council president who I lost interest in the moment we spoke."

"You're the only one who can talk so like this to me in all my three years in this school."

Nagumo brings his mouth to Kiryuuin's ear and whispers.

"If you think you're better than me, then allow me to correct your hubris, you dirty princess riding on a high horse."

As if declaring war against Kiryuuin in the next uninhabited island exam, Nagumo challenges her to a battle.

"If you lose, then it will amount to something quite grand, student council president. I know you're mistaken, but I'm not underestimating you. I don't have the superior leadership skills of you nor Manabu Horikita, and I don't have any talent at all for making friends. In fact, I've never had an entity I could call a friend, have I?"

Nagumo moves his face away from her ear in a somewhat boring way.

"But the other elements are different."

Even though they were far apart, the distance between their

faces was only 40 centimetres from each other.

Kiryuuin sharp eyes stared at Nagumo.

“You think I’m inferior to you in any way, shape or form?”

“Oh, well, how can you say that there is absolutely nothing inferior within you?”

“I’ve given you several opportunities to try that and you’ve done nothing. And what’s the result of that? Getting stuck in class B.”

Up until now, Nagumo had competed with Kiriyaama’s class many times in special exams.

However, not once did Kiryuuin cooperate, and her previously A-class was defeated and she fell to B-class.

“It’s certainly a catastrophic defeat if you look only at the results.”

Kiriyaama glared at the amused Kiryuuin, but didn’t interrupt their conversation.

“Well, I knew you weren’t someone who’s going to be obsessed with being an A or a B after all this time.”

That’s the end of the conversation, and Nagumo stood up from the bench.

“I’m sorry to interrupt you, Kiryuuin. Enjoy the rest of your school life to the fullest.”

Nagumo says that and turns to leave.

“I said earlier that I was withholding my assessment of Kiyotaka Ayanokouji, but I think he’s an interesting student.”

“What?”

“This is the answer you wanted for Ayanokouji, isn’t it?”

The reason he contacted Kiryuuin was to find out what she thought about Ayanokouji. That was one of the reasons.

“Interesting? You seem to have a personality that’s far from funny, don’t you?”

Seeing that Nagumo took the bait, Kiryuuin laughs.

“The talented hawk hides its claws. I heard he got a perfect score on a high-difficulty test.”

“There are guys who don’t want to stand out in any way and hide their talent. So what? I’ve defeated all of them from one side to the other. I don’t think it’s interesting.”

With that, Nagumo looked once at Kiriyama, who was waiting at a distance.

“Speaking of air, I felt like he had a different atmosphere than you and Manabu Horikita, you know.”

“That’s too abstract.”

“Then why don’t you try it?”

“Of course I’m going to do that. I may be able to see the extent of his abilities at the upcoming uninhabited island survival test.”

“Since Manabu Horikita has graduated and you look bored, is your junior colleague a good playmate for you? If you’re serious about taking on the challenge, you’re going to be aiming for first place in the uninhabited island exam, right, Nagumo?”

“Yeah, I’ll take first place, of course. Or Kiriyama, who’s running against me. But I’ll need one more pair to do all the tricks, right? You’ll take on that role, Kiryuuin. I’ll give you a useful companion if you need one.”

At this point, Nagumo mentions the first reason why he approached Kiryuuin.

As if to say he was satisfied, Kiryuuin laughs.

“I see. So the reason you came to see me was to ask for my cooperation?”

“You’d think I’d let the juniors take at least third place, but I’m not that nice of a person.”

“You have a myriad of pawns to work with, don’t you? You don’t need to rely on me.”

“So you’re not going to do it?”

“The top 50% is good enough for now. I’m sorry to have you wasting your time.”

As if he knew she was going to answer that, Nagumo turned away.

“You’re just that kind of person at the end of the day. I tried to talk to you as a third-year on equal footing, but it seems I’m just wasting my time.”

Nagumo, who suggested calling it off, walks over to Kiriyama.

“I have one piece of advice for you, for coming all the way out here.”

“You? To me? I’m sorry, but I don’t need advice from a someone lower than me.”

“Well, if you go by that theory, you’re not going to have anyone to advise you.”

At Nagumo’s back, who was laughing condescendingly, Kiyuun continued to speak.

“Then listen to me as if I were talking to myself. You should be looking in front of you, not your juniors. If you keep playing with your juniors who stand behind you, I’ll guarantee that you’ll get hurt.”

“What a nonsensical soliloquy.”

As if to say that he had lost interest, Nagumo started to walk away.

— CHAPTER FIVE —

An Invitation

The preliminaries of the recruitment battle before uninhabited island special exam continuously heats up day after day. There are only a few things left to do. The group formation process—which ends in one week—has reached a climax, with more than 90% of the school’s students already having belonged into groups of two or more people, making the leftovers chasing after each other in a one-way relationship of sorts.

The students who had invited me, such as Ishizaki and Matsushita, soon disappeared as time dwindled. It’s only natural, because the longer one delays in forming a group, the more one puts themselves in danger.

How will less than 10% of the remaining students decide by next Friday? Just as I was thinking about that, I received an email. The time was Saturday morning at 9:30, and the sender was Ishizaki of the second year B-Class. I feel like I’ve been contacted by him quite a lot recently, but the contents in his message seem to be different from usual. Ryuen is calling out to me and wants to meet me at the café. It seems like a compulsory meeting, seeing as there is no accompanying note saying “if possible.”

Of course, I can decline, but then Ishizaki will be blamed. I had a plan today to meet up with the Ayanokouji Group, but fortunately the meeting times do not conflict, as the one with Ryuuen is at 1:00 PM while the meeting with my friends will take place later in the afternoon. It was 15 minutes before the meeting that that I finished my preparations and set out for Keyaki Mall.

Fifteen minutes is enough time to get there. With the group formation finally coming to a close, does this mean that Ryuuen, who has been silent up to this point, will start to move?

Right now, Ryuuen hasn't formed a group with anyone yet. It's not impossible that he might try to recruit me, but I don't think it's very likely. Leaving that side, it's interesting to know what kind of story I'm going to hear from him.

On the way to Keyaki Mall, I come across Kanzaki, who seems to have returned from the convenience store.

Two 2-liter plastic bottles could be seen through the plastic bags he was carrying in his hands.

“Going to Keyaki Mall at this time?”

“I won't have time to relax once the uninhabited island test begins.”

Since there is some time to spare, we talk while standing there.

“It seems that D-class people is also making groups, but you are still alone?”

“I guess that's because I don't have many friends, unlike the other students.”

I tried to make a joke like that, but Kanzaki's expression was severe.

“I believe you and Horikita are the backup personnel who fill the gaps of the D-class. Because talented people can get results in any group.”

Kanzaki, who is wary of me because of my reputation the other

day, would only see it that way.

“I guess that means Kanzaki, at this point in time, has a similar role to play.”

Similarly, in the C class, Kanzaki is currently alone and has not teamed with anyone.

“Ayanokouji, you seem to have a lot of trust in Ichinose, but can you really trust her?”

“If I say I do trust her, would Kanzaki believe me?”

“I can only take your words at face value.”

The air around the cold plastic bottle condensates and forms water droplets on the plastic bags.

The midsummer temperature, which easily exceeded 30 degrees, was mercilessly attacking the two of us.

“The alliance has ended, but I don’t think Ichinose is an enemy.”

I answered Kanzaki truthfully.

“It depends on how you see it. Do you even recognize C class as an enemy?”

I thought I could deceive him well, but Kanzaki’s wariness seems to be a little higher than I had imagined.

“Kanzaki, what do you want to get out of me?”

Unlike his usual appearance, I got the impression that he was in a hurry to do something.

And if I can anticipate the direction he wants to lead me in, I’ll be able to see a little bit of what he’s aiming for.

“Are you planning to take some kind of verbal message from me and make Ichinose hear it?”

“... You, Ichinose... No, she was a much sharper person than we thought. I’ve had a strange feeling that I wouldn’t grasp it since we met, but now I finally see it. It means that you were behind the D-class progress.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Then I dare to ask for your cooperation. Ichinose has a strong sense of trust in you. That’s why I want you to tell me from your mouth that the current Ichinose is not good enough.”

Kanzaki took one step closer to me as a single drop of water dripped from the plastic bag to the ground.

“And you expect that to change the way Ichinose thinks?”

“That’s it.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t cooperate. I want to see how Ichinose manages it.”

“So that means you want to watch us, the enemy, fall down?”

“You’re free to interpret it like that, but...”

I think a little. No one knows what kind of fate is waiting for Ichinose at this point in time. But when it all finally falls down...

For a moment, I am wondering if I should tell Kanzaki my thoughts. However, I quickly stop thinking about it. Adding unnecessary extras that isn’t part of my calculations into the mix isn’t going to help the situation get any better.

Instead, it will only lead to the introduction of unnecessary foreign matters.

“If you talk about the fundamentals, you’ll have to take care of your own class. Right?”

“...That’s right. It may have been a deceptive action.”

Kanzaki bows to me as if to reflect on his actions.

“I thought I’d gotten the sole answer, but it seems I was just taking the easy way out, even if I wasn’t intending to do so.”

Kanzaki replies so and walks towards the dormitory.

He’s probably getting impatient because he can no longer afford it, but even a cornered rat would dare to bite back at its predatory cat.

In the next special exam, Kanzaki will definitely stand in the frontlines as a powerful enemy.

I arrive at the café in Keyaki Mall before the appointed time.

After paying for my drink, I entered the café, where two unexpected men who don't usually socialize with each other were gathered.

One was the person who called me here, Ryuuken, and the other one—

“I heard that one more person will come, but it turns out to be Ayanokouji?”

Kohei Katsuragi, a second-year Class-A student, looked at me with an uneasy expression.

I wouldn't say that they are like water and oil, but these two aren't exactly on good terms.

“What kind of a gathering is this?”

“Are you going to stand there and talk? Sit down.”

I follow Ryuuken's instructions, who had an amused smile on his face, and sit down in the last empty seat.

There is a unique atmosphere in the air that I have never experienced before.

“I thought you had an atmosphere that was somewhat different from normal students, but you seem to have hidden more fangs than I imagined. Isn't this right, Ayanokouji? You got a perfect score on that test.”

Katsuragi, who hadn't had a single conversation with me since my second-year, prodded me about math.

“Ku-ku, don't be impressed with every single thing that happened that long ago, Katsuragi.”

“Long ago? That’s quite a long time for an unexpectedly strong enemy to come out. Are you buoyed by the fact that you defeated Ichinose and rose to the B-class?”

“Cut it out. Ichinose is literally self-destructing on her own. She’s not on my radar as an enemy.”

After all, it’s an unexpected combination, and the mood is already starting to get sour.

“...So? Let’s hear what kind of subject you called us here for.”

With that one word, it was confirmed that the organizer of this meeting was Ryouen,

Katsuragi and I waited for Ryouen’s words.

“Why are you in such hurry? You should be more relaxed.”

“There’s no way I can relax. It’s just awkward to be seen with you.”

It’s no wonder that Katsuragi is vaguely aware of his surroundings and urges him to talk.

It’s a holiday morning, but of course the eyes of the students are still out there.

Students of the same grade who see us can’t hide their shock.

“In the next special exam, what are you going to aim for in class-A?”

“What do you mean? I’m sure we’re all aiming for the same thing.”

“Are you aiming for class points alone or not, and from what I’ve seen of the group on OAA, it looks like they’re building around the C and D classes, but Kitou seems to be on his own. Besides, Ichinose and Shibata being in the same group as Sakayanagi is strange. Why did they team up?”

I was also concerned about that point. In addition to the three people named by Ryouen now, A-class Kamuro and Hashimoto have formed a group with C-class student Ninomiya. Moreover, it

was Asakura who had the special card “Increase,” but now it belongs to A-class Hashimoto. I don’t think these are just coincidences.

“You can interpret it any way you want, but don’t make assumptions.”

“I’m not here to bargain. All I need is the correct answer, plain and simple.”

“Then I’ll give you a plain and simple answer. I will not tell you anything.”

That’s right—Katsuragi asserts clearly. Even though Katsuragi and Sakayanagi are hostile, he replies with the natural attitude that there is no way he would tell his enemy, Ryuen, what’s going on inside.

“Only on the day of the battle will we find out how Sakayanagi will fight. No one will know until she says it herself. If you want to know, then you’ll have to ask her directly.”

“Are you saying you don’t know what she is planning because you’re not trusted?”

“Well, I guess you could be right.”

As Ryuen says, information does not always come down to Katsuragi.

I said earlier that they’re hostile, but Katsuragi is the only person in class-A who is not in the Sakayanagi faction.

It’s a well-known fact that I don’t need to bother to check it out with my words.

At any rate, it would mean that this story is only a starter.

“It’s a tight fit, Katsuragi. This time last year, you were still in charge of my playmates. But now you’re a sight to behold. You are on par with those scum out there. So that’s what happens to people who lose in factions.”

“I heard that you also lost to Ishizaki once.”

Buying and selling words. While exchanging taunts, Ryuuen is laughing happily from start to finish.

“You’re not going to crawl out of one either? Totsuka Yahiko was expelled due to his clumsiness.”

Suddenly, Katsuragi pounds his right fist on the table. The mention of Yahiko’s name, who had been a close follower of the Katsuragi faction, brought up his wrath.

“If you’re trying to piss me off, you’ve succeeded, Ryuuen. Are you satisfied?”

“What the hell, you still can’t get those emotions out? That’s a bit of a relief.”

Ryuuen, who clapped with applause three times, continued to harass Katsuragi.

“Don’t you think it would be an interesting development if you get rid of Sakayanagi in the next special exam?”

“...What?”

“If she’s gone, the leader of Class-A will naturally be absent. When that happens, you will be able to regain her leadership position once again.”

“I don’t know what you’re up to, but it’s impossible. Even if she is stuck on an uninhabited island, there exists plenty of private points for relief and she can use her protection points when she needs to.”

With the funds and protection points, it will be extremely difficult to expel Sakayanagi from the school.

“Sure, if you want to expel her, you’ll have to poke at her at least twice. Well, I’m just kidding about the next special exam. The uninhabited island survival test isn’t about kicking the enemy down—it’s about crawling up on your own.”

Little by little, I can see that the main issue that Ryuuen has set up here is getting closer.



“The rewards for first to third place are enough points to keep Class-A within range, but the rules are a bit cumbersome. So I thought I’d take care of it beforehand.”

“And that’s why you called me and Ayanokouji?”

“That’s what I’m talking about.”

Whatever the strategy, Katsuragi wouldn’t be the kind of person who would easily go along with Ryuen’s story. I believe that Katsuragi has extraordinary hatred for Sakayanagi, but making an enemy of her would also mean drawing a bow on the Class-A that he is enrolled in himself. Even if they were fighting for supremacy from the beginning, doing that now would only be a negative.

“Then again, how could Ichinose ever want to team up with that woman? Was it a fact that she was well conciliated or incompetent? Don’t you think so?”

“I don’t know. Besides, if Sakayanagi hears those words, it will be returned exactly as it was. There aren’t many people who would like working with you. You’re a troublemaker, you know.”

Katsuragi doesn’t try to sell out his adversary, Sakayanagi, but rather responds by siding with her.

Then everyone here is the same problematic person.

The three of us act alone without forming groups with anyone.

But why bother trying to intimidate Katsuragi in a way that would infuriate him? No matter how much they try to incite hostility, if you’ve seen what’s happened so far, you can see that Katsuragi won’t easily betray them. It seems understandable.

Or... Is he carefully checking his stance of not trying to sell out Sakayanagi?

“That’s good, Katsuragi. That useless honesty of yours isn’t bad.”

“You won’t gain anything by stirring things up, Ryuen.”

At this point, Ryuen finally decided to move on to the main

issue and sat back down casually in his seat.

“One of the most important things about this upcoming special exam is that landing on the last few ranks at the end will lose us class points, and I don’t want to feed the first years and third years. And in order to do that, you’ll need to at least have some allies on your side. I don’t have enough strength to win with my class alone.”

The proposal for cooperation came at a time when group formation was about to end.

“I thought I’d rather fight on my own than fight with a Class-B student in the group, but if you can pull strength from the rest of us, that’s a different story.”

A somewhat eerie smile and gaze catches Katsuragi’s attention.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to ask me to help you?”

“It’s not just you. You’re the one who’s sitting there idly listening to the conversation as well, Ayanokouji.”

He looked at me, too.

“...Me?”

“I’m not going to call you here for no reason.”

I had tried to lie low, but I didn’t expect Ryuen to flat-out ask me to help him.

“I refuse. I’m not going to team up with someone like you, even if the reward is also in the Class-A.”

“That’s a very quick decision. You have to listen to the end of the story.”

“I don’t need it. But—tell me why you called Ayanokouji!”

“Why, you say?”

“The fact that Ayanokouji scored a perfect score in math on a special exam at the end of April is a surprising point. I admit that it is certainly an extraordinary ability. But can you say that he is the right person to choose for a guaranteed victory?”

Although Katsuragi immediately denied that he would

cooperate, he was not happy with Ryuuken's strategy.

He didn't seem to be satisfied with the inclusion of me in the strategy he set up.

"Do you think I made a half-hearted strategy?"

"That's right. By including Ayanokouji, the reward for class points will be reduced by a third. If you're going to invite me as a class-A student anyway, I'd say it's a wiser choice to include Kitou in the group than to have it split between three classes. If there has to be, Kanzaki is still alone in the C-class, too. At least his priority is higher than Ayanokouji."

Katsuragi gives out the correct candidate for membership as if he were a general counsellor.

"It's not unreasonable since you don't know anything about it, but my choice isn't wrong. Isn't that right, Ayanokouji?"

"I don't see your point."

I shrug my shoulders in agreement with Katsuragi, not understanding why I was invited.

"Don't act like you're in the dark. You're the guy who beat me once and silenced me."

Ryuuken said so much, without regard to our convenience.

It could be taken as a joke, but Katsuragi could not draw any easy conclusions on this occasion.

"Silenced? ...Is that true?"

He's going to go check that truth for both me and Ryuuken.

"Yeah, I've been beaten. It's thanks to that I even decided to drop out of school once."

If you listen so far, you'll find a lot of things to connect with in Katsuragi.

It's easy to imagine if you put it together with the fact that he had disappeared from the public stage for a while.

"Admit it, Ayanokouji. If you keep hiding things from Katsuragi

here, I'll just keep revealing things about you, understand?"

In fact, if he spills more than needed, it will mimic a half threat.

"Even if I admit it, you think I'm going to cooperate with you?"

"Well, it's not going to be as easy as Katsuragi."

Katsuragi, who had been listening to us, sighed.

"I still don't agree with what you just said. I can't believe that Ayanokouji has beaten you. In the first place, as I said before, if the three classes are going to work together, even if you come in first place, you'll still get class points. You'll only get 100 each. And the gap between you and the A-class you're trying to catch up with will be completely unchanged."

Katsuragi strongly doubts the significance of this group's existence.

"Oh no, I've completely forgotten. I'll give you a pass as a chief strategist."

Grinning, Ryuen shifts his gaze to Katsuragi again as he says that.

Even in this situation, Ryuen does not do anything to soften his somewhat joking attitude.

"I see... I wondered why you would say something so outlandish as being knocked down by Ayanokouji at the suggestion of forming an inefficient group with 3 classes inside. I thought about it, but apparently there was no such thing as a serious discussion from the beginning."

Katsuragi tries to leave his seat, as if he sees that Ryuen is joking around the whole time.

"Serious discussion? You know they wouldn't let you do that in the first place. But you came here. Were you asked to do spying for Class-A?"

Katsuragi responded to the call that could have been ignored.

There was certainly some reason for that.

“Your position is similar to a dead person, but you were looking for a chance to come back to life somewhere. Isn’t that right?”

Sakayanagi has forced a student named Totsuka Yahiko, a student who sided with Katsuragi, to drop out of school.

Ryuuen confirms whether or not he has forgiven her from the bottom of his heart for doing so.

“Whether you think about it or not, I don’t have a shred of connection with you.”

“Now that you’ve come to this point, listen to the end of the story.”

“I won’t cooperate with you in any way you ask. It’s true that I’m halfway at odds with Sakayanagi. But I don’t want to cause trouble for my classmates. There’s no way I would do that.”

Hearing Katsuragi’s words, Ryuuen clapped his hands repeatedly in amusement.

As if he was waiting for those words, not to make fun of Katsuragi.

“You don’t want to be a bother? Did you forget that Class-A has been carrying a lot of money every month due to contract with me since last year’s uninhabited island test?”

Katsuragi returned his gaze, which had been removed from Ryuuen as he stood.

“That thing is an equal contract. I received 200 points from your class. That’s only the A-class paying for it on your behalf, it only helped the Class-A to run alone.”

“Sure, if you just look at the numbers. But aren’t you guys taking mental damage every month? Why should you have to share our own private points?”

People are surprisingly greedy creatures. Even those that were originally carried away by such a plan begin to feel dissatisfied, that 20,000 points, month after month, would continue to be exploited

by Ryuuen, even though they were missing one person. 780,000 for the entire class. 9.36 million yen per year goes into Ryuuen's pocket.

If it's not someone you like, you'll continue to pay tribute to the leader of the enemy who is about to face the Class-A right now. It is not a pleasant thing to do. And the one who signed the contract is not the leader of the class, Sakayanagi, but the one who is now a shadow of a presence, Katsuragi.

"Of course it's uncomfortable, Katsuragi. But I'm also indebted to you, and I can't get revenge on you."

"So... So what?"

Katsuragi, who has lit up his anger again, gives Ryuen a look that looks like he's about to grab him.

Looking at his eyes, Ryuuen tells him, as if he's sure of something.

"Come to Class-B, Katsuragi."

The invitation of Ryuuen is too bold.

Katsuragi's thoughts must have paused as he almost forgot his anger.

"That's ridiculous. You're saying I'm to come to Class-B?"

"Of course, I'll give you the money you don't have."

"If you had the money you need, why should I go to Class-B? You think I'd give up my Class-A status if I wanted to?"

"Sakayanagi will be dragged down by me before long, and when that happens, that class will only fall. That means the current Class-A is worth nothing. Right?"

Lacking a leader named Sakayanagi, it would certainly be difficult to fight on the front lines.

"How much do you have on hand?"

“...About 1.8 million points.”

“What the hell, you’ve sure got a hoarding problem. You’re rotten for a class-A student.”

But, of course, 20 million points is an endlessly long way off. Even with the money transferred from the school every month and the money collected from A-Class, it’s only a little over 800,000 a month. However, Ryuen’s wallet is not increasing. If you ask me if I have 10 million on hand right now, it’s a delicate question.

Knowing that he’s going to be plugged in, Ryuen takes out a sheet of paper and puts it on the table.

“You recognize this one, right? It’s that contract you and I signed last year.”

“...Yeah.”

“I negotiated with Sakayanagi and decided to let this guy go for five million.”

Although it is a fairly high amount of money, a simple calculation of the amount to be paid before graduation will give a discount of around 10 million. In addition, the psychological burden of paying money to Ryuen will disappear. It is a proposal that Ryuen loses in no matter what.

Of course, paying a large amount of private points at once would give Ryuen the ability to do something with the money, as Sakayanagi must have predicted. In this test, to create the optimal group, or to buy the most powerful card. I consider it a touchstone.

However, it can be said that Sakayanagi was aware of this risk and agreed to negotiations that would have given him an overwhelming advantage.

Even if I were Sakayanagi, I would have been on board with Ryuen’s proposal.

“Didn’t you tell him you were going to use that money to pull me out?”

“Don’t tell me you think that if you talk, Sakayanagi won’t take this proposal?”

“...No, I’m sure Sakayanagi would take it.”

Katsuragi admits that there’s no way Sakayanagi would kick a proposal that could only benefit them.

“You’ll never get a chance like this again, Katsuragi.”

The story is about revoking the contract that keeps Katsuragi tied up, and then using the money to pull in Katsuragi.

This means, in other words, that he’s going to pay 20 million points to someone named Kouhei Katsuragi.

And it also means that Katsuragi will be allowed to confront Sakayanagi with impunity.

“Why... are you doing this for someone like me?”

“Ku-ku, you have a very low self-esteem, Katsuragi. Well, it’s certainly not cheap, though.”

What Ryuen has to do is to beat Class-A. Even if they were able to defeat Sakayanagi and force her to be expelled, it wouldn’t be preferable for Katsuragi to stay. If Katsuragi returns to his position, with his emphasis on defense, it will be inevitable that the Class-A will become a strong fortress of sorts.

But if they crushed Katsuragi first and then defeated Sakayanagi, Class-A would collapse in one fell swoop.

They wouldn’t be willing to spare the money needed for that.

And I’m sure they fully appreciate Katsuragi’s high individual ability, as well as his overall strength by OAA, and Katsuragi will be ranked first if he enters the current B-class.

“You have 5 million points by nullifying the contract. The rest of the missing points have already been collected from the class. We’re forced to live in poverty to get you in.”

Between May and July alone, if 39 people save, nearly 6.5 million private points would be saved. Now they only need to

collect just under 200,000 points per student to cover the shortfall. Of course, the B-Class funds will be temporarily depleted, but if they can pull off a top-tier student, it won't come off as an expensive purchase anymore. Ryuuken takes out another contract that he had prepared in advance. In it is an arrangement for Katsuragi to use the money he provided and move to Ryuuken's Class-B.

“Quickly sign it, because there are several conditions for using the 20 million to move between classes. Someone else can't forcibly order a certain person to move to a class. It's only necessary for the person in question to declare that he or she will move to any class voluntarily and with his or her own funds.”

This contract is designed to prevent Katsuragi from giving him a large sum of money to take away or use for other purposes.

Well, if he spent such a large sum of money on whatever he wanted, Katsuragi would be suspected of fraud.

In other words, the purpose of this contract is not to prevent Katsuragi from cheating.

It's a contract to keep him from changing his mind.

“Sounds like you're serious.”

“Good for you, Katsuragi. It's only because you've been alone until today that I've been inspired to ask you here.”

If Katsuragi had formed a group with someone else, as Ryuuken says, this proposal wouldn't have happened.

“Just accept that this is fate.”

Katsuragi stood up from his chair and stood silently for a while, then sat back in his chair as if he had given up.

The vengeance against Sakayanagi that was hidden inside Katsuragi.

Ryuuken successfully dragged it out and brought it into his group. With this, Katsuragi was now under Ryuuken's umbrella. One thing

is for sure—this will definitely be a big plus for Ryuen’s class. The gap between them and Class-A is definitely going to be reduced.

Katsuragi slowly signed the contract.

“You can bring me in, but what do you want? You don’t mind me giving you my opinion as I please?”

“Do what you want. Your stubborn opinions can be useful sometimes.”

That’s what Ryuen replied after receiving the written contract. A case would be made of an individual moving to another class, which was unprecedented in this school. Moreover, instead of going to A-class, they’re moving to B-class. It can be said that this is an accidental product created by an overlap of two conditions.

Ryuen bares his strength by showing how he can easily gain so much points just by taking control of his class. And Katsuragi is the person who was isolated in A-class and was dissatisfied with the leader and yearns for revenge.

If there is a concern, the next uninhabited island test will have to be utilized. Only a few students in B-class can afford the penalty.

“By the way, Ayanokouji. What are you doing?”

“What?”

Seeing that I was pouring water into the remaining one-fifth of the coffee in my cup, Ryuen asked me suspiciously.

“No, I suddenly wondered what it would taste like if I diluted the coffee by three or four times or so.”

Both Ryuen and Katsuragi looked even more confused when I answered nonchalantly.

“...That’s strange, Ayanokouji.”

Katsuragi makes a somewhat bemused and slightly awful remark to me.

“So, what are you going to do with Ayanokouji, who was invited

like me? If you put the D-class students in your group, your reward will be cut in half.”

“I did not say anything about bringing him to this group.”

“If so, what kind of cooperation are you looking for?”

“It’s about the Trial card that Ayanokouji has.”

Ryuuen mentioned the card that had been distributed to me.

“Sell that to me.”

I was wondering what kind of cooperation was requested, but it turns out to be that kind of thing.

“The acquisition of Katsuragi must pose quite a problem for your cash reserves. Can you come up with enough money to buy my card?”

“I can get by with half a million or so. That’s enough.”

It’s certainly the only time to give up the Trial card. It’s not a lucrative trade, but at least I can set aside some money for Kei.

“I’ll make one condition. You must trade the cards of the student who has a Halve card in your class for the student who has a Piggyback card in my class. If you accept it, then I can give it away.”

If you can’t make a group of six and Kei is penalized with three people, with a Halve card, you can keep it down to half a million points. It’s a great way to get it to a secure safe zone.

“Ku-ku, then it’s settled. A Halve card is just fine, right Katsuragi?”

“You’ll lose your handheld anyway. There’s no point in having a Halve card if you’re aiming for the top.”

Speaking of which, the card that was given to Katsuragi is a Halve card.

If Ryuuen, who got the trial card, came in first place, it would give 450 class points at once.

If that happens, then B-class will have a total of 1000 class

points by the end of the exam.

2

July 16, the time limit for group formation has soon to come to an end.

I was getting ready for the morning, when I received a phone call. It was Ishizaki.

“Yo, Ayanokouji, good morning.”

“It’s very unusual for you to call me.”

“It’s almost the deadline for the group formation, right? I wanted to talk to you about that for a minute.”

“Is this about Nishino? I don’t think she has teamed up with anyone else yet until yesterday.”

I haven’t confirmed the OAA this morning yet, but has the situation changed?

“In the end, I couldn’t find anyone from my class that I could team up with, so I finally asked Ichinose to help me out. Then Tsukabe from Class C agreed to help us out.”

Hitomi Tsukabe, a second-year Class-C. She’s a student with both academic and physical abilities of B or above, and she’s a good enough student to be competitive.

“That’s good to hear.”

“Yeah. Now almost all of us in Class B could make a group of two or more people...”

A student in Class-B who still hasn’t formed a group.

“It’s Ibuki.”

“Yeah, only Ibuki is still alone. Can someone in your class group up with her?”

“It’s risky to take a special exam by yourself. I can understand why you want to do something about it.”

But I can tell from Ishizaki’s appearance that he’s tried and failed to convince her repeatedly.

“Give me some time. It’s not like I don’t have an idea.”

“Really? I’ll be waiting, then. Sorry for bringing this up to you so early in the morning.”

I told Ishizaki that I’d call him later and hung up.

Then I decided to contact someone who might be able to team up with Ibuki.

Fortunately, that person hadn’t left the dormitory yet, so we met up in the lobby.

After I went downstairs in the elevator, Horikita, who was waiting for me, showed up.

Horikita was also one of the few students who still hadn’t shown a willingness to team up with anyone else.

“What are you going to do with the group?”

“It’s too late now. I’m not going to do anything about it, so I won’t be making a group with anyone else this time. Given that the maximum group size is six people, it’s not a bad thing to act alone.”

“I know what you mean, since you’ll have the most flexibility alone. But in the unlikely event that you get sick, you’ll be disqualified at that point. You won’t be able to pay the hefty penalty and you’ll be expelled from school.”

I know it’s not something I should be giving advice on.

“I think you should be prepared to take that much of a risk. Isn’t that why you’re currently not in a group with anyone else, too?”

“But even so, the risk is different for you and me.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Last year, you got sick before the uninhabited island test.”

“I didn’t think you’d bring up a story from a year ago. We all

get sick at times.”

“Yeah. You missed another winter with a fever, twice in one year.”

“You just so happened to not take a day off last year, so now you’re confident that you won’t fall sick this time around as well?”

“When it comes to matters of self-discipline, I’m more confident than you are.”

When confronted with the fact that it was a perfect match, Horikita has no choice but to agree.

“I get it. I certainly have less self-control than you do. I’ll admit it. But even if there is a cause for concern in that regard—”

Horikita, who had been looking into my eyes, calmed her tone a little, which was beginning to get somewhat heated.

“If you know what you’re doing, that’s fine. I have no intention of disagreeing with your methods from the beginning.”

Keep yourself in good shape.

It’s enough to make you very aware of that.

“But that still doesn’t change the fact that acting alone is dangerous, you know.”

“Yes.”

“The only three people in my class who don’t have a group with anyone is me, Horikita, and Kouenji. The rest of us have at least two people in our groups. We should form a two-person group if possible and get some insurance.”

“You and Kouenji-kun are the only ones left in the class. That means there’s no way to team up anymore.”

“That’s only speaking in terms of our own class.”

“Are there any girls left who haven’t worked with anyone?”

“Yeah, I can think of one person.”

“I wonder who you’re talking about.”

“It’s Ibuki, a second-year Class-B student. Didn’t you see it in

OAA?”

“Come to think of it, the last time I saw it, she was still alone.”

“I heard a voice of concern from Ishizaki. He’s wondering if there’s anyone who’d be willing to team up with Ibuki. Why don’t you team up with her for the upcoming special exam? Horikita.”

“Me with Ibuki-san?”

“Two girls can join any group. Why don’t you just listen to what they have to say?”

“It’s true that it’s better to have insurance, but... fine, I’ll try talking to her.”

I guess she couldn’t do it outright, but Horikita agreed to meet with Ibuki.

I decided to call Ishizaki and ask him to make time for me during lunch break.

3

Then, at lunchtime, I took Horikita with me to the meeting place I had previously confirmed with Ishizaki.

“Oh Ayanokouji! This way, this way!”

As soon as he spotted me in the distance, Ishizaki jumped up and down and waved his hand at me.

Next to him was Ibuki, who was glaring at me with her arms crossed in a sullen manner.

“She agreed?”

“By the looks of it, I’m not so sure.”

She seems to be in a pretty bad mood for someone who is planning to listen and team up.

It should be assumed that he brought her here without giving a

detailed explanation.

“Hurry up and get over here!”

Ishizaki appeals with jumping up and down even more.

“You’ve got some pretty close friends.”

Horikita is somewhat taken aback by Ishizaki’s attitude.

“He’s a good guy.”

“Even so, I wouldn’t want to get too close with that kind of person.”

He’s similar to Sudo in the sense that he’s the strong and “brother-like” type, but Ishizaki is only Ishizaki at the end of the day.

“What in the world does this mean? Why are Ayanokouji and Horikita here?”

I guess she didn’t get it.

Horikita and I look at each other. There seems to be some uneasiness in leaving Ishizaki in charge of the proceedings here.

“Actually, I have one thing to discuss with you, and I asked Ishizaki to call Ibuki.”

I can’t help it, so I start explaining things here.

“So?”

“I heard that Ibuki is going to participate in the upcoming special exam by yourself?”

“It’s up to me to decide.”

She returns it so short and unassuming that it’s impossible to get a hold of her motives.

“I’ve recommended many times that she should form a group.”

“I don’t need to.”

“Well, it isn’t that you don’t need to, but that you don’t have another person who’s willing to work with you.”

Whether he wanted to cooperate or interfere, Ishizaki would say something extra each time.

I turned to look at him to keep him silent with my eyes.

“Eh? What’s that for, Ayanokouji?”

But... There’s no way to make such a request, and Ishizaki asks back.

“It’s nothing. By the way, Horikita here, just like Ibuki, hasn’t form a group with anyone else.”

“So?”

“The next uninhabited island test, it’s a huge disadvantage if you don’t have a group. As long as you make a group of two, if not three, you can continue even if one of you retires at worst.”

If I explain this much, they’ll come to understand what I’m talking about.

“We don’t have much time left before the deadline, you know.”

“Does that mean, perhaps, that you want me and Horikita to team up?”

“Well, that’s what it comes down to.”

“Huh! What are you saying?!”

“As far as your physical abilities are concerned, you seem to be doing fine... Other than that, I’m a little unhappy with you.”

“I mean, how can you be so selfish on your end!”

Ibuki closes the distance between them.

Then she glares at Ishizaki, who is drinking some beverage behind her.

“So you also had a hand in making me and Horikita become a group?”

“I didn’t know it was Horikita, but it would nice though—you two working together.”

“I hate this guy too, but I hate Horikita even more than that.”

The “this guy” Ibuki says is me. She very *politely* sticks her fingertips up to my eyes.

“Ayanokouji-kun, you’re hated a lot, aren’t you?”

“It’s unbeknownst to me, but she seems to hate you more than me.”

“It’s an honor.”

The fact that Horikita and I were whispering in each other’s ears was annoying, and Ibuki didn’t even try to hide her annoyance.

“I don’t know if Horikita asked me to do this or not, but I’m not going to team up with her or anything!”

She really doesn’t seem to like Horikita.

She says strongly to me that she refuses to do so.

“Oh my, though I don’t remember saying that I’m going to team up with you?”

Seeing Ibuki’s demeanor, Horikita utters something that provokes her.

“What? What does that mean?”

“I think you’ve misunderstood something. You were left alone with a surplus, but I was going to fight alone on my own. It’s as if the same thing came into the minds of two different people.”



Horikita replied that with some dismay. But looking at it, Ibuki seemed to be on fire.

“I’m doing it alone because I want to, too. It’s just fine if you want to do it alone. Let’s fight, Horikita.”

She shifts the point of her sharp gaze from me to Horikita.

“I wonder if it’s one thing. Why are you so determined to rival me? Sure, we had the opportunity to compete against each other when we were on the uninhabited island or at the sports festival, but I’m sure there was nothing special about it.”

“You’re the only one who thinks that.”

As far as I know, Ibuki won the uninhabited island brawl.

And in the 100-meter run at the sports festival, Horikita won in a close contest.

One win and one loss. However, this cannot be attributed to the best efforts of each other.

In the uninhabited island test, Horikita had a disadvantageous battle with a high fever. At the sports festival, Ibuki was overly conscious of Horikita, and it was also a setback that she wasn’t in her best condition at that time.

In other words, if you ask me which one is better, it is currently impossible to judge.

Ibuki, who was defeated by me along with Ryuen on the rooftop, once challenged me to settle the matter at a later date.

The bottom line is that she has a personality that can’t be satisfied unless it’s completely black and white.

This time, she wants to compete on the uninhabited island survival test.

With that in mind, there was no way this Ibuki would take Horikita’s hand.

“Looks like it was a waste of time.”

“Wait. Will you accept? I won’t take it.”

“I’m not choosing to be alone because I want to do it individually. I choose to be flexible and join up with someone else’s group once the special exam starts.”

It might be a viable match if it was one on one, but it certainly wouldn’t be a fair fight.

“That’s it.”

“Don’t be lame, it’s not like we’re doing the special exam.”

Pushing her arms, Horikita only returned Ibuki’s provocations at every turn with a nonchalant response.

“If you have a strong will to fight alone, then try not to lose, even if I join the group. If you won, I’ll give you a little credit.”

“...It’s not good enough.”

There was no way the group could be made up of Horikita and Ibuki, and the negotiations broke down.

However, the only thing they dared to do was to solidify Ibuki’s motivation by provoking her at the end. There’s no doubt about it. I lightly apologized to Ishizaki and decided return to the classroom with Horikita.

“You knew from the beginning that Ibuki would never get along with me. That’s very kind of you. By provoking her, you’re trying to get her to do something reckless and disqualify her.”

I thought it was very Horikita-esk way of answering the question without being honest.

— *EPILOGUE* —

Calm Before the Storm

I couldn't help but feel that the closing ceremony for the first semester passed way too quickly. And as soon as that's over, we must move on to the next obstacle.

After leaving the school grounds again for the first time since a year ago, we will head to the port, in order to board a cruise ship to the deserted island.

Without sparing any time to enjoy, a special exam will soon begin tomorrow morning. The students, who at once gathered in the classroom and had a brief explanation, went to school as usual. While we waited for the homeroom teacher to show up, a small check sheet is displayed on the monitor to see if there is anything left behind.

A week's change of underwear is absolutely essential for maintaining hygiene in this exam. Bringing our phones also seems to be a must, but they will be confiscated upon stepping foot on the deserted island. Even if they are allowed to be brought into the island, there wouldn't be any signal anyway, so it'll just become extra luggage. Though, they may be used for payment of penalties or for shopping when on board.

As I wait for the bell to ring, I reconfirmed that everything is

already packed up and in check. The rest of the class is also scuffling to prepare themselves. As they did, Keisei approached me.

“To be honest, fighting on an uninhabited island is the type of special exam I’m not good at.”

“That’s only natural—it’s a far cry from everyday life.”

“Girls seem to have it particularly difficult; I’m a man so I can’t complain.”

Unlike boys, girls have more problems to withhold, so this type of exam is unsuitable for them. Of course, the school staff took extra care in that subject, but the fact does not change.

“It’s a group battle, but I’m planning to back you up as much as I can.”

It is a special exam that he is not good at, but Keisei still expresses his determination to do his best and protect his friends.

“Yeah. There should be some way to cooperate with each other, so I’ll lend a hand as well.”

I promised to cooperate as much as I could.

“But is it really beneficial to tackle it solo? It’ll be over when you fall sick. If something like that actually happens, there’ll be a 6 million-point penalty... everything will be over.”

“That would be one of my special traits,” I boasted proudly.

“It’s starting to sound a bit ironic, considering the recent events.”

Keisei, who laughed after saying that, returns to his seat. Soon after, the bell signalling the start of school rang, and all 39 students of class 2-D remain seated.

The expression that Chabashira-sensei wore on her face while entering the classroom is naturally stiff.

“Summer vacation is starting today, though it’ll get a bit rough soon enough. It’s only natural.”

Chabashira-sensei manipulated the monitor's screen with her tablet.

“The final confirmation will start from now on. Those who are sick should report it.”

Everyone checked their belongings and their physical condition. Then, the schedule and the necessary items are displayed once again. Fortunately, there are no unhealthy students in class 2-D, so the final check progressed smoothly.

As expected, Kouenji, who did not form a group and chose to go alone, could not care less.

“Looks like there aren't any problems.”

After checking the necessary items before departure, the monitor is turned off within a few minutes. Then, in order to attract the attention of the students, Chabashira-sensei gently tapped on the teacher's podium with her palm.

“This isn't the first time you've taken a special exam. We've been fighting at this school for over a year now, and we've managed to overcome many hardships.”

Advice from Chabashira-sensei herself. Advice that is given from the homeroom teacher to the students of class 2-D in order to not lose the fight.

“It's going to be tougher than the previous special exams you've done, which is an unavoidable reality.”

Chabashira-sensei looked closely at each and every student, as if to burn her face into everyone's minds.

“I have one request for all of you. If possible, come back to this classroom again without anyone gone.”

Chabashira-sensei hoped that our fates chained to the uninhabited island is not a one-way ticket to expulsion.

“After 10 minutes, gather on the school grounds for rollcall. If necessary, use the toilet when there's still time.”

The students weren't given much time, so they rushed out of the classroom. The Ayanokouji Group gathered around my seat near the entrance, preparing to take off with our luggage.

At about the same time, Kouenji got up but did not go out into the corridor; he actually approached a student.

"Isn't this good news, Horikita girl?"

Not only me, but the students that remained in the class were deprived of their senses when they witnessed the unusual behaviour.

"It's unusual for you to talk to me so spontaneously."

That impression was also shared by Horikita, who was called out.

"I want to talk a bit about the special exam that will be starting soon."

"Oh, I wonder if you're finally going to cooperate with us?"

"Let's say you're half correct."

Horikita shows a slightly suspicious expression to Kouenji's indecipherable words. Everyone knows that Kouenji isn't the type to easily cooperate.

"What are you aiming for? Care to tell us the other half, if not for cooperation?"

"You want the class to secure the top three positions in order to shrink the gap between other classes. Is that right?"

"Of course. The positions of each class may change significantly depending on the class points we get."

"Then let's make one suggestion here. If I perform well in the uninhabited island survival exam, promise me my complete freedom all the way until graduation."

Kouenji's incredible remarks silenced the class for a moment. He expressed his willingness to take part in the special exam, albeit with conditions.

“Promise you complete freedom... It’s certainly a bold proposal. So you want us to continue allowing you to do whatever you want?”

“Exactly. Of course, I’ll settle into the class like a passenger in a horse-drawn carriage—so make sure I don’t suffer any harm once I secure my freedom.”

That is, for example, the class poll last year. In the future, if there is a special exam that forcibly expels unnecessary students in the class, it is obligated that Kouenji receives protection.

“It’s not an easy-to-digest proposal. Everyone would think the same in this class.”

As long as you are in this class, there is a kind of obligation to cooperate with each other. No one would easily permit the teamwork to be thrown away.

“It’s like getting a loan before graduation.”

A proposal that forces Kouenji to do his best and contribute in the next special exam.

“It seems like you’re in a crisis. Your classmates will not allow you to milk that special freedom anymore. If a special test such as the class poll ever occurs again, all the arrows will surely be pointed at you.”

Even though Kouenji is a strangely laid-back person, it is still impossible to avoid falling into a pinch depending on the exam contents.

“It’s best to do your best like other people, without making such pointed conditions.”

Horikita tries to poke at Kouenji’s proposal, which is only natural.

However, even if she declines here, Kouenji will not cooperate in the future special exams either. Here, she is driven into a corner. This uninhabited island special exam is the one time that Kouenji

is motivated to perform well.

“I’m sorry, but I appreciate Kouenji-kun’s talents. It’s not worth the effort to make a ‘so-and-so’ attempt for success in this special exam only, and give you a carefree tour to graduation afterwards.”

Horikita decides her answer by putting various things on the balance scale.

“I see. Then negotiations are dissolved.”

“—No. I’ll accept your proposal if an extra condition is added.”

It seemed like Horikita refused for a moment, but she has another idea.

“You shouldn’t be ambiguous about ‘performing well.’ This test has a huge reward for the group that achieves first place. If you took the first place by yourself, that’ll be a good reason to convince us to ascertain your freedom until graduation.”

If Kouenji, who did not form a group with anyone, obtains number one, 300 class points will be awarded to our class. That amount of contribution will be enough to guarantee him freedom until graduation.

However, that is not easy to achieve. Kouenji is Kouenji, but when there are more than 100 rivals fighting for the same position, getting that top spot will be difficult.

“Hmm. I see. You’ll only accept if I can take the first place alone.”

Kouenji laughs cheerfully at such a suggestion.

“At best, let’s conclude the negotiations with that added condition.”

“No, that’s not enough.”

Horikita seems to have one more condition to add to Kouenji’s proposal.

“I haven’t talked about one last condition. In the chance that you aren’t able to take first place in the exam, you’ll just act the same

as always, so I have one more thing to add.”

“And that is?”

“If you don’t get first place, promise me that you’ll help the class in subsequent special exams and produce results.”

I could hear the excited gasps of students around me. It’s a wonderful condition. Should Kouenji take first place in the special exam, that’s fine. Even if he can’t get first place, he’ll have to contribute in the next special exam, according to the added condition. There will be no loss for class D regardless of what result he obtains in this special exam.

Whether or not Kouenji will accept these additional conditions is another matter...

“Horikita girl, you seem to have matured. Your orders are quite strong here.”

“If the conditions I just talked about are okay, I’ll take your suggestions this time around.”

“Then the negotiations are done. Horikita girl—don’t forget the conditions we spoke of.”

Even after receiving additional conditions, Kouenji still expresses his willingness to fight without refusal.

“Are you really going to take the top spot alone?”

“Of course. Nothing is impossible for me.”

Although Horikita’s demands are unreasonably high, she couldn’t hide her surprise at Kouenji’s confidence.

“Now the negotiations are complete. Let’s go.”

Kouenji is happy with the negotiations and left the classroom. Nobody could call out to Kouenji; we only saw him off as he walked away.

“I have no idea how serious he is...”

“Well, it’s fine either way.”

“But this is a one-of-a-kind chance. I was able to get him to

“speak for himself.”

I think it would be nice to trust his words, but it certainly is a new development.

Kouenji himself needs some kind of backup in order to live a carefree school life in the future. If he's to do anything he likes, our class will inevitably fall to the bottom of the school hierarchy. Even if he fails this time, he'll be able to take action elsewhere.

But if Horikita, the leader of class 2-D, takes action to prevent his freedom, the story will be different.

“In the unlikely event that he leaves behind the top spot, it would be great if a group in our class could take it.”

Saying so, Horikita turns to look at me.

“You'll take the number one position in this exam, and knock Kouenji to second or third place. If you manage to achieve such a feat, the benefits to our class will be considerable. We'll be able to catch up with the other classes.”

By simple calculation, class 2-D will get at least 450 class points. If that happens, our class points will rise up to 780, and we'll suddenly become class B.

What's more, Kouenji will actually cooperate in the next special exam.

“But it's weird. There is a mysterious fog that shrouds Kouenji in the unknown.”

Whether it's an academic ability or physical ability, it's not far to say he has a lot of potential. It is certain that he has extraordinary talents.

“Yeah, but whether or not we can take first place is another matter.”

Sakayanagi, Ichinose, and Ryuen, who are representatives of our rivalling classes, will also seriously aim for first place.

Of course, there's not only that, From the first-years, there are

up-and-coming dangers such as Housen and Amasawa. In addition to that, there will also be formidable third-years like Nagumo, Kiriyaama, and Kiryuuin.

And I haven't said it so far, but I intend to aim for the higher ranks myself.

Who will take the cake after two weeks?

Who will be ousted from this school?

A long summer is about to begin.

1

“It'll get quite hot in the second half of July.”

While looking down at the large buses coming into the school grounds one after another, Tsukishiro muttered audibly.

“Yes, that's right.”

It was a first-year student who responded with no emotions.

Tsukishiro continues to speak without looking at the first-year.

“End your analysis time already. I will not heed any further delays.”

“Kiyotaka Ayanokouji—do you want me to expel him in this exam?”

“Do you have what it takes?”

“He's not an easy opponent, but I already knew that from the beginning.”

“I'll do my best to help you, but I can only do it to a certain extent.”

Upon hearing this, the student recalls that Tsukishiro is eager to force this plan forwards.

“Didn’t you say there was a considerable loss of money?”

“Yes. We did a lot of work to raise the budget for this special exam, and forcibly turned over the strictest rules of this school.”

“Isn’t it more difficult to continue acting as the director?”

“I wonder. It’s about time Chairman Sakayanagi’s false allegations of injustice clear up, and it’ll be clear that I have no more use. That’s why I prepared to go out with a bang. I would like to see Kiyotaka Ayanokouji expelled from this school by using the following means.”

“—Yes, I’ll do it without hesitation.”

“Good. You may rampage around in this special exam as much as you want. Once everything is done, you can return to your normal life. Let’s go back to where we should be.”

A girl who naturally has the strength in her left hand, which is her dominant hand.

Looking sideways, Tsukishiro smiles softly.

“I’m looking forward to it—

“—Tsubasa Nanase.”



— *SHORT STORY* —

[SUZUNE HORIKITA]

He Who Stands Beside Me

You want to join the student council?”

President Nagumo looked surprised when I asked to join the student council.

“What kind of development occurred for this to happen? I honestly can’t say I have the intention to accept your request.”

“So I’m not welcomed?”

“No. I basically don’t refuse anyone who wants to come to me. If there is a person who wants to join the student council, I will accept them as long as vacancies allow me to. I’m not interested in the reason for applying either. Even if it’s for the OAA’s sake, future job positions or for justice, it’s all up to you.

“But you are special, Suzune Horikita. I’ll only give you one condition to join the student council.”

As Manabu Horikita’s sister, it seems a condition is necessary for me to join.

“What’s the condition?”

I prepare myself to receive it by asking him.

“Tell me why you decided to join the student council at this timing.”

That condition isn't what I would've imagined, but I can't refuse to answer it either way. Even if I made up some stupid lie here, he surely wouldn't think twice about it. That said, I can't mention Ayanokouji-kun's relation to this either.

"I had a certain obsession over my brother that caused some tumult between us. To eliminate that feud was the reason why I entered this school. However, the relationship between me and my brother never changed.

"I didn't want to admit that I wasn't growing as a person. My brother wouldn't accept such a person. In the end, a whole year was wasted without settling anything with him—that is, until just before his graduation."

I answered with the most convincing voice I could muster, feeling my heart beating faster and faster. And he, who listened closely, didn't say anything either. If it all ends without me being able to enter the student council, he would surely be disappointed.

I want to avoid that at all costs.

Disappointed? In me? Why am I so afraid of him being disappointed in me?

My heart couldn't handle this feeling that I never realized I had before. How do I look to him right now? I'll admit I am a bit interested in that...

The fact that he isn't a normal student is something I've known for a long time, even before he got that perfect score in mathematics.

President Nagumo, who stands in front of me, is certainly an amazing student, no less even acknowledged by my brother... but even comparing him to Ayanokouji-kun—I feel that my impressions are beginning to change.

I undoubtedly value him very highly. While a part of me wants to learn his true potential, I realise there is a part of me that wants

something else.

That is—I want him to *acknowledge* me.

Perhaps that was one of the reasons why I so happily obliged to join the student council?

...That isn't my intention.

I pushed those odd thoughts into the back of my mind. There's other, more *important* things I have to focus on right now.

—I have to enter the student council and watch President Nagumo's movements. That is a crucial task.

Taking hold of my focus again, I threw away those unnecessary thoughts.

“There are no student council members from the second-year, other than Honami right now, and the lack of numbers is causing us a fair bit of trouble.

“Welcome to the student council. From today onwards, I'll have you work as a student council member, Suzune.”

I took the left hand that he held out towards me.

“Of course.”

Our relationship will be full of thorns. Even so, there are certainly many things that I can learn from him who once stood beside my brother. I will take that experience and grow further.

By doing so, Ayanokouji-kun will surely acknowledge me. And when that time comes... we will definitely be knocking on the door of class A.

That is a premonition I can't shake away.

— *SHORT STORY* —

[ICHIKA AMASAWA]

What is Reflected in her Eyes

I wore my favorite clothes today as I hummed to a song.

“Will this be cute enough for him?”

For two weeks now, I’ve been watching the movements of a class 2-D student by the name of Kei Karuizawa. From the café, to the karaoke, she’s been going to every corner of Keyaki Mall.

However, thanks to my endearing dedication to stalking her, the promised day has finally come.

Unlike her normal routine, Karuizawa is heading straight back to the second-year dormitories after school today. I rushed to the lobby of the second-year dormitories and watched as she went inside her room.

After waiting for a while, I took the elevator up to the floor where Karuizawa’s room is. Whilst waiting for her to appear again, I hid myself near the emergency staircase, with my breath held as I stood on alert.

An hour later, she exited her room, wearing her school uniform.

Looks like she’s ready for her *secret date*.

The beat of my heart accelerated as I watched her take the elevator to Ayanokouji-senpai’s room floor. With that confirmed, I

hastily left the second-year dormitories and returned to my own room.

“Perfect!”

It’s a hassle that I had to do it this way, but now I can finally change into some cute clothes! It wouldn’t work as well if I’m not cute enough.

“Ah, yes! I can’t forget this!”

I bought a lovely little protective box at the convenience store earlier, which will be crucial to my act. I slid it into one of my pockets.

After I finished changing my clothes, I left the first-year dorm. I really wanted to head straight to the second-year dorm, but I resigned myself and went to Keyaki Mall first.

At the supermarket, I hurriedly threw in whatever cooking groceries I could find into my trolley. The type of groceries I picked weren’t important, so long as they spoil easily, such as vegetables and fresh meat.

After paying for them, I once again head to the second-year dormitories.

Luckily, a student had just returned, so I followed them inside from behind and got past security. Using the emergency stairs, I climbed up to room 401 where Ayanokouji-senpai and Karuizawa are secretly dating.

My heart raced as I approached his room. I tried to calm myself down before I reach the door.

I assumed they could see me through the peephole on the door, so I hid the bag with fresh groceries in a corner, dead to all lines of sight.

Alright! Preparations are complete!

I rang the door bell without any prior notice. After a stretched length of silence, I felt senpai from behind the door.

“Senpai~!”

I called out to him in the sweetest voice I could muster. He must be looking at me now. My cuteness must have already attracted his line of sight.

But it won't be enough.

I have to make him realize it's the one and only *me*.

For that reason, I must force him to invite me inside using whatever means I could think of.

Everything's fine. I can predict all the ways he'll reject me.

Twice. *Thrice*.

No matter how many times he may try to push me away, I won't back down. He'll succumb to my tenacity.

To get close to a strong opponent, it is necessary to pierce at them using their weak points. I will thoroughly aim at his ever so little weaknesses.

As the door slowly creaked open, I smiled broadly.

“It's me!”

I wonder what sort of face he is making right now... I'm so looking forward to that.

— *SHORT STORY* —

[SHIINA HIYORI]

An Excuse

Albert-kun and I waited quietly on standby right around a corner. I could hear the voice of an energetic Ishizaki-kun and a calm Ayanokouji-kun from a slight distance away.

Our goal was to create a small group for the special exam which is scheduled to be held on an uninhabited island. The first student that crossed our minds to invite wasn't Sakayanagi-san, Ichinose-san, nor even Horikita-san.

Ishizaki-kun and I both shared this train of thought.

Our idea was to call out to Ayanokouji-kun and invite him to our group before anyone else does. I just thought this was such a right move to do.

Before long, Ayanokouji-kun bumped into us, and showed a surprised look at the sight of Albert-kun.

“Hello there, Ayanokouji-kun,” I greeted.

“This is a rare combination.”

“Maybe so.”

The plan was rushed, so it's no wonder Ishizaki-kun hadn't planned anything after this. I could easily have said something to him, but I decided to keep silent.

“I have a bad feeling about this. Can I go?”

He probably sensed some danger ahead so he asked if he could go back.

“Well, aren’t you free right now? We’re not letting you go anywhere.”

With our movements in sync, Albert-kun and I went behind Ayanokouji-kun.

“You won’t let me... what?”

“I’m sorry, Ayanokouji-kun. I can’t let you escape.”

Albert-kun held his back with a tight grip, while I took hold of his left arm to prevent him from escaping.

“What...?”

Us using force on him was not expected, so it’s no wonder why he looks so confused. Though, truthfully, even if we invited him by force, I already know it would be futile.

He’s probably going to join a group solely made up of class D students, or possibly even going alone. In either case, such a person who holds the key to success wouldn’t easily succumb to other classes.

But even so, I chose to encourage Ishizaki-kun on his plan and accompany him while doing so.

“We’re looking suspicious here. Let’s move, Ishizaki-kun.”

What was my reason for helping? Well, I only wanted to...

Yes—I only wanted to meet Ayanokouji-kun.

I decided to cooperate since I wanted an excuse. I slightly tightened my embrace of Ayanokouji-kun’s arm.

I’m looking forward to spending more time together with him, even just for a second longer—

— *SHORT STORY* —

[SAKURAKO TSUBAKI]

What Could Be Seen from That
Back

If I were to be asked about what I am best at, I would answer, without hesitation, that it was my insight and intuition.

On the way back to the dorms from Keyaki Mall, I am watching Ayanokouji-senpai's back disappearing into a convenience store.

I had been silently trailing him until now, but he hasn't yet shown any signs of noticing me.

However—he definitely *did* notice me.

His usual behaviour is that of a normal high school student. He looked completely ordinary, like a student one would find anywhere without needing any effort.

I stayed a proper distance away from him, taking a lollipop nearby before calling out to him. But still, there isn't a need for me to assume he's already noticed me.

He didn't pay any attention to me and continued to put items into his shopping basket. Before long, I called out to him right as he was about to pay.

“Excuse me?”

If I decided to let him leave, there won't be any other chance left today.

“Tsubaki, right? Do you need something from me?”

Even when I directed his attention towards me, he didn't seem surprised at all. He didn't bring up the fact that I've been watching him in the café either.

“There's something I want to speak to you about, so if you don't mind, could you wait outside for me for a moment?”

Buying a lollipop is the least I could do to show courtesy towards the shop and not have the impression of a window-shopper.

Well, actually... this guilt might just be the work of the store clerk.

“Thanks for waiting.”

I removed the wrapping paper of the lollipop as I started to walk. To tell you the truth, I'm not very good at holding conversations.

It's not like I'm particularly bad at talking to people of the opposite gender—I'm just bad at talking overall.

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

He asked me the reason for calling out to him.

“There's something *he* had to tell you about, if I happen to meet you, Ayanokouji-senpai.”

For now, I have to buy enough time for Utomiya-kun to arrive.

“Utomiya-kun did?”

He knows what I'm thinking. That questions of his answered itself.

“Guess I was right.”

As expected of him... wait, is that the right way to put it?

“He said he'll be here at once.”

I'm not able to dig into his psyche just yet. Though, there is more than enough time to spare, so no need for panicking. Just do it slowly but surely.

And then—

*CLASSROOM OF THE
ELITE*

SYOUGO KINUGASA

AFTERWORD

Hello there, readers. First of all, I would like to apologize for postponing the release of this volume. As a result of the self-quarantine, my daughter's nursery school was closed, my wife's physical condition deteriorated, and the birth of my second child arrived.

Thanks to that, the number of family members has increased, and the environment has begun to change, so the time available for me to write is gradually decreasing.

Even in such difficult times, I convinced myself to not forget that there are people out there who are looking forward to my work as entertainment. I will definitely try to fill the gap that the postponed release of volume 2 has created. Please wait for a while.

Hey, Syougo Kinugasa here. Guys, how do you do? My whole body is tired.

Actually, I'm tired of all sorts of things. I'm feeling a lot of melancholy at the moment.

When I have a lot of time, my writing work can be frustrating, but this time I experienced the opposite. *Let me write!* I shouted from the bottom of my heart. When I don't have the time, I'll be reminded of how grateful I am to be able to work.

There are a lot of dark news surrounding the world right now, but there are small things that happened which I thought wasn't all that bad. For example, during the self-quarantine period, various stores have begun selling bento boxes, which gave people an

opportunity to discover the taste of a store that they would've usually only pass by. Plus, many shops have decided to keep doing so even after normal business returns.

Now, for this volume, which is 2nd year volume 2, it's all about the battle to prepare for the upcoming special exam in volume 3. Basically, I am thoroughly conscious of the special exams taking place in each book, but I can't say the same for this one.

All grades are fighting earnestly to win, so it inevitably makes this arc longer. In that sense, I would like to deliver the next volume as soon as possible, as it will be a sort of "continuation" more than ever.

Just two more books within this year... I want to be able to publish them. I wonder if I can do it or not...

So please, pay attention to that as well, if possible.

Don't expect too much, will you? ☆

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—Thank you for reading the ZeroBooks translation of Classroom of the Elite 2nd Year Volume 2!