
NOVEL
10
CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR 2
STORY: SYOUGO KINUGASA
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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
YEAR 2
NOVEL 10


"It's cold."
"It's cold."
"Don't copy me."
"Don't copy me."
It wasn't that big a deal or anything, but the feeling of being on the same wavelength was strangely hilarious.


"I wanted to meet you. I wanted to be alone with you, Ayanokouji-kun, just the two of us, no matter what… Do you think that I'm repulsive…?"
"Repulsive? Why would I think that?"
"Because…I mean, I'm coming to see a boy who has a girlfriend, and…"


SAKAYANAGI ARISU


10
WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

NOVEL 10

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku

Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

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POSTSCRIPT



Chapter 1:
Hashimoto Masayoshi's Soliloquy

BASICALLY, IT BOILS DOWN to this: I don't trust people. It's like I'm allergic to the very idea of wholeheartedly trusting other people.

I mean, why would I?

People betray each other easily. They'll put on a friendly face and say stuff like "Don't worry, you can trust me," all while stabbing you in the back. The more you believe in them, the bigger the shock when they twist the knife.

Knowing that, don't you think it's better to betray them before they betray you? It's better to live your life dishonestly and cleverly, making a profit, than to live your life being naively honest and struggling.

That's my, Hashimoto Masayoshi's, absolute creed.

Masayoshi...

Masayoshi, huh? Written with the same characters as "justice." Funny, yeah?

You know, every time I talk to myself like this, I feel a sense of disgust about my own name well up within me. But I guess that feeling isn't all that uncommon nowadays. Compared to those folks who simply hate their names, my disgust is, well, kinda quaint. I only hate my name because of the mismatch between it and who I am.

My name has nothing to do with justice at all. Logically, I understand that, but still, people will make assumptions about me based on it. They arbitrarily judge a person's character by their name. Sorry, but I can't stand on the side of justice anymore.

When I entered this school, I made up my mind. I'm going to graduate from Class A, no matter what. And I'm gonna make those who betrayed me pay for what they did. No matter how dirty my hands get, I'll do what it takes. I'll kick anyone down, *anyone*. I'll do things to make people resent me, no matter who they are.

Even if it's Ryuuen or Sakayanagi. Hell, even Ayanokouji. I won't change, no matter who I face.

I'm gonna look out for me, and me alone.

Chapter 2:
The Curtain Rises on the Third Semester of the Second Year

THE ROAD TO SCHOOL was jam-packed with people. I hadn't seen this sight at all during winter vacation. It's not like I hated the scenery during times of peaceful quiet, but I guess I preferred seeing the sea of students. Or perhaps I have just become accustomed to seeing the bigger picture. Was it that I could foresee the end of these times approaching and I was subconsciously beginning to feel regret?

"What's the matter, Kiyotaka? You stopped."

Looking at my right arm, I could see the face of my girlfriend, Kei, peering up at me as she held my arm in a warm embrace. Her moist lips caught my eye. She had probably put on her favorite lipstick before heading out.

"It's nothing," I muttered, and the two of us began walking.

Spending every day with her was, at the very least, a release from boredom. That was because Kei, who loved to chat away even if the other person stayed silent, would automatically provide the topic of conversation for the day, day after day. However, she was becoming overwhelmingly irrelevant compared to my alone time. If you asked me whether the days we spent together were necessary or unnecessary, I'd say it was about a fifty-fifty split.

The reason I needed those days with her was because they gave me the ability to communicate with others through invaluable practice. It was a valuable opportunity for me to hone my as-of-yet unripe skills. On the other hand, precisely because I was inexperienced, I would often fail in my conversational skills. There were many instances of me choosing the wrong answer when dealing with Kei, especially when she was in a bad mood, which resulted in making her even grumpier. That was a taxing part.

On the other hand, it was also a disadvantage to me because it cut into time for honing other skills. Putting aside the benefits of analyzing communication and romance, as well as the opposite sex, it was a deep sacrifice.

“What? You’re staring at my face,” said Kei.

“Does that bother you?” I asked.

“No, it doesn’t. It’s just… Well, it makes me want to kiss you again. A lot,” replied Kei.

The day before winter vacation was over, Kei and I spent the entire day together in my room, from morning until night, taking it easy. If a young man and young woman who are intimate with one another spend time together in the same space, well, what happens goes without saying. Kei squeezed more tightly, wrapping herself around my right arm and pulling me in close.

We remained closely nuzzled together all the way up until we had arrived at our classroom, except for when we had arrived at the school gate and took off our shoes to put on our school slippers. The classroom was already bustling, and it looked like nearly half of the students had already arrived.

“Morning, everybody!” exclaimed Kei.

It was the beginning of the third semester. Kei waved to her friends in class. She slowly released me from her grip as she pulled away before saying, “See you later!” with a wink. After Kei had parted from me with such a pronounced display of affection, Kei headed to her seat in the middle of the classroom and set down her bag, which held an assortment of things. Since our class began using tablets, the amount of supplies we needed to bring had decreased. Even so, our bags were indispensable.

“Ugh, seriously, dude, don’t go showin’ up to school in a way that makes me embarrassed to even look atcha, Ayanokouji,” said Sudou, conveying his discomfort. Looks like he’d shown up before me.

“I mean, like, rockin’ up together arm-in-arm and junk, that’s like the peak trashy behavior, ain’t it? Ugh, goddammit, I am jealous,” huffed Sudou.

Apparently he had some envy mixed in with his discomfort.

“Just for the record, it’s not like I wanted it,” I replied.

“Nah dude, I know you didn’t. I mean, hell, if you did, I would’ve been floored. Seriously, like, absolutely weirded out, for real,” said Sudou.

Sudou repeatedly muttered quietly under his breath, then brought his face closer to mine.

“Anyway, you two flirting and all is fine or whatever I guess, but did you see that email ’bout those first-year students gettin’ handed over to the guidance counselor over winter vacation? Knowing you, I’m sure there’s nothin’ to worry about, but just in case, be careful, yeah?” said Sudou.

“Now that you mention it, there was an email like that, wasn’t there?” I replied.

Near the end of winter vacation, we received an email from the school stating that two first-year students had been punished. Their identities were kept anonymous, so we didn’t know who exactly it was, but the email stated that two students, a male and a female, had been caught by a third party engaged in an illicit sexual act outside. Acts for the purpose of sexual stimulation were generally forbidden, so naturally such things would be subject to punishment.

“They could’ve just done it in their room and that would’ve been fine. Anyway, yer my senpai in this kinda thing, so what would you have even done in their situation?” asked Sudou.

“What would I have done? What do you mean?” I asked.

“…Y’know dude, if, like, you wanted to do, um, ‘stuff’ outside, and, like…yeah, *stuff*, y’know?” said Sudou.

If he was so embarrassed, he shouldn’t even be asking about it, but I kept that thought to myself.

“I’d have to go with what the email said. There are eyes and surveillance cameras everywhere around campus. If you do something strange, there is a significant risk that you’ll get caught. Given that, I would choose not to let my instincts get the better of me,” I replied.

“Y-yeah. I dunno, dude, I feel like that’s an answer that only you could give… It’s a little off-puttin’.”

I’d apparently shaken Sudou, but for some unrelated reason.

“…Sigh.”

Not that it seemed like an especially intentional sigh on his part, but I heard Sudou let out a fairly heavy sigh. It sounded like

he'd let it out unconsciously, but Sudou seemed to have noticed once he did it, and hurriedly apologized to me.

"That wasn't about you just now or anything, my dude. Sorry if it came off like that," said Sudou.

"I don't mind. What's wrong?" I asked.

I remembered plenty of times when Sudou had raised his voice in front of people, but he wasn't the sort of student who sighed often. This change wasn't something I could casually brush off.

"I've just been kinda exhausted lately," he said. "I thought I was managin' to balance my studies and sports, but it's like it's gettin' tougher and tougher... I guess..."

Sudou tried to talk his way out of it, perhaps because he felt like it was a mistake to share his feelings. I figured that any further words of concern on my part would likely backfire, so I decided I'd just give him a few words of advice instead.

"Even if you try to cram more knowledge into your head, if you rush it, it just makes it easier for that knowledge to spill back out. Slow and steady wins the race, as they say," I replied.

"...Yeah. Anyway, let's do our best this semester," said Sudou, answering me with a smile. He'd cheered himself up in time to head back to his seat.

Immediately afterward, Satou, who had just entered the classroom, walked past me while greeting our fellow classmates. Just as she passed by, she whispered, "You two were awfully hot and heavy this morning," in a quiet murmur, adding, "Thanks for the show! It gives me life!" before joining up with a group of girls.

I guess she'd been behind us on the walk to school.

2.1

EVEN AFTER WINTER VACATION, nothing had fundamentally changed for the students or the teachers alike. Once Chabashira-sensei came into the classroom, she offered a quick new year's greeting and then put her hands on the podium.

"The third semester begins today. This is a time of year that seems to go by in a flash. Just like they say, January walks,

February runs, and March is already gone. Please be sure to keep your mind focused so that you don't end up going on autopilot," said Chabashira-sensei.

No one pointed it out, but the hair at the back of Chabashira-sensei's head was rather amusing—it looked like she had a case of bedhead. Perhaps she had woken up late this morning and had been in too much of a hurry to notice. So even though she was telling her students to keep focused, her hair undermined her message a bit.

Upon announcing the end of morning homeroom, Chabashira-sensei was about to leave the classroom, but then stopped near the doorway.

"I forgot one announcement," she said while turning around to address the students once again. "We're planning to hold your first student-teacher meetings next month. While we will discuss things like your activities and performance at school thus far, we will mainly focus on discussing matters related to your academic career path and future employment. Naturally, we have already conducted interview surveys with your legal guardians as well."

While some families might leave the matter of their child's future course solely to that individual student's decision, in many cases the parents' opinions will be taken into consideration as well. That was proof that the school was doing things properly, even when the students weren't there.

"Huh, wow. Even this school has something like that. I thought for sure it wouldn't."

To no one's surprise, Ike had been the first to say something.

"Although high school is not classified as compulsory education, it's not as though we can simply let students decide their futures while completely ignoring their legal guardians' opinions. Naturally, at some point, we will hold student-teacher conferences with a legal guardian present as well," replied Chabashira-sensei.

A meeting between student, teacher, and parent or guardian. Did that mean there was a possibility that man would leave the White Room and come here once again? No, he said that we would never meet in this school again, but will he really stick to that?

Though I was concerned about that issue, the first thing to deal with was the student-teacher meeting in February. Even so, since there was nothing I could do about the future regardless of my wishes, one could say that it didn't matter. I was extremely grateful that Chabashira-sensei understood my situation, even if it was only a little. My meeting with her would likely only be a formality, as there was no need for any in-depth discussion or anything.

As for my classmates, the student-teacher meetings and ones where the students would also attend would be valuable for their futures. Would they go straight ahead and pursue their own path with single-minded focus, or would they take a detour and look for another way? Parents and teachers should be able to provide guidance in areas that you couldn't see on your own.

"If you have any concerns, you can come and talk to me directly," Chabashira-sensei added.

Now that she had finished talking, Chabashira-sensei put her hand on the door. In that brief moment, as she was closing the door behind her, she raised her hand to the back of her head with her other hand. I guess she'd noticed her own bedhead.

2.2

AFTER CHABASHIRA-SENSEI had left the classroom, the class immediately filled with chatter about the student-teacher conferences and their futures.

"I guess we need to start thinking about what we're going to do soon," said one girl.

"We need to consider one pathway in which we manage to graduate from Class A and another where we don't, right? Hey, Hirata-kun, what are you planning to do?" asked another girl.

The girls gathered around Yousuke, who was enshrined as the center of the class bringing the conversation to him.

"I'm considering going to college even if I don't get the benefits of Class A. My parents have told me from early on that they want that for me, too," said Yousuke.

I didn’t intend to eavesdrop on their conversation, but the sound reached my ears anyway, so it was inevitable that I heard. It sounded as though Yousuke had no intention of finding a job at this current stage and instead was keeping his eye on college as the finish line. Considering his attitude toward his studies and his actual academic ability, that was a natural progression.

Regardless of whether you had the privileges that came from Class A or not, if you didn’t have the ability to back it up, you wouldn’t be able to make the most of those privileges anyway. However, that was true for everything.

“Oh, okay. Huh, I thought for sure you were going to be a soccer player or something,” replied one of the girls.

“Ha ha, well, that’d be a bit of a stretch for me, I think. Hypothetically, even if you used the privileges of Class A to force your way into going pro, it’d be obvious. You’d be let go immediately if your abilities aren’t up to snuff. I am planning to continue playing soccer even after I get to college, but I guess it’s nothing more than a hobby for me,” said Yousuke.

You could say that employment in a sports-related field was still an extremely high hurdle to clear, even after graduating. The only instances when someone should go into sports even if it meant they’d have to use the privileges of Class A would be things like if they had the ability, but they were stuck in obscurity and hadn’t been discovered for some reason, or maybe if they had some other problem that they were dealing with that prevented them from getting in the normal way. So then what was the right way to make effective use of the benefit from graduating from Class A? Keisei, who’d established himself as a brilliant student among those in our class, opened his mouth to speak.

“You should absolutely use Class A’s perks to get a job at a big company. If you can do the work just like any other ordinary person, you won’t get laid off that easily unless your abilities are clearly subpar. Wouldn’t you want to be a winner just by making the wisest use of those privileges?” said Keisei.

Our classmates nodded in apparent admiration of Keisei’s reasonable comments. When a company hires someone, that company takes on a great responsibility. It would be unreasonable for a company to dismiss an employee simply for personal reasons unless that employee failed in some major way. ANHS

was not a newly established school or anything, and it was famous as a government-backed institution. Any student who has graduated from Class A thus far has been able to find employment. Therefore, if you choose to go to a major company, you could feel secure in your employment and work for a long time.

"If we're considering efficiency alone, then I think your choice might be the correct one, Yukimura-kun. However, I also think that it's important to aim for the career path that you actually want to pursue," replied Yousuke.

That was also one correct answer. You only live once, and we didn't have to decide to live our lives solely for money or landing a stable job. Would you go for a place of employment that matched your ideal vision or a place of employment that matched your reality? Eventually, the students here now would stand at that crossroad. There were upsides and downsides regardless of the choice they'd make.

There was only one future waiting for me after I graduated, but even so, it would be a long, long time before I knew whether it was the right decision or the wrong one. In the end, would I be able to look back and believe I had chosen the correct path? I'd have to live a whole life to learn the answer.

2.3

IT WAS TIME FOR OUR first lunch of the new year. Kei seemed to have already gotten together with a group of girls, including Satou, and headed over to the cafeteria with them. You couldn't just focus on your significant other, you had to treasure your friends. When I went out into the hallway and casually watched Kei leave from behind, I saw that she and her friends were walking together neatly in a horizontal line.

"Why do girls always have to line up like that, even if they're in a group of four or five?" I wondered aloud, posing my question to Horikita as she stood behind me.

"Hey, don't ask me. I have no idea why they do it. Lining up like that is such a nuisance," said Horikita.

Apparently, she didn't know either.

“More importantly, do you have eyes in the back of your head or something? I wonder how you noticed I was here. How mysterious,” said Horikita.

“Don’t you think it’s better to let mysterious things remain a mystery?” I replied.

“So you’re not gonna tell me,” said Horikita.

“If you can come up with a reason why girls always line up like that, I’ll answer your question,” I replied.

“It’s kinda mean to ask Horikita something like that, you know. She doesn’t have enough friends to walk like that,” said Kushida-san, showing up after Horikita.

“It’s because there’s a caste system. Sometimes it’s necessary to do that to keep the group whole, even if it means blocking the hall,” explained Kushida.

“I see. So that means people naturally avoid getting into a formation where they’re following someone else?” I asked.

“Perhaps. It’s not as though everyone actually talks about it out loud, but I think that it’s something people sense,” said Kushida.

If so, then you could say that was a mechanism derived from a common group psychology women shared.

“Honestly, what a ridiculous reason. People should be aware of their surroundings when they walk,” sneered Horikita.

“Yes, yes. That’s exactly what someone with no friends would say,” replied Kushida.

“Are you trying to pick a fight with me?” asked Horikita.

“Did you seriously think that I wasn’t? Oh, you make me laugh.”

Sparks flew between the two of them as they glared at each other.

“Hey, cool it, guys. Did you want something from me?” I asked.

“Yes, I do. Ayanokouji-kun, if you wouldn’t mind, would you be so kind as to allow me to treat you to lunch?” asked Horikita.

Horikita treating me to a meal? Even digging deep into my memories, I couldn’t find any good associations with that

scenario.

“When you say something like that, it’s typically not a good thing. I’m talking from experience,” I replied.

“Rude! I won’t ask you for money and I won’t be asking you for advice on anything strange, either. Would you feel safer if I told you that?” said Horikita.

“Well… I suppose,” I replied.

I felt like she’d get angry if I said that I wouldn’t feel safe at all, so I just nodded obediently.

“You sure thought about that for an extremely long time,” said Kushida.

“I really don’t like the fact he did that, but whatever. Are you ready as well, Kushida-san?” asked Horikita.

“Yes, I’m ready,” she replied.

Kushida nonchalantly switched from battle mode to angel mode.

“I see, you invited Kushida, too. That’s also really unusual,” I remarked.

Could it be that Horikita invited me along because she didn’t want to have lunch alone with Kushida? No, there was no need for Horikita to have set up a meeting in this way if she hated being with Kushida so much. There was most definitely some underlying reason these two had teamed up and invited me. I wondered what in the world they were thinking. Kei wasn’t with me today, so I supposed there wasn’t any harm in accompanying them.

“So? Are we headed to the cafeteria?” I asked.

“No, that wouldn’t be the best choice…yeah. Somewhere quiet and not too crowded would be good, I think,” answered Horikita.

After she said that, I noticed that Kushida, walking along next to me, was empty-handed. Did that mean we were going to stop at the convenience store or a food stall along the way and pick up lunch? I figured the answer would come soon, and so I got up from my seat and the three of us stepped out into the hallway. Naturally, we didn’t line up side-by-side in the hall. Horikita took the lead, while Kushida and I lagged a little behind.

“Hey, Horikita-san? I just wanted to double-check with you, but are we really planning to eat lunch?” asked Kushida.

“That’s what I had said we would do, didn’t I? We’ll be eating,” said Horikita.

Kushida sighed. “Well, in that case, could you let me stop by the convenience store first? I’d like to buy some stomach medicine,” said Kushida.

“Knock it off. I understand that you’re feeling anxious, but that would be an unnecessary purchase,” snapped Horikita.

Huh. I guess she had tummy troubles.

“Hold on a minute? What’s this about stomach medicine? What in the world are we going to be eating?” I asked sharply.

The fact that Kushida wanted to procure an item that was normally completely unnecessary for lunch meant that something was clearly off. She answered me immediately, without even turning back.

“Ibuki-san’s homemade lunch,” said Horikita.

“...Ibuki’s? Homemade?” I repeated.

For an instant, my brain froze, and then I forced myself to calmly assess the situation.

“She’s making lunch today for me, Kushida-san, and you, Ayanokouji-kun. So we’re going to divide her lunch neatly into three equal portions and eat it all. Didn’t I tell you?” said Horikita.

“You had no intention of telling me, did you?” I replied.

If I had heard that explanation first, then I would have run away as quick as a hare. Besides, there was no way she made it for me, anyway. This was a shock.

“If I remember correctly, Ibuki isn’t known for being a good cook though, right?” I asked.

I deliberately avoided saying that she was awful while suppressing my fear by using more roundabout language as I asked that question.

“Up until now she hasn’t really cooked much. Because of that, the food she makes is somewhat lacking in nutrition. I’m sure what happened recently is still fresh in your mind, right?” asked Horikita.

We had been on winter vacation until recently, but just after the start of the new year, I had run into the three of them: Horikita, Kushida, and Ibuki. I did indeed recall hearing them talk about this.

“I’ve been inviting her to come to my room to have meals that I’ve cooked. Poor nutrition can have negative effects on your health, you know. She’s never missed an invitation to have a meal, despite her apparent discontent, because she could save money on food costs,” explained Horikita.

“It’s not cute that she complains about being fed, is it?” added Kushida.

I supposed that wouldn’t be cute, no.

“You seem to be well informed about the situation despite hating Horikita and Ibuki,” I remarked.

“It’s just because I end up going there too. I expected they’d start a fight or something,” said Kushida.

Well, that was like Kushida, I supposed. Expecting something very unpleasant.

“Thanks to that, I’m stuck having to make servings for three people, including me,” said Horikita.

Even though she was complaining, Horikita didn’t seem that bothered by it. She must have been used to it.

“But how does that tie into us eating Ibuki’s homemade lunch?” I asked.

“It’s because the two of them engaged in a verbal tit-for-tat. When Horikita-san asserted her superiority and told Ibuki-san that she should at least learn to cook, Ibuki-san bragged that she could easily cook something if she wanted to. Then Horikita-san said, ‘Okay, in that case, make something.’ Ibuki-san responded, ‘I will! Get your taste buds ready!’ Then Horikita-san said, ‘If you can’t do it, just go die.’ Then Ibuki-san said, ‘If I *can* do it, then I’ll kill you instead!’ Which brings us to today,” said Kushida.

I was impressed by how straightforward the explanation was. However, those last two statements that Kushida quoted must have been a lie—at least, I hope it was.

“Okay then, I understand the situation completely now. Anyway, I’m off to the cafeteria, so I’ll see you later,” I announced.

Once we reached a fork in the road, I turned on my heel and tried to escape in the other direction, but Kushida grabbed my arm without warning.

“Isn’t this great? You get to eat homemade cooking by someone who I guess counts as a girl,” said Kushida.

“You tricked me,” I replied, venting my resentment at Horikita as she walked on calmly ahead.

“You’re making me sound like a villain. I simply wanted to share Ibuki-san’s cooking with as many people as possible. But it would’ve been odd to have involved people who aren’t close to her though, wouldn’t it? Besides, it’s too early to judge that her cooking isn’t delicious,” said Horikita.

The flow of the conversation did not give me the impression that this was something to look forward to. I couldn’t escape, so it looked like I had no other choice but to give up and follow.

“But, wait… Couldn’t you have run away without getting wrapped up in this, Kushida?” I asked.

I could understand why she might barge into Horikita’s room for a home-cooked meal. No matter how much she wanted to see Horikita and Ibuki face off, that was a substantial risk for her to take. You never knew what kind of tragedy might await.

“Well, yes, you’re right. But I have my reasons,” said Kushida.

“It’s because you’re a sore loser, Kushida-san. You forced yourself to come because Ibuki-san made some cheap shots about you being a coward if you ran away, right?” said Horikita.

“…I just want to see Ibuki fail and apologize,” said Kushida.

The fact Kushida had left out the honorific “-san” in referring to her then sounded significant. That sign of intimacy aside, did Ibuki have the disposition to apologize, even if she failed? Maybe it was precisely because Kushida had a nasty personality herself that she thought she could see Ibuki apologize, even if the probability was low.

“It seems like she hasn’t arrived yet. Well, it’s still a few minutes until we’re supposed to meet, I suppose, but…,” said Horikita.

We stopped just before the roofed corridor connecting the school building outside, which apparently was our meeting place.

She had misled me with the whole “quiet place” thing from earlier. It looked like she had intended to involve me from the beginning.

“Hey, aren’t our classrooms close enough so that we wouldn’t have to meet up here?” I asked.

“It’s a pointless meeting place, for sure. I had invited Ibuki-san to meet us normally, but she refused, saying she didn’t want to walk with me,” said Horikita.

If Ibuki hated Horikita (and Kushida too, probably) that much, then she should have just refused the challenge from the start. This was a good example of how being too competitive could lead to big problems.

“At any rate, it’s obvious that she’s going to fail and come here with an awful-tasting lunch,” remarked Kushida.

“I don’t want to make assumptions before seeing the results, but yes, I’m absolutely certain she will fail,” said Horikita.

“Yeah… So does this mean I’m going to be forced to eat something inedible?” I asked.

“Oh my *god*, shut up! Listen to you, going on and on, ‘fail’ this and ‘inedible’ that!”

Just as the mood grew sour, Ibuki showed up, barking at us. In her hands was a bomb… I mean lunch. She had lunch in her hands. I didn’t want her to have that in her hands. I wanted her to shout out something caustic like “I forgot, so it’s off!” or something. I would’ve cheered her on.

“Hold on, why is Ayanokouji here? I didn’t invite him,” said Ibuki.

“Come now, it’s fine, isn’t it? Besides, having more judges means you’ll get a more objective answer about your skills. Now that we’re all here, let’s head off. I’m sure you don’t want people thinking that we’re friends, do you?” said Horikita.

“Obviously not!” snapped Ibuki.

With that, we went outside through the hallway. It was still early January, so it was moderately cold outside, making the usually popular area for eating lunch a quiet spot. Ibuki held up what appeared to be a bento box wrapped in a simple, plain wrapping cloth (which I had seen before at the discount shop). She slammed it onto the bench.

“I’m going to make you regret calling me a failure over and over. Hurry up and eat,” snapped Ibuki.

“You certainly sound confident. Perhaps a miracle occurred, and you actually made something good?” said Kushida.

Ibuki was indeed brimming with confidence. It was far, far better than for her to have no confidence at all, I suppose, but could I really expect anything from this?

“She’s obviously the overconfident type, so I wouldn’t count on her attitude at all,” said Horikita.

Horikita knew that sort of thing very well. She turned her gaze away from Ibuki to her bento box. The faint hopes Kushida and I held crumbled.

“Hmph. I wouldn’t have come here if I didn’t stand a chance of winning,” countered Ibuki.

“You have certainly conveyed your confidence to me. Even so, you shouldn’t handle the food so roughly. Supposing even if, hypothetically, your cooking was good, that would disqualify you as a cook,” said Horikita.

“Shut up. All right already, just get to eating it. And then apologize to me, HoriKushi! And you too, Ayanokouji, while we’re at it!” shouted Ibuki.

“Do not combine me with Kushida-san. Besides, what method of abbreviation even is that?” replied Horikita.

She referred to me like I was an afterthought, but that didn’t particularly bother me. Actually...

“The three of you have really gotten close, huh?” I remarked.

That’s all I could think of while witnessing this disaster.

“We are not friends in the slightest. How did you even arrive at that misconception, Ayanokouji-kun?” asked Horikita.

“That’s right. Don’t make bizarre assumptions,” added Kushida.

“If you ever say that again, I’ll kick your ass!” shouted Ibuki.

It was obvious one of them was on a different level of energy. Anyway, they did seem to be getting along well, and I felt like a third wheel.

“So...I guess I should get going now?” I asked.

I thought it would be wrong of me to get in their way, so I had meant those words from the heart, but—

“Don’t leave!” shouted Ibuki.

“Don’t run away,” added Kushida.

“That’s cowardly, Ayanokouji-kun,” said Horikita.

The three of them shouted their thoughts at me. I didn’t really understand it, but it seemed like I wasn’t going to be able to escape, so I decided to take a seat. Well, that was all right. After listening to the conversation, my curiosity was piqued. Ibuki’s homemade cooking likely wasn’t even to the level of a beginner, no matter how much thought you put into it. Even so, she had come up with something after trial and error to make Horikita and Kushida say, “Okay Ibuki, you win.”

Probably.

Wrapped up in anticipation, I started my assessment with the presentation, which was one of the essential elements of a dish. Out of the wrapping cloth appeared another plain item, the bento box (which I had also seen at the discount shop).

“Well, let’s open it,” announced Horikita.

Ibuki, reclined in a cocky posture, arms folded, neither anxious nor worried. The lid of the box was gently removed. And what appeared underneath was…

The first thing that caught my eye was the rice. It wasn’t white rice, but fried rice. There were a variety of colors too. She must have used some vegetables and meat. It was just that, as ingredients in fried rice, the proportion of veggies and meat was rather large. Well, that was one issue. Aside from that, there were mini tomatoes, fried eggs, gratin, and nimono, as well as fried chicken and mini hamburger steaks. There wasn’t that much of each individual item, but there was a wide variety—seven elements I could count. The deciding factor was the four slices of green plastic dividers included in the bento. At the very least, it qualified as a bento.

“Are these all homemade?” I asked.

“Of course,” answered Ibuki.

Judging from the fact that she answered immediately and without hesitation, it seemed to be true, but I suddenly wondered

about the nimono.

“I’ll give you thirty points for presentation at least, as a bonus,” said Horikita.

“Food isn’t about looks! It’s about taste! Taste!” shouted Ibuki.

“Relax, it’s almost a compliment. I was expecting something closer to zero points,” said Horikita bluntly.

Horikita was rather brilliant in shooting down Ibuki, going as far as telling her thirty points was more than enough. Horikita had taken out disposable chopsticks she’d prepared for the occasion, and after taking her share of the food, she gave Kushida her portion and then gave me mine.

“Well then, let’s get to taste-testing,” said Horikita.

“Wow, this is the least exciting taste-test ever. This will be a lovely memory,” said Kushida in a monotone voice.

Kushida separated her chopsticks but didn’t appear to be interested in going first, and waited for Horikita to start eating. Horikita picked up a light chunk of fried rice with her chopsticks and brought it to her mouth. Then she grabbed a piece of gratin and gave it a try as well.

After Horikita finished eating those in silence, Kushida asked, “How is it?”

“Not yet. I don’t want my opinion to affect anyone else’s. It’s your turn next,” said Horikita.

“Tch.”

Kushida just clicked her tongue at that. It was a sight that would’ve likely caused a student who still carried delusions about Kushida to faint were they to witness it. Perhaps if one of those students were listening nearby, they wouldn’t think that it was intentional.

“Can I just have a mini tomato?” asked Kushida.

“Take this seriously,” snapped Horikita.

“Tch. You’re so nitpicky,” huffed Kushida.

Kushida clicked her tongue again, louder this time. Kushida, acting as though she had no choice in the matter, chose to sample the nimono and mini hamburger steak.

“Ah… I see. All right, your turn, Ayanokouji-kun,” said Kushida.

Kushida, who had a look on her face like she had come to an understanding, crudely passed the baton over to me. What to do? There were seven different items included in the bento, including the mini tomatoes. Since two out of the three of us had eaten four different items, I figured it would be best if I ate the two remaining items: the fried egg and the fried chicken. So, was this life and death? Or was it death and death?

“Okay, I guess I’ll start with the fried egg,” I announced.

This was a staple bento item. It took skill to master, but it was easy to make something edible. I popped it into my mouth, but I was distracted by my fear of eggshells. However, the fried egg wasn’t crunchy or gritty at all, and it went down my throat without difficulty. Riding my momentum, I moved on to the fried chicken. It was only when I picked it up with my chopsticks that I realized it was like a croquette rolled into bite-sized pieces.

“…”

I cautiously placed it on my tongue. When I bit into it, the contents spilled out from the batter. It was easy to tell that it was a croquette, and it tasted like one. However, what I found more strikingly noticeable was the gooey mouthfeel. The filling hadn’t lost its moisture at all, and Ibuki hadn’t fried it nearly enough. The feel of it on my tongue was bad, and it left an awful aftertaste. After I had finished eating it, I quietly put down my chopsticks and briefly closed my eyes.

…Hm, yes, I see.

If you just chew and swallow, the answers will come to you naturally.

“Now that the three of us have finished eating, I’ll give you my honest opinion. It’s not good,” said Horikita.

“What?!” blurted Ibuki.

“It’s not inedible, and visually, it’s not like it’s a worst-case scenario worth zero points. I can see that it was made by a beginner who tried her best. That aside, it’s very salty and the seasoning is haphazard,” said Horikita.

As Horikita had said in her analysis, the reason the flavors were intense was probably because Ibuki flavored things in the

amounts based on her own tastes.

“While it certainly is true that you can eat the skin of the carrot, it’s not palatable to leave it on. The sizing of your cuts is sporadic. You aren’t really hiding the fact you got lazy,” added Horikita.

Although Horikita had only seen and eaten part of one of Ibuki’s lunches, she was able to guess what kind of thought process Ibuki had put into making it, delivering her analysis bluntly. It was evident Horikita had hit the nail on the head when you saw the look of shame on Ibuki’s face.

“I don’t want to eat any more of this. What a waste of food,” said Kushida.

Kushida gestured like she was about to throw up. Her attitude, in combination with Horikita’s, made Ibuki’s shoulders shake in frustration.

“Seriously, this is all you could do after all that bragging about how you could beat Horikita in cooking? Hell, if anything, you could’ve even given money or something to a real cook and had them make something for you instead,” added Kushida.

It was a little sad that she was being criticized so harshly, but it couldn’t be helped. That’s just how bad the quality of her lunch was.

“You guys aren’t judging fairly!” shouted Ibuki.

“If you think so, then you eat it. I bet you didn’t even properly taste-test it yourself, did you?” countered Horikita.

“Taste-test? No, I didn’t, but…I mean, it looks normal and all, and it’s edible, right?” said Ibuki.

“I didn’t say anything about it being inedible. I’m just saying it doesn’t taste good. Just eat it already,” snapped Horikita.

The lunch that Ibuki had made herself was now being forced upon her. Though irritated, Ibuki took it in her hands.

“…Y-yeah, it’s not g—I mean, it’s tasty…! Oh wow, it’s amazing!” shouted Ibuki.

“Don’t force yourself to lie,” snapped Horikita. Ibuki howled as Horikita smacked her on the head.

“Why does it taste so bad?! It just tastes like disappointment! And it’s salty as hell!” shouted Ibuki.

“I have already explained everything to you. You can’t make food based solely on what you think feels right,” explained Horikita.

“Well, whatever! It’s just that I thought that all that stuff about one tablespoon this, two teaspoons that was a pain in the butt and that it wouldn’t matter if I winged things!” snapped Ibuki.

That was a huge problem. The side dishes packed into her bento box had a striking difference between them. They swung wildly between two different degrees of seasoning: bland or overly seasoned or salty.

“If I had to give your dish a score, I would give it twenty points,” said Horikita.

“…Out of twenty?” asked Ibuki.

“Out of a hundred,” stated Horikita.

“Huh? Did someone pay off the judges?!” exclaimed Ibuki.

“I was being generous. I don’t want to eat this,” said Horikita.

“That’s true, she was. If it were me, I would’ve probably given you two points,” said Kushida.

Ibuki stamped her feet in frustration as she protested the harsh ruling.

“I’m guessing you probably feel the same way, Ayanokouji-kun?” asked Kushida.

“No. It’s not quite inedible; I would’ve given it a higher score,” I replied.

“See?! You see?!” exclaimed Ibuki.

Ibuki hopped up and down only slightly, perhaps in joy at having backup.

“Are you insane? This is obviously a bad lunch. It’s poorly made, at best,” snapped Horikita.

“Oh yes, without a doubt,” I replied.

HoriKushi aligned with nary a moment’s pause, but I wanted to add a different perspective.

“But you do agree that it wasn’t though her lunch was inedible. Right?” I added.

“Well… Yes, you’re right. But I don’t *want* to eat it,” said Horikita.

“Sure, yes, in an age where we have ample access to food and can eat what we like until we’re satisfied, I can’t imagine anyone would *want* to eat this. But what if you were left on an uninhabited island? If there was nothing to eat except for this, you would be overjoyed to have it, wouldn’t you? So, with that in mind, my score would be—”

“There’s no need for that. Thank you for providing that analogy, which was simple and weird at the same time. At any rate, all I understand is that you didn’t compliment the food at all,” said Horikita.

“...Okay,” I replied.

I felt somewhat unwell and like I had slight indigestion. My score hung in the back of my throat.

“Averaging our scores, you get eleven points. Too bad, Ibuki-san,” said Kushida.

If you weren’t going to include my evaluation in the end, then you didn’t have to call me here in the first place... I thought.

While it was already over and done with, I couldn’t help but feel a sense of unbearable vexation.

“Grr...” grumbled Ibuki.

Ibuki had no other choice but to accept the situation. This was the result of her trying to do something beyond her ability when she hadn’t been capable of cooking in the first place.

“You know, it’s not as though I wouldn’t make time for you if you say that you’re going to try making it over again later,” said Horikita.

“I am *not* making it over again!” Ibuki sounded disgruntled, perhaps because she had been criticized so much that it’d broken her spirit.

“There’s nothing wrong with you giving up so quickly. As you are right now, you aren’t meant for cooking,” said Horikita.

Though Ibuki was being criticized once more, she must have already given up caring. She snorted and crossed her arms.

“Whatever, it was stupid to even try. You two are just wasting your time,” huffed Ibuki.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” spat Horikita.

“I mean you don’t even really have to cook; you can just buy lunch at the convenience store or the supermarket. It saves time and you don’t have to deal with leftover ingredients either. Plus, it tastes good. Obviously!” countered Ibuki.

Well… That was certainly the function of ready-made bento boxes, sure, but…

“That’s unacceptable. You need to consider proper nutrition when having meals. How many times are you planning to make me repeat what I’ve already explained? This is why you aren’t growing,” shouted Horikita.

“A ha ha ha ha, yes, she’s right. Your mind certainly hasn’t matured either, but your growth is also stunted,” added Kushida.

“Hey, what the hell, Kushida?! Where are you looking when you say that?!” snapped Ibuki.

“Where do you think?” asked Kushida.

“I’ll kick your ass right now! I’ll kick you to the ground and make you get down on your knees and beg for forgiveness!” shouted Ibuki.

“Yes, yes, all right. Stop snapping at people like that. That irritability of yours is also proof that you aren’t getting enough nutrition. Come to my room again today at seven,” ordered Horikita.

“Fine, I will!” shouted Ibuki.

So, she’s going, huh? I had thought she would’ve refused, but Ibuki agreed to it, even though she still looked irritated. She was going to eat a delicious meal high in nutrition while saving money on food. There was the downside of her having to listen to Horikita’s lecturing, but Ibuki probably figured it’d be a shame to waste that opportunity over that inconvenience.

“See ya later!” shouted Ibuki.

Almost spitting out those parting words, Ibuki half jogged away. She moved with such intensity that if she were in an apartment building right now, the people downstairs would’ve been furious.

“Oh for the love of… She didn’t even pack up the bento box she brought with her,” sighed Horikita.

Horikita picked up the messy, scattered lunch while outwardly acting like a mother grumbling about her daughter's inadequacies. She was probably going to wash the containers after taking them back to her dorm room. Kushida, who had been sitting beside her, stood up while averting her eyes.

"Well then, I'll pay you a visit tonight at seven as well," announced Kushida.

"...I don't remember inviting you," replied Horikita.

"Come now, it's all right, isn't it? Personally, I would like to hold onto as many Private Points as possible. Besides, the meals we eat when you're scraping together funds aren't bad at all, Horikita-san. I'll be eating well," said Kushida.

It sounded as though Kushida found deliciousness in a completely different place than other people did.

"Don't you have plenty of Private Points saved up, though?" asked Horikita.

"Not at all. I was supposed to be getting money from a certain someone, but those plans changed rather unexpectedly," replied Kushida.

Kushida smiled warmly when she said that, but I felt her cold eyes on me. Then she quickly went back to her usual angelic aura and left, heading toward the cafeteria.

"Well then, I suppose we're done here. Thanks," said Horikita.

"Yeah, thank—hey, wait, hold on a second," I replied forcefully. It stopped Horikita in her tracks as she was about to quickly pick up the bento box and walk off.

"What?" asked Horikita.

"I don't remember being treated to lunch. All I did was taste-test a lunch that didn't taste good," I answered.

"In that case, why not go ahead and eat all of this not-delicious lunch then?" asked Horikita. "There's plenty left," she added, offering the bento box to me.

I didn't hesitate to forcefully push it back at her.

"I'm kidding. Come on, let's go to the cafeteria. I'll treat you to whatever you like," said Horikita. Seemed like her conscience got the better of her.

“Anyway, Ibuki and Kushida, huh? It can’t be cheap treating the two of them to meals,” I remarked.

“Yeah. My food expenses have almost doubled. Kushida-san comes even though I don’t invite her,” said Horikita.

“Maybe that’s because you and Ibuki serve as a good way for Kushida to vent her frustrations and let off some steam?” I offered.

If Kushida really hated Horikita, she wouldn’t try to spend time with her, even if it were just for dinner.

“I have to wonder. It seems like she likes to see me suffer. I think she probably just wants to see the hardship and frustration on my face, and on Ibuki-san’s too, so she can’t help but want to come,” said Horikita.

That made sense. If she spent time together with Horikita, then that meant she would get the chance to see a weaker side of her.

“It’s a little hard for me to imagine, but I’m sure that when the three of you get together, it can’t all be bad?” I asked.

“Not at all. This is not the kind of group of girls that you would normally imagine. There’s not even a single laugh. Actually, if anything, it’s tense the entire time. Didn’t you see us earlier?” asked Horikita.

She had a point. It certainly wasn’t what you would call a fun gathering, even if you were being charitable. Any time Kushida smirked was just out of habit. Even so, compared to the times she spent together with most other people, she smiled about half as often or less than normal when she was with Horikita and Kushida. Still, I didn’t get the feeling that she felt glum or stifled with them. Kushida seemed strangely at home with those two.

“Let’s be going. We’ll just be wasting time if we keep on talking about those two forever,” said Horikita.

“Okay, let’s go,” I replied.

Horikita and I started walking. I thought back on this little event. The suffering I had put my tongue and stomach through aside, today’s gathering had been a worthwhile one. Horikita and Kushida, and then Ibuki, a girl from a different class. The newly formed relationship between the three of them, though warped, was surprisingly strong. If I were to describe their relationship as

friendship, I'm sure that all three of them would vocally deny it, but the fact I could expect them to all respond that way could also be interpreted as a sign of deep feelings. However...

"What?" asked Horikita.

Perhaps Horikita didn't like the way that I was looking at her as we walked together, because she narrowed her eyes at me intensely.

"I was just thinking about what kind of expensive meal I could get you to buy for me," I answered.

"Just get what you want," said Horikita.

"I feel like I want to eat the most expensive thing," I answered.

"Oh, honestly... Whatever," snapped Horikita.

Despite being owed for my pain and suffering, I was forced to decide on which of the normal lunch combos I wanted to eat instead for some reason.

2.4

KEI HAD COME OVER to hang out in the evening for a while, and then went back to her room. It was now after nine o'clock at night and I was getting ready for tomorrow. Kei had left the TV on, and some kind of variety program was playing. I stopped what I was doing and cast a glance at the TV. A man who looked to be in his forties was hosting the show and was going up to comedians and making them laugh. The scene changed, and he was now taking a stroll through the city, perhaps shot on location.

After watching for a while, there was a wipe effect transition. The moderator repeated the same routine from earlier at the studio, going up to people and getting their reactions. The same thing endlessly, over and over. Five paintings were shown, eliciting surprise and laughter as people tried to figure out which one was the real thing.

"The fourth one," I remarked.

After muttering the answer to myself nonchalantly, I aimed the remote at the TV and turned it off. In an instant, the noisy room fell quiet once again. Kei liked TV and would often turn it on

right away when it was just the two of us alone. While I wasn't strongly against TV or anything, I had learned that, after trying to learn from television, I didn't like variety shows very much.

I walked over to the drawer and took out a sketchbook that was in the second drawer, as well as a set of colored pencils. I had bought this sketchbook with my Private Points not too long after I had been admitted to this school, but I hadn't ever gotten around to using it. I remember seeing Kei find the sketchbook in my drawer and looking inside, and she had a puzzled look on her face because the book was completely blank.

I laid the sketchbook open on my desk and opened the silver case containing the colored pencils. Then, I reached for the still brand-new colored pencils, and—

My hand stopped.

What do I draw? If I don't think of anything, I guess I can't keep my hands moving after all. I had thought that I could've just let momentum carry me and create something from that, but that wasn't working for me. In the White Room, I learned many artistic techniques to improve my skill. This included reproduction, which was never my cup of tea.

However, the process of thinking of something on our own and creating that wasn't in the curriculum.

My blank sketchbook.

After staring at it for a while, I closed the silver case.

"And so ends another day," I muttered to myself as I put the sketchbook and colored pencils back in the second drawer.

The third semester might pass on by before I knew it, just as Chabashira-sensei had said.

Chapter 3:
Survival and Elimination Special Exam

WITH WINTER VACATION behind us, our school lives were off to a new start. There was some degree of bewilderment among my classmates as they exchanged greetings with those they hadn't seen for close to two weeks, since before the new year. But other than that, things were the same as usual.

Meanwhile, one question lingered in the back of everyone's minds: *When was the next special exam going to be held?* Horikita, who had been given hints by our upperclassmen, probably felt that question weighing especially heavy on her mind.

Our homeroom instructor, Chabashira-sensei, showed up, her appearance signaling the start of a new day at school. Her expression was stern as usual, and she made her way to the podium with a serious profile that left no room for messing around. It was interesting, however, that some of the students seemed to naturally and intuitively sense that something was different, even though everything appeared the same as usual.

Observing everything from the back of the classroom, I had also arrived at the same conclusion. It was Thursday, well past the middle of the week, and it seemed as though we were finally starting the preliminaries.

"Good morning. Today, I'm going to talk to you about the first special exam of the third semester," announced Chabashira-sensei.

Just as the homeroom instructors had been watching my fellow students over these past two years, the students had been watching the teachers closely too.

"Few of you seem surprised. I suppose that means you've gotten a sense of the timing of these things now, hm?" observed Chabashira-sensei. "That'll make this go quickly," she added, adjusting her posture once more before looking out over the students.

"I'd like to jump straight into the explanation. The rules for this special exam are a little complex," said Chabashira-sensei as she turned on the monitor and booted up the software. "First of all, it will be conducted only for the second-year grade level."

This wasn't going to involve students from the other grade levels, the first-years and third-years.

"The rules for this special exam are different from the special exams you've had in the past, like the ones where you've all competed against each other to get first place or exams where you've gone up against a specific class in a one-on-one competition. I will explain it to you with easy-to-understand diagrams. Take a look at the monitor," said Chabashira-sensei.

The data was quickly loaded and the file was opened.

"Survival and Elimination Special Exam"

The first words to appear on the screen looked to be the name of the next special exam. Simply the name made the students slightly nervous.

"Survival and elimination? Oh man, this kinda sounds like something real, real dangerous..." said Ike.

He was stating the obvious, as usual. But I couldn't blame him. When you saw the word elimination, you would make an association with danger whether you wanted to or not. None of the students said it out loud, but they all associated the word elimination with "expulsion." Chabashira-sensei didn't elaborate on the name of the special exam and instead launched into an explanation of what it would entail.

"The school has prepared a wide variety of category-specific tasks. Each class will select a category, a difficulty level, and then assign that task to the target class in a specific, predetermined order," explained Chabashira-sensei.

To illustrate, Chabashira-sensei brought up a quadrilateral diagram on the monitor as an example.

1: Class A → 2: Class B
↑ ↓
3: Class D ← 3: Class C

"This class lineup you see here is just an example, but, going clockwise, first, Class A gives Class B the task of their choice to solve. Class A is on the offensive side in this scenario. Class B, on the other hand, is on the defensive side. If Class B manages to

fend off Class A's attack, meaning that they solve the task given to them and get it correct, Class B will have scored points. Once that attack and defense is over, next, Class B will be on the attacking side, issuing a task to Class C. Attacking and defending is repeated in this same manner, shifting from one class to the next, until we reach the end of the rotation, with Class D attacking and Class A defending—the process up until this point is one turn," explained Chabashira-sensei.

What I understood from this initial explanation was that your class's score wouldn't increase when you were on the attacking side, but rather, your score increased based on how many tasks you solved correctly when you were on the defending side.

"After a total of ten turns, the first half of the battle is over. The second half comprises another ten turns, with the arrows switched, going in counterclockwise order. You will spend a total of twenty turns between both halves of the battle alternating between attacking and defending," said Chabashira-sensei.

The counterclockwise diagram was also thoughtfully displayed on the screen.

1: Class A ← 2: Class B
↓ ↑
3: Class D → 3: Class C

How the placement of our classes would be determined remained to be seen, but it was important. There wouldn't be any pattern of attacking or defending between classes placed diagonally across from each other. It would add an extra mental burden if you were to fight offensive and defensive battles in succession against the class that posed the biggest threat against your classmates.

"Next," Chabashira-sensei continued, "I will explain the tasks, your method of attack, in greater detail. As I mentioned at the start, the school has prepared tasks across a wide variety of categories. They range from topics based on academic ability, such as literature, economics, English, calculations, kanji, history, and so on, to nonacademic genres such as subcultures and performing arts."

“Wait, do students even need stuff like performin’ arts…? That ain’t exactly my strong suit…” After hearing the name of something he was clearly unfamiliar with, Sudou expressed his disdain.

“It is certainly true that there are some subjects that are not a student’s main area of concern, yes. However, people who are ignorant of the world when they enter working society are weeded out. To put it another way, there are also occasional instances where having allies with a variety of talents is useful, even if they aren’t capable in their studies. Your well-roundedness as a person is what will be tested,” said Chabashira-sensei.

While some of the students understood things from how Chabashira-sensei had just explained it, others did not fully understand. Sensing this vibe in the classroom, Chabashira-sensei switched gears and tried again.

“Some of you seem to have trouble understanding, so I’ll try to put it in simpler terms. In short, you could say that this special exam is similar to a quiz. The attacking class issues the quiz, while the defending class solves it. That’s how this works.”

That explanation was so incredibly easy to understand that the majority of the students began to indicate that they understood. However, at the same time, more than a few students looked perplexed.

It seemed safe to think of this exam as a battle of pop quizzes. Successful people and capable people didn’t necessarily excel only in academics. No matter where their academic records stood at the end of their schooling, many of them would likely have proficiency in an area outside of that. With that in mind, you certainly couldn’t declare that knowledge in areas such as performing arts was unnecessary.

Hypothetically, if one were to pursue a career related to the performing arts, there would be an enormous difference between starting out with absolutely no knowledge at all and having a wealth of knowledge, both in respect to getting your start and your subsequent path. Also, when trying to communicate smoothly with bosses or subordinates, knowledge outside of academia would be tested. If you could demonstrate your knowledge, it would be a plus.

ATTACKING SIDE

Choose a category and difficulty level. Attack by nominating the students who will be given the task.

ATTACK RESTRICTIONS

There is no limit to the number of times a student can be nominated consecutively. Similarly, the same category can also be selected multiple times consecutively. Within three minutes upon starting, the attacking class must nominate five people in the defending class and inform the instructor in charge of their choices.

**Note: If the attacking class does not finish selecting the five students in time, the remaining number of people to be nominated will be determined at random.*

LIST OF POSSIBLE CATEGORIES

Literature, History, Science, Social Studies, Sports, Performing Arts, Music, Economics, Trivia, English, Calculation, News, Kanji, Everyday Life, Gastronomy, Subcultures

DIFFICULTY

Three levels of difficulty, ranging from 1–3 (the higher the number, the higher the difficulty)

NUMBER OF TARGETS

Five people

The school had only said that there would be a wide variety of topics, but the selection of categories alone included sixteen choices.

“The attacking class will first select a category from this list, and then—” began Chabashira-sensei.

“Wait, difficulty level? Isn’t it obvious that the attacker’d just pick the hard stuff for their opponent?” blurted Ike, interrupting Chabashira-sensei.

The words had probably spilled out of his mouth unintentionally while Chabashira-sensei was in the middle of explaining. Realizing what he’d done, Ike covered his mouth in a panic, but it was already too late. Amid the awkward atmosphere hanging in the air, Ike looked up at Chabashira-sensei fearfully. Although the mental image of Chabashira-sensei responding

harshly to being interrupted in the middle of her explanations remained firmly planted in our minds, she simply let out a sigh.

“Refrain from making unnecessary comments, Ike,” she warned.

“Y-yes, ma’am, I’m sorry!”

Chabashira-sensei resumed her explanation. “The attacking class selects a category and then a difficulty level, and the average level of difficulty for the first level is considered the basic level of difficulty. It is possible to select the second or third level of difficulty, which are tougher, but that requires spending the points that you have earned. That means that for every point you spend from the pool you have saved, you can increase the difficulty by one level.”

Little by little, the rules of the special exam were becoming more complicated. It sounded like the attacking side didn’t simply choose a category.

“The attacking class nominates five students from the defending class and assigns them a task. You may nominate the same students as many times in a row as you wish, or you can change which ones you nominate. Similarly, the same category can also be selected consecutively.”

There were no restrictions on the nomination of students or selection or categories, and the attackers were free to target a number of unspecified students or target specific students endlessly, then, judging from the explanation.

“So let’s say, for instance, you’re not good at a particular category, and the opposing class is aware of this fact. Then, well…”

It wasn’t difficult to quickly catch onto what Chabashira-sensei was getting at. If the attackers focused their attacks in an area that the defenders weren’t proficient in, then it wasn’t unlikely that the defending class would get the questions wrong.

“I understand that you are feeling anxious, but this isn’t a special exam where you just have to conquer your weakest subjects beforehand. In this special exam, individual knowledge is also important, yes, but another important aspect is how well a class understands its allies. This exam is designed in such a way that the leader doesn’t just have to passively let a student be targeted for tasks repeatedly. They can protect a situation at

times, and even attack if the situation calls for it," added Chabashira-sensei.

DEFENDING SIDE

Five people can be protected per task via nomination by the leader. If there is a protected student among the five students nominated by the attacking side, then that student will be treated as though they've solved the task correctly. Within three minutes, upon the completion of the attacking side's action, the defending class nominates five people from their own class and informs the instructor in charge of their choices.

**Note: If the defending class does not finish selecting the five students in time, the remaining number of people to be nominated will be determined at random.*

TASK EXCLUSIONS

Each student is free to choose up to a maximum of three from the sixteen total categories to exclude in advance. The attacking side will not be able to choose tasks in the excluded categories.

ELIMINATION

If a student answers incorrectly a total of three times, he or she will be eliminated and be ineligible for further nomination. For each student who is eliminated, one Negative Point will be added to the class's score.

**Note: Negative Points will continue to accumulate even if the total number of points earned is zero.*

SCORE

One point is awarded per correct answer (or successful protection) per person for a task. There is no reduction in points for incorrect answers.

"At this point, I'm sure some of you may be confused," said Chabashira-sensei. "Remember that, since you can nominate five students and remove them from the list of possible targets every time you're on the defense, if a student appears targeted for concentrated attack, you can prioritize that person as someone to be protected. Of course, if the attacking side determines that

someone would be kept safe by the protection rule, they also can change their targets every turn. Aside from worrying about getting tasks correct, you should focus on strategy."

As she had mentioned beforehand, you could say that this was a somewhat complicated special exam. However, when you unraveled the thread, you would see it was surprisingly simple in some respects, and you were basically just doing the same thing repeatedly.

"Also, students will always be allowed to discuss and debate necessary matters during the special exam, whether they are on the attacking or defending sides, but all final decisions will be made by a single leader elected by the class. It's a position that comes with an extreme amount of responsibility," said Chabashira-sensei.

It was all up to the leader if their actions would reflect the opinions of their classmates. You could absolutely not entrust such a position to someone who lacked decisiveness or someone whose judgment would falter.

"Additionally...in the event there is a class with students who have made three mistakes and were eliminated from the exam, and that class then sinks to the bottom of the scoreboard out of the four classes, then one of the eliminated students from that class will be expelled."

"Whoa... I-I can't seriously believe we could get expelled! Well, sure, I mean, I knew it was possible and all, but still...!" wailed one student.

Small shrieks arose from students in the room.

"Now, let's take a look at the rewards for this special exam," said Chabashira-sensei.

REWARDS

1st Place: +100 Class Points

2nd Place: –50 Class Points

3rd Place: –50 Class Points

4th Place: –100 Class Points

**Note: If more than one class has the highest score, the special exam will go into overtime until a single winner is decided.*

**Note: If all four classes have the same number of points at the end of the special exam, all four classes will be penalized 100 Class Points.*

"WHAT?! What the hell is this?! Everyone except for first place loses Class Points?!" exclaimed one student.

It was no wonder why students would raise their voices, sounding agitated and tinged with surprise. Out of the four classes, there was only going to be one real winner. However, once you delved into the rules in depth, you could guess the reason why. As indicated by the notes under the rewards section, if the four classes colluded and worked out a secret arrangement before the special exam, all four classes could finish the exam with equal scores. To combat that, there were measures to avoid collusion. As long as second place and below got points deducted, it became almost impossible to cooperate with each other across class boundaries. Even if classes cooperated, only one class could win.

Of course, it wasn't like it was actually impossible for classes to cooperate. If they went with an unusual approach, it was totally possible. For example, the time when Ryuuen entered into a contract with Katsuragi in the special exam held on the uninhabited island during the summer of our first year, wherein he received Private Points in exchange for giving up on Class Points. However, cooperation wouldn't be possible unless there was a strategy in place to ensure that first place would be taken.

Since the rules made it easy for a class to get a high score if they worked together with someone, the restrictions to prevent this from happening were strict. This was also a valuable opportunity to get a specific student expelled if their class fell to the bottom of the rankings. This was a step further than even the special exams that we'd had thus far, and the students would likely not do anything to throw away such a one-in-a-million opportunity unless it came with a heavy price.

If there were any sort of cooperative relationship, it would be one based on a mutual "no eliminations" premise. That was a way to ensure equality and security no matter the class. However, Horikita and Ichinose aside, it was unlikely that Ryuuen or Sakayanagi would accept such a proposal. Moreover, due to the

system of attacking and defending, each class had to compete against two classes. It was unlikely it would be as simple as sticking to a policy of no eliminations.

“In the event there are multiple eliminations in the lowest-ranked class, that class leader will nominate one person from among the eliminated students,” explained Chabashira-sensei. “Of course, the nominated student has no right to protest the decision. In the event multiple classes are tied for last place, it is possible that there could be expulsions from multiple classes.”

That meant if the lowest-ranked class had eliminations in their class, one or more expulsions would definitely happen. The only exceptions that could be made to this would be either the usual route, paying twenty million points, or if the eliminated student selected for expulsion had a Protect Point. It was possible to avoid expulsion where there were no eliminations in even the lowest-ranked class, but in a frontal attack, that was close to impossible.

“Sensei, may I speak?” asked Horikita.

Horikita, sitting in front of Chabashira-sensei, raised her hand for permission to ask a question.

“Sure. What is it?”

“What happens if the leader is eliminated during the special exam? Also, will those who have been eliminated be asked to take some kind of special action, such as leaving the room?” asked Horikita.

“I’ll start with your second question first, as that is easy to answer. If a student is eliminated, they will simply be ineligible for nomination by the attacking side thereafter. Aside from that, nothing changes; that student would remain in the same place as the other students. He or she would also be free to join discussions and the like,” explained Chabashira-sensei.

So basically, they’d be up for possible expulsion, but otherwise faced no real consequences.

“Regarding your question about the leader being eliminated, actually, in this exam, the leaders will not be participating in the tasks in the first place. It’s impossible for the attacking side to nominate the leader, so there is no fear of elimination,” added Chabashira-sensei.

“Which means the leader only gives commands and doesn’t fight…” remarked Horikita.

“Correct. Those elected to be leader are effectively exempt from the risk of expulsion. Whether that is considered a benefit or not is a matter of perspective.”

The leaders would fight by commanding their class and did not risk expulsion. Instead, if their class came in last place, they were tasked with nominating an eliminated student from their own class to be expelled. The responsibility for losing was great. They must expel a fellow classmate; such was their role. Though it was the only position that provided security, few students would likely be willing to volunteer for the job so easily because they’d have a crucial role in whether the class achieved victory, and the responsibility of having to dispose of a friend in the event of defeat.

Even if there were students who could be casually ruthless like Ryuuen or Sakayanagi, the other students would probably be hesitant to take the job. The role of pushing the button to remove the floorboard of the gallows under a death row inmate was just that difficult.

“Also, an important point of note, cell phone use will be permitted during the special exam except for when you are doing a task on the defensive side,” explained Chabashira-sensei.

“Huh? It’s…okay?” asked one student.

“If anything, you could say that your cell phones are indispensable gadgets in this particular special exam. Information about the other classes will be disclosed once the test begins. This means that you will need to sort through information in real time to determine who has excluded which categories, and to find the best solutions.”

If you added any three classes together, you had more than a hundred students. Even if you just took the two target classes, that would be about eighty students. The whole class would need to come together to gather information even to specify the category. Additionally, there were other advantages to being able to use our phones. For example, students who normally weren’t particularly good at engaging in conversation would find it difficult to talk when they noticed something. Such students would keep their observations to themselves because they’d think

it was too trivial to speak up about, only to realize later that in fact it was something that should have been asked. For shy students, it would be easy for them to send a message about an issue they've noticed just to a specific friend via an app and look to that friend for a decision.

"You can also use your phones when you're defending, of course. You are even free to cram for a task until the very last minute or to contact and negotiate with students from an opposing class. You can do whatever you want. If you notice a trend in the tasks during the course of the exam, you may even be able to come up with countermeasures," said Chabashira-sensei.

Conditions were added to this exam that would have been unthinkable before now. If cell phones could be used, the range of attack and defense would be greatly expanded. It looked likely that how quickly information could be shared and how efficiently it could be used were also part of the evaluation.

"The special exam will be held on Friday of next week. First of all, be sure to make time sometime before the end of class on Monday early next week to discuss the situation thoroughly, decide upon a leader, and notify me. In the unlikely event that you are unable to choose a leader, one will be selected at random, as I'm sure you're already aware."

Most likely this was the end of the explanation for the special exam because Chabashira-sensei then let out a heavy sigh.

"I'm sure you already understand this, but this will be a difficult battle. What I can tell you is..." she began.

After looking at the students, Chabashira-sensei finished her statement.

"Do everything within your power to avoid coming in last place. That's all."

This was a special exam in which losing meant risking the loss of a fellow classmate, so avoiding coming in last place was an absolute necessity. We had been told that the special exams in the third semester had the potential to be grueling, and this exam was exactly that. It was entirely conceivable that talented students could be expelled, even if they were academically or physically gifted, depending on the strategies that other classes used.

At any rate, I was impressed by the fact that this time around, the school didn't use a system where we scored points by attacking. It was well thought out. Because it was up to the defending team's judgment that led to points being scored, it was more important to think about one's own class and face it head-on. This was an exam where classes would score points through the leader discussing things with their peers. How well you knew your class and how well you knew your opponents would determine whether you win or lose.

3.1

CHABASHIRA-SENSEI LEFT the classroom, and we had a brief time before our morning classes began. On days like today, where we weren't heading into classes in different rooms, everyone usually spent their time chatting about various things. However, today, the students spontaneously gathered around Horikita, as though there weren't a moment to waste. First, Yousuke took the vanguard position, to calm his agitated classmates.

"We don't have much time, so for now, let's just stick to looking back at the special exam contents," said Yousuke, reining in the conversation.

Of course, after close to two years' experience, very few students would be disinclined to listen to Yousuke. Yousuke, taking the students around him falling silent once again to mean that they agreed, nodded, and continued speaking.

"The point of concern for this special exam is the fact that there will almost definitely be at least one expulsion from the lowest-ranked class. It's difficult to imagine a situation where a class will come in last place without any eliminations. On top of that, while the odds of this happening are low, there might be multiple expulsions from multiple classes if multiple classes tie for last place," said Yousuke.

There would be twenty turns' worth of attacking. Since there were five students per attack phase, that meant there'd be a total of one hundred attacks. No matter how good the leaders were, it seemed inevitable that there would be a few eliminations.

“The unique nature of this exam will put students who have gotten two tasks wrong into a tight spot,” Yousuke continued. “If you protect those specific students from being eliminated, then obviously the other classes will target other students. If you keep protecting those students who are in trouble, then the number of students who end up in the same situation, with two tasks wrong, will start popping up one after another…”

That concept was precisely one of the things we’d be strategizing over. The attacking class would analyze the defending class, take aim by determining which category someone in the defending class isn’t good at, and take their shot. The attacking class would need to determine which targets were protected and avoid going for them to prevent giving the defending class points. The defending class needed to read the attacker’s thinking in much the same way.

“It’s not necessarily going to be the weaker students who get eliminated. It is the natural order of things that the other classes will, in consideration of the future, want to get the capable students eliminated and drive them to expulsion. If we as a class misjudge who we should be protecting, then even the capable students are at risk.”

This was an exam where, in the most extreme case, everyone except the leader faced the possibility of expulsion. It wasn’t even impossible for exceptional students like Yousuke or Kushida to be eliminated if they were continuously bombarded with tasks over and over. Of course, you couldn’t say that would be a wise strategy. It would have to be done when there were no other students who had priority for protection. The chances were high that the class doing something like that would be giving up on winning the exam. Even if such a strategy were to succeed, the damage it would inflict wouldn’t compare to the Class Points lost. Taking that into account, the reward for this particular exam might actually be rather modest. This was a special exam more about placing the losers at a disadvantage than putting the winner at a greater advantage.

“It’s only natural to want to avoid eliminations, at any cost. But, in this short time we have right now, I just want to say don’t be overly anxious. Let’s not make a fuss while we still haven’t seen the true nature of this special exam, and let’s start by unifying our

overall awareness,” concluded Horikita, reminding her classmates that while they could see the obvious dangers on the surface of the special exam, that wasn’t all there was to it. Of course, if she left the issue alone forever, self-serving delusions would spread. Therefore, Horikita encouraged her classmates in the classroom to discuss things during our lunch break. Although it wasn’t mandatory, she had asked as many as possible to attend.

3.2

STUDENTS WHO DIDN’T BRING lunch rushed to the food stands or the convenience store and quickly returned to the classroom. About ten minutes into the start of our lunch break, thirty-seven classmates, excluding Kouenji, had gathered. Their purpose was, of course, to discuss the upcoming special exam. The plan was to make the most of their time by discussing the exam while eating lunch. There were several important items, one of which, as Horikita had informed everyone earlier, was to properly understand this special exam so they would be fully prepared.

The second item would likely be the selection of a leader. If Horikita, who had actually functioned as leader many times up until this point, were to volunteer for the position, few would object. However, she had not said anything herself about it yet, perhaps because the discussion had only just begun. Although Horikita was not the type of person to run away from a big responsibility, she may have wanted to listen to the class first. There was no guarantee that other students wouldn’t volunteer for the position.

However, even though Horikita didn’t speak up and volunteer herself, someone came forward who was considering endorsing her as the leader.

“Horikita-san, before we delve into full-fledged discussion, I would like to ask you something. If we asked you to take the position of leader in this special exam, would you accept?” asked Yousuke.

Yousuke took the initiative and asked the question. He was probably acting in the interest of the class, wanting to back Horikita for the position early on, as she was likely to get a solid

seventy or eighty points, rather than allowing for a situation where an unexpected student might suddenly come forward and take the leadership role.

However, in Yousuke's heart of hearts, he might not have felt that way himself. That was because he also had a strong, lingering impression of Horikita as the person responsible for changing our class's policy during the Unanimous Special Exam and causing chaos. I was impressed by how Yousuke didn't let those feelings show at all.

"If the majority nominate me, I don't intend to refuse. However, in this special exam, according to the rules, though the leader will be exempt from the risk of being eliminated or expelled, they bear a great deal of responsibility. If there are other candidates, I for one would like to hear what they have to say," said Horikita.

Horikita, on the other hand, wasn't rushing things because she understood the stakes. This time around, the leader had the responsibility of making strategies and appointments, but they also had the privilege of avoiding expulsion. Not a single one of the thirty-seven students present here wished to get expelled. There was no guarantee that the privilege of avoiding expulsion wouldn't rouse someone to action, and cause someone with the same or greater level of ability as Horikita to volunteer to take the lead. However, not many would do that. An ideal situation.

The reality was that, ultimately, only those who wanted to buy security in exchange for becoming the leader would be the ones to come forward. However, if someone volunteered for the position only for the sake of self-preservation, their classmates would obviously reject them. The leader must be someone responsible and have the determination and confidence to lead the class to victory.

"If anyone here wishes to be the leader, I would like them to speak up," said Horikita, after having moved over to the podium overlooking the class.

The classroom immediately fell silent, the students merely exchanging glances as time passed. After waiting about thirty seconds for a candidate to emerge, Yousuke nodded.

"I think that you're right. Honestly, I don't think that the part about the leader being exempt from elimination and expulsion is

a tremendous benefit in itself. If there is no other student who can take on the important responsibilities of the class, I would definitely like to entrust the position to you, Horikita-san. What do you think?" asked Yousuke.

If no other students wished to be the leader, Yousuke was going to try to prompt a decision as soon as possible. I didn't really think that such haste was necessary, but the decision of who would take the leadership role was an important one. Yousuke was waiting for the response he hoped to hear from Horikita, but reaction was slightly delayed, perhaps because she was looking at her cell phone screen. It seemed that she had been listening properly to what he said though, because after turning her screen off, she answered.

"Yes, I intend to take the position, of course. Even though I wanted to hear other peoples' opinions and expressed reservations about the role myself, I had been planning to accept the leadership position from the beginning. So then, if there are no objections..."

"Hold on a minute."

Just as the vibe in the room was leaning toward *"Horikita is the obvious choice,"* Maezono raised her hand to speak, albeit hesitantly.

"I, um, well, I actually think there is a little room for discussion on this," said Maezono.

Yousuke's face stiffened for a brief moment, but his smile didn't fade. Normally, he wouldn't have shown any opening like that, but today was different. That was coming from the wariness of a special exam that could result in an expulsion.

"I think that you're dependable and stuff, Horikita-san, for sure. And it's super appreciated that you're willing to take on the responsibility of being leader, but...we absolutely, positively cannot lose this special exam, right? If we come in last place and someone gets eliminated during the exam, someone is going to get expelled. We should choose the leader who will give us the best chance of winning, right?"

Yousuke probably would have reacted immediately and denied it if her statement had been that Horikita wanted to take the position of leader to buy her safety. However, that wasn't the case. Maezono had called into question Horikita's ability to lead.

“Yes, you’re absolutely right, Maezono-san, having a leader who has a high probably of winning is the best thing. But I think that Horikita-san would do well enough to make winning decisions, don’t you?” Yousuke was convinced that Horikita was the most qualified person for the job, so he hadn’t hesitated with his retort.

“Not that I’m, like, doubting Horikita-san’s skills or anything. But it’s, like, is she really the best? That’s what I mean when I say there’s room for discussion, I guess. Maybe there’s someone else in class who can make the best decisions?” said Maezono.

Maezono appealed to her classmates, Yousuke included, though she was being pretty vague. Yousuke nodded several times in response, never letting his smile slip, but his words in response to her remained stuck in his throat. That was because Maezono’s question, while not so strange, was tricky. If it were handled badly, it could create an unpleasant atmosphere. Amid all of this, an unexpected reaction came from Ike, who didn’t seem like he had been thinking too deeply about the issue.

“What, so you got somebody in mind, Maezono? Because I have no idea,” said Ike.

“Yeah, but hold on a sec. Is it okay if I just, like, give my personal opinion about something?” said Maezono.

It sounded like Maezono did indeed have someone in mind after all, because she had affirmed what Ike had asked. Since no one had any right to stop her from speaking, Maezono continued.

“You remember how Horikita-san changed her opinion about expelling Kushida-san during the Unanimous Special exam, right? Back then, the student who should have taken responsibility for everything that happened was the one who kept consistently antagonizing the class. But it’s like... I feel like Horikita-san didn’t follow through where she should have. This time around, the leader decides everything, right? The fact that the leader even decides who gets expelled from the list of students who got eliminated is something we can’t ignore. Oh, and for the record, I’m not trying to say that Horikita-san’s decision back then was, like, a mistake or anything. It’s not like all our problems have been resolved, but Kushida-san staying here has been a big plus for our class in some ways,” said Maezono.

Maezono was careful to stress that she didn't just hate Kushida for no reason. Of course, deep down, Kushida was probably irritated just to have her name brought up in this conversation. There were more and more opportunities for her to take off her mask in class, but for the time being, she maintained her smile. That said, whether that smile was a warm one or not was debatable… Anyway, what Maezono was trying to say was just that she felt Horikita might be indecisive in some ways. In other words, she was doubtful that Horikita was worthy of trust.

"It's just the part about how the leader has deciding power that I'm hung up on. What I'm trying to say is, like, putting aside the question of who else is right for the job, is Horikita-san really the best person for us to entrust this exam to?" asked Maezono.

Once again, Maezono advocated that the class should think about whether letting Horikita handle things was a good idea. If you asked me whether Horikita's decision-making skills and judgment were perfect, at this present time, I would say no. I thought that this was a good question, and one that should be welcomed. This conversation was especially important to Horikita. This could be an opportunity for her to absorb the perceptions of her peers as she matured. At any rate, I was surprised that Maezono was so eloquent in questioning Horikita's abilities.

"I see… What you've said is all painfully true," conceded Horikita, "I have to say that you're certainly right that I was lost back then. I rejected the opinion of the majority of my classmates and changed the decision for personal reasons. That is an undeniable fact."

I could tell from Hasebe's side profile that her stern expression had clouded for a moment, but she didn't do anything remotely resembling glaring at Horikita. She likely understood that Horikita had faced a difficult decision.

"I cannot assertively declare that I am the best possible candidate as leader. But at the moment, no one else has come forward to volunteer for the position," added Horikita.

"Even if no one else has come forward themselves, we can just nominate someone. If you ask other people, me included, about it, we might be able to come up with more suitable candidates. Isn't it worth a try?" replied Maezono.

“I see. Nominating someone… I am sure there are students in this class who would prefer that it not be me in the role, but I did ask the class once before. If there was someone willing to be the leader, he or she should have raised their hand. Can we really leave the decision-making to someone who is not voluntarily coming forward?” countered Horikita.

“That’s—”

“Or should we ask Kouenji-kun, who is being very quiet? He has a sharp side to him, and I’m sure he is undoubtedly capable of making decisions,” added Horikita bluntly, as though she were trying to slice Maezono’s opinion in two.

Kouenji would certainly have strength enough to be able to respond to any question. Irritation flitted across Maezono’s face, but she couldn’t produce a counterargument, and the words wouldn’t come.

“Your thinking is correct, though. I agree with your opinion that we should look for someone with good, fast judgment. So, after hearing Maezono-san out, I would like to ask the class for a show of hands. If there are any students confident in their ability as leaders who can guide the class to victory in this exam, I would like for you to raise your hand. I will gladly hand over the position if someone comes along who I think is more qualified than I am,” said Horikita.

It was obvious that by “someone” she was referring to me, and some people in class were even looking in my direction. I didn’t budge an inch, of course. I had no intention whatsoever of depriving Horikita of the opportunity to experience this and for her chance at developing as a leader. Besides, Horikita herself, more than anyone else, knew from the very beginning that there was no way I would volunteer. That was why she had intentionally been vague in her wording, saying that she would hand it over to “someone” in class with decision-making abilities. You can’t fight with only your hidden strength. She wasn’t going to entrust this test to me unless I could raise my hand and say that I was the one for the job.

“You’re exactly right, Horikita-san. We can’t make someone the leader when they’re not coming forward to volunteer for the job,” said Maezono.

The room quieted down as Maezono withdrew her opinion in the face of Horikita's sound argument. It will sound like I'm repeating myself, but Maezono's statements were neither unnecessary nor reprehensible. It was particularly important to put a stop to the bias that our classmates were falling into, namely, that Horikita should be the undisputed leader. Was Horikita the best possible candidate as leader at this present time, or not? As long as the class could arrive at an answer while still asking themselves this question each time, then there was nothing to worry about. When those doubts completely disappeared, that would be when Horikita had grown into a leader recognized by everyone in class.

"It looks like we can finally move on. Now then, why don't we start talking about what this special exam will be about? I think we should all start eating our lunch too. We've all been holding back from doing so," said Yousuke.

No one had touched their lunch, probably because there was tension in the air, with many students feeling nervous. Some of them were given a sudden start by Yousuke's words, and hurriedly started shoveling food into their mouths. Then Horikita and Yousuke once again took the lead in explaining the outline and rules of the special exam, each eating while the other spoke. By the time the second half of our lunch break rolled around, all the students had a deep understanding of the exam, including the parts they were unable to understand when Chabashira-sensei had given her explanation. As students began to exchange opinions, Sudou, perhaps having been thinking about something for a long time, spoke up rather forcefully.

"I know I'm talkin' 'bout someone who ain't here, but what are ya gonna do 'bout Kouenji? You gonna to protect him for sure? That was what you promised, right?" asked Sudou.

Kouenji, calling it advance payment until graduation, had achieved first place completely on his own in the Uninhabited Island Exam. In return, he was entitled to complete freedom. That meant that Kouenji would be protected unconditionally. In this special exam though, even Kouenji was in danger of being eliminated and expelled. They had made that promise just before the end of the Uninhabited Island Exam, but the fact that Horikita

had made that promise was well-known among everyone. Horikita had already told our classmates in an effort to explain things.

“A timely topic. I had just received a rather courteous message from the person in question, and it reads, ‘Needless to say, you are going to make sure I am protected from expulsion, yes?’” said Horikita, turning the screen of her phone to show her classmates the actual text.

“Oh my god, this sucks! This means that we’ll be forced to work with only four protections!” wailed one student.

If the attacking side realized that Kouenji would always be protected, then naturally, they would avoid nominating him. However, even if the attacking side avoided nominating him, there was no guarantee that an attack wouldn’t come, so Horikita would have to continue protecting Kouenji over and over if she were to keep her promise.

“Don’t jump to conclusions. We can’t say for certain that it will be necessary to protect him constantly. I will think of some countermeasures. I won’t go into details now, but don’t ruminate on it,” said Horikita.

Since this was an area where strategy was involved, she couldn’t casually discuss things right here. If the discussion heated up, it would waste time and just a lunch period would not be nearly enough time to resolve a conflict. Horikita, in consideration of the time remaining, would only reconfirm the necessary points and take questions regarding those points. Horikita had also indicated that discussions about strategy should be conducted with caution from the standpoint of information leakage. While she solicited people for ideas and anything else that they thought of, she ruled that communication about this matter in the classroom, where there were many people around, or in the hallways, where people were passing by, or on devices like cell phones, which could easily leave a record, would not be permitted.

3.3

AFTER SCHOOL, Kei and I headed for Keyaki Mall. I hadn’t originally planned to stop there today, but she had asked me if we

could. However, Kei, the one who had invited me out, didn't have a smile on her face like usual. Rather, she looked dejected the whole time.

"You've been looking down for a while now. What's the matter?" I asked.

"Oh... Yeah..." mumbled Kei.

It seemed like there was something on her mind, and after some slight hesitation, she looked over at me.

"H-hey, Kiyotaka? It's, well, I'm wondering what'll happen to me in this exam, and...I think that if I get targeted again and again, it'll be impossible for me to keep answering the questions correctly, and... Will the class be able to protect me?" she asked, frightened, unable to hide her anxiety.

"You're not the only student lacking in confidence, Kei. Almost every student in class must feel anxious to some degree. Horikita too, our leader, is well aware of this fact, of course," I replied.

"I wish you were the leader, Kiyotaka... Then I would definitely be protected," said Kei.

I deliberately avoided responding to her delusions. Right now, the priority was to dispel her worries.

"Horikita will protect her classmates. Even so, we can't bring the possibility of losing down to zero. However, when the time comes when someone must be cut, she'll have to make a decision about who. If there are several other students aside from you who have been eliminated, Kei, then Horikita wouldn't pick you so easily, as you are someone who unites the girls. Besides, Horikita also knows that you are my girlfriend. Even if I can't protect you, I'm sure it would be difficult for Horikita to choose you for expulsion," I replied.

That was not a point of view that I was intentionally going to guide Horikita to, but rather a point of view that Horikita would come to all on her own. Namely, Horikita would believe that if she wanted my cooperation in the future, Kei would be someone that would be difficult to get rid of. However, that situation would require there to be other eliminations aside from Kei, and that Kei would be given higher priority after taking those conditions into account. If it came down to a choice between Kei and Yousuke, it

would be impossible to change Horikita's decision on the matter without intervention regardless of the fact that she was my girlfriend.

"Y-yeah, you're right. I'm your girlfriend, Kiyotaka. Horikita-san wouldn't choose me so easily," said Kei.

"Yeah. Besides, Horikita can only protect five people each time out of a class of nearly forty. Taking that fact into account, it wouldn't be unusual for there to be eliminations. After twenty turns, there should be a fair number of eliminations in every class. Supposing if ten students in our class were eliminated, it's highly unlikely that Horikita would choose you, Kei, the leader of the girls, right?" I asked.

"...Right," replied Kei.

If there were a lot of eliminations, there wouldn't be exceptions, even for an honors class like Class A. If anything, conducting the exam in such a way to avoid having a single elimination would be stifling to a class—they'd strangle themselves. In extreme cases, even if half of the class got eliminated, you could still avoid coming in last place. That kind of reassurance wouldn't be wasted in trying to give the students peace of mind. Just making them understand their value would lessen their emotional burden.

The fact that Kei was my girlfriend was a relief to her. However, depending on how you thought about it, it could also be interpreted as a dangerous factor. It was entirely conceivable that if someone wanted to inflict damage on me, they could get rid of Kei. At any rate, there were aspects of this special exam that would reaffirm the value of each individual student. Who was necessary for the class and who was unnecessary? That would make you look at it from all angles.

3.4

ON OUR WAY BACK from Keyaki Mall, I found Morishita lying on a bench.

"What the...?" muttered Kei, standing next to me, sounding puzzled (and looking quite taken aback) as she looked at Morishita.

I couldn’t comprehend the sequence of events that could’ve led her to lie face down on a bench and close her eyes when it wasn’t even warm and sunny. Even though the snow had melted, we were still smack in the middle of winter in mid-January.

“Is she dead?” I asked, letting the thought of that small possibility escape my lips.

“No way! She couldn’t be!” exclaimed Kei standing next to me, denying it emphatically.

“You are correct. I am not dead,” replied Morishita.

Morishita abruptly sat up and looked up at us with a slightly sleepy look on her face. Apparently, she was just about to fall asleep, but hadn’t yet. She must have felt incredibly drowsy to be able to sleep in such cold weather.

“What are you doing in a place like this?” asked Kei.

“Are you curious?” asked Morishita.

“I’d be lying if I said that I wasn—”

“Then I will tell you. I was waiting for Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, who seems to be hiding something,” said Morishita, interrupting her.

When Kei tried to respond to Morishita’s initial question about her level of interest, Morishita gave her the reason.

She was still speaking very politely, but the fact that she wasn’t using any honorifics in her address really did feel a little off-putting.

“Huh? You know each other?” exclaimed Kei.

Naturally, Kei was surprised as well.

“Well, I…wouldn’t even go as far as to say we’re acquaintances, really. We’ve only ever talked once,” I replied.

“Hmm? You know, you sure do seem to know a lot of other girls from other classes, Kiyotaka-kun.” She looked up at me with her arms crossed, speaking as though she were a teacher pressing a student for answers.



“It’s not like I was the one who started the conversation in the first place,” I replied.

“It doesn’t matter who started it. It’s the fact that you’ve talked at all that’s the problem,” huffed Kei.

Absurd. Of course, I knew that while that was how she truly felt, it wasn’t an opinion she was advocating seriously.

“You said that you were waiting for me, but what were you going to do if we didn’t say anything to you?” I asked.

I would have been fine with completely ignoring Morishita’s presence. I had only said something to her by accident, nothing more.

“Do not worry. My eyes were still open, albeit only ever so slightly. Hence, I would notice you if you walked past,” said Morishita.

If she wasn’t sleeping, then I felt like it was even more difficult for me to understand why she was laying down like that. I felt like trying to think too deeply about Morishita’s behavior would only be a losing battle.

“Why were you waiting for me?” I asked.

“Why do you think?” she asked.

I didn’t expect her to turn my question back on me. “I can’t even begin to imagine.”

“Truthfully, I have had quite the stroke of good fortune. It just so happens that my business involves your girlfriend,” explained Morishita.

“Huh? Me?” Kei blinked and pointed at herself in surprise.

“Yes. I am curious to know what manner of person you are,” said Morishita.

“Curious? What are you talking about?” asked Kei.

“While I was conducting my research, I noticed something rather peculiar,” said Morishita. She then sluggishly got to her feet and approached Kei, gazing at her with her sleepy eyes.

“What?! What is it?” snapped Kei.

Morishita had a unique air about her, but different from that of Hiyori. It wasn’t calm and composed; it was just strange. Kei

also seemed to have gotten a sufficient sense of Morishita's strangeness in just this brief time and was quite put off.

"Karuizawa Kei. You were initially dating Hirata Yousuke, yes?" asked Morishita.

Oh, she dropped the honorific when saying Kei or Yousuke's name too.

"S-so? What about it?" replied Kei.

"Why did you go out with Hirata Yousuke? Actually, no, rather, why would Hirata Yousuke date a woman such as yourself in the first place?" asked Morishita.

Morishita slowly walked in circles around Kei as though she were a detective pressing a criminal for answers.

"Hey, what the hell?! This is so rude!" shouted Kei, looking at me.

"I have also researched Hirata Yousuke in my own way and discovered that he is apparently a young man quite popular among women at this school. In addition to belonging to the soccer club, an aspect that contributes to his popularity, he possesses exceptional academic ability. He is graced with physical features that are deemed attractive, and furthermore, he treats everyone equally regardless of gender, is kind and considerate, and he is capable in his studies," said Morishita.

While some of Morishita's phrasing was a little off-putting, it was a reasonable and accurate assessment of Yousuke. On the surface, there would be nothing wrong with saying that he was a student who checked all the boxes. He got emotionally wounded very easily and had a habit of putting himself down, but that information wasn't common knowledge so it could be left out.

"Why would someone like him choose someone blithe like you?" asked Morishita.

"...What does 'blithe' even mean?" asked Kei.

"No idea. It's the first time I've ever even heard that word," I replied.

That was a lie. It meant that she was a lightweight. Sloppy. It was a word that meant things like that. But if I told Kei that right now, I'd be setting off a firestorm. Morishita gently poked the bewildered Kei's cheek with her index finger.

“Don’t just touch me without permission!” shouted Kei.

“You seem to refrain from doing so now, but when you first entered this school, you wore thick makeup despite being a first-year student,” said Morishita.

“Th-that’s my own business, isn’t it?” snapped Kei.

“A vapid person who doesn’t seem to possess any exceptional qualities and who wears too much makeup. I do not understand why Hirata Yousuke would have chosen you,” said Morishita.

“Well, because! I mean, because I was cute?” said Kei.

Kei didn’t breathe a word about the fact that she had asked Yousuke for help so that he would function as camouflage to hide her past of being bullied. The assessment that people had of her was that dating Yousuke was convenient for her.

“It is easier to understand if we think of your thick makeup as a mask. You are timid and possess a delicate heart. However, if that is truly the case, then there is a contradiction in the fact that you are determined, self-assured, and the leader of the girls,” said Morishita.

Morishita was a strange one, but she had the intelligence to gather information and notice things that are suspicious.

“What are you even…?” asked Kei.

Kei was perturbed by Morishita’s reasoning, as though Morishita had seen right through her. If I let the two of them continue this conversation any longer, it probably wouldn’t end well.

“I don’t think that logic applies to romantic love. Kei and I have feelings, so we’re going out. Is there a problem with that?” I asked.

I leaned in close to Kei in a protective manner. While she was surprised, her eyes creased happily in response to what I said about her.

“I see. I have never experienced romantic love myself; therefore, I cannot deny your assertion that logic does not apply,” said Morishita.

If love were something that could be achieved by making a calculation or two, then I wouldn’t have spent so much time on it.

“I apologize for the rude things I said, Karuizawa Kei,” said Morishita.

Morishita walked back in front of Kei, and then bowed deeply. Actually, she bowed so low that she was bowing *too* deeply. On top of that, after bowing to Kei, she didn’t budge.

“Y-you don’t have to be that sorry, okay? I get it, it’s fine,” said Kei.

“I see. So, now that the apology has been made, there is no longer a problem, yes?” asked Morishita.

“Huh? Uh… Yeah, sure, whatever, but it’s not like I’m cool with this,” replied Kei.

I could understand how Kei felt, almost painfully so, but there didn’t really seem like there was anything she could do about the situation.

“It would seem that I am interrupting your time together. I will end the conversation here,” announced Morishita.

“She understands that… Maybe she’s actually a good girl, somehow?” pondered Kei.

The safest thing to do right now would have been to let Morishita go, but it didn’t seem like I would have many opportunities to make contact with her. I decided to ask Morishita a question that had been bothering me.

“For a student in Sakayanagi’s class, you seem like quite the unique individual. Do people around you say that?” I asked.

Kei made a face at me that seemed to be saying, *“You’re trying to make her stay?”* but I didn’t pay her any mind and waited for Morishita’s answer.

“Yes, I hear that often. I am a unique individual,” replied Morishita.

Yeah, that made sense. No matter how you looked at her, she was certainly unique.

“But it is quite strange. I am well aware that I am a peculiar individual by nature, and I have long considered myself to be special. I do not like it very much when people deliberately mention that I am unique every time they talk about me, belaboring the fact,” said Morishita.

“I’m sorry. But it’s just that for these past two years, I had no idea a student like you even existed in Sakayanagi’s class, Morishita,” I replied.

“I see. You were surprised that a student you didn’t know existed was a unique individual,” said Morishita.

“Yeah, exactly,” I answered.

“I do not take action myself unless I am interested. During the course of events of Sakayanagi Arisu and Katsuragi Kouhei guiding the class as leaders, there was no need for me to do anything because they always protected the entirety of Class A. There was no need for me to show my individuality. I was in an environment where, if I were to live a quiet life, I could have graduated as I was. So I do not find it surprising that I was seen as indistinct,” said Morishita.

She was very plain about it. Morishita’s explanation provided a convincing reason—namely that I was now attracting so much attention that I was catching the eye of students like Morishita. I was originally supposed to have been a student with her same level of impersonality and inconspicuousness, but I had become someone who people had come to take notice of and be wary of, just as much as Horikita. Maybe more so. Of course, that was only because I had intentionally made moves. Had I been in Class A together with Morishita when I had enrolled, and if Sakayanagi had the sort of relationship where we had no contact with each other, my situation would have been completely different.

I wouldn’t even have to do anything; just by following instructions, my and my classmate’s position as Class A would be firmly secured. Nothing could have been easier. I would have likely spent my days peacefully, without a care, as an ordinary student, devoid of personality. It would have been a path to graduation without anyone suspecting me, without anyone being wary of me. Morishita was already over halfway along, idly strolling that quiet path.

“I am glad that I was able to meet the both of you today. Thank you very much for accommodating me like this,” said Morishita, politely.

“U-uh, no, it is all right. You’re very welcome,” replied Kei.

For some reason, Kei also started speaking in a polite manner, matching Morishita.

“The majority of students enrolled in this school hope to graduate from Class A. Of course, I am one of those students as well. That is precisely why I have been feeling a sense of urgency and decided to talk to various other students. Furthermore, you are quite a high-profile figure as of now, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka,” said Morishita.

Once again, Morishita didn’t hide her agenda around Kei.

“I may wish to contact you once again in the future, so I humbly ask for your patience and understanding when that time comes, Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, Karuizawa Kei,” added Morishita.

After bowing her head to us deeply, almost too deeply, Morishita started to walk away...but then she suddenly stopped and turned around.

“You two were just about to return to the dormitory just now, yes?” she asked.

“Uh, yeah, we were, I guess...?” said Kei.

“I was planning to return to the dormitory as well. May I accompany you? We can chat while we walk,” said Morishita.

“H-huh...? Wait, I thought we just came to a clear stopping point in the conversation, and now you wanna start talking again? God, read the room...”

“This is a good opportunity, so please do not hesitate to ask about me either, should you wish,” said Morishita.

“Uh, no, I’m not interested at all...!” snapped Kei.

“Do not say that. If you do not mind, let us exchange contact information. That includes Ayanokouji Kiyotaka as well, of course,” said Morishita.

“No, no, NO! You are NOT exchanging info or whatever! Okay?” shouted Kei.

“I don’t really mind exchanging contact info though,” I remarked.

“The hell?!” shouted Kei.

“Besides, it’s better to have lots of friends, after all,” I answered.

“A wonderful line of thinking. I agree completely,” said Morishita.

“Uggghhh. Kiyotaka, that part of you is kinda cute, but it’s also, ugh, I can’t even! It pisses me off so much!” groaned Kei.

And so, we had decided to exchange contact information with each other (albeit grudgingly so, in Kei’s case). The chat app was somewhat convenient, and there wasn’t any harm for anyone in getting to know each other. One thing that piqued my interest was that there were only a few people registered as contacts in Morishita’s chat app. It seemed like she really hadn’t made an impression until now. I’m sure that her being a weirdo played a big part in that.

Chapter 4:
The Identity of the Sender

IT WAS NOW FRIDAY, the day after the special exam was announced, and classes had just ended. Since the discussion during lunch yesterday, there hadn't been any gatherings that involved the entire class, and nothing had happened that was specifically related to the exam. I would have expected that Horikita, who was now in a position to take charge of the class as the leader, would have made progress in her strategies and thoughts since yesterday, but the details of her intentions remained unclear. It didn't seem like she was trying to make any appointments with me, either. Since we still had another week and there was no need to panic, it was best she take her time and think things through.

"Ayanokouji-kun... Um, excuse me, but could I have a moment of your time?"

Just as I was getting ready to leave the classroom alone, Mii-chan called out to me. This weekend, Kei had plans to hang out with her friends until nighttime, and she was already gone, leaving me completely free right now and able to offer my time without hesitation.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Well, it's kind of difficult to talk about here in the classroom... I would like to talk somewhere else, if possible," said Mii-chan.

There weren't any students around to pay attention to our conversation, but it sounded like Mii-chan wasn't comfortable here. Judging from how she sounded, I could guess that the nature of the conversation was serious.

"I understand. Is it okay if we walk and talk on the way out?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," she replied.

We didn't have any reason to remain in the classroom, so we grabbed our bags and began to walk. There wasn't any need to go through the trouble of going all the way to a secluded place, however. The building was always full of people right after class,

and there were lots of students in the hallway and entrance, allowing us to hide in the noise.

“So, what did you want to talk to me about?” I asked.

When I prompted Mii-chan to speak, she quickly looked around the area, scanning for eavesdroppers. Perhaps she felt relieved, because she started to speak.

“Do you remember that time when I wasn’t coming to class for a while? I know it’s so pathetic, but… Well, you know, that thing with Hirata-kun, and well… Um…” stammered Mii-chan.

She was talking about what happened in late September, after Kushida revealed who Mii-chan had a crush on during the Unanimous Special Exam.

“What about it?” I asked.

“Well, it’s about how someone was delivering food to me during that time when I couldn’t leave my room,” replied Mii-chan.

“Yeah, I remember that. You said that someone had been bringing you food every day.”

At the time, Mii-chan had asked me if it had been me.

“The reason I had talked to you about the matter of the sender was because I was hoping to get your advice, Ayanokouji-kun, and…” began Mii-chan.

“I see.”

Quite a long time had passed since then, so the fact that she was mentioning this now must’ve meant…

“Did you solve the mystery?” I asked.

“Oh, um, no, I still don’t know. But if I can confirm something, then…I think I’ll know,” said Mii-chan.

“You’ll know if you can confirm something?” I asked.

Mii-chan nodded in response and then began to talk, the words coming out little by little, starting and stopping intermittently. Even after Mii-chan had summoned the courage to go to class again, she was apparently still concerned about the certain someone who had helped her. I had thought she would have given up on the issue for sure, but it sounded like she felt driven by a powerful desire to find the person who helped her and thank them.

There were two ways that she could have gotten clues. One way was from the piece of paper that had been placed inside the bag of food, which only had Mii-chan's room number written on it, so that people would know it was something being given to Mii-chan. If the handwriting were unique, it's possible it could have led to an identification, but that method was trickier than it seemed. Mii-chan had the paper with her back then and had shown it to me, but the writing was a messy scrawl. It would've been impossible to tell whose handwriting it was.

"The student who sent you the food is a peculiar individual," I remarked.

"Yes, I agree," said Mii-chan.

That just left only one other way to pick up on the sender's trail. All the items sent to Mii-chan had been purchased at the convenience store. Mii-chan had taken down notes recording everything that had been sent to her. All she had to do was describe the items she had been given to the clerk at the store and ask if there were any students who had purchased those same items. Asking the clerk at the convenience store to find the sender was the standard practice approach. However, the longer you took to do so, the more the clerk's memory would fade, so the sooner the better. I had figured that Mii-chan surely would have known something like that, but her next statement came as a surprise.

"I tried talking to the clerk at the convenience store about the issue right after I had come back to school," said Mii-chan.

Apparently the answer she had gotten from the clerk was not a gratifying one. The clerk whom Mii-chan had asked was newly assigned to the store and had not been working there at the time. Also, the shift leader who had been working at the store during the time the sender had purchased the items had been transferred. If Mii-chan were a detective with the police, she could have asked to see the surveillance camera footage, but obviously she couldn't do something like that.

"I even talked to some of the girls who live on my same floor, just in case, but they didn't know, either. That's when I gave up," said Mii-chan.

Once there were no more clues, there would be nothing the average student could do.

“Sounds like you had no choice,” I remarked.

“Yes, it certainly seemed that way…” said Mii-chan.

Apparently, the days that followed had passed in much the same fashion, without any new clues. Then, Mii-chan, after being left at a total loss, happened upon some unexpected information. The other day, when she stopped by the convenience store to do some shopping, she was approached by a clerk. By sheer coincidence, the clerk who was currently working at the store happened to bump into the old shift leader. The clerk remembered Mii-chan’s concerns and explained things to the shift leader.

The shift leader had warned to not put too much stock in what they said, but they remembered a student who just may have fit the bill, perhaps because it had happened just before they had been transferred. Apparently, the clerk offered to tell Mii-chan the name of the student that the shift leader gave. However…

“Maybe it’s because I was caught off guard, or perhaps I was shaken by the abrupt, unexpected conversation, but I told her that I would come back another day to ask for more details and I ended up running away,” said Mii-chan.

“You ran?” I asked.

“Yes, I did, regrettably…” replied Mii-chan.

Only Mii-chan knew why it would be necessary to run away in that situation.

“By the way, when did you have this conversation?” I asked.

“Um… Well…” she stammered.

Given how reluctant she was to say anything, it was clear it hadn’t happened in the last day or two.

“…Today marks six days since it happened,” said Mii-chan.

“You’ve been running for a long while,” I replied.

“Yes, you’re right…” said Mii-chan.

Her face flushed with embarrassment—no, shame—over how pathetic she had been.

“I keep thinking that I need to go back and ask. I can’t help but feel nervous, or…it’s like I can no longer carry on and just let the situation end with me not knowing who it was once I find out. I won’t be able to ignore it. The person who sent me the food still

hasn’t come forward and identified themselves. They don’t want me to know who they are, right?” asked Mii-chan.

I’m sure that Mii-chan had been feeling like she wanted to thank this person despite not knowing their identity. But as long as she didn’t know who they were, she could let the situation end feeling like there was nothing more she could do. The more time that passed, the more she would have come to think so.

“Well, yeah, I guess that’s true,” I replied.

This person supported Mii-chan from the shadows, without giving their name. It was no wonder she was considering the circumstances appropriately given that this person hadn’t come forward.

“What possible reason could they have?” asked Mii-chan.

“A lot of different possibilities, I think,” I replied.

Narrowing down the list of reasons would be impossible from the information currently available.

“I’m sure that it’s a classmate… I don’t have that many friends, but I don’t think they’re the kind of people who would hide things from me like this. So then, why…?” asked Mii-chan.

Someone in her circle, huh? That tracked. Normally, it would never occur to someone that a person they had no connection with whatsoever would give them things.

“This is just one plausible reason I can think of, but… Well, no, forget it,” I began.

“What is it? Please tell me.”

I’d refrained from saying it outright out of consideration for the possibility that vocalizing it might put a strain on Mii-chan’s mind and body, but she asked without hesitation.

“Please tell me,” she pleaded once more, as if to make doubly sure that I had heard her, so I decided to come out and say it.

“I’m sorry to destroy the premise that your line of thinking is riding on, but first of all, it’s not necessarily limited to your classmates. Even if someone outside of our class didn’t know the reason you weren’t coming to school, it wouldn’t have been difficult for them to find out that you were absent,” I offered.

“That’s true, yes, but… But I have extraordinarily little contact with people from the other classes, though,” said Mii-chan.

“That doesn’t really matter. A close relationship wouldn’t be a perquisite for this. Not even if it involves a girl, necessarily,” I replied.

“H-huh?” she blinked.

She made a face that seemed to say, “*But I have even less contact with boys!*”

“To put it plainly, as an example, there could be a boy that secretly likes you, Mii-chan. That sort of thing is possible, right? It could be that a guy found out that the girl he likes is absent from school and decided to give her something out of concern,” I explained.

“H-huuuh?!” she sputtered.

She was so flustered that she practically fell over. I’m sure she wasn’t trying to draw attention to herself, but she was succeeding nonetheless. After realizing this, she quickly regained her composure and got her breathing under control, though her shoulders were still quaking.

“That’s just one possible reason. It’s nothing to get so flustered about,” I replied.

That wasn’t necessarily the case, anyway. It was just an example.

“Y-y-y-y-yes, you’re right! Right?!” she exclaimed.

She showed no signs of calming down whatsoever. Maybe it was a somewhat unnecessary supposition on my part after all.

“I derailed the conversation there, but maybe it would be best if you just come out and say what it was you wanted to say,” I replied.

I had almost guessed what she had wanted to say already, but it was better to hear it directly from Mii-chan’s mouth.

“It’s just that I don’t know what I should do now, after all this time. Should I find out who this person is? And then should I offer my thanks…?” said Mii-chan.

“If you’re going to drop it, then it’s probably now or never,” I offered.

Mii-chan, nodded her head meekly, looking devoid of confidence.

“What would you do if you were in my situation, Ayanokouji-kun?” she asked.

“What would I do?” I asked in return.

While I was a little perplexed, I figured I should probably just tell her what I thought.

“I don’t know if this will be of any help to you, but I think my desire to know would win out. And then I would decide if I would contact that person once I discovered their identity,” I replied.

“You mean you would leave open the possibility that you would not say thank you even after finding out who they are?” asked Mii-chan.

“That’s just me, though. This isn’t going off the example I gave earlier, but if it were a student with whom I had absolutely no relationship, I’d still be a bit puzzled. It might even be better if they didn’t know that I was looking for them,” I reasoned.

“Yes, you’re right. I think that makes sense,” said Mii-chan.

Secretly offering aid to the person you like. I’m sure they’d be shocked their crush tracked them down. I’m sure the end result would be similar even in cases which were not related to romance.

“And in the event this person is being quiet because they don’t want you to know, then that would make things even worse,” I offered.

“...Yes,” said Mii-chan.

“Aside from that, another question is whether the type of person who can remain silent even after finding out their identity, Mii-chan. If anything, as far as I can tell from what I’ve seen, I don’t think my way would work for you.”

“Yes, I suppose...” said Mii-chan.

Most likely, once Mii-chan knew the answer, she wouldn’t be able to hide it well on her face.

“It’s not a bad idea for you to drop this,” I offered.

“That’s... That is true, I suppose,” said Mii-chan.

Even so, she felt sorry for the person who had helped her. It took the form of conflicted, uncertain feelings, which had finally

been fading over time but were now violently on the surface. Even if she chose not to find out who they are right now, it would take a long time for those feelings to fully fade.

“Once you open that box, you can never close it again,” I said.

Considering how easily Mii-chan’s heart was shaken, it was no wonder that she ended up running away. In fact, she probably should’ve seen moving on without finding out the sender’s identity to be a positive thing. If she learned the identity of her anonymous supporter, it would change the perspective of her future a little, no matter who that supporter was.

“I…” Distressed, Mii-chan took her time and slowly arrived at her answer. “I-I think I want to know, a-after all…” she concluded.

“Even if you end up regretting it?” I asked.

“…Yes,” she replied.

She’d made up her mind. If that was true, then there was nothing more for me to say to her.

“Then you should head on over to the convenience store,” I answered.

Even though that’s what I told her, Mii-chan just looked at me and didn’t move, bashfully fidgeting in place.

We exchanged silent looks. There was a bizarre feeling in the air, but I could clearly understand what Mii-chan was asking me for.

“How about we head to the convenience store together right now?” I offered.

“I-is that okay?” she asked.

She was prepared to find out the sender’s identity, but she couldn’t ask the clerk on her own.

“I can at least accompany you. If it gives you a little courage, then that’s a small price to pay,” I answered.

“O-okay. Thank you very much, Ayanokouji-kun!” exclaimed Mii-chan.

Mii-chan nodded the most emphatically she had all day, and then we headed straight to the convenience store.

4.1

MII-CHAN AND I soon arrived in front of the convenience store. I was about to take the lead and enter, but she tugged on my sleeve.

“Would you please wait just a moment…? It looks like there are some other students in there.”

“So you want to wait for the right time, when no one else is around,” I remarked.

“I know that chances of it are low, but it’s possible that the person who had helped me is inside,” said Mii-chan.

“I see,” I replied.

What she said was very typical of the sensitive Mii-chan; she always considered the situation carefully. Many students visited the convenience store on the weekend, but they typically only stayed for a brief time. After waiting for a while, there soon came a time when there were no other customers in the store.

“Shall we head inside?” I asked.

“Y-yes,” replied Mii-chan.

If we dawdled, another customer would soon come in. We hastily entered the store. The clerk was in her twenties, and someone whom I’d seen quite a lot as of late.

“Welco—oh!” When she saw Mii-chan’s face, she stopped mid-sentence, but then she started again with a smile. “Welcome!” she exclaimed.

“H-hello. Um, I’m sorry for running away the other day!” said Mii-chan.

Mii-chan bowed sharply to the female employee, who gently smiled in response.

“It’s all right, really. It didn’t bother me at all. It’s just that you were afraid to hear it, right?” said the clerk.

The clerk had seen right through Mii-chan, who nodded in response.

“Did you boyfriend give you a little push and bring you back here?” she asked.

“Huh?” asked Mii-chan.

Mii-chan looked up at the clerk, a blank look on her face.

“What a totally cool boyfriend you’ve got! That’s so nice,” said the clerk.

“H-huh? B-boyfriend?” sputtered Mii-chan.

“You’re…Ayanokouji-kun, if I remember correctly. Right?” said the clerk.

“How do you know my name?” I asked.

“Well, you know how you use your student ID for payment? I end up learning students’ names,” said the clerk.

It was true that when we made payments, we would use our student IDs, which had our photo and name on them. It was no wonder then that she would remember if I’d shopped here several times.

“But…wait, you often go shopping arm-in-arm with another girl, don’t you? The other day too, you… Huh?!” she exclaimed.

“I suppose you’ve figured it out, but just to be clear, this girl is just a friend,” I quickly replied, pointing to Mii-chan.

When I did so, Mii-chan nodded her head in agreement.

“Oh, I see, so that’s it. But you now, surprisingly, I think you two have real chem—”

“Absolutely not!” shouted Mii-chan, cutting her off with uncharacteristic force. I didn’t have romantic feelings for her either, so why did I feel just a little bit dispirited by that? Mii-chan loved Yousuke, so she most definitely did not want to be misunderstood on the matter.

“So, um, anyway, about the person I was looking for…” said Mii-chan.

“Oh, yeah. Err, well, is it all right for me to tell you? Are you all right?” asked the clerk warmly.

“…Yes. That’s why I came,” said Mii-chan.

“I see. Okay, in that case, I’ll tell you,” said the clerk. After a short pause, the clerk revealed the identity of the person that Mii-chan had been searching for. “The previous shift leader didn’t remember the student’s name, but did remember that it was someone very distinctive. It clicked in my mind when she described him. It’s someone in your same class, actually. Kouenji… um, Rokusuke-kun, I think it was. Apparently, he had bought the

same items as the ones that you had been given," explained the clerk.

"Huh...?" blinked Mii-chan.

The name of the sender, that she had wanted to know for so long but hadn't been able to find out. Wait a minute, don't tell me. It couldn't possibly be Kouenji, could it? Why Kouenji? Mii-chan looked just as shocked as I was—she was literally dumbstruck. That was an exceedingly unexpected name.

...That was what I initially thought, but hold on. Maybe it wasn't really so unexpected after all? Kouenji and Mii-chan hadn't interacted very often, but I had seen Kouenji being very gentle with her. Normally, I would've thought that acting that way would be normal, but this was Kouenji we were talking about.

"W-was it really Kouenji-kun?" asked Mii-chan, listlessly.

The clerk nodded. There was no doubt in her mind.

"The shift leader remembered that it was a kid with long blond hair. He was a strange one, and pompous. He would stare at his reflection in the convenience store window and fix his hair with his hand mirror. And also... Well, there's no end to the list of distinctive traits the shift leader gave, so that has to be Kouenji-kun, right? I mean, I often see that kind of behavior from him myself," replied the clerk.

That was most definitely Kouenji—he was one of a kind.

"It sounds like there's no doubt about it," said Mii-chan.

"Yeah. And the items you received also seem typical of Kouenji, come to think of it. It all makes sense now," I replied.

"...Yes," said Mii-chan.

We thanked the clerk and left. Mii-chan was in a daze, like she couldn't wrap her head around the situation.

"Kouenji-kun did...? Why did he do that?" wondered Mii-chan.

"Who knows? It turned out to be someone whose mind's a mystery to me," I answered.

"What do I do...?" thought Mii-chan.

Was she puzzled over whether to thank him? Or was she still confused over the fact that it was Kouenji?

"Well, considering that it's Kouenji, wouldn't it be okay to just let it go without thanking him?" I asked.

“H-huh?! I-I couldn’t do that!” she exclaimed.

“You couldn’t?” I asked.

“Because…he’s a classmate. And the things he gave me cost quite a bit of money,” said Mii-chan.

Kouenji was sitting on a boatload of Private Points, but money was money. I guessed that Mii-chan was too conscientious to ignore something like that.

“I think that I’ll go buy a thank-you gift to give him in return. Should I get something that costs about the same as what I was given?” asked Mii-chan.

“That would be too much. I think about half the value would be good,” I replied.

They were gifts without any strings attached (I assume; who knows with him?), so I thought that would be sufficient to convey her feelings of gratitude.

“I-I understand. I think I’ll do that,” said Mii-chan.

“All right then. Good luck with handling the rest and delivering your thanks,” I replied.

With that, I figured it was time for us to go our separate ways, and I was about to start walking away on my own, but—

“…Would you please come with me?” asked Mii-chan.

“Huh?” I asked.

“Well, um, I mean, to see Kouenji-kun,” said Mii-chan.

“Yeah, I guess that asking him why he did it would be, you know, tough. But it would be weird if I were there,” I replied.

While I did have the desire to help the forlorn Mii-chan, this was a bit much. Besides, I didn’t know why Kouenji gave her those provisions.

“Also, hypothetically, if it turns out his reasons are really personal, then it would be bad if I were there, right? No matter how much we say that I’m going out with Kei, if a guy is standing next to the girl that he has a crush on, he might have some thoughts on the matter,” I added.

“But this is Kouenji-kun we’re talking about, right?” said Mii-chan.

“Even Kouenji is an ordinary high school bo—well, no, he’s not actually, I guess,” I replied. Plus, in the unlikely event that Kouenji would be shaken by my presence, I thought I would like to see it. “All right, well, how about we go together, then? Forgive me for this though, but depending on the situation, I might take off after we find him.”

It was quite possible that he wouldn’t like me being there.

“I understand. And thank you,” said Mii-chan.

Mii-chan understood that she couldn’t hope for anything more and nodded her head in acceptance.

“So when should we do it?” I asked.

Mii-chan took out her cell phone with her right hand and opened her calendar. She lightly touched the area where she’d sometimes tie up her hair with an elastic band with her other hand in an absent gesture.

“I know that this is short notice, but would it be all right if we did it first thing tomorrow? I’m worried that if I take too much time to do this, I won’t be able to sleep, and…” said Mii-chan.

It would be terrible to imagine Kouenji in *that* way while you were in bed in the middle of the night. I had a date with Kei planned for tomorrow morning, but with some adjustments, I’d be able to swing it.

“Thank you for everything today. I know I’ll be counting on you tomorrow too, but I am already so grateful,” said Mii-chan.

She also said that she would like to thank me again once the issue had been fully resolved, but I told her that wasn’t necessary.

4.2

THE NEXT DAY, Saturday morning, just before 11:30 a.m., I waited for Mii-chan on the sofa in the dormitory lobby, just like we’d agreed. Kei had secretly come over Friday night and stayed overnight in my room. We were up spending time together until the wee hours of the morning, but now, she was sound asleep. That was my gambit to change our date plans, which were originally scheduled for the morning, to the afternoon. I could see

Mii-chan getting off the elevator via the monitor in the lobby, so I got up off the sofa.

“Morning,” I offered.

“Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun,” said Mii-chan.

In her hands, she held a paper bag, which contained a thank-you gift that she must have bought yesterday.

“So? Where are we meeting Kouenji?” I asked.

“Huh?” she asked.

“Huh? Wait, we *are* meeting Kouenji now, right?” I replied.

“Yes,” said Mii-chan.

“So you’ve made plans to meet up with Kouenji somewhere, right?” I asked.

“...I did...not,” she answered.

The air around us froze. Time passed. We couldn’t just stay silent forever, so I made time start moving again from my end.

“Meaning Kouenji doesn’t know about today,” I remarked.

Mii-chan nodded in agreement and, for some reason, made a face like she was about to cry.

“Y-yes, that was the obvious thing that I should have done, yes. I guess maybe it was, um, just that I was so, well, nervous, that I just couldn’t think straight at all, and um. I don’t know Kouenji-kun’s contact information, and I guess I selfishly assumed that you would, well, um, take care of the arrangements for me, and... I’m so sorryyyyy!” she wailed.

In the middle of our conversation, perhaps because she couldn’t stand it anymore, Mii-chan started to cry. Fortunately enough, no one else was in the lobby, but it would’ve been bad if someone were to see this.

“Just calm down for the time being. Kouenji and I aren’t exactly in daily contact, but it’s not like I don’t have any guesses about where he might be,” I replied.

“R-really??” asked Mii-chan.

It wasn’t an absolute certainty, but there was a way we could meet with him that had a fairly high chance of success.

“I think that Kouenji is probably at the gym at this hour,” I told her.

“...The gym? On the second floor of Keyaki Mall?” asked Mii-chan.

“Yeah. I’ve been going often myself as of late, and I see him a lot on Saturday and Sunday mornings,” I replied.

I had seen him several times in the afternoons too, when he was leaving the gym after finishing his workout. Mii-chan regained her composure after being presented with a brighter outlook, and the two of us headed over to Keyaki Mall.

Along the way, I stole a sideways glance at Mii-chan. Her eyes were still a little red. She was academically capable and had a gentle disposition, but she was so fragile when anything went wrong. She wasn’t an uncommon type of high school girl by any means—the sort that you would find anywhere. That made her an oddball here.

That was exactly why I was curious about her connection with Kouenji. Putting the matter of like or dislike aside, objectively speaking, Mii-chan was better than average in terms of physical appearance. Did she just happen to line up with Kouenji’s tastes? Or was she being secretly favored by him?

I doubted that Kouenji would be reserved with women he liked. If there was someone in class that he had feelings for, he seemed like the type to make a scene about it. The idea that a guy who had absolute confidence in himself couldn’t talk to the girl he liked was a contradiction, plain and simple.

Recognizing this scenario as true would prove Kouenji did *not* have absolute confidence in himself... Though could I really say that for certain? People went about things in their own ways. It was possible that Kouenji could be someone who, for instance, would prefer to deliberately show his love to the woman he had feelings for from a distance. After much deliberation, there was really only one conclusion: I was overthinking it. I would never know unless I met with him in person and heard his true intentions straight from his own mouth.

Mii-chan and I entered the already-open Keyaki Mall and went straight up to the second floor without taking any detours. Then, I decided to have Mii-chan wait outside the gym while I went inside and checked to see if he was there.

“There he is,” I remarked.

Just as I thought, Kouenji was right in the middle of a workout. He was using the bench press right now, and that was probably going to be it for him today once he was finished with it—Kouenji liked to use the bench press last. He should have been exhausted already, but he was doing the two-hundred-kilogram level, working up a good sweat with a smile on his face. Who else could manage that as a second-year student in high school?

Anyway, it was just about time for him to shower and head out. It would be a bother if I ended up getting spotted here like this, so I left the workout room immediately. Afterward, Akiyama-san, the gym employee, approached me, so I gave her a casual hello and ducked out. There was that promise I'd made with Mashima-sensei, but I could ignore that for today.

"What do you think?" asked Mii-chan.

"I think he'll come out in another twenty or thirty minutes. If it's not a problem, we should wait here," I replied.

"O-okay," said Mii-chan.

Then Mii-chan and I sat down on a bench near the entrance to the gym and waited for Kouenji to come out. We didn't really talk, just listened to the music playing in Keyaki Mall.

"I'm getting a little nervous," said Mii-chan.

As the time drew closer, I guessed that the feeling was probably really settling in for her, like, *it's finally almost time*.

"I can't even begin to imagine how Kouenji is going to respond," I told her.

"Me either," said Mii-chan.

"By the way, what did you buy him as a thank-you gift?" I asked.

"Oh, um, well, I had a lot of trouble deciding. I ended up buying a face towel and hand towel," said Mii-chan.

"That's...quite a curveball," I replied.

"Yes, I suppose it might seem that way, but I personally thought that it might please him. I see Kouenji-kun using both on a daily basis," said Mii-chan.

"I see. I knew about his hand mirror, but I didn't know about that," I replied.

“Yes. I thought high-quality organic towels would be something he’d appreciate.”

“That sounds expensive,” I remarked.

From the sound of it, Mii-chan hadn’t followed my advice to go with something cheaper.

“Uh… Y-yes. I’m sorry…” said Mii-chan.

“How much did they cost?” I asked.

“Let’s see… About 12,000 yen,” said Mii-chan.

That was about as much money as he’d spent on her food. She must have given it some thought.

“Well, I’m sure it’s fine. I hope that Kouenji will be pleased,” I replied.

“Yes. I have to repay him for helping me, after all,” said Mii-chan.

Mii-chan spoke with unusual confidence on that point. Maybe she was right about the gift.

My time estimate was a little off, and after waiting for close to forty minutes, Kouenji came out of the gym.

“He’s here,” said Mii-chan.

Kouenji noticed us right away, but his facial expression didn’t change at all, and he moved to walk past without bothering to greet us. Totally uninterested. This didn’t seem like a secret crush who had fed Mii-chan behind a screen of anonymity at all. Still, the testimony of the clerk made it hard to imagine it was anyone else.

In that case, we had no other choice but to ask him the truth. Mii-chan hurriedly got up from the bench and ran after Kouenji.

“U-um, excuse me, Kouenji-kun! Do you have a moment?!” she wailed.

When she shouted like that at his back, Kouenji stopped on his heel and gracefully wheeled around.

“Do you have business with me, Wang Girl?” asked Kouenji.

“H-huh? W-Wang Gi—?” said Mii-chan, confused.

Kouenji came up with that by taking part of Mii-chan’s real name, Wang, from Wang Mei-Yu, and added the word “girl” to it, but since this was a Kouenji-ism, it was no wonder she was confused. Mii-chan seemed unable to understand, but she got a

hold of herself quickly. She tightly gripped the handle strap of the paper bag that she had been carrying with both hands.

“To tell you the truth, there is something I would like to talk to you about. May I have a few minutes of your time?” asked Mii-chan.

Her voice was not loud, but you could feel a sense of effort behind her polite words. Kouenji looked like he was thinking it over for just a moment, but then he raised his arms and shook his head imperiously.

“I am sorry, but I am in a bit of a hurry right now, you see. Maybe another time. Ha ha ha!” He turned his back to us once again and started walking away.

“Huh? Wait,” mumbled Mii-chan.

Mii-chan took it at face value and was clearly flustered, perhaps because she didn’t expect that Kouenji would’ve rejected her request to talk. I didn’t understand it myself.

“Wh-what do I do?” she thought aloud.

“You want to try again some other time?” I asked.

“Ughhhh. I finally worked up the courage. I don’t think I can do it again.”

It was certainly true that having to set up this same situation with Kouenji again would likely be a high hurdle for Mii-chan to cross. If that was the case, then we had no choice but to do something today.

“Well, then you’ll just have to chase him,” I replied.

“But I’d be bothering him…” she replied.

“Sure. But if you can’t do this all over again, then you’ll just have to do it anyway, right?” I replied.

I also felt like, considering Kouenji’s whole thing was bothering people, it wasn’t something we should be all that concerned about.

“What are you going to do? If you lose him, you’ll have no choice but to give up,” I told her.

“I-I don’t know what to do…” she wailed.

She seemed unable to make a decision, repeatedly looking like she was about to take a step forward and then pulling back,

over and over. Obviously, she wanted me to take the lead, so I figured it would be best if I just kept doing what we'd been doing.

"I was the one who had urged you to follow him, so I'm in. Let's go," I told her.

"O-okay. Let's tail him!" exclaimed Mii-chan.

Tailing him! I didn't think there was any need to stay hidden while chasing after him, but since Mii-chan wanted it, that's what we'd do.

Kouenji got off the escalator, and while checking which direction he was headed, I pulled Mii-chan behind me, taking her over to the stairs, and then we quietly snuck down them. Meanwhile, Kouenji kept striding through the mall on his long legs.

"Sh-should we hurry? We may lose him," Mii-chan asked.

"That's fine," I assured her.

Everyone stopped by Keyaki Mall pretty much daily and knew its map by heart. There were several shops along Kouenji's path, of course, but none of them had sales floors that went far back inside, so you could immediately tell if there was anyone inside at a glance. Furthermore, the end of the path was an open cafe area. There was no need to worry about losing sight of him unless he used one of the several mall exits along the way.

If Kouenji headed back to the dormitory, it would've been quicker for him to head back in the opposite direction, the way he came from, anyway. The chances of him using those exits were not all that high. When Mii-chan and I reached the bottom of the stars, Kouenji's back came into view, though he appeared smaller from this distance.

"This must be where he was headed. Thank goodness it was somewhere easy to find," I remarked.

"Y-yes, definitely," said Mii-chan.

Kouenji had finished ordering and now had a cup in his hands. Mii-chan and I drew closer and watched as Kouenji sat down at a two-person table together with a female student.

"Huh...? Who is that?" wondered Mii-chan.

"Enoshima Midoriko, from Class 3-B," I replied.

"Are you acquainted?" asked Mii-chan.

“I’ve only seen her in OAA before. All right, let’s get closer,” I replied.

“If we get any closer, won’t we be in Kouenji-kun’s field of view?” asked Mii-chan.

“Well, I mean, I know we’ve been tailing him more or less until now, but it wasn’t really necessary for us to do so, right?” I replied.

It should be perfectly fine for us to just wait nearby until Kouenji was finished with his meeting. Hiding and waiting for the moment when he was all alone looked kinda sketchy, though. I wasn’t especially interested in what they were talking about anyway.

“Since we’re here, I think I would kind of like to know what sorts of things Kouenji-kun normally talks about,” said Mii-chan.

It seemed like Mii-chan wanted to spy, though.

“You’re saying you want to eavesdrop?” I asked.

“I-I know it’s bad, but… Well, I don’t know if he’ll be honest with me about why he helped me. Maybe I could get some insight,” said Mii-chan.

Uh, no, I don’t think that you’d get any kind of hint from his conversation with Enoshima, who is sure to be unconnected to all of this…

“Let’s keep tailing him,” said Mii-chan.

“I don’t have any objections. I’ll take the lead.”

Kouenji probably wasn’t paying any mind to his surroundings because he was engaged in a friendly conversation with Enoshima, but I couldn’t say for sure if we were in his line of sight. Mii-chan and I briefly left the mall via the side exit nearby and circled around to the opposite entrance. It would take a few minutes for us to go around, but I figured that since Kouenji had just bought a drink, he would stay for a while. However…

When we got back inside the mall and arrived at the cafe, Kouenji wasn’t there. Enoshima was alone, fiddling with her cell phone.

“Did he go to the restroom?” asked Mii-chan.

“…No. Kouenji’s drink isn’t there, so that’s not likely. He might have wrapped up his business with Enoshima in a short time and

left," I replied.

"Oh no... Then does that mean we won't be able to meet him again today?" asked Mii-chan.

"Well, I thought so for a moment, but apparently, there's no need to panic," I answered.

We spotted Kouenji heading back the way he came, looking as stately as ever.

"Kouenji-kun!" exclaimed Mii-chan.

"Oh? Wang Girl and Ayanokouji Boy. You've chased me down again, have you? My goodness, it's tough being popular. Heh heh heh heh," said Kouenji.

That was certainly a way to look at it, but at any rate, Kouenji was free now.

"May I have a minute of your time?!" shouted Mii-chan.

Mii-chan was in such a panic to catch up with him that she didn't even have the time to get nervous and clam up, so she spat it out. He didn't have the drink he had just purchased earlier in his hands, so he had probably chugged it.

"I do not mind. I had finished with my personal business earlier than expected," said Kouenji.

I couldn't imagine what he and Enoshima, an upperclassman, had to talk about.

"Kouenji-kun, were you the one who left those items purchased from the convenience store outside my door while I was absent from class...?" asked Mii-chan.

The supporter that she had been searching for all this time. She wanted to know why. Would Kouenji admit to it? Or would he feign confusion? Or perhaps he would deny it and—

"Yes, I was the one who brought you food. What of it?" he replied.

Kouenji affirmed it without even the slightest hint of pretense. Unexpected, as usual.

"U-uh, well, um, I... Why?" asked Mii-chan.

"Why? If someone is in need, you help them. Isn't that the sort of person you are?" replied Kouenji.

"Huh?" Mii-chan was at a total loss for words.

“If you are satisfied with my answer, may I leave now?” asked Kouenji.

Mii-chan seemed unable to say anything back to him.

“Wait a minute,” I stepped in. “I know this is none of my business, but there’s something bugging me about this. Yes, it’s true that helping those in need is a natural course of action for people to take. However, I’m sorry to say this, but Kouenji, this doesn’t seem like you. You helped Mii-chan, and only her on a whim? Multiple times? I think that there must’ve been some special reason for it.”

I tried needling him, to probe an answer out of him.

“Such word games are typical of you, Ayanokouji Boy. It would seem you had chosen the word ‘whim’ in anticipation of what I’d say, so that I could not wrap the conversation up simply by saying it was a flight of fancy. You’re right. No, I hadn’t helped Wang Girl on a whim. I dislike hypocrisy. But it is not as though I make light of righteousness. If I feel sincerely indebted to someone, then I think it is only natural to repay the favor. That is all there is to it,” said Kouenji.

Wow. Unexpectedly cool. But Mii-chan seemed like she could not make heads or tails of the situation. She was still frozen, even now. The only thing we were certain of was that this did not seem like a romantic thing after all.

“Are we finished?” said Kouenji.

Mii-chan, who had been frozen, started speaking. “But I haven’t done anything for you, Kouenji-kun… I don’t think you owe me anything. Based on what you just said, it sounds like… I think one could interpret that as you saying that I had helped you before, Kouenji-kun,” said Mii-chan.

In response to Mii-chan asking him that question apologetically, and certainly with a level of understanding, Kouenji slowly ruffled his hair.

“Heh heh heh… It was simply a trivial thing that does not need to be remembered,” said Kouenji.

So it seemed Mii-chan had helped Kouenji in some way before, thus leading to Kouenji feeling indebted to Mii-chan, which was why he habitually acted in a relatively caring manner toward her—not typical behavior for Kouenji. So during the time

Mii-chan was absent from class, he helped her out in return for that initial goodwill she showed him. That's what he was saying.

"I don't remember anything at all... A-anyway, please accept this," said Mii-chan.

With that, she held out the paper bag containing the thank-you gift that she had purchased.

"That is not necessary," said Kouenji.

"Uh... If you do not like it, then I suppose it's understandable if you don't accept it. Could you at least allow me to pay you? The food you gave me wasn't cheap," said Mii-chan.

"I'm not hurting for money right now. I don't need it," said Kouenji.

Something was off about what he just said. Sure, Kouenji had a lot of money after making a large profit via the Uninhabited Island Special Exam. However, Kouenji cultivated his image as a wasteful spender. He himself had said before that his philosophy was to be liberal with his cash.

If he needed to be economical after all that spending, sure, that'd make sense. But he was seen buying a large TV the other day, so was what he said simply a lie to avoid receiving points from Mii-chan, then?

"B-but that wouldn't be right! Besides, I wouldn't be able to get rid of this feeling of guilt over what you did for me. Could you please at least tell me what it was that I did for you, Kouenji-kun?" said Mii-chan.

"My goodness. You do have a difficult personality. I already told you, didn't I? It was something trivial and there is no need to remember it. I have nothing further to say on the matter," said Kouenji.

The conversation ground to a halt. Mii-chan seemed somewhat dejected, but even so, she bowed her head.

"Am I free to go?" said Kouenji.

"Y-yes," replied Mii-chan.

"Sorry, but I have a question," I said.

"I do not think I wish to be popular with men, but you do like to pry," replied Kouenji.

“It’s important. If you feel indebted, would you cooperate with the class in the future?” I asked.

“Nonsense, Ayanokouji Boy. You need me for the class to win, and for that reason, you will show me goodwill. But that’s transactional, understand?” said Kouenji.

He wouldn’t interpret something done for something in exchange as honest, good intentions. Fair enough.

“Operating strictly within the rules of this school doesn’t allow for goodness. Am I wrong?” asked Kouenji.

“Maybe,” I replied.

“You cannot win me over as your ally, no matter what means you use,” said Kouenji.

“You’re right about that. Despite my best efforts, you still resist full cooperation,” I replied.

“Exactly. I will not change until graduation, nor will I change after graduation. No matter what kind of shallow manipulation my peers attempt, they will not reach my heart. And that includes you, of course,” said Kouenji.

“In that case, what about special exams like this one we’re just about to take? What if Horikita chooses a plan that involves not protecting you? You can’t say for certain she’ll keep her word. Even if you cry unfairness, you wouldn’t be able to avoid expulsion,” I replied.

Horikita could change tactics and force Kouenji into helping by threatening him.

“I don’t rely on anyone,” said Kouenji.

In other words, he was saying that he was confident he could get by even without protection.

“All right then, we’re done. I’ll let Horikita know that there’s no need for her to protect you,” I replied.

We’d be in a stronger position if we didn’t have to protect one person. Horikita was a girl of her word, so getting her on board would be tough.

“Do as you like. Either way, if you ingratiate yourself with me in the hopes of getting something in return, you won’t get it,” said Kouenji.

Kouenji was determined to be useless. Could I turn that to my advantage? Kouenji possessed exceptional abilities, but his presence was a double-edged sword. There was a risk that Horikita could be dragged down in the future, depending on the content of the special exam. If I were the class leader, then I could easily declare Kouenji a dead weight. The promise made on the deserted island was made between him and Horikita, so it had nothing to do with a third party. One option would be to get rid of him now, as a gift for Horikita, but—

"However." Kouenji's gaze changed, sharpening, making a complete change from the easygoing aloofness that he showed earlier. "If 'someone' were planning to eliminate me, then they'd have me to contend with."

He'd read my mind. No, perhaps it was wild intuition on his part?

"'Contend with,' huh? How do you mean?" I asked.

"That is something you'll have to find out," replied Kouenji.

I wagered he would do something to shake up the class's standing.

"Would you care to open that box and see? I would have to correct your overestimation of yourself," said Kouenji.

"I'll pass. The class leader is Horikita," I replied.

"I see. Well then, I have more dates lined up after this, so I had better be on my way," said Kouenji.

It was curious phrasing, 'dates' plural, but the conversation was at an end. Kouenji was an eccentric. Also, although it would be an ordeal, we'd have to keep him around.

"U-um, excuse me... Ayanokouji-kun?" said Mii-chan.

"Sorry. I just wanted to get a few things out of Kouenji while I had the chance. We rarely speak," I replied.

"It's all right, but...well..." she began.

"What?" I asked.

"N-no, it's nothing. Never mind," she replied.

Mii-chan seemed uneasy. I supposed my half-threats to Kouenji might have had that effect.

Chapter 5:
Advice

ON MY DAY OFF, I had found out the identity of who had sent Mii-chan food, and the rest of the weekend passed me by. Monday and Tuesday came and went, but Horikita didn't come back around. But then after class on Wednesday, with the exam fast-approaching and only two days left to go, a certain young man said something unexpected.

"Dude...! I think I might've come up with a crazy strategy... A winning strategy...!" exclaimed Ike.

Ike quickly drew back his chair with a clatter and stood up, slamming his hands down on his desk. Since all the students were still in the classroom, he naturally attracted a great deal of attention. However, no one looked at Ike with excitement, only skepticism.

"H-huh?! You did, Kanji? No way," said Shinohara.

Shinohara, his girlfriend, was the most surprised and the most in disbelief, judging from her reaction.

"No, seriously. Oh, but, uh, wait a sec, let me do some recalculating..." Ike began counting on his fingers. When that failed him, he eagerly whipped out his cell phone, which also seemed to give him some trouble. While he struggled, his classmates began heartlessly trickling out of the room. They probably decided that whatever he'd thought of was probably half-baked. However, Ike must have finished confirming the idea in his head again, because he nodded in affirmation, not noticing the people leaving.

"We can totally win with this! Can I talk about it?!" shouted Ike.

"Ike-kun. I am going to hear you out, but I do not want to discuss strategy here. Understand?" replied Horikita.

"O-oh yeah, I gotcha. If my too-perfect strategy were to get out, that'd be bad news!" he answered.

"Horikita-san, why don't we go to our usual spot?" Yousuke called, apparently wanting in on it. I was lucky to have caught this moment, and glad they were taking the special exam seriously.

“Good idea. If anyone is interested, please come along. However, it’d be impractical for everyone to come, so let’s have a show of hands. Who wants to hear it?” said Horikita.

Shinohara raised her hand at this, followed by Hondou and Miyamoto. That was all. We didn’t have high hopes for Ike’s ideas. Personally, I was curious about what kind of strategy it was that Ike produced, so I decided to raise my hand too.

“You too? What chance stroke of luck is this? Do you have a reason for coming?” asked Horikita.

Horikita didn’t seem to care about the first three who raised their hands, as they were close friends of Ike’s, but she demanded a reason from me.

“Shouldn’t I be interested? Ike said it was a winning strategy, and he sounded fully confident. I want to hear it,” I replied.

“...I see. I don’t mind. We didn’t really have any plans to get together today anyway,” said Horikita.

While listening to the exchange between me and Horikita, the six of us began to move. After leaving the school, we headed over to Keyaki Mall on foot and arrived at a karaoke room. It was a good place to talk in private. There were snacks and a drink bar, but it was inexpensive. Pretty hard to pass up reliable, safe, and private.

“Satsuki, you good with your usual?” asked Ike.

“Yeah. Same for you, Kanji?” she replied.

Ike and Shinohara were huddled close to each other, looking over the menu and discussing it, their conversation suggesting they were each familiar with it.

“Hey, Horikita,” I remarked.

“What?” she asked.

“When you think about it, it seems a little confusing that, while you’re free to sing or not sing when coming to karaoke, you’re supposed to have at least one drink. This is a place meant for singing, technically,” I replied.

“Huh? Sure, you might be right about that, but what an odd thing to say,” said Horikita.

“Come on, Ayanokouji, my dude. I mean, it’s obvious why,” said Ike, in a knowing tone.

I had only asked in jest, but I wasn't about to embarrass him in front of Shinohara. She gazed at Ike with rapt attention, spellbound, so I just let it be. I picked up the tablet and checked out the rankings to see what songs were popular right now.

"...I see," I thought aloud.

I had absolutely no idea what these were—no, that wasn't quite right. Looking through the titles, there were some songs I could recognize, but there were more songs that I didn't know. It looked like songs from Asian countries other than Japan were quite popular right now. This karaoke place had their fingers on the pulse of the music world.

"All that's left is your order, Ayanokouji-kun," said Horikita.

While I was looking at the charts, the others had finished putting in their orders.

"Then, I'll have plum kelp tea," I replied.

Horikita finished putting in everyone's orders, and we were stuck waiting a while. We wanted to avoid being interrupted. I think it would've been fine for the employees to overhear, but we wanted to minimize the chance of leaks. A few minutes later, all the drinks came.

"All right then, let's hear what you have to—" began Horikita.

I brought the tea to my mouth and jumped. "Hot! ...Oh, sorry. Continue." I was pierced by everyone's blank stares, so I apologized and turned my face away. The drink was hot enough to sting my tongue and make it go numb. As I did, it occurred to me how interesting it was Horikita was letting Ike take the lead.

"Ahem. Let's hear your idea, Ike-kun," said Horikita.

As the leader, Horikita was obliged to take Ike seriously.

There was no element of playfulness in Ike's expression, and his face stiffened up slightly. "Okey doke, I'll get down to business. What if we could absolutely, for sure get sixty-eight points for our class? Wouldn't that give us a shot at winning?" said Ike.

Ike looked over at Shinohara and winked at her. He had my attention.

"Sixty-eight points? Sure, but that's an extremely specific number," said Horikita.

Thanks to how opaque this upcoming special exam was and what'd be in it, we couldn't predict how many points each class would receive. And yet Ike said that we could get sixty-eight points. That was where Horikita felt like something was off. Ike, sensing some resistance, drank down half of the carbonated soft drink he had ordered in one gulp, wetting his throat.

"So, okay, my strategy is to make sure we get sixty-eight points. The way we do that is this! Like a magic trick! We fake illness at the start of the exam and use that. We have thirty-eight people in our class. So, we just have the leader and the five people the leader will protect alone, and we drop the rest of the class, all thirty-two of them," said Ike.

Hondou immediately dropped both of his hands to the couch in exasperation, letting out a sigh. "What? If we do that, we'll lose thirty-two points right when it starts. Dude, do you not even understand the rules?"

Horikita, however, was listening intently. That was only natural. Sixty-eight points guaranteed for thirty-two dropouts. There was no way it could be a coincidence that they would add up to a hundred points.

"Nah dude, it's okay. Even if they take away thirty-two points from us for students missing the exam, I'm sure we can definitely get sixty-eight," said Ike.

Hondou and Miyamoto were puzzled, shooting him looks that seemed to say, *What are you talking about?* Perhaps Shinohara had already heard about his strategy before coming here because she smiled brightly.

"No, seriously, dude, listen. Opponents can only nominate five students, right? When you're defending, you can protect five students each time. What if we only have five students left that can be nominated?" said Ike.

Miyamoto wrapped his head around what Ike was saying before Hondou did. "Wait, so you're saying that, since we can get five points every turn for all twenty turns that we go through, it's like we play a perfect game?"

This idea was unexpected coming from Ike.

"It also means that no one even needs to study for the exam or anything! Not a bad idea, am I right?!" exclaimed Ike.

“B-but hold on, would the school allow thirty-two people to like, you know, fake being sick? No way man, it’d be completely unreasonable,” said Hondou. It was a good idea, but it was Ike’s, so Hondou was skeptical.

“I dunno man, this just sounds like some kind of underhanded trick, no matter how you slice it,” added Miyamoto.

Miyamoto also expressed skepticism. Thirty-two students in class all falling ill at the same time, on the day of the exam? It’d be a little absurd.

“Faking illness is somewhat of a gray area, but the school probably wouldn’t be able to put a stop to it. No one could prove we were faking,” said Horikita.

The school would have greater than 99 percent certainty the coincidence was too good to be true, but they couldn’t be absolutely sure. The school would have no choice but to accept it. It was clearly stated in the rules that if someone were out due to illness, that student would just be treated as an elimination. There was no rule that limited the number of students out at a time.

“It’s an excellent idea on your part. You can certainly say that it’s a strategy that will ensure a high average,” said Horikita.

“Right? Right? So, how ’bout this plan, everybody?!” exclaimed Ike.

Horikita’s unexpected acknowledgement to Ike’s plan made Hondou and Miyamoto, who had shown reluctance, begin to open up to it.

“A plan to get sixty-eight points for sure… Hold up, this is actually a pretty good plan, huh?” said Miyamoto.

“I was surprised too, when I heard about it from Kanji. It’s a good idea, don’t you think?” said Shinohara.

Ike was strongly focusing on the part that we could assuredly get sixty-eight points, but there were other plusses as well. This strategy required no skill, luck, or advance preparation. It could be implemented on the very same day the exam started, and no other class would be able to interfere and prevent us from securing sixty-eight points.

In the unlikely event that we came in last place in the rankings and lost the exam, since we could freely choose who would be expelled out of the thirty-two students who were out, it

would make it easy for us to discard a student with a low level of ability. It would be distressing to carry out, but if we determined who would be expelled in advance by some method and consent was obtained, even the aftermath could be handled smoothly. If a holder of a Protect Point was included among the eliminated students, then the risk of expulsion could be reduced to zero. At first glance, Ike's idea wasn't bad, but it was unlikely we'd adopt it.

"If it weren't for a 'certain rule' in this particular special exam, this proposal of yours might have been adopted," said Horikita.

So Horikita had noticed the problem too.

"Wh-why though? Aw man, I wasn't, like, saying you had to use it or anything, but still, dude..." sighed Ike.

Ike seemed disappointed. He obviously wanted to know why.

"Let's say, hypothetically, that Ryuuen-kun's class adopted your strategy as soon as the exam began," said Horikita. "One student was expelled from his class, but thanks to the addition of Katsuragi-kun, he now has forty students in his class. If he were to only have the leader and five other students, that would mean there would be thirty-four students eliminated. Which would mean he could earn sixty-six points, with absolute certainty. Now, that isn't a bad score, of course, but if you were to flip that around, it also means that he could not get any more points than that. If the remaining classes were to get sixty-seven or more points, then it would turn into an unwinnable strategy," said Horikita.

After cutting out all the other students that you needed to for this strategy, it put a ceiling on your points. It would also mean that, as the attacker, you relied on your opponent to make mistakes.

"Y-yeah, sure, that's true. But where's the guarantee that the other three classes are gonna get sixty-seven points or more? Sure, there's a risk of coming in last place, but the chances of coming in first are higher, aren't they?" asked Ike.

"No. In all probability, in this scenario, Ryuuen-kun's class would come in last place using this strategy," said Horikita.

"...Why, though?" protested Ike. He didn't understand. "We won't know the actual difficulty level until we actually take the exam, right? In that case—"

Horikita stopped him. “Listen. If you’re going to execute a strategy that involves faking illness to have a massive number of students drop out of the test, then obviously that means you’re doing it on turn one. There is hardly any merit in delaying it to turn two or later.” The more you procrastinated, the more you risk reducing the maximum score that you could secure. “Furthermore, this strategy draws attention. It would quickly become known to the other three classes. Think about what our class’s reaction would be in this scenario. Do you think we would say, ‘Oh no! They got us good?’” asked Horikita.

“W-we would…wouldn’t we?” said Ike.

“No. It would be the opposite. If they executed this strategy, it would suddenly make things much, much easier for the other three classes,” replied Horikita.

With that, Horikita picked up the cell phone that she had placed beside her earlier and showed it to everyone.

“Your phone…? Oh, yeah, that’s right. I think I remember they said we can use our phones during the exam,” said Ike.

“That’s right. The moment the other classes can see they’ve adopted a strategy, then all we have to do is use that information and work together. If Ryuuen-kun’s class could only get up to sixty-six points in this scenario, the other three classes would work together and aim to get more than that. If a class has limited its ability to win, then I’m sure that Ichinose-san and Sakayanagi-san would proactively consider working together,” said Horikita.

“Wait a minute. I don’t really get it. So they’d lose if the other classes work together?” asked Ike.

“Yes, they would. ‘Who do we nominate?’ ‘Who do we protect?’ Just by cooperating, the two classes engaged in competition with Ryuuen-kun’s are sure to score fifty points. They’d only need to earn seventeen more points beyond that. The rules in this exam allow us to use points to increase the difficulty level, but on the other hand, if you have zero points or fewer, then you could only target opponents with tasks at an average difficulty level. It should not be difficult to score seventeen or more points,” said Horikita.

In terms of the percentage of questions answered correctly, you would just need to get a 34 percent or higher. No matter how

uncertain we are of the exact contents of the tasks, as long as we didn't get a considerable downturn, we'd be in the clear. Since we could factor in the protection element, the actual percentage of correct answers required may even be a little lower than that. This scenario, in which you could get sixty-six points for absolutely certain, came with advantages, but the disadvantages were too great.

In this scenario, Ryuuen's class, which would start at a negative value due to thirty-four students dropping out immediately at the start of the exam, wouldn't start getting a positive score until after the end of their defensive phase on turn seven. If they choose to increase the difficulty level when attacking their opponent, their ultimate score would be lowered down to sixty-five points, then sixty-four, and so on, each time they did so.

"If you're betting on whether you can win with sixty-six points or winning by scoring at least seventeen points on your own within ten turns, I think you can already figure out which is the more advantageous position to be in," said Horikita.

Ike slumped his shoulders. He'd been riding high in the clouds and now he'd come crashing back to earth.

"Ah, damn it! I really thought we coulda won with my plan! I'm so sorry for wastin' your time!"

Seeing Ike so unexpectedly and intensely despondent left Horikita a little startled.

"There's nothing for you to apologize for. Your strategy was well thought out, Ike-kun. Please allow me to apologize to you for assuming that it was certain to be something useless even before I heard you out," said Horikita.

"Uh um, okay...I guess that's a compliment, but I've got some mixed feelings..." said Ike.

"Your strategy does have a chance of succeeding. If the three other classes, now forced into a position where they need to take action, cannot cooperate with one another, the odds of us winning with it would increase accordingly. Even if the other classes do conspire with each other, there's still a chance that we could win. If we were a class with a low level of overall ability, it wouldn't be a bad idea to go with that strategy. However, I think that our current class is strong enough to be able to fight without having to rely on

such methods," said Horikita. "Also, there is one more good thing that you have taught me."

"A good thing...?" asked Ike.

"This particular special exam could be really tricky if our opponents work together. You've reminded me of that," said Horikita.

By alternating between two distinct phases, attacking and defending, both classes were attacking each other and defending against each other. They were trading blows, essentially. If those two classes were to cooperate, they could surely get fifty points. If three classes were involved and worked together, it wouldn't be impossible to get a perfect score of a hundred points.

Of course, it was unclear whether the other classes would accept this approach. Working together would mean finishing with the same percentage. You could deliberately bring the competition into sudden death and try to pull ahead right at the end, but it would be difficult to coordinate. Considering the current gap in Class Points among the four classes, the bottom two classes, Ryuuen's and Ichinose's classes, would want as many Class Points as possible.

Of course, Horikita's class would want to put themselves in a better position too, if possible. It wouldn't be difficult for Horikita's class to single out Class A as the only enemy in the exam, but you couldn't say that simply making things tougher for the top class was the ideal scenario, even if you were being charitable. In this special exam, only one class would be selected as the ultimate winner.

"I'm impressed you had the courage to speak up," said Horikita.

"O-oh, well, um, okay, uh, that makes me glad. Heh heh." Ike bashfully scratched the back of his head.

"Shinohara-san, Hondou-kun, Miyamoto-kun. You all as well. I want you to speak up if you think of anything. Pass that on to our classmates who aren't here too. I promise I won't underestimate any of you again," said Horikita.

Just like Horikita said, it was better for people to offer their ideas as much as possible. Whether they were perfect or not was a secondary concern; it was important to discuss things like this.

In fact, Ike presenting his idea, even though it wasn't perfect, reminded us of important information. Even though Ike was frustrated by the process, he also learned from it. That alone should have given a certain degree of meaning and significance to this discussion. After a while, Ike and all the others left the karaoke room, smiling and chatting.

"What are you going to do now, Horikita?" I asked.

"I'm going back to my dorm room. I have been meeting with Hirata-kun and the others every day up until yesterday, and I'd decided to take at least one day off to rest and relax, so I kept today open," said Horikita.

Despite it being her day off, she still took the time to listen to Ike. Maybe Horikita was tired of the drinks at karaoke, seeing as she had hardly touched hers. Well, the drinks here weren't exactly cafe quality, to be fair. The advantage of being able to drink cheaply, quickly, and a lot was nice, though.

"At any rate, I was shocked that you wanted to hear about Ike-kun's idea. His strategy was an interesting one, but then again, you're *you*, so I'm sure you must have thought of it at least once already, haven't you?" said Horikita.

I let what Horikita said go in one ear and out the other, not confirming or denying anything, and decided to make a new proposition.

"How about we head someplace else and talk?" I asked.

"I don't have plans, but...you want to talk? If it's relationship trouble with Karuizawa-san or something, then I would prefer you leave me out of it," said Horikita, jokingly, standing up while grabbing her ticket.

"If that were the case, then you certainly wouldn't be the right person for the job," I replied.

"True," said Horikita.

"I'd like to talk to you about the upcoming special exam, one-on-one," I told her.

Horikita's eyes widened.

"You do? About the special exam?" asked Horikita.

"Does that surprise you?" I asked.

“I come to you a lot, but it’s unusual for you to come to me, after all,” said Horikita.

“I guess,” I answered. I couldn’t say for sure, but she was right; she certainly came to me more often.

“I can’t be relying on you all the time, which was why I wasn’t including you as much,” said Horikita.

“I’m not really talking about getting you to accept a strategy or anything. I just want to hear your thoughts,” I replied.

“You want to grade me on my readiness to lead this fight effectively?” asked Horikita.

She was irked. It seemed childish to me.

“Are you mad?” I asked.

“Heavens, no. If I were, it’d be difficult for me to refute your right to test me. Where are we going?” she asked.

“How about the cafe? I want to drink some good coffee,” I answered.

The plum kelp tea wasn’t bad, but right now, I was craving something bitter.

“Would I sound excessively self-conscious if I said that I was worried about other people seeing and hearing us…?” said Horikita.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going to do anything that you’re going to worry about,” I told her.

“I see. Well then, let’s hurry this up and get on with it,” said Horikita.

She seemed to believe me without hesitation, and the two of us left the karaoke room.

5.1

WE DIDN’T REALLY TALK on the way to the cafe and it wasn’t long before we arrived. Since it was a weekday, the place was relatively empty, giving us our choice of places to sit. After asking Horikita what she wanted to drink, I pointed over to a couple seats by the window and let her go sit down first. I queued up behind two

people already waiting by the counter and waited patiently for my turn.

After Horikita took her seat, I noticed that she was looking somewhat uncomfortable as she looked over at me. I figured it was because she didn't know what I was going to talk to her about. How she would fight, her policies and ideas, what she would prioritize, what she would subordinate—those were details I wasn't particularly interested in knowing. I wanted to leave those things to Horikita, the leader. So then, why was I meeting with her like this?

It was to bestow upon Horikita a new power. As the special exam was gradually approaching, I had decided that I needed to entrust it to her. She was entering a period of adolescent maturity, so it was time. She knew herself; she knew her class; and she knew her friends. That was why it was possible to advance to the next step.

When my turn came, I ordered two blended coffees and waited for them near the order window. The barista brought the coffees out in about two minutes, and I grabbed them by the handles and headed over to where Horikita was waiting.

"Thank you. How much was—"

"Don't worry about it. You paid for karaoke. Besides, you treated me to lunch the other day too," I answered.

"In that case, I'll take you up on your generous offer," said Horikita.

We both savored the hot but robust, full-bodied coffee. Horikita sighed deeply. Fatigue was plain on her face as I looked at her side profile. It seemed like whenever she wasn't sleeping, her mind was hard at work, even on days off.

"...Do I have something on my face?" She glared at me, perhaps annoyed that I was staring so openly.

"I just was thinking that your hair has gotten quite a bit longer," I replied.

Even if what I said was just a misdirection, it proved quite effective, since she was already fixated on that topic. Touching the ends of her hair with her fingertips, she let her eyes wander.

"You're right. It's almost been a year since I cut it. It feels like it was almost yesterday, though," said Horikita.

“You were crying your eyes out back then, I remember,” I told her.

“I wonder what you would do if an unfortunate accident were to happen right now, like if someone were to grab your coffee, grab you by the scruff, and throw it on you?” asked Horikita.

“Well, I would get burned. Also, I wouldn’t call such an intentional act an accident,” I replied.

“Well, if I tried it, you’d run away, yes? So naturally the accident could only occur if I had you grappled” said Horikita.

Horikita had seen what happened from up close when Ryuuen had unexpectedly tried to splash me with orange juice at karaoke. I supposed that if she really wanted to make sure she got me, then grabbing me was the correct answer, but…in the unlikely event that she did pour her coffee on me, the damage it would inflict would be a little more serious than a splash of orange juice.

“Why are you leaning away? I wouldn’t do something so publicly,” said Horikita.

“Worry more about the fact that you would be seriously burning one of your classmates.”

“Ugh, honestly…You really are a weirdo, you know that?”

“How am I strange here? You’re the one being weird.”

If anything, Horikita was subjecting me to abuse.

“No. I’m just a little… There are times when my seriousness goes in the wrong direction, is all,” said Horikita.

No, she was definitely strange, but I was not going to say that aloud, of course.

“This annoying conversation surely isn’t what you’re after, is it? You said that you wanted to talk about the special exam, so…” said Horikita.

It was time to get down to business.

“There’s no need for us to talk about our strategy, so this location is plenty secure enough. I’m curious about a different matter: I want to know what your expectations are for this special exam,” I answered.

“…Hrm. I’m sorry. I’m just a little confused about your intentions here. My expectations?” asked Horikita.

“Winning in this exam. To do so, you need to use your brain, agonize over what to do and make a decision—but we do that anyway. Just like you do every day with Yousuke and the others in that circle, and sometimes, with Ike and his group. What I want to talk to you about is something only you and I can discuss. This special exam carries with it the problem of expulsion. I’m sure you’ll understand what I’m getting at as soon as you think back to what happened then, but I would like to hear what changes have taken place in you between the time of the Unanimous Special Exam and now,” I replied.

By invoking memories from that time, I got Horikita to understand the meaning of “expectations.”

“Yes, I suppose you’re the only one I can discuss this with…” said Horikita.

Exposing one’s heart was never easy. While it was important to rely on one’s friends, it wasn’t easy for a leader to show weakness.

“I wonder if I can count on you to correct me if you think that my expectations are wrong,” said Horikita.

“I might not be the best person to give advice, but I’m planning to give it anyway.”

Horikita straightened her posture and looked me right in the eye. I waited for her to speak, but she only narrowed her eyes and brought her hand up to her mouth.

“This is fishy.” She must have not intended to actually say that aloud, because she seemed quite flustered. “Sorry. That was a little blunt.”

“Is this really that suspicious?” I asked.

“You’re being too nice. It’s only natural I’d feel a bit creeped out, wouldn’t you say?”

“I suppose, but ‘creeped out’ is going a bit far.”

“I guess. Well, anyway, I promised to take my classmates more seriously.” Horikita straightened her posture once more.

“Have you decided what you’re going to do if you come in last place in this special exam?” I asked.

She wouldn’t want to expel anyone, but she’d have to. Though the contents of this exam were completely different, she

could be forced into a decision in the same way as in the Unanimous Special Exam.

“I understand what you’re asking, but I can’t answer that right now.”

“I see.”

“Since that day, I’ve been asking myself the same questions repeatedly. While I believe that I made the right decision, sometimes I feel overcome with regret and guilt. It’s pathetic.” Her gaze dropped as she spoke. “I cannot say that I’ve made up my mind exactly about what I’m going to do. It’s not just me. Everyone in class is growing a little bit, every day. Even if we were to arrange everyone in a hierarchy based only on ability, the order would fluctuate.”

I wasn’t going to deny that. Some days Ike came in last, other days Hondou did. Since they were engaged in a friendly rivalry to get out of last place, mutually encouraging each other to work hard, whoever was truly last was still up in the air.

“This special exam is different. I expect I’ll be faced with two possible choices if we do fall into last place. One choice would leave a shallow wound, while the other choice would be costly. There are a lot of obstacles and no guarantees that the choice that will result in a shallow wound will actually materialize…” said Horikita.

It seemed she’d put a lot of thought into it already.

“If we come in last place, I can’t avoid choosing someone to expel. There is no way we could get out of eliminations if we came in last, and we don’t have Private Points to spend on saving anyone. In that situation, I’ll have two choices,” thought Horikita aloud.

The latter choice, the painful one, was probably the unavoidable expulsion of someone in class. An act of responsibility as leader, who must choose from among the students who were eliminated, even if she didn’t want to.

“At any rate, I intend to establish a guideline myself so that I can make a choice without hesitation.”

There was no point in putting up a tough front here. Horikita’s gaze was straight and true, so much so that it felt like it would pierce right through me. I could tell that, whichever choice

she made, she was prepared to make the call when the time came.

“I can tell. I’m glad we’ll have you to rely on,” I replied.

“Maybe I shouldn’t even be thinking about losing. Since there is a risk of expulsion, my issue was that I really wanted to be able to make a decision on it ahead of time. It might sound pathetic, and you might laugh at me, but…” said Horikita.

“What part would I laugh about?” I asked.

“I suppose you have a point, but…it’s just that you don’t seem to think about losing ahead of time.”

“Whether you think about it first or later, if you’re aiming to win, then I prefer to focus on that. You thought about what would happen if we lose because you were looking out for us, That’s all there is to it,” I replied.

“Thank you,” said Horikita.

I didn’t do anything to be thanked for, but I was in a position where she could ask me for advice in case she needed it. Perhaps she was being so honest because she knew that.

“I’m just glad it was groundless fear on my part then. It sounds like it’ll be okay to let you handle things if things go wrong,” I replied.

“You helped me in the Unanimous Special Exam, after all. So, was that everything that you wanted to know? About my expectations?” asked Horikita.

Horikita’s heart seemed lighter. It hadn’t been so bad. Unfortunately for her, the answer was no, that wasn’t everything.

“No. I was just getting started,” I replied.

“I see… What is it, then? If you’re not going to talk to me about strategies to win the exam, do you want to know about what will happen after we win? No, I can’t imagine that’s it, either.”

“Winning in this special exam means knocking the other classes down. And if you knock them down, then obviously that means another class is going to come in last place. It’s extremely likely that someone will be expelled,” I answered.

“Yes, that’s right,” said Horikita.

“It’s not your decision on who gets expelled in that class. That much should be obvious, but do you understand what I’m

getting at?”

“Of course. It’s up to the leaders of each respective class to consider their options and decide.”

“You’ve learned from your previous mistakes how to deal with an expulsion from your own class, should the time come. But if I hadn’t helped you before, then it’s hard to say what would’ve become of the class by now,” I told her.

“I don’t like hearing it, but you’re right. Our class might have collapsed without your help.”

“It’s important to fail and grow, but you can’t fail every single time. You can’t make up for that. You have to succeed and build on successes while overcoming obstacles to prove you’re a capable person.”

Horikita, holding her cup of coffee, which was now getting a little cold, silently brought it to her mouth and drank. “I think you’re exactly right,” she said.

“Let’s talk specifics. There will always be opportunities to confront specific classes directly. When that happens, there will be three possible outcomes. In one, your class will win. In the second, your class will lose. And the third is neither of those outcomes, ending in a draw, with both sides suffering. Which outcome do you want?” I asked.

“That’s a stupid question. There is no choice but for my class to win,” said Horikita.

“Okay then, I’ll add one condition. Your class wins, but at the cost of an expulsion of a particular class that loses. What would you choose?” I asked.

“I’d feel sorry for them, but I would prioritize our own victory. That’s clearly the correct answer, isn’t it?” said Horikita.

“So your answer wouldn’t change. You would still choose your own class’s victory?”

Horikita pursed her lips a little tighter, then said, “That’s the exact same condition that’s on this upcoming special exam. Am I wrong in thinking that winning comes first?”

“No one said anything about it being wrong. Okay then, one last condition. The specific class in this situation is Ryuuen’s class, and the person being expelled is Ibuki Mio. Now, which of the three outcomes would you choose in that scenario?” I asked.

She froze.

“Ibuki-san…?” she asked.

“What’s wrong? Which of the three options would you choose? Win, lose, or tie?” I asked.

“Wait a minute. Even if this is a hypothetical question, Ibuki-san is close to Ryuuen-kun. I can’t imagine she would be the first person to be expelled. Is that even a valid hypothesis?” asked Horikita.

“Valid hypothesis? You’re saying some incredibly bizarre things here. I’m just talking hypotheticals, nothing more,” I replied.

“But—”

“Ibuki’s position and her safety have not necessarily been established. Even from looking at her scores in OAA, she is a perfectly reasonable candidate for removal. If we take Ryuuen’s personality into account as well, it’s a realistic course of action. There’s no guarantee that Ryuuen will necessarily be the one to nominate the student being expelled anyway. Her expulsion could be an unavoidable casualty.”

Horikita appeared miffed and opened her mouth to speak.

“…If it means my class will win, then it’s obvious I would choose to win. Even if the certain someone who would be expelled in this situation is Ibuki-san,” said Horikita.

“You didn’t answer the question immediately. You can’t deny that it’s an outcome you don’t want to choose.”

“What’s your point?” asked Horikita.

“It’s not like I know every single detail about your circle of friends, but at the very least, I can sense you and Ibuki are friends. Maybe a little more than that.”

“We’re not on *friendly* terms, exactly,” said Horikita.

Horikita averted her eyes, with an attitude that seemingly said, *“So? What about it?”* It wasn’t that she wasn’t going to deny it, it was that she couldn’t deny it. Horikita was unaware of it herself, but those were her defensive instincts kicking in. She didn’t want to admit it, and it would be inconvenient besides.

It’s easy to fool people if they can only see you or only hear you, but hard if they get both kinds of information. The more you

try to focus on one aspect, the more you neglect awareness of the other.

“But this special exam, by its rules, is one where a student will be expelled by another class’s actions. For the first time, there could be an unexpected student being expelled,” I said.

“And even Ibuki-san is no exception.”

“Hypothetically, if it became known that Ryuuen had Ibuki down on his list as a candidate for expulsion, and there was a high probability that she would be chosen if she were eliminated in the exam, could you lead your class to eliminate Ibuki, in order to win?” I asked.

Up until this point, Horikita had answered that she would choose to win, even if she were feeling shaken, deep down. For the first time in this conversation, her composure, which had held up so well thus far, was completely broken. She would be choosing to expel Ibuki, albeit indirectly. If this had been a year ago, Horikita would have done it with almost zero hesitation. However, circumstances had changed. She had come to know Ibuki. She was an enemy, and yet, undeniably, a friend.

“Why are you asking me that?” asked Horikita.

She threw the ball back at me, forcefully, as though she were running away from it.

“This special exam is the perfect opportunity to eliminate students that you want to get rid of, but eliminating those who are easy to get rid of is also a fundamental part of battle. When the time comes when you can gain an advantage by attacking Ibuki as part of a strategy, I wonder if you, as the leader, can give the order without hesitation. Confirming that is a fundamental prerequisite. I wanted to make you aware of that,” I answered.

If I were to tell her this on the day of the exam, she would probably have a challenging time dealing with it calmly. This conversation needed to happen now, before the fact.

“You’re telling me to be prepared to eliminate Ibuki-san…or rather, any student I might be attached to,” said Horikita.

“No. It is important to be cognizant of it. You’re so focused on your own class that you don’t have a good grasp of the other classes. I’m sure you’ve only been in your head a little—‘I want to eliminate that person in this other class, I don’t want to eliminate

this person.’ Did you have a clear view of what was going on?” I asked.

“No. ‘How can I minimize damage when I lose?’ ‘Who do I expel from my side when the time comes?’ ‘How do I need to conduct myself in order for my class to win?’ That’s all I was thinking about,” said Horikita.

Horikita surrendered and admitted her error. She hadn’t been giving clear thought to her opponents, whom she would be crushing. It wasn’t easy to find someone that you wanted to crush. There was a strong possibility that multiple people would be eliminated, so the leader would hold onto the capable students anyway. That was why she didn’t think about it. If you only thought about what was immediately in front of you, you couldn’t plan ahead.

“So what am I supposed to do about that problem?” she asked.

“Just be mindful. Each person has their own way of fighting. Ryuuen won’t show mercy to anyone. He will always be thinking of ways to defeat his enemy’s strongest students. Sakayanagi tends to target people that her opponents don’t want her to target, regardless of whether they’re strong or weak. Totsuka is a good example. In Ichinose’s case, she’s the opposite; she doesn’t think about eliminating her opponents. There are things that she’s cut out for, and things she’s not,” I explained.

“I still don’t know which fighting style suits me best,” said Horikita.

“That’s your battle. Whether we’re talking about defeating opponents or defending yourself, if you are aware of both of those things, you will find your way of fighting—but *choose* it. Be aware. That alone will bring about a huge change in the world that you see,” I replied.

Horikita, her eyes closed, quietly whispered something to herself, her lips moving ever so slightly. I continued to watch her silently until she was finished.

“To be honest, I’m not sure I have that kind of self-awareness,” she admitted.

“I see.”

“But I will keep telling myself to remember it up until the special exam. If that doesn’t work, I’ll keep telling myself afterward too. As for the question of how far I can go… I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

She seemed ashamed of herself.

“There’s nothing wrong with you at all. You’re beginning to have enough awareness now. I’m here to help,” I replied.

The only difference was whether she’d get a complete understanding now, tomorrow, in the future. I was almost finished with my analysis of Horikita Suzune. Compared to the average person, she was capable, and she was someone talented enough to be accepted by and recognized by society. She could grasp a happy life for herself if she wished. However, it was unlikely that she would achieve significant success in the future, accomplish great feats that would lead to fame, or do anything that would make her go down in history. She was merely gifted. This wasn’t society yet—we were in school, where her competition was children. Here, in this miniature garden, she had the potential to grow.

That was thanks to the new perspective that Horikita Manabu had taught me. If I hadn’t been taught that perspective by that young man, I probably would not have noticed her shining qualities.

“That’s all that I wanted to say,” I added.

Horikita stared straight into my eyes, intently, and even though it felt like she would look away, she didn’t.

“What in the world are you?” asked Horikita.

“What do you mean, ‘what am I’?” I asked.

“I don’t understand you at all.”

“Do you need to?”

“It isn’t a bad thing for me to know about my classmates as a leader. Even for this next special exam, the more detailed information I have, the more advantageously I will be able to fight,” said Horikita.

If you understood individual people’s strengths and weaknesses regarding the tasks, then yes, you could certainly say that was true.

“In that case, can you and Kouenji come to understand each other?” I asked.

“We can’t understand each other, but I think I can understand him. Or is that wrong of me?” she asked.

“No. You’re right,” I replied.

I brought up Kouenji’s name to shift the conversation away from myself, but it brought the question to my mind: Was it really that simple to understand Kouenji?

“You’re not interested in moving up to Class A, and you’re a fundamentally quiet and unsociable person. But you’re not consistent in what you do, like how you started dating Karuizawa-san out of nowhere, or when you’re prepared to stand out and help for the sake of the class. Am I wrong?” asked Horikita.

“Can’t you see that as growth on my part? The former junior high school boy who used to be a wallflower has made his high school debut and has slowly been gaining courage. Eventually, he begins to put in serious effort, with the goal of moving up to Class A, and the result is what you see now...kind of.”

“Not a chance. Your reasons are too obscure for that.” She stopped there, swallowing the rest of her thought, then started a new one. “...I wonder how someone even develops a personality like yours. What kind of child were you?”

“I’m still a child. Don’t change the subject.”

“That’s not what I meant. I meant when you were really little. Where did you go to elementary school?” asked Horikita.

“You probably wouldn’t understand even if I told you.”

“You don’t know that. It could be that your school is surprisingly local to me or something.”

“We’ve had a similar conversation before. I really don’t feel like repeating myself.”

“...We did? I’m sorry, but it must not have been memorable. Tell me again?” Horikita tenaciously pressed me for answers.

“There are some things I want to keep to myself.”

Once I forcefully conveyed to Horikita that I wouldn’t be happy about any further prodding, she seemed to understand, even if all she knew was she’d make no headway. Anyway, Horikita also seemed rather mentally fatigued. It was a lot to process.

“I think you should take a breather. Get some air,” I added.

“Yes, all right…,” said Horikita.

To bring this discussion to an end, I supposed that the first thing I needed to do was finish my drink. Horikita and I each picked up our respective cups of coffee, which we both had hardly touched, and downed them. When the coffee hit my tongue, it was unpleasantly lukewarm.

“It’s cold.”

“It’s cold.”

“Don’t copy me.”

“Don’t copy me.”

It wasn’t that big a deal or anything, but the feeling of being on the same wavelength was strangely hilarious.

“Huh…?”

It would be an exaggeration to say that she jumped out of her seat, but Horikita’s eyes widened in surprise.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Ayanokouji-kun, you cracked a little smile just now.”

“Hm? And what’s wrong with that?”

“It’s just that I’ve never seen you smile.”

“Rude. It’s not like I’m a baby smiling for the first time.”

I’ve smiled many times. Intentionally, consciously, I’ve made the effort. It wasn’t an especially rare occurrence.

“Sure, I guess it might be an unusual thing for me,” I added.

It was true that I’d not consciously tried to smile a moment ago. Huh, an unintended expression of emotion. How many experiences like that have I had thus far? It’d just come naturally. It was precisely because I knew how difficult that was for me that I found it deeply interesting. It felt like a drop of color on a blank sketchbook. I hadn’t done that in front of Kei, nor in front of friends like Yousuke. Not even I knew why that had happened in front of Horikita.

“I wonder why I smiled. If you smiled too, then maybe you know why?” I asked.

I expected Horikita would have a clear answer. Maybe what’d happened was just that funny. I looked Horikita in the eye as I

asked her that question, but she just averted her eyes and sounded flustered when she gave her response.

“E-even if you ask me earnestly, I don’t know.”

“You’re saying that there was nothing notably humorous about what happened?” I asked.

“I already told you. I don’t know,” said Horikita, raising her voice a little and averting her eyes. “You’re making it weird,” huffed Horikita as she vigorously gulped down the rest of her coffee and stood up. “We’re done talking now, right? I have plans.”

“I thought it was your day off?”

“I just remembered.” Horikita picked up the cup that she had just emptied. “I’ll try thinking about things in my own way, about the next special exam and what comes after that.”

“Good,” I replied.

Even though she was the one who was going first, and moved to leave, she stopped in her tracks as though she just remembered something.

“That reminds me. Sorry, but there’s one thing I must confirm with you,” said Horikita.

“About excluding tasks in the special exam?” I asked.

“That’s right.”

“What about the other students?”

“I’ve already heard from everyone except you. It’s about time you give me your input. ”

Apparently, while I’d been taking it easy, the other students had already finished notifying Horikita.

“Well, knowing you, I’m sure you’d be fine even if you don’t give any exclusions, but what do you say?” asked Horikita.

“Performing Arts and Music, and then Subculture, I guess.”

“Categories that have nothing to do with studying. The same choices as mine,” replied Horikita.

“There are other categories that I’m not sure about, but I wanted to eliminate the ones that I’m not good at.”

News, Everyday Life, and Gastronomy. It seemed like there were probably things I would know in these categories, but there

were all kinds of things I didn’t know. However, the three I gave were my weakest.

“Okay, I’ll go ahead with those,” said Horikita.

“Thanks,” I replied.

Now it was my turn to think about myself in unexpected ways.

Chapter 6:
Game Changer

THURSDAY MORNING, the day before the special exam. Today was a special day off. I was usually a good sleeper, but I had an unusually sleepless night.

"I guess it's true what they say, a lack of sleep ain't good for you… I'm so tired…" I groaned.

When I got up, I saw that I had gotten a message from Kitou on my phone.

"Looks like Princess has finally settled on a plan of action, apparently," I thought aloud.

She was finally going to gather the class executives to discuss their plans, and it was the day before the exam. Well, I say "discussion," but it's not like she was going to go into detail about her strategy. As always, Sakayanagi acted on her own. She would only tell the students what is necessary for her to carry out that action, using them like extensions of herself.

"Tch…"

In addition to the message from Kitou, I had received dozens of others. They were from the girl I was currently dating. Even though I remembered that we were together and chatting with each other just yesterday, and until pretty late at that, I had just dipped out of the conversation partway through, because it was just dragging on and on.

Where are we gonna go next?

I wanna eat that. I want this.

What do you like? What do you dislike?

I wanna see you. I'm lonely.

All just pointless crap, all the time.

"Sorry, I fell asleep. Lemme make it up to you next time, OK?"

I sent her that text, along with a cute, illustrated sticker, without feeling. I figured that would satisfy her for the time being. If she nagged at me, I could just throw her away, but there was still some information left for me to pick up. No matter what class

it was about, no matter how trivial the info was, any info was good.

I put that girl out of my mind for now—there was the matter of Sakayanagi to deal with. That kept me up at night. What was the strategy? And even before we considered that, what should I do? With the final exam approaching, my anxiety was getting stronger by the day.

We could lose to Ryuuen in a direct conformation and a large number of Class Points would move around. That had to be avoided at all costs. I needed to do whatever I could, right?

6.1

SAKAYANAGI DIDN'T BOTHER fretting over a meeting spot. Karaoke, or a room in the dormitory, to avoid being seen was fine. Or even in the special building or behind the gym. Anywhere that was a good place to have a confidential conversation. From Sakayanagi's point of view, she probably didn't care; she didn't think she was spilling secrets.

Today, as always, we went to the most bustling cafe in Keyaki Mall. Sakayanagi seemed to be enjoying a moment of leisurely comfort together with Kamuro and Kitou, all of them seated together at a popular spot.

"Sorry for being a little late, Princess." I sat down on an empty seat, remembering to use my pet name for her.

"Oh, you have a girlfriend? And one you're especially fond of it seems," said Sakayanagi.

"...Oh, I wonder if you saw us somewhere, then?" I asked.

Last year, all I had to do was keep an eye on the Class A students. Now that I was a second-year student, I had to keep the other eye on my juniors. I wondered if I had been too careless since I'd been seen. Nah, if a first-year were in the second-year student hallway, they'd definitely be noticed. If that was the case, then...

Was there a pawn that Sakayanagi had been holding onto in my class? In the majority of cases, she used Kamuro, Kitou, or me, but Sakayanagi accepted information over her cell. I had asked

Sakayanagi about that before, keeping it light and casual, but I didn't directly ask who. It was possible that, whoever it was, they were watching.

I decided that if it was a student in my class, then there wouldn't be any need to rush to track them down. However, if it turned out that this wasn't a coincidence, and this person was intentionally spying on me, I would have a problem with that.

"I'm pretty private when it comes to my love life, so please keep that on the down-low," I added.

"Heh heh, I will not say a word," said Sakayanagi.

"Okay, so? What are we talking about today?" asked Kamuro.

"Do you even need to ask, Masumi-chan? I'm sure you know already," I replied.

"Back up. We're not on a first-name basis," snapped Kamuro.

"Sorry, sorry, my bad. Force of habit," I said.

"'Habit'? You've only done it a few times," argued Kamuro.

"In my heart, you're always Masumi-chan."

"Gross."

My familiarity repulsed Kamuro. That was just as well. If our positions were reversed, I bet I would've felt the same. I was playing the clown, though, so I needed to affect the mannerisms.

"Okey doke, let's get this show on the road, Princess. We're talking about the special exam, right?" I asked.

"No, we are not. Today is just a tea party," replied Sakayanagi in a mocking tone of voice.

I forced a slight overreaction, sliding out of my chair.

"You didn't hafta gather all your executives here for that, Princess," I exclaimed.

"It's an act for those outside our class," said Sakayanagi.

An act? What? Don't make me laugh.

"If Class A calls a strategy meeting, then students from other classes will inevitably whisper about it. Tensions will increase. They'll put in every possible effort in order to win, won't they?" I argued. I'd been simpering in the hopes of being let in on her secrets, but after yesterday, I wasn't in the mood. "I don't

understand what we'd gain from doing something like that. Tell me."

"We do gain something. It draws out the spirit of the three other classes, wouldn't you agree?" replied Sakayanagi.

"...That's supposed to be a benefit?" asked Kamuro.

Kuro and I were on the same page; that did not sound like a benefit. Far from it. What the hell was the point of getting people on edge when you instead wanted them to be proud and drop their guard?

"We want to enjoy the competition, do we not? We have been engaged in quite a bit of play as of late, like the cultural festival and the school trip," said Sakayanagi.

She prioritized her own enjoyment, even if it meant lowering the odds of us winning or suffering some kind of disadvantage. That was how Sakayanagi had continued to play her cards during her reign, as the leader of our class. Our classmates tolerated that because it led to good results—she had a history of steadily accumulating Class Points.

However, if that track record were to disappear, Sakayanagi's value would suddenly plummet. I didn't know who else saw that possibility for her except me. Should I say something? Probably not.

After finishing what really was just a simple tea party, I went into the bathroom near the east exit. I wasn't going in there to do my business nor to have a secret chat with somebody; it was just a habit that I couldn't shake. I entered the stall furthest in and locked the door. The lid opened for me cheerfully, and I pulled down my pants to sit and think.

The stalls in Keyaki Mall were always kept pristine, so it never felt uncomfortable here. There weren't even any nasty odors. To be honest, I didn't really mind places that had a certain amount of filth and stink anyway. The BGM playing throughout the mall amounted to nothing but empty noise, but I closed my eyes and leaned forward, placing my arms on my knees.

At school, which had little privacy, it was an exceptionally useful place—a priceless treasure. It didn't have to be a bathroom specifically for me to hide in, but habits really are tough to break. I

remained in the stall for the next thirty minutes or so, without even once taking my phone out.

"Guess I should head back," I muttered.

When it felt like everyone in the bathroom was completely gone, even from the handwashing stations, I got up off the toilet, flushed, washed my hands, and then left the bathroom.

"Looks like you're finally done with your shit." Ryuuen leaned against the wall near the entrance to the restroom, phone in hand, sneering at me.

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"I was just wonderin' how things were goin'. Let's you and me have a chat," said Ryuuen.

"Come on, man. The special exam's tomorrow, remember? If people see me together with you in a place like this, who knows what people'll think. You could've come to my room or something," I replied.

"If yer innocent, then just act confident," said Ryuuen.

"You're being ridiculous. Make it quick, will you?" I replied.

It was one thing for me to do the contacting, that was fine, but I didn't like being taken off guard. That was especially true in Ryuuen's case because he was sloppy. However, having a dialogue with him was unavoidable if I wanted access to the inner workings of his class. They were stormy seas, but the more I could see, the more I could ride those waves.

6.2

I SPENT MY whole day off, from the morning on, with Kei at Keyaki Mall. I think she was able to enjoy herself well enough, though she occasionally expressed her anxiety about tomorrow's special exam. We returned to the dormitory together, talking about trivial nonsense on the way.

While we were walking, my phone rang. It was Kanzaki. Kei peeked at my phone, wondering who I had gotten a call from but immediately lost interest once she saw the name and took out her own phone to play with. We stopped in place and I answered.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Where are you right now? I went directly to your room, but you aren’t back yet.”

“I’m heading back right now. What do you want?” I asked.

“Could we have a moment to talk? I’m here, and so is Watanabe. Would that be all right?”

I sometimes talked to them when we would meet up somewhere, but it was unusual for them to come directly to my room spontaneously.

“I’m on my way back right now,” I replied.

“May we continue to wait outside your room?”

I told him that was okay and then ended the call. Kei also put her phone back in her pocket at the same time.

“What did Kanzaki-kun want? I heard Watanabe-kun’s name too,” said Kei.

“Dunno. Apparently, they want to talk to me, and they’re waiting outside my room. Sorry, but you and I are going to have to call it a day,” I replied.

“Okay. Are you close with those two?”

“I was in a group together with Watanabe during the school trip, but we’ve only recently started talking.”

“Oh? Seems like you’ve been making a lot of friends, huh?” Kei nodded her head a few times, sounding deeply impressed and proud of me.

We rode the elevator to the fourth floor. When the doors opened, I saw them: Watanabe and Kanzaki. Watanabe noticed us and waved.

“Okay, text me later! Oh, but no rush, you can totally take your time,” said Kei.

Kei spoke with a smile on her face, because if it was guy friends, then there was no problem. She welcomed me spending time with men anytime. Now that Kei and I had made up, she had much less anxiety.

“I apologize for the unexpected visit. Were you by any chance planning on spending time alone with her?” asked Kanzaki as I approached.

“You don’t have to worry about it. Besides, it’s not often that you two come to see me. Come in,” I replied.

I unlocked the door and invited them inside. The two of them looked somewhat bewildered when they looked around the living room, probably because it was so colorful. The girlish presence was quite strong. I directed them to sit down and asked them what they wanted to drink. However, shortly after I headed into the kitchen, Kanzaki stood and followed me.

“I was asked to keep this quiet because they weren’t sure if they could come earlier or not, but after I told them that I had just met up with you, two more people asked if they could come. Do you mind?” asked Kanzaki.

“Okay, well, I’ll have to get them refreshments too. Who’s coming?” I asked.

“Ichinose and Amikura,” said Kanzaki.

I didn’t have any problem with adding more people, but I couldn’t guess what was going on based on this particular crew. Kanzaki was part of the reformist camp, so to speak, who was now making moves because he wanted Ichinose and the class to change. On the other hand, Ichinose was part of the conservative camp, who wanted to maintain the current situation. It seemed like Ichinose was keeping an eye on Kanzaki. Or maybe I was just reading into things too deeply. There wasn’t any sign of Himeno or Hamaguchi—Kanzaki’s supporters—coming either.

“We have settled on a course of action for our class regarding the upcoming special exam, and Ichinose said that she wanted to have a final, brief check with you, Ayanokouji. However, I don’t know if there will be any benefit to you in hearing what we have to say,” said Kanzaki. He was apologetic and not exactly thrilled about the topic of conversation.

“Nah, I don’t mind. How did Watanabe and Amikura end up being part of this, though?” I asked.

“Watanabe and I just happened to run into one another while I was on my way to your room, Ayanokouji,” said Kanzaki.

“Yep, coincidence,” added Watanabe.

I guessed that he probably caught wind that Amikura would be coming somehow and pretended it was a coincidence so he could tag along. Or was I being too suspicious? I didn’t really care

either way, so I held back from asking him. We turned on the TV and passed the time for about fifteen minutes until my doorbell rang. When I went to answer it, I found Ichinose and Amikura at my door.

They'd brought some snacks that they bought from Keyaki Mall as gifts. After preparing drinks for everyone again, I adopted a listening posture.

"You might have already heard this from Kanzaki-kun, but I really wanted to talk to you about tomorrow's special exam, Ayanokouji-kun. I've been thinking about coming to you for a while. I'm really sorry for the short notice," said Ichinose.

Oh, so this wasn't spur of the moment, hm?

"I don't really mind, but I'm not the leader. If you want to know about our class's internal affairs, or if you want to find out what our plans are for the exam, you'll have to speak with Horikita directly," I replied.

"Oh no, it's okay. Actually, if anything, it's more like something we wanted to tell you," said Ichinose.

"Hold on a minute. Before you talk to Ayanokouji, there's something I'd like to ask you first," said Kanzaki.

"Hm? What is it?" asked Ichinose.

"If this is about collusion or something along those lines, I'd like to make it known that I am firmly against that," said Kanzaki, preempting that conversation.

He was only worried about cooperation between two classes, not four, so he meant something specific.

"You're worried about the possibility of me having all four classes get the same score, right?" said Ichinose.

"Bluntly, yes," replied Kanzaki.

"Why didn't you bring that up during the class meeting?" asked Ichinose.

"If I voiced a statement saying that I was against colluding, but then you spoke up and were in favor of it, they would have supported you just to support you. I wanted to avoid that. I cannot do anything if there are talks going on behind the scenes without my knowledge of course, but I could not let talk of collusion happen right before my eyes," said Kanzaki.

Kanzaki had preferred to put a stop to the idea in a more private setting, like now. With me lending a helping hand in reforming his class, he could use me as an ally to thwart collusion. I'm sure he must have factored that into his plans.

"The special exam is tomorrow though, right? Isn't it a bit late to propose having all four classes collude now?" asked Amikura. It was common sense.

"Normally, yes, you'd be right. However, Ichinose being Ichinose, I wouldn't be surprised if she were thinking about it until the very last minute, to avoid the risk of expulsion. She could even change her mind to protect her friends," said Kanzaki.

"If all four classes were clearly aligned on a plan like that ahead of time, and such a thing were solidly feasible, then yes, I would be open to considering a proposal like that. Even if we lose Class Points, if all classes got the same result, it would be perfectly fair. And as you said, Kanzaki-kun, I have been thinking about the feasibility of that, even now," replied Ichinose.

Kanzaki, hastily jumping to the conclusion that the development he had feared was happening, tried to argue back. "Just as I thought... However, that would mean we would lose our chance to move up the rankings and—"

"Don't worry. I didn't come here to ask Ayanokouji-kun to collude with us," Ichinose cut in politely, gently putting a stop to Kanzaki's protests. "If that *were* my intention, it would've made more sense to talk directly with Horikita-san," he added reassuringly.

Kanzaki most likely wasn't comforted by Ichinose's words. Even if they weren't talking about collusion, if she put forward a strategy that was meant to avoid expulsion, that would be a similar outcome. If she stuck with a stance of protecting her classmates even if it put her at a disadvantage, victory would likely move further out of their reach.

To keep his anxiety from showing outwardly, Kanzaki clumsily made a show of being relieved. "In that case, good. I am sorry for derailing the conversation like that. I guess I do that. I'm a pretty bad conversationalist." said Kanzaki.

We assured him it wasn't a problem.

“Kanzaki-kun, it seems like you’ve gotten to be really close with Ayanokouji-kun,” observed Ichinose.

“…Oh?” he asked.

“Yeah. I think that if you were the old Kanzaki-kun, even if you had something on your mind, you wouldn’t have said anything about our class in front of him. I’m sure that if, for example, it was Hirata-kun or Kaneda-kun here, your response would’ve been totally different.”

Kanzaki cocked his head to the side, confused. Shortly after Kanzaki started making his move with Himeno and the others, Ichinose herself had already sensed that things were changing.

“Enough about me. Continue with your conversation,” said Kanzaki.

Ichinose responded to him with a smile and a nod, and then turned to me.

“So, the reason I came to see you, Ayanokouji-kun, and not Horikita-san, is…”

I prepared myself, wondering what she was going to say, but when she finally came out with it, it wasn’t a big deal, honestly. What she said was closer to a list of aspirations, like that she wanted to win together with her friends, and that she didn’t want to lose. Expressing such notions didn’t require a big meeting. Even Kanzaki, who had been listening along with a stiff expression at the start, relaxed his guard partway through.

Once that was over, our get-together switched to being a casual chat—no more mention of the special exam at all. The presence of Watanabe, the life of the party, kept the conversation animated, and our meeting ended like a normal, friendly get-together. It was around six o’clock in the evening, and was already darkening outside, when Kanzaki suggested we wrap things up. Our meeting had ended. Ichinose and Amikura left through the entranceway to my room first, followed by Kanzaki, and then finally Watanabe.

“Man! I wasn’t sure what was gonna happen today, but it ended up being lots of fun!” exclaimed Watanabe.

I signaled Watanabe with my eyes, telling him, “*That’s because you could talk with Amikura without worry, right?*” When he got my message, he responded with a big, bright smile.

After I shut the door on the final parting words of “Sorry to have bothered you! Thanks for having us!” my room immediately fell back into silence. The sounds coming from the TV hadn’t reached my ears until just now, and it was so harsh and annoying that I immediately turned it off. Then, when I reached over to pick up the cups left on the table…

Ding dong. My doorbell rang.

I still hadn’t contacted Kei yet, so there was no way that she would’ve come back without checking. *Who could it be?* I wondered. I opened the door while thinking that this was a little bit curious. When I opened the door, I saw Ichinose standing there, who, for some reason, had returned alone.

“I’m sorry, Ayanokouji-kun. I think I forgot my phone…” said Ichinose.

Ah, was that all?

“Your phone? Where was it? I’ll go get it for you,” I replied.

“Um, I think it’s probably under the table. I’m really sorry,” said Ichinose.

It wasn’t unusual for people to forget their phones, and I supposed Ichinose was no exception. Our cell phones were a necessity in our daily lives, and since we spent a lot of time with them, it was easy for people to accidentally forget them, only to quickly realize they were gone. Kei often forgot her phone in my room and would hurriedly come back and get it in a panic.

“Wait a minute,” I answered.

I had Ichinose wait in the entranceway of my dorm and I went to check under the table. I immediately noticed that there was indeed a cell phone right next to where she’d been seated. After ten or so seconds of searching under the table and walking back to the door, I handed the phone back to Ichinose.

“Thank you. I’m sorry to have bothered you again,” said Ichinose.

“No worries. See ya later,” I replied.

“…Hey, um, would it be okay if I talked to you for a little while?” asked Ichinose.

We had already chatted quite a bit, but girls could jump from one conversation to the next. I nodded in approval, feeling more

understanding than surprised.

“If people were to see the two of us alone though, they might get the wrong idea, so why don’t we lock the door?” said Ichinose.

She turned around and reached out for the front door, but then she quickly changed her mind, and refrained from doing so.

“Actually, no, wait, that’s probably not okay. If we were in a locked room… That would look worse,” said Ichinose.

Thus far, it wouldn’t have appeared like we were meeting alone. In fact, Ichinose’s classmates were here with us until just moments ago. However, if we locked the door behind us, then it’d be a different story. People would probably think that we were doing something to feel guilty about. Something that we didn’t want others to see us doing. Something like that.

“Mako-chan and the others headed back. I told them that I forgot my phone in your room, Ayanokouji-kun, so even if someone sees us here together right now, we have a good excuse,” said Ichinose.

To me, it sounded only like she was explaining her intentions.

“Did you forget your cell phone on purpose?” I asked.

“What do you think, Ayanokouji-kun?” she asked. Ichinose smiled, as though I’d said exactly what she wanted me to. That was a little unexpected.

“Seems like I hit the nail on the head…”

Ichinose couldn’t resist in the face of my questioning, and she admitted to it, while looking sad and downcast. “I wanted to meet you. I wanted to be alone with you, Ayanokouji-kun, just the two of us, no matter what… Do you think that I’m repulsive…?” asked Ichinose.

“Repulsive? Why would I think that?” I asked in return.

“Because…I mean, I’m coming to see a boy who has a girlfriend, and…” said Ichinose.

It was true that it would be easier for me to understand if our situation were reversed and it was a guy going to see a girl. A guy risked looking like a stalker if he did that. However, ultimately, interpretation of such actions depends on the attitude of the

person on the receiving end. If that person disliked the other, then they'd be a stalker; if they liked the other person, not so much.

"It would be weirder to come see a guy who has a girlfriend out in the open. I'd say you're showing me more consideration this way," I replied.

If Ichinose forced her way into my room, it would be extremely difficult for me to smooth things over with Kei. By creating a situation like this, even if Ichinose and I are meeting alone, it would be easy for me to play it off as something I was forced into.

"...Really? You really don't think that I'm repulsive?" asked Ichinose.

"Really, I don't," I answered.

As I looked at Ichinose right now, there was only one thing that I thought.

She's becoming a much more interesting subject.

Ichinose slowly drew closer to me and pushed up against my chest.

"That was an accident... I stumbled and was about to fall, and you just helped me, is all... Right?" said Ichinose.

"Yep. No clue as to why you'd do it on purpose," I joked.

I felt like Ichinose was probably smiling, though I couldn't see it.

"I love you so, so much, Ayanokouji-kun. I can't help it... I've never been in love before. I get this strong feeling, like this is going to be the first and last time I fall in love or something. That's strange, isn't it?"

Ichinose was doing things that I could not have imagined her doing when we first met, and she was so perfectly calm about it. Her actions could be interpreted as attractive, even in the sexual, romantic sense.

Ichinose's romantic love was a driving force. It drew out even more of her potential, a potential that she herself hadn't noticed that she possessed. She used it for herself, to her own advantage.

Ichinose's unchanging good-natured, gullible character. I had set up alien elements like Kanzaki and Himeno to try to disrupt

that character, but so many unexpected things had happened. Of course, that wasn't a bad thing—rather delightful, actually.

Now I could approach improving her class from two directions. Originally, there was only one line drawn, only one outcome—likely failure. From there, I created a new line, to increase the odds of her class's survival. However, that line was still likely to end in disaster. Ichinose introduced another change to it. It was difficult for me to judge whether this new special case, this new line, would succeed or fail at this current stage.

From Ichinose's hair right below me wafted a scent so alluring I could barely describe it. It wasn't just bath products.

"If we weren't in separate classes, we could be together more regularly..." said Ichinose.

That's when it happened. Without warning, the door to my room flew open.

"Hey, I'm really sorry, Ayanokouji, but I was just wondering if maybe you could give me some personal adv—"

It was Watanabe, who had been here with us until just a short time ago. I'm sure that Ichinose must have been on high alert just in case something were to happen. She had most likely considered the possibility that someone might unexpectedly show up. Even so, anyone would've expected him to at least knock. Someone simply waltzing in took me off guard.

I went stiff, I think. I couldn't feel my body. Ichinose, unable to suddenly pull herself away now that we were close together like this, simply turned around in surprise.

"Whaaaaaaaaa?" blinked Watanabe.

Watanabe himself, who had opened my door without thinking, looked even more flabbergasted than either of us. It was only a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity. Ichinose's body heat, which I could feel through my clothes, suddenly went cold. It would be impossible to pass off Ichinose and I being in such close contact with each other as mere accident. Her "I was just about to fall" excuse had only worked as a joke.

Watanabe was still too flabbergasted to make sense of the scene, but that wasn't going to last forever. Of course, I'm sure that it wasn't just me who understood the seriousness of the situation—Ichinose knew. Watanabe's response would determine

Ichinose's next move. There was nothing I could do, so I had to leave it to the two of them to take the lead.

"Oh, ah, uh, erm, I, uh, sorry! I didn't knock...so...okay, bye!" shouted Watanabe.

Watanabe's decision in this impossible situation? Run away. Watanabe tried to close the door, but Ichinose moved even quicker. She stopped the door with her hand.

"Watanabe-kun," said Ichinose.

"Y-yes, ma'am?!" he wailed.

Watanabe spoke formally and stood at attention.

"Will you please come inside?" she asked.

"Well, uh, but, I'm uh, bothering, I mean, being a bother! And my stuff isn't that, uh, a big deal!" he sputtered.

"Please? Come inside?" asked Ichinose again.

"...O-okay," replied Watanabe.

Because she was looking at Watanabe, I couldn't see Ichinose's facial expression, but when she turned around, I saw that she had that same kind, warm smile that she always showed to everyone. There was no sign of her being panicked or flustered. She must've been upset and scared the moment that Watanabe saw us, but she'd switched gears and acted decisively. She pulled Watanabe into the entranceway, and once the door was closed behind him, she asked for my permission and locked the door—now that Watanabe had come in, locking the door was no issue. Ichinose was thinking through every move. Her calm in an emergency was honestly impressive.

"Come on in," I said.

Now that we were three, it was too cramped to talk in the entranceway, so we moved into my room. Emotions warred behind Watanabe's stiff expression. From his point of view, the two people who should have been the most flustered of all in this situation didn't appear to be perturbed in the least. It was understandable that he was terrified.

The TV was turned off, but the inside of my room was enveloped in a strange stillness. Watanabe hadn't been forced or anything, but he lowered himself to the floor, kneeling with the

tops of his feet flat on the floor and sitting on his soles—he was so stiff he looked a little dead.

"About what you saw earlier, that was all me. I selfishly did that on my own. Ayanokouji-kun is not at fault," said Ichinose.

"Y-y-yes, of course, madam. I politely comprehend what you have communicated to my unworthy self," said Watanabe, awkwardly.

"Um, I'm a little uncomfortable with how formal you're being," said Ichinose.

"S-sorry..."

"I just hugged Ayanokouji without his permission. You saw that, right?"

All Watanabe could do was nod repeatedly, in calm, composed confirmation.

"I did something that I shouldn't have. So, while I understand that I'm not qualified to say this and am not in the right here, I know that you're not malicious, Watanabe-kun. You're not the sort of person who goes around spreading rumors that'd hurt innocent people," said Ichinose.

Ichinose didn't use a simple method like telling Watanabe to keep his mouth shut. She considered how sorry he felt, and how down he felt, and tried to contain the situation by using his own conscience against him. It was unimaginably more effective than trying to intimidate Watanabe into silence.

"I am really truly sorry, Ayanokouji-kun, for doing that to you without your permission," said Ichinose.

"Don't worry about it," I replied.

"It makes me happy to hear you say that, but if Karuizawa-san knew, she'd be mad... No, worse, she'd be devastated. I will accept whatever punishment you wish to give to spare her," said Ichinose.

I would never punish Ichinose for something like that, and I'm sure they both knew it. What Ichinose said was probably her last push, to fill in that remaining 1 percent after she had already gone 99 percent of the way in reining in Watanabe. I'm sure Ichinose's analysis of the situation was right on the money. However, she was pushing a little hard. There was an element of

Ichinose's natural good self unconsciously mixed in there, among calculated cleverness. The ratio was unclear though.

There was silence for a while. We couldn't let the time pass without a word forever, obviously.

"I think it's best that the two of you head out," I said.

Ichinose seemed like she was waiting for me to say those words, because she softly mumbled, "Yes, you're right."

Watanabe, however, didn't budge and showed no signs of standing up. He seemed to have calmed down though, having regained his composure after being so flustered moments ago. I wondered what he was thinking.

"Watanabe?" I asked.

When I called his name, Watanabe took a deep breath, and then looked at both Ichinose and me.

"Well, to be honest, I think I'm the one in the wrong here, not you folks, Ayanokouji, Ichinose," he said. "It's not polite to barge into someone's room without even knocking. I don't think my promise I'll be quiet will reassure you enough, but... Well, I came back to your room because I wanted to talk to you, Ayanokouji. And, uh, well, since I'm here, I was wondering if maybe I could talk to you about my junior high days...?"

That's right. I hadn't heard the reason why Watanabe had come back to my room.

"Okay then, in that case, I'll head on back already," said Ichinose, motioning to leave.

"W-wait, please hold on. Actually... Ichinose, if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to talk to you too," said Watanabe.

It was a sudden request, but as there was no way that Ichinose could refuse him, she stayed put. Watanabe wanted advice. He began by telling us a story from his past.

"So, okay, I met the girl of my dreams when I was in my second year of junior high. I met this girl when I switched classes, and we became fast friends. At first, we started out talking just because we were sitting next to each other. She said I was funny. Then we got closer and closer. We were in the same group on the school trip this year. I knew that she was my destiny," said Watanabe.

It might have been his first love, but looking at Watanabe, there was no doubt that it was a major one for him.

“I thought we were close, enough to the point that I was like ‘Hey, maybe this girl likes me too.’ But, well, it turned out that I didn’t know anything… That girl was actually going out with this high-energy, nice dude from the next class. I didn’t know about that at all, and there I was, my feelings for her growing.”

A one-sided love. Although the sexes were different in his scenario, you could swap out the players in his situation with me, Kei, and Ichinose right now.

“We would talk on the phone every single day, and chat about nothing until late at night, and—”

It didn’t feel like he was talking about happy memories. He had a pained, ashamed look on his face.

“This one time, we were having a lot of fun talking on the phone. The vibe was just amazing. She said that she liked me. I was so happy, I mean like, *so* happy… Then she asked me, ‘How do you feel about me?’ and I don’t even know how long it took me to respond and say that I liked her… I couldn’t say anything at all for about five minutes or so,” said Watanabe.

Watanabe let out a self-deprecating chuckle, with a look of slight embarrassment on his face.

“Was that girl dating the other boy at the time?” asked Ichinose.

The idea that this girl was about to start two-timing with Watanabe was the first thought that came to mind when hearing his story, but he denied it.

“No… I guess that she got dumped. I didn’t know how long before exactly, but I think their relationship probably started turning sour when she and I started talking on the phone,” said Watanabe.

In other words, this girl fell for Watanabe once she was a completely free agent. There was nothing wrong with that.

“I didn’t know about her past romantic relationships or anything at the time, but I guess because she got dumped by that kind, cheerful dude, she fell for me, as a rebound. I didn’t know that was where she was emotionally. I just got completely carried away,” said Watanabe.

Since they were junior high school students at the time though, they weren't officially dating out in the open; it was a secret between the two of them. They talked on the phone, and they would sometimes go over to each other's homes to spend time together. It sounded like it was smooth sailing.

"And, well, we only ever kissed twice, y'know? Well, actually, she was the one who kissed me, but still..." said Watanabe.

He looked somewhat ashamed when he said that.

As he continued to speak, it seemed as though Watanabe's fate had taken a turn for the worse when he entered his third year of junior high. He and that girl were placed in different classes. Watanabe's best friend from elementary school happened to be in that girl's class, and apparently, he had fallen in love with her. I didn't need to ask that many questions to understand where this story was going.

"In the end, she...she apologized to me over the phone, crying. She said, 'Sorry, I can't go out with you anymore...' Stuff like that. She said she liked me over the phone and then she told me she didn't like me over the phone. Funny, huh?" said Watanabe.

The girl had started dating his best friend.

"Personally, I guess I felt like 'Oh well, nothing I can do...' But still, it was tough. I think what hit me the hardest though, like a real knife to the heart, was when, a few months later, my best friend told me that he dumped her. He was laughing while he said it," said Watanabe.

Watanabe's relationship with that girl was a secret. That was why he felt like his best friend didn't mean any harm. Of course, there was no way to deny the possibility that his best friend had indeed known that Watanabe dated her and was being cruel to him.

"I'm a coward when it comes to love... I thought that I'd never fall in love with anybody again, but as soon as I came to this school, I fell in love with another girl. I'm guessing you know what I'm talking about, right?" said Watanabe.

Watanabe was a positive person. I assumed he was a late bloomer, but he'd actually been through some heartache.

"So, uh, that's basically it. I didn't really want to tell anybody about my past because it's just like, super disgraceful, right? That's

why I want you to believe me… I won't tell anybody about what happened today."

An exchange of shameful secrets. That was the best that Watanabe could do at the moment.

"So, uh, what I wanted to talk to you about today, was, erm, about the girl I like. It's not like I've made, like, progress or anything, but, you know, like, how sometimes you just want to talk to a friend about stuff?" said Watanabe.

It sounded like Watanabe had just wanted to ask questions like "How did Amikura look to you today, from a third-party perspective?" "Did she look at me?" "Did I make the conversation fun?"

"Honestly, I was planning on coming back here alone to talk, just myself. But when Ichinose said that she forgot her phone, I shifted my timetable forward a bit and came earlier. I didn't think that she would still be here," said Watanabe.

Watanabe was probably feeling confused and flustered, of course. He had heard from Amikura and Himeno that Ichinose probably likes me. So, while that part specifically might not have come as a surprise to him, the embrace certainly did.

"This is an unrequited love on my part. Mako-chan and Chihiro-chan both know that I love Ayanokouji-kun, too." Ichinose couldn't hide it any longer, even though it was a bit of an open secret. "I came back to get something I lost, and I just succumbed to the temptation, that's all."

"I-I see… Temptation…" repeated Watanabe.

Watanabe nodded his head in understanding, but it was also clear that his confusion hadn't abated fully. After all this was Ichinose. Unrequited love or not, I had a girlfriend, so the mood was serious.

"I think that I understand you better after our talk today, Watanabe-kun. You love Mako-chan, don't you?" said Ichinose.

"Huh?! H-how do you know that?"

"I can tell by looking at you. You've really been looking at Mako-chan a lot, especially lately," said Ichinose.

Ichinose wasn't the only one who'd noticed it. But then again, his staring wasn't exactly subtle.

“From what she’s told me, Mako-chan still seems to be in love with a former classmate of hers from junior high. But I think that she wants to put herself back out there, so there shouldn’t be a problem there. Of course, I don’t know who Mako-chan will go for or what her exact feelings are. Speaking as her best friend, I’d be happy if it were you,” said Ichinose.

This was a transaction so to speak, but Ichinose spoke with genuine warmth. Watanabe had tried to get forgiveness by telling us a secret from his past, and Ichinose intended to get additional insurance. She gave him information about what the current situation was with Amikura and indicated that she was willing to act as a go-between, depending on how the situation played out. Watanabe was timid, but his feelings for Amikura, whom he loved, were genuine.

He was going to try regardless. However, if Ichinose could give him a helping hand, it would be a godsend. She was an encouraging, heartening helper. Watanabe went from trusting Ichinose 100 percent to trusting her 120 percent. Watanabe was entirely in Ichinose’s hands.

“R-really? It’s okay?” he asked.

“Of course. First though, you need to start by closing the distance between you and Mako-chan,” said Ichinose.

“Y-yeah!” exclaimed Watanabe.

Watanabe nodded happily and somewhat excitedly. I’m sure that he was still feeling like he had seen something that he shouldn’t have, but that feeling would be gradually painted over. A love triangle. A scandal. This was just gossip people used to entertain themselves. If Watanabe were to spread what happened around out of a desire for attention, he would make Ichinose his enemy.

On the other hand, if he kept it to himself, then Ichinose would be a good friend. It was an advantage, and naturally, he’d want it. In the end, it didn’t matter to Watanabe at all if Ichinose and I were in the throes of a tragic drama if his own interests were met. Ichinose had seamlessly turned this vulnerable situation to her advantage.

Ichinose had sensed that Kanzaki and his followers were acting suspiciously. Watanabe, who had been on the side of the

reformist Kanzaki, had now suddenly switched over to Ichinose's camp. Even I didn't know what to make of this turn of events. I had originally intended to use Kanzaki and his followers to deliver an explosive blast to the class, but Ichinose was changing it without my intervention. Would this strengthen or weaken the class? I didn't have enough time until the end of the year to watch how it'd play out. By then, it might be too late.

6.3

Around eight o'clock in the evening, Hashimoto, alone in his room, let out a deep sigh.

"No word after all, huh? Guess that chick is really planning to just sit back and just let the exam happen," huffed Hashimoto.

Even if I let things be, considering Sakayanagi's accomplishments, her chances of winning were good. Seventy or eighty percent, probably. Sakayanagi would perform solidly and slide into first place—second place at worst. That wasn't always going to be enough. There were some important things that I needed to do to ensure Class A's future. I made up my mind and called Sakayanagi. That fight would determine everything.

"It's unusual to hear from you at this hour, Hashimoto-kun."

Sakayanagi's voice sounded both mild-mannered and reserved as it came through on the other end of the line.

"Sorry to call you up like this, Princess," I replied.

"I do not mind. Why are you calling?"

Sakayanagi's calm tone made it sound like she had plenty of time to talk.

"Hey, so I had tons of fun at the tea party today, but there were a couple of things I wanted to bring to your attention after all. I did a bunch of research, and the results show that there doesn't seem to be any danger of 'that.' I thought I'd report that to you," I answered.

First, a jab. I created a flow so that I could probe her for more reactions. I would take my time. I had simulated this conversation over and over in my head after getting back to my room.

“What danger are you referring to?”

She knew what it was and coolly played ignorant. Being that way when dealing with an enemy was one thing, but I was an ally. She enjoyed making all the decisions on her own and did not want unsolicited input.

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? I’m talking about the possibility that the other three classes will work together to set a trap for Class A. If they work together, they could manipulate the scoring. If we go into this thing the respectable way, we wouldn’t stand a chance of winning,” I explained.

“My, my, you’re afraid of such small problems.”

How in the hell would making the other three classes our enemy be small? The possibility frayed my nerves, but I continued to investigate it regardless.

“You might not be worried, Princess, but for me, them making a faction is a threat as it will allow them to concentrate their fire on Class A,” I answered.

“Those from the other three classes are desperate to move up to Class A. They will want to get as many points as possible in the special exams, and it isn’t so simple for them to join hands for the sole purpose of forcing us off the throne.”

I mean, I got it. Even if Class A came in last in this exam, all that meant was the top was going to take a hit. That would be especially advantageous for Ichinose’s and Ryuuen’s classes but wouldn’t do much for them. If Ayanokouji and Horikita’s class took first place, that could also be seen as a loss from their perspective.

“If there’s someone lurking in the shadows who can make it happen though, that’d be a different story,” I argued. If Ayanokouji was who I thought he was, then he was more than capable of that.

“I will not deny the possibility. Did you really bother to call me just for that?”

Jeez, it practically sounded like she was saying, *Thanks for wasting my time*.

“No, no, there’s more. Actually, I’d say that this is the important part. I want to be useful to the class somehow, y’know?” I replied.

I passed on as much information about the upcoming special exam to Sakayanagi as I could—everything that I had collected before today. About how Kouenji and Horikita made a promise and that she was going to honor it. How Ryuuen seemed to be in contact with a student from our class, and although I was unable to identify who, they were up to something nefarious. And about which students in the other classes stood out and should be targeted for expulsion. Aside from that, there were other assorted details I passed on, even information that would be meaningless to an ordinary person.

"... And that's all I have on Horikita's class right now," I concluded.

What I wanted Sakayanagi to buy was my enthusiasm. I wanted her to think that I was doing all of this because I wanted to make Class A's position rock solid.

"It sounds like you have been zealous in your information gathering activities, Hashimoto-kun."

It sounded like my wish was granted. The degree of my enthusiasm came across over the phone.

"Of course. Horikita's our trip rival. She's earning an incredible amount of Class Points. I want to get whatever information I can, no matter how trivial, and share it with you, Princess. In fact, it would have been best if I could have talked about it during the tea party," I answered.

"You are an industrious worker. So, you are dating Maezono-san not out of love, but for information?"

There it was. Sakayanagi might not have had legs, but she had lots of eyes. I'd gone out on dates with Maezono out in public many times, so it was hardly surprising to hear that someone had spotted us. I told myself not to panic, to just calm down and deal with the situation.

"That's just another strategy on my part. Where'd you hear about that, anyway?" I asked.

"I'm aware that you have been in contact with her frequently as of late. The audio data of the Ayanokouji-kun threat theory, which you had played for Masumi-san, must come from her as well."

"My oh my. Did Masumi-chan tell you about that?" I asked.

This really was bad for the heart. If I hadn't predicted the worst, I would be freaking out about now. I'm sure that even if I hounded Kamuro about this, she'd probably respond with something like "You never told me not to tell Sakayanagi. Even if you did tell me, it's up to me to decide whether I tell her."

"Anyway, please make the most of the information, Princess," I concluded.

"I will graciously accept your kindness. While I am unsure how useful it will be exactly, I will be sure to capitalize on it."

"Unless I'm mishearing you, it sounds like you don't want to use my intel," I replied.

"I already have a foundational strategy in place. I will not trust in or rely on solely the information that you have gathered. However, now that I have heard it, I suppose there are some things that I have no choice but to incorporate into my strategy."

She wasn't going to pretend she hadn't heard it, but she didn't sound happy.

"Are you saying it was unnecessary on my part?" I asked.

"Yes. If something unexpected happens during a special exam, that's fun. You stole some of it."

As usual, she was strangely honest. She thought of the class as nothing more than her private property and didn't even try to fight for Class A.

This is just a pastime to you. Don't involve me in something like that, I thought to myself.

"Is there a guarantee that you'll win this time?" I asked.

"I will not lose. Just stand by and watch."

If I were only going based on her self-assuredness and the results she's given so far, then I might not have been so worried—but I was too informed not to be. Ayanokouji's presence required a response.

"Oh, for the love of... You're always just brimming with confidence. Fine, I get it. I'll do what you say and stop worrying. As long as it goes smoothly, I'll sit on the sidelines and watch," I replied.

There wasn't any point in trying to hound her; I'd done all that I could on this call.

“Please do. Goodbye.”

At some point during the call, though she had sounded normal, displeasure had crept into the edges of her voice. Sakayanagi hated help. She wanted to fight using only the information in her own head that she had gathered herself. While this wasn’t ideal, it was somewhat of a relief to me, in a way, like a weight off my shoulders.

“Serves you right,” I spat.

It felt good to say, but it wasn’t like my fight was over yet. The real fight was about to begin. I didn’t know many orders of magnitude of determination that I would need for my next move. Calling Sakayanagi was the first step. I needed to execute an entire strategy to win.

Chapter 7:
Quadrilateral of Offense and Defense

IT SEEMED LIKE the teachers had taken care of preparations for the special exam the day before, because when I had arrived at school at the usual time in the morning, I noticed that the classroom was arranged differently than usual.

The five desks in the frontmost row where Horikita and some other students sat had been pushed slightly forward, and each of those desks had a tablet and accompanying stylus pen placed on them. Additionally, each desk was sandwiched by partitions to prevent cheating. I'm sure that the tablets were equipped with privacy screen filters in addition to the partitions. The role of the partitions may have been to prevent indirect forms of communication, such as eye contact, for example. Five new desks and chairs were placed in the back behind the last row of desks.

A maximum of five students—the ones who would be nominated—would sit in the frontmost row and solve problems. With the teacher monitoring them closely, it would be difficult for them to cheat.

"Did you sleep last night?" I asked Horikita, who had just taken a seat behind me.

"I slept like normal. There was nothing more I could do anyway, and all that was left was for me to take proper care of my health," said Horikita.

"You had a fever during our first uninhabited island exam. That was tough," I replied.

"Shut up. I'll stab you," snapped Horikita.

"Sorry," I didn't understand exactly why she was going to stab me, but I didn't like being stabbed regardless. I figured I'd just apologize.

"Feel calm?" she asked.

"Not at all. If anything, it may affect my performance, so I apologize in advance," I replied.

At the very least, I was certain that neither Sakayanagi nor Ichinose would hit me with a frontal academic attack.

“Sorry, but I will absolutely not grant you protection,” said Horikita.

“Never, huh?” I replied.

Wow, what a position to be in, to be told from the very beginning that I could not receive any protection. She seemed to be half joking, but I thought it best to take her words at face value. Shortly afterward, after confirming that there were no absences and thus all the students in Horikita’s class were present, Chabashira-sensei wished us good luck and left the classroom.

It was becoming customary for these exams to be monitored by a homeroom teacher from another class rather than by their own homeroom teacher as a necessary measure to prevent unfairness. Sakagami-sensei, the homeroom instructor for Ryuuen’s class, appeared in the classroom.

“My name is Sakagami, and I’ll be overseeing your class this time. I will now provide you with information about today’s special exam, the order of attack, and other things of note,” explained Sakagami-sensei.

After giving that short statement in a calm tone, Sakagami-sensei closed his mouth and kept it shut for a long while afterward. He operated the tablet wordlessly, displaying the placement and notes up on the monitor.

SPECIAL EXAM – CONFIGURATION

1: Class A → 2: Class B

↑ ↓

3: Class D ← 3: Class C

NOTES

Trips to the bathroom can only be made during the 10-minute break window held every four turns.

After 10 turns (the first half), there will be a 40-minute break for lunch.

Conversation among yourselves and cell phone use are permitted except when nominated students are solving problems.

Students deemed unable to continue the examination due poor physical health or other circumstances will be treated as an elimination.

Any student found to be cheating will be immediately eliminated and the points that student has earned will be forfeited.

New information was included in the notes section, but there wasn't anything particularly surprising. Nominated students couldn't do anything to escape from an attack by faking sick, nor would doing anything that might cause delays be allowed. Unlike a normal written exam, the questions would be different for each participant, so students couldn't go hide in the bathroom and give each other the answers. Even if you did run into a student from the other class while in the bathroom, it wouldn't be a problem. It was a pretty lukewarm restriction, and it didn't matter when you could use your cell phone anyway. The class configuration and the order of attack displayed on the monitor was more important.

First, the turn would begin with Class B—or rather, Horikita's class—who would attack Ichinose's Class C. Next, Ichinose would attack Ryuuen's Class D, and then Ryuuen would attack Sakayanagi's Class A. Finally, Sakayanagi's Class A would attack Horikita's class, completing one loop. That would repeat for a total of ten turns. Then, when we entered the second half of the exam, that order would be reversed, moving counterclockwise. Horikita stared at the monitor to check the flow of attacking and defending, and then immediately directed her attention to her phone. All of Horikita's strategies against Ryuuen's class had become unnecessary.

She must have moved on to pulling the offensive and defensive plans against Ichinose's and Sakayanagi's classes out of her head. If we were to evaluate the situation only on a superficial level, having Ichinose's class as one of our opponents was a positive, as they were likely to only take a straightforward approach. On the other hand, facing off against Sakayanagi's class was a negative. In addition to her class's overall strength, she had sharp insight and would work on fraying our nerves.

I figured that I would sit back and watch to see how it'd play out. Not that I could actually admit to that level of detachment.

I thought back to the sixteen categories featured in this special exam. I didn't intend to write off "elimination = expulsion," but even looking back at the past two years of special exams, it

was an unusually rare rule. Someone like me normally wasn't really at much of a risk. I could make it through the academic category, but I was below average in areas like subcultures and performing arts. Even though we could make three exemptions in advance and protect ourselves, there was still a reasonable chance of encountering a problem that I didn't know the answer to. I couldn't rule out the possibility that I could be eliminated.

If Sakayanagi and Ichinose had come to some arrangement before the exam and decided that they'd make me the only elimination and we came in last place, then expulsion would inevitably await. As a student, I didn't think of this as an unreasonable rule—actually, this exam would be the only way some people would shine. It was a good opportunity for new talent to be recognized.

"Now, we will begin the special exam. On the first turn, this class, the first attackers, will be asked to choose a category and difficulty level and nominate five students," explained Sakagami-sensei.

Sakagami-sensei gave the signal to begin the special exam. The time limit for one attack and defense was a mere three minutes. That didn't give us any leeway. We had no time to think, just to communicate what we'd planned. Since we would be spending far longer observing the movements of the other classes, the better course of action would be to hold discussions during those times. The only time we'd hesitate would be when we hadn't planned for something.

"We're going in blind at the start. We will proceed as we've discussed," Horikita said firmly as she reached for the tablet that would be the main device. I hadn't participated in that discussion, so I didn't have any information on what plan Horikita was going to use. We had to verbally inform the teacher of the category, difficulty level, and nominated students. Sakagami immediately displayed Horikita's choices up on the monitor.

Category: English

Difficulty Level: 1

Students nominated by the attacker: Kobashi Yume, Watanabe Norihito, Sumida Makoto, Ninomiya Yui, Shibata Sou

The category was English, and Horikita's target were students in Ichinose's class who were not academically gifted. It was a solid choice as a first move, one that reflected the core of her strategy—an attack made in a category that we could measure objectively. Since we had zero points, we didn't have anything to spend to change the difficulty. Even in light of the fact that we were the first class to take a turn, choosing an academic subject was a solid move. Horikita's class, as well as the other classes, would use their first question as a stepping stone to get a grasp on question trends, the standard difficulty level, and so on.

However, there were many students in Ichinose's class that had exceptionally balanced academic abilities. All of the students enrolled in her class currently had an Academic Ability score of C– or higher. Inevitably, the question of which students to nominate would be important but knowing who struggled in what subjects could only be determined from past inquiry or through individual interactions.

Aside from their academic standing, though, it would be easier to exploit weaknesses in opponents through irregular categories. Those areas could be deadly for students who were weak in areas like subcultures or performing arts. You'd need courage to attack with that on the first move. Those categories were so irregular that it was more difficult to determine strengths or weaknesses compared to academic categories and harder to figure out the degree of difficulty.

Now then, who would Ichinose protect? I found myself looking forward to finding out. After the defending side's nominations were over, the screen updated.

Successful protections by the defender: Ninomiya Yui, Watanabe Norihito

"That means that those two people were protected, then?" asked Nishimura, as she looked at the monitor.

"...Yes, that's what it means. Ichinose-san's class received two points then, unconditionally. Whether we will earn points or not

hangs on whether the remaining three students get the question right,” explained Horikita.

There were three students in Ichinose’s class who had excluded English. Horikita had the right to choose from thirty-six students to nominate, excluding the leader, but the fact that two of the students chosen had been defended because of the protection mechanic wasn’t a happy probability. It was understandable though—Horikita had targeted students who weren’t good at English. Perhaps it was because it was the first turn, but this was a very straightforward gambit. The question that we had assigned to the opposing class was also displayed on the screen for us.

“Rearrange the English words shown in the brackets and add one additional word, so that the English sentence matches the meaning of the Japanese sentence.”

誰も成長するためには、ある程度の苦労が常に必要だ。

[everyone/amount/necessary/always/a/grow/of/hardship/for/is/to]

“Wh-what the heck? Isn’t that, like, really hard?!” wailed Ike, jumping to his feet.

The students who were capable of studying, like Horikita and Yousuke, looked at each other with conflicted expressions on their faces.

“The questions are pretty difficult,” said Yousuke.

“Only if you don’t study,” said Horikita.

Opinion was split in the class on how difficult the question was. Ichinose’s class had an abundance of students who, though not perfect, had a stable level of academic ability. How well would the lower-ranked members of her class perform? The results of the three remaining students from Ichinose’s class who had been tasked with the first question were shown up on the monitor.

Students who answered correctly: Kobashi Yume, Shibata Sou

Together with the points they gained from the two protections earlier, that brought them to a total of four points. A great start. Next, Ichinose's class attacked Ryuuen's class. Their chosen category was Economics. Ryuuen succeeded in defending one person; however, nobody else answered correctly, so they had only scored one point. The class's academic weaknesses were starting to show. I'm sure that was painful for them, but there was no time to be discouraged. We'd get a chance to cancel out Ichinose's lead by scoring four or more points when it was our turn.

In this special exam, it was important to not let your opponent get protections or get answers correct, but it was also crucial that you get a high percentage of correct answers while on defense—you only scored while defending. Sakayanagi had protected one person from Ryuuen's class's attack, and three of her people had answered the question correctly, scoring four points. We'd come to the latter half of the first turn. Sakayanagi's class was about to begin its attack on Horikita's class.

"It's finally time," said Horikita.

"Yes. I wonder how Sakayanagi-san will attack..." said Yousuke.

The category that Sakayanagi had selected was announced.

Category: Mental Calculation
Difficulty Level: 1

I assumed that the Mental Calculation category would include some problems that were simply adding or multiplying in our heads, filling in the correct figure to get the correct answer, and so on. How challenging would these problems be at difficulty level 1? Surprisingly, there were many students who struggled with calculations in Horikita's class, so much so that seven people had chosen it as a category to exclude. The issue of handling Kouenji was of bigger concern to me. If we were to assume that keeping the promise Horikita made to him was a prerequisite, then that would mean she had to protect him.

Kouenji had demonstrated outstanding talent in the Uninhabited Island Special Exam, but essentially, he was a free spirit who did whatever he wished and couldn't be counted on to prep for this. However, there was little reason for the other classes to specifically go out of their way to concentrate on someone like Kouenji, who had a high academic ability and a keen intuition. Still, a promise was a promise. With that in mind, what decision would Horikita make?

Students nominated for protection by the defender:
Sonoda Chiyo, Ichihashi Ruri, Okiya Kyousuke, Ike Kanji, Makita Susumu

Kouenji's name was not among the five students nominated by Horikita for protection. Kouenji, who ignored things like special exams, didn't even react.

"H-hey, Suzune. Are you sure about this? Not protectin' him?" Sudou cried out in panic. It seemed like he had been worrying about Kouenji all along.

"This is a special exam in which you only run the risk of expulsion once you have been eliminated. I decided not to protect him until he got two questions wrong. No need to protect him earlier than that." said Horikita.

"Well, yeah, okay, that makes sense..." replied Sudou. Although he was shocked for a moment, he quickly accepted Horikita's judgment.

"Now, I am simply stating an alternative, but: Kouenji-kun is free to answer the questions seriously or leave them blank. I trust that's all right with you?" said Horikita.

The way Horikita said it made it sound like it was essentially an after-the-fact agreement, but Kouenji didn't seem bothered.

"Do whatever you like," he replied.

Even though she'd promised that she wouldn't let him be expelled, she was saying that she couldn't protect him constantly as if he were a baby. You could say that Horikita's handling of the situation was a conservative one. Moreover, though he was given assurance that he was free to solve the problems however he wished, Kouenji was at liberty to take an active role in protecting

himself. There was always that 1 percent chance of uncertainty, even if he was 99 percent safe. Most people wouldn’t put a noose around their own neck.

Successful protections by the defender: Okiya Kyousuke, Ike Kanji

Students nominated by the attacker: Ishikura Kayoko, Kikuchi Eita, Inokashira Kokoro

Horikita had brilliantly managed to successfully protect two people in her first defense, scoring us two big points. Just doing that had put us in third place at that moment. If all three students about to tackle the upcoming question answered correctly, Horikita would tentatively be in first place, but who could say? The nervous participants took their seats at the front of the class and looked at the question displayed on their tablets. The onlookers watched quietly. Things like whispering to each other were strictly prohibited until the nominated students had finished submitting their answers.

Time Limit: 1 minute

15 × 24 × 16 =?

A multiplication problem. Naturally, there was no choice but to solve it by mental calculation. The problem would be a breeze to do on paper, but much harder to do in your head. Although it seemed pretty easy to me, from the way the nominated students were panicking, it was clear they were struggling to arrive at the answer. The minute passed by in a blink of an eye, and the results showed…one student answered correctly.

Only Ishikura had answered the question correctly. The other two returned to their seats apologetically. Sakayanagi’s choices in the first round were quite interesting, which made me curious. Of all the students in Horikita’s class, Ishikura was the best at mathematics. Even if mental calculation wasn’t exactly the same category, they were related enough. There was no need for Sakayanagi to take the risk of her opponent getting a correct

answer. Even factoring in the seven who had excluded the category, there were several other weak students she could have targeted.

It wasn't impossible that Sakayanagi was simply ignorant of Ishikura's abilities; Sakayanagi had seen Ishikura tackling math problems in our final exams at the end of our first year. It was difficult to imagine that Sakayanagi would have overlooked that. Was it possible that Sakayanagi decided that a student who was good at performing calculations, like Ishikura, wouldn't be defended? Maybe she'd chosen Ishikura to test her.

The first turn ended. A not-too-shabby three points gained right out of the gate. It was on to turn two, Horikita once again notified the instructor of the five students that she was selecting as the attacker. Ichinose's class failed to defend anyone we chose, but two of their students answered correctly, bringing them to a total of six points. One student was protected in Ryuuen's class and one person answered correctly, bringing their total to three points. One student was protected in Sakayanagi's class, and three students answered correctly, so they now had eight.

The gap between the classes was already widening in the second round. Then came time for Horikita's class's second round of defending. This time, Sakayanagi changed her choice of category from Calculation to Gastronomy, with a difficulty level of 1. I had no idea what gastronomy was, but I was sure that Horikita knew and had prepared accordingly. Horikita decisively notified Sakagami-sensei of which five people she'd chosen for protection.

Successful protections by the defender: None

Students nominated by the attacker: Kouenji Rokusuke, Hasebe Haruka, Hirata Yousuke, Yukimura Teruhiko, Onodera Kayano

Unfortunately, all of Horikita's choices for protection had been in vain. Kouenji's name was listed among the five nominations as early as the second round. This was a lengthy battle, and even Kouenji was likely to be nominated in at least one

round. That in itself was nothing special, but what was important was whether Kouenji could defend himself without help.

“When eating French cuisine, what does it mean when the knife and fork are placed on top of the plate, with the bottoms of the utensils pointing at 4 and 8 o’clock?”

It was a simple etiquette question, which I could have answered even before my education at this school. However, Kouenji got it incorrect as he’d left the answer field blank. From behind him, I saw he hadn’t even picked up his stylus. As for the four other students, unfortunately, it looked as though Keisei had mistakenly given the wrong answer; he smacked his desk in frustration immediately after the correct answer was announced. The results were disappointing, but our class still received three points—we were up to six.

“Hey, I saw that, Kouenji! I knew you weren’t gonna take this seriously...!” snapped Sudou.

He wasn’t screaming his head off in a rage or anything, but Sudou was angry. His snappy reprimand came across more like he was scolding Kouenji on behalf of the class rather than venting a personal frustration. If Kouenji wasn’t going to even try to solve the problem, it was no wonder Sudou felt frustrated.

“No need to blame me. If you are dissatisfied, simply protect me moving forward,” said Kouenji.

“Damn it. You’re so selfish,” said Sudou.

His disapproval was understandable, but until Kouenji got a second question wrong, Sudou didn’t have to worry too much about it. The class probably felt a sense of security with Horikita, who was unconcerned despite Kouenji’s refusal to answer any questions. It would’ve been a problem if Horikita didn’t keep her promise and made it her mission to expel Kouenji, but she probably didn’t want to use her precious protection slot without a good reason. Horikita stood confidently; Kouenji glanced over at her for a moment, grinned, and returned to his own seat. Meanwhile, Keisei, who had answered the problem incorrectly simply out of ignorance, came over to Horikita to apologize.

“I’m sorry, Horikita. Maybe it was because I was nervous, but the answer just didn’t come to me… I should have known it,” he said.

“I’m not that worried about you. If they attack you again in the same category, I’ll defend you when the time comes, okay?” said Horikita.

Sakayanagi would not overlook an opening to exploit. That was why Keisei, aware of the danger and solid in his faith Horikita would protect him, nodded meekly to her, to which she responded with a nod of her own.

The battle had begun in earnest. Every time a problem was posed, the students would concentrate wholly on their cell phone screens, coming up with their own countermeasures.

But while the leaders didn’t have to worry about being nominated, they had less time to rest than anyone else. How would you submit questions to your opponents? How prepared were you to adapt to the moment and change your nominations? Horikita, having little time to so much as speak, hurriedly scrawled notes in her phone or, at times, in an open notebook. Then came Sakayanagi’s attack for the third turn.

Once again, it was the Gastronomy category. The difficulty level remained the same, at one. I had thought that Sakayanagi wouldn’t have chosen the same category because the previous question had been an easy one, with three students answering correctly, but apparently our opponent had a plan. Did Sakayanagi see Kouenji and Keisei’s mistakes as an opportunity to exploit? They were both powerful classmates. Horikita had chosen to protect Keisei, just as she had told him she would before, and had then selected her remaining four nominations. However…

Successful protections by the defender: None

Students nominated by the attacker: Kouenji Rokusuke, Miyamoto Soushi, Ijuuin Wataru, Satou Maya, Azuma Sana

This was the second time in a row that Sakayanagi had nominated Kouenji, and the other four nominations were completely different. Keisei hadn’t even been targeted.

“She read me like a book…” said Horikita.

That was exactly right—attacking and defending was a matter of reading your opponent’s moves. If you attacked in the same category, it was a given that the defender would take action to prevent an elimination. There would be no point in targeting Keisei since there was a possibility that he would be protected. However, the same was also true for Kouenji. How did Kouenji and Keisei differ in Sakayanagi’s mind? And how had she been so accurate? One thing was certain: Sakayanagi had gotten a good read on our class’s mind.

Kouenji stood up from his seat once again and walked proudly to the front.

“Kouenji-kun, I can’t force you to make a promise to the class. However, I think that it would be safer for you to answer correctly,” said Yousuke.

Once all the nominated students were seated at the designated desks and it was time to answer the questions, private conversations amongst the audience were strictly prohibited. Yousuke had no other choice but to make his plea while Kouenji walked past. However, Kouenji had no doubts he’d be protected in the following rounds, so once again his answer was blank. His classmates couldn’t contain their emotions at the sight of this, but the other four students answered correctly.

The issue of the third turn was simpler: a commonsense problem. If Kouenji had done what he was supposed to, our class would have had the chance to get a perfect score even if he wasn’t offered protection. No one could really feel happy about that. The ranking as of the end of the third turn was as follows: first place, Sakayanagi’s class, eleven points; second place, Horikita’s class, ten points; third place, Ichinose’s class, nine points; last place, Ryuuen’s class, five points.

If Kouenji had done his best, Horikita’s class would have been in the lead with twelve points. As long as Kouenji was only looking out for himself, there was nothing we could do about it. Sakayanagi’s class had taken a solid lead right away since the exam began and firmly held onto first place. I’m sure Ryuuen had wanted to put a stop to that, but in the first half of this exam, all he could do was watch. Everything depended on his skill. However,

Ryuuen's class was lagging both on the offense and defense—they were really struggling.

It seemed representative of the pure academic ability of the students rather than anticipating each other's moves or luck. Then came the fourth turn, Horikita's defense.

Category: Gastronomy

Difficulty Level: 2

Sakayanagi had unexpectedly chosen to go with the same category for a third time in a row. This time, however, the difficulty level had been raised to 2. She was spending a point to go in for the kill.

"Gastronomy, again? What is Sakayanagi thinking?" wondered Sudou.

The students were preoccupied with Sakayanagi sticking with the same choice of category rather than the issue of the difficulty level. With Kouenji reaching elimination soon, did Sakayanagi intend to go on the offensive? This was the first time that anyone had increased the difficulty level in any of the classes—it was an experimental attack.

"They won't go after Kouenji again...will they?" asked one student.

"Do you really not get it? I think they might see this as a chance to get rid of Kouenji-kun," replied another.

Kouenji, after deliberately refusing to answer questions in the Gastronomy category twice in a row, no longer had any way out. Should Horikita protect him now that he was in danger of elimination? Or should we guess that Sakayanagi deliberately wouldn't go after Kouenji, because he was already close to being eliminated, and thus would be protected? No, Sakayanagi's choice of category was clearly influenced by her target, with Kouenji dead center.

Our situation was different from those of the other classes. It was an issue that went beyond tactics. If Kouenji were to refuse to answer again, he would be the first elimination in our class. Since Horikita had promised to protect him well in advance, she had no other choice but to do so if she wanted to keep her promise. If the

opponent came at us and selected Kouenji, we could get a point by choosing to protect him.

All eyes were on Horikita.

Kouenji's name was not among the five she mentioned.

Successful protections by the defender: Shinohara Satsuki, Sudou Ken

Students nominated by the attacker: Kouenji Rokusuke, Sotomura Hideo, Miyake Akito

Our classmates, who had watched in relative silence up until this point, were visibly bewildered.

"H-Horikita-san?" said Yousuke.

Yousuke was most surprised of all. He'd never doubted her for a moment, and now he leaped to his feet.

"You sure about this, Suzune? I mean, if Kouenji messes this one up, he's eliminated, right?" said Sudou.

Sudou was similarly shocked. However, Horikita just quietly stared ahead. The only person whose facial expression didn't change a bit at this turn of events was Kouenji—the very person who should have absolutely been panicking.

"Heh heh heh. You're really giving it to me, eh, Horikita Girl?" said Kouenji.

To people who didn't think about the matter too deeply, it looked like Horikita had abandoned Kouenji, that she was someone who went back on her promises. It was a betrayal. I couldn't say throwing away the trust of the class was the best course of action, considering everything that had happened since the Unanimous Special Exam. Kouenji said nothing further and sat down at the front like the other students.

The problem that they were presented with was certainly more difficult than the previous two. I caught glimpses of students exchanging glances and cocking their heads to the side in confusion. I didn't know how much Kouenji knew about gastronomy, but there was an uneasy feeling in the air. The young man who hadn't even picked up the stylus pen the previous two

times had finally made a move. Watching him, I got the impression that his hands moved swiftly, not even a hint of hesitation. But would his answer reflect that confidence?

Students who answered correctly: Kouenji Rokusuke

Kouenji's name appeared in the list of students who gave correct answers for the first time. He'd managed to avoid elimination.

"Wow, so someone was worried after all, huh?" hollered Sudou. He was teasing, but there was also a note of relief in his voice. Even those who disliked Kouenji didn't want him to be eliminated.

"You have an active imagination," said Kouenji.

I didn't know what Kouenji was thinking, but his reaction was sensible. One more wrong answer and he would've been a candidate for expulsion. What concerned me was Horikita. Even if Horikita assumed that Kouenji would've taken the problem seriously if he were backed into a corner, had Kouenji gotten it wrong, things would've been bad.

Horikita needed to defend him, even if she were confident that he could've answered correctly. The class was clearly anxious, but not even Yousuke could make sense of it. The only exception was, of course, the young man in question. Kouenji walked past me, to my side, and stood in front of Horikita.

"If you have an explanation, I'd like to hear it," muttered Kouenji.

"Explanation? For what?" asked Horikita.

"Oh, it's like that, is it?" After seeing the steel in Horikita's eyes, Kouenji smiled.

"You weren't eliminated. You shouldn't be worried about being expelled, right?" said Horikita.

"I would have been eliminated had I not answered correctly. So what are you playing at?"

"But you got it correct," said Horikita.

"Heh heh heh. Yes, you're right, I did. Excuse me. It appears as though I've hastily jumped to a conclusion."

“If we’ve cleared up your misunderstanding, could you please return to your seat? You’re blocking the monitor,” said Horikita.

Their conversation seemed to imply that Horikita had abandoned Kouenji, and it did nothing to quell everyone’s bewilderment, apart from perhaps Kouenji himself. I could have done something to reassure the students by explaining Horikita’s thinking and the usefulness of not protecting Kouenji, but I remained a neutral observer.

Horikita chose not to reassure anyone; she had other aims. In fact, she didn’t even bat an eye at their confusion. She didn’t nominate Kouenji as a candidate for protection during Sakayanagi’s attack on the fifth turn, either. However, Kouenji’s name also disappeared from the list of targets to be attacked.

From the perspective of the other students, Kouenji would have been a good target to choose, as they would have seen this as their chance to eliminate him. After all, he wasn’t being protected. However, Sakayanagi chose other targets. Kouenji had been the only person to correctly answer the problem in the gastronomy category with a difficulty level of 2, so it was possible that Sakayanagi had recognized Kouenji was too tough to pick off and chose another tactic. Many of the students here likely had this misunderstanding of the situation.

Kouenji had answered the question using his own knowledge. This meant that Sakayanagi could no longer expect he’d make mistakes, which in turn meant that Horikita took a risky gamble that could have cost her the trust of her allies. This time, however, Kouenji’s name was not on the list of candidates.

Horikita’s face clouded over upon seeing this. “I guess our opponent won’t fall for it so easily…” she said.

Because I was seated in close proximity to Horikita, I overheard her muttering to herself. During the first half of the battle, the turns flew by, and I enjoyed the action. The number of students who made mistakes steadily increased as time went by, and finally, at the end of the seventh turn, Ishizaki from Ryuuen’s class went down as the first student to be eliminated. In the following turn, turn eight, Sotomura and Ijuuin from Horikita’s class were eliminated simultaneously, while Isoyama and Yano from Ryuuen’s class were the next to go in that same turn. Then it

was Kamuro from Sakayanagi's class. By the end of turn ten, the first half, Hondou from Horikita's class, Morofuji from Ryuuen's class, and Yamamura from Sakayanagi's class had been eliminated.

HALFTIME RESULTS

1ST PLACE – Sakayanagi, Class A – 29 Points – Eliminations: Kamuro, Yamamura

2ND PLACE – Horikita, Class B – 28 Points – Eliminations: Sotomura, Ijuuin, Hondou

3RD PLACE – Ichinose, Class C – 24 Points – Eliminations: None

4TH PLACE – Ryuuen, Class D – 19 Points – Eliminations: Ishizaki, Isoyama, Yano, Morofuji

Nine eliminations in all. That might've sounded like a lot, but it would get even more brutal in the second half. A number of students had eaten up two of their three allotted mistakes. Ichinose's class was the only one that still had zero eliminations. At first glance, that appeared to be a fine play on Ichinose's part, but appearances could be deceiving.

"Your strategy worked well, Horikita-san," said Yousuke, coming over to congratulate her.

"I knew that her stance wouldn't change, even on this special exam. I've managed to box her in," said Horikita.

I wondered how many of our classmates had noticed what was happening as Horikita unleashed her strategy against Ichinose. The reason the number of eliminations in her class remained at zero was because Horikita intentionally kept the number of students within range of being eliminated to five. Ichinose would absolutely protect her classmates. Knowing that, Horikita had distributed her attack nominations to avoid creating a sixth person in range of elimination.

Ichinose, on the other hand, seemed to have continued to protect those five students in danger of elimination, even though she knew Horikita would spread out her attacks. After those five students had gotten to that point, Ichinose hadn't gotten even one successful protection because she was protecting them

instead. She didn't want to risk leaving the five students at risk of expulsion, after all.

"She really doesn't back down. It was a ridiculous long-term strategy. Even if she could defend them in the first half, it's going to get much, much more difficult later," said Horikita.

Illustrating her point was the fact that Ichinose's class had the highest number of students who had gotten one question wrong out of the four classes.

"In the second half, Ichinose-san will have to defend her classmates from Ryuuen-kun. I'm sure that will be painful," added Yousuke.

"There is the option of abandoning protecting those five in the second half of the exam, she could just do that, but..." said Horikita.

Even so, this was Ryuuen. He wasn't strategic either.

"Anyway, it's down to us. We have a good chance to eke out a one-point win," said Horikita.

Sakayanagi's class had pulled far into the lead early on, but Horikita was nipping at her heels. By herself, Horikita seemed a half step behind when it came to anticipating Sakayanagi's moves, but her classmates were skillfully making up the gap.

"Regarding the rate of questions answered correctly, putting aside cases of successful protections, it seems that the school expects that approximately half of the students will be able to answer each problem. When the difficulty level increases by one, the rate of correct answers is 20 percent, and when it's at difficulty level 3, it drops to about 10 percent or so," said Horikita.

At a difficulty level of 3, we couldn't reliably expect anyone to get a correct answer, but that option wasn't used too often because it cost two points. If the opponent defended from it via protection, that would result in a big loss. I imagined it wouldn't be used too frequently even in the latter half of the exam. The battle for the top spot was the most interesting part, yes, but the struggle to stay out of final place was also heating up. Ryuuen's class was in a particularly tight spot.

Assuming that the trends we'd seen continued, and assuming that more people would be eliminated, the line to cross for first place would be somewhere between fifty and fifty-five

points. In the second half alone, Ryuuen would need to gain at least thirty points just to survive. Generally, students with high academic ability tended to be more difficult to target; however, they were difficult to protect too. We saw a smattering of students who got something wrong in unexpected categories.

It also seemed like questions in areas not related to academics, like subcultures and gastronomy, were often easier than those related to academics, even when they were technically set at the same difficulty level. Incidentally, I got a question wrong once myself in an academic category. The question was “What is the animal that was bred in a zoo and became a worldwide sensation because of how cute it looked when it stood up on its hind legs?” from the News category.

I had no idea what animal it was, so I just randomly wrote “dog” as my answer, which prompted an icy look from Horikita.

The correct answer was red panda.

7.1

WHEN IT CAME TIME for our lunch break, I told Horikita to give me a few minutes of her time and brought her out into the hallway.

“It was a red panda, okay?” snapped Horikita.

I never imagined that she would take me to task for something like that right away. “That’s not what this is about. I’m curious about a few things,” I replied.

“It was a joke. What is it you need? Advice?” she asked.

“Nothing worth calling advice, really, but did you notice how the nominated names are displayed?” I asked.

“No… To be honest, I haven’t been paying any attention to the order. It wasn’t in alphabetical order or in order of boys first and then girls afterward, was it?” asked Horikita.

“I can’t say for certain what the order is without hearing what the other classes said when they were attacking, but there was no systematic rule on the school’s part at all when you had nominated your five, Horikita. That means they were likely shown in the exact order in which the leader said them.”

“I see. You might be right about that. So?” asked Horikita.

“What got my attention were Sakayanagi’s nominations from turns two through four in the first half of the exam. Kouenji was targeted three times in a row, and in every case, he was the first one nominated,” I explained.

“So she decided to go after Kouenji-kun by the second turn, and she continued to pick him first until he answered a question correctly…? If I remember right, Yukimura-kun got the question wrong on the second turn too, didn’t he?” asked Horikita.

“Yes, he did. Kouenji would be a threat as well if you looked at him in terms of his abilities alone, but overall, Keisei should be seen as more of a problem. Yet, Sakayanagi didn’t even nominate Keisei on the third turn, after he had made a mistake,” I answered.

“Don’t you think that she’s simply not so good at anticipating my moves? She might’ve decided that I’d protect Yukimura-kun because I thought he was important, right?”

“Yes, it’s true that in Keisei’s case, she might have removed him from her list of targets for that reason, but that doesn’t explain what happened with Kouenji. During the first half of the exam, he got the question wrong twice in a row, on turns two and three, and then answered correctly on turn four. His name didn’t show up even once after that point. If he were being defended via protection, that would make sense, but he got the question right on his own on turn four. Which means that we had never protected him once. Our opponents would’ve known that, too,” I answered.

“Sakayanagi-san initially had her sights set only on Kouenji-kun. She had gotten him in range of elimination after he had answered incorrectly twice, but she simply stopped attacking once he had gotten one question correct. Very unusual,” mused Horikita.

It would be better to eliminate as many students as possible. If there was a good chance that he was not going to be protected, then Sakayanagi should have kept attacking.

“Is she perhaps wary of his knowledge?” asked Horikita.

“If so, she wouldn’t have attacked Kouenji from the very beginning. It doesn’t explain why she nominated him three times in a row,” I replied.

“…Is Sakayanagi-san aware of the promise that I made to Kouenji-kun?” asked Horikita.

“I think that’s a safe bet. With that promise in hand, Kouenji wouldn’t take this exam seriously. She must have calculated that you wouldn’t have defended him until he got two questions wrong,” I replied.

The chances that Kouenji would have taken the questions seriously from the start or that Horikita would have defended him right away weren’t zero. Sakayanagi would have changed strategies in that case.

“Why didn’t she target him from turn five on, then? I had chosen not to protect him then, remember?” asked Horikita.

“She didn’t precisely because you made that choice. If her intention was to make you get rid of one of your protection slots by using it on Kouenji, and that plan was no longer viable, she must have felt like it was a waste of time—disadvantageous to her, in fact,” I reasoned.

“Even though we lose a point if someone is eliminated?” asked Horikita.

“Yeah. You said as much yourself before the exam. You said that you had a plan in place to minimize the damage in the event that our class came in last place. That option was to let Kouenji be eliminated, wasn’t it?”

“…So you knew.”

“Your promise with Kouenji was that you wouldn’t ‘expel’ him. You’d let him be ‘free.’ In this special exam, you haven’t asked anything of Kouenji, so it goes without saying that you’ve kept your promise to give him his freedom. As for the other part, about you not expelling him…hypothetically, if Kouenji were to be the only one to be eliminated, he wouldn’t be expelled if he uses his Protect Point. Problem solved,” I answered.

Kouenji had won that Protect Point on his own, by winning in the Uninhabited Island Exam, granting him the right to nullify an expulsion.

“That’s right. I hadn’t promised that I would protect Kouenji-kun’s Protect Point. As long as he isn’t expelled, I’ve fulfilled my promise. He would have no right whatsoever to resent me over it,” said Horikita.

Even though we would lose one point for an elimination, all Horikita would have to do is strip away Kouenji's Protect Point. There would be no risk of anyone getting expelled if we were in last place in that scenario.

"I'm sure I worried everyone, though," said Horikita.

"If you did explain, Kouenji would know what you're trying to do, right?" I answered.

"Yes. But he seemed to catch on right away. Personally, it would have been easier for me in the second half of the exam if he had been eliminated early."

That was why Kouenji had answered correctly on his own—it would have annoyed him to have his Protect Point stripped away.

"It's reasonable to assume that, because of Sakayanagi's personality, she decided that she didn't want to erase the pressure of possible expulsion from our class, Horikita."

"Her personality comes through in every one of her actions. But why didn't Kouenji-kun give correct answers right from the start?"

"Not even I know the answer to that question. Maybe he just decided he could hold out until the third question. Anyway, there may be students in the class who are leaking information."

That was invaluable to keep in mind, not just for the special exam but for after as well.

"Thank you. I'll be sure to keep that in mind," said Horikita.

"That's all I needed to say. What are you going to do for lunch?"

"I didn't have the time to make one, so I think I'll go to the cafeteria today. What about you?"

"I think I'll do the same. Kei will probably be staring at her phone the entire time," I replied, turning toward the classroom as I said that.

Horikita nodded in apparent understanding. Kei had gotten through the first half of the exam unscathed, as she hadn't been nominated by Sakayanagi even once. However, I couldn't say that came as a relief to her. In as few as three questions, she could join the ranks of the eliminated. She probably wanted to drill as much

knowledge as possible into her head, even if it was just a stopgap measure.

7.2

THE SURVIVAL AND ELIMINATION Special Exam had begun, and was progressing slowly. Ryuuen weathered his first attack from Ichinose's class, but with only one out of five protections being successful and no students answering correctly, no one felt especially good about it. That was understandable: academics were a weak point in Ryuuen's class.

Even putting aside the students who had excluded Economics, the category that Ichinose had chosen, nearly half of the students in Ryuuen's class felt anxious about the category. On the other hand, Ichinose's class, which had been attacked by Horikita's class, had scored a total of four points. A three-point gap had already opened by the end of the first turn, and a gloomy feeling hung over the class. However, that wasn't because they didn't gain points.

"Okay then! As the attacker, who do you plan to nominate from Class A?" said Hoshinomiya, cheerfully guiding the leader.

But Ryuuen didn't budge. He stared at his cell phone in calm silence.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" asked Hoshinomiya.

She called out again from the podium just to be sure, but Ryuuen remained still. As was understood from the explanation of the rules, the nomination time was steadily ticking away, one second at a time. Though Hoshinomiya figured that Ryuuen would have surely decided on who they would attack on the first turn and belt it out, Ryuuen still hadn't moved in the first minute. Normally, you would've expected to hear the voices of classmates piping up with people asking, "Are you okay?" but no one did.

Even if the majority of people in this class wanted to say something, they couldn't. Now, in battle, Ryuuen exuded an even more overwhelming and intimidating air than ever before. It was rare for Hoshinomiya to see Ryuuen's class so tense. Ryuuen's classmates, however, were a little more used to it—this was an everyday occurrence. It was something they saw all the time. It

would’ve been quicker if Kaneda, the general adviser, made a move on Ryuuen’s behalf, but since he tended to wait for instructions from Ryuuen, no one was bothered by his silence.

At times like this, uncertain classmates tended to turn their eyes to Katsuragi. Although he was a transfer from another class, the students considered him Ryuuen’s chief strategist. In addition to Katsuragi’s overall strengths in OAA, he didn’t cower before Ryuuen’s surly temper. If all it took were defiance, Ibuki would have qualified, but in Katsuragi’s case, he had reasons for acting the way he did.

Katsuragi, the person the other students would usually turn to, didn’t move a muscle. With eyes closed and arms folded across his chest, he allowed time to pass while he was on the attacking side. Had he figured that calling out to Ryuuen in this situation wouldn’t change anything and thus gave up on even trying? Or was he merely confident? In either case, the students could only watch in silence.

“Hey, listen, it’s still only the first turn, okay? Three points isn’t that big of a difference, so you shouldn’t get too worked up about it,” Hoshinomiya said, offering them encouragement.

They just hadn’t pulled ahead on the first attack, that was all. It might have seemed a little biased, but she couldn’t remain silent in the face of the students before her and their anxieties. That was her official stance, anyway.

In reality, if Sakayanagi’s class pulled too far ahead, it’d be hard for Ichinose’s class, the class that she was in charge of, to win. If Sakayanagi’s class continued to win high scores time and time again with their cowardly strategies, her own class would have no chance of winning. It was a calculated move on her part to say something, but as Hoshinomiya watched the class continue in silence, she realized that she had made an error in judgment. Even though many students questioned Ryuuen’s lack of action, few actually felt anxious about it. Normally, silence often brought about negative consequences, but in this class, it was a unique strength they had cultivated.

Hoshinomiya accepted the unusual situation: with nearly two minutes having passed now and still no attempt to so much as utter the names of their nominees.

That silence holds secrets. Hoshinomiya started thinking that way for the first time. In that brief moment, what fantastic strategy would they come up with? An ideal set of nominations against Sakayanagi's class, where they would fail to protect anyone and get many of the questions wrong?

When the countdown neared thirty seconds remaining, Ryuuen gave Hoshinomiya the five names.

"O-oh, w-w-wait a minute! Let me enter them," said Hoshinomiya, quickly tapping the names in.

Category: Everyday Life

Difficulty Level: 1

Students nominated by the attacker: Kitou Hayato, Kamuro Masumi, Hashimoto Masayoshi, Machida Kouji, Yamamura Miki

Hoshinomiya hurriedly finished inputting the information but was astonished by the choices. Ryuuen had picked students who were close to Sakayanagi.

Successful protections by the defender: Machida Kouji

In the end, after all that consideration, one person had been protected. The problem was what came after.

Students who answered correctly: Kitou Hayato, Kamuro Masumi, Hashimoto Masayoshi

Three of the four remaining students had answered correctly. That meant Ryuuen's class had given the opposing class four points while he had only gotten one. A bad start. Not much could be expected from them. Hoshinomiya had been impressed as she looked at the students, who seemed surprisingly calm, but now, inwardly, she had taken that feeling back. She realized that

they weren't as good as she thought after all, and it was unlikely that they'd be able to crush Sakayanagi's class.

From that point onward, you couldn't say that Ryuuen's strategy had been skillful, even if you were feeling especially generous. Most of the people he had nominated had been the same people he'd nominated in the first turn. Although he occasionally switched it up, possibly as a diversion, he continued to nominate Kitou, Kamuro, Hashimoto, Yamamura, Machida, Sanada, Satonaka, and Matoba once every two turns or so. Sakayanagi started to predict his pattern and adjusted protections accordingly.

Even so, Ryuuen didn't drastically change his nominations. He just spent more turns at the bottom of the rankings. On the fifth turn, the midpoint of the first half of the exam, Hoshinomiya noticed something inexplicable. Even though some students had already answered two questions incorrectly and they ought to be panicking…

"They're all so calm," she muttered.

They couldn't get themselves out of last place because they had a weak defense. Since they clearly had a lower percentage of correct answers to problems compared to the other classes, they weren't earning points where they should have been. However, even in this situation, few students were feeling nervous. Hoshinomiya strolled around the classroom, pretending to monitor them, and casually peaked at each student's phone.

They weren't just playing around, but rather, they were browsing various websites and checking out videos to study the categories they were weak in. Was it simply that they were too nervous to speak up? Or maybe because they were under Ryuuen's control? That thought had occurred to Hoshinomiya too, but…

"Kaneda-kun, it doesn't appear that you're doing anything. I assume you are fully prepared, yes?" asked Hoshinomiya, suddenly reaching out to Kaneda. He wasn't even touching his phone while the rest of the students were silently preparing.

"I always make an effort to study, and I don't like cramming at the last minute. It isn't good to disrupt routine," announced Kaneda, pushing up his glasses, flashing a fearless grin.

“I-I see. Smart kids certainly are built different,” replied Hoshinomiya.

Hoshinomiya, slightly taken aback by Kaneda’s response—which just fell short of being “*Why even bother asking?*”—had lost Kaneda’s interest. Students like Ishizaki even had the audacity to doze off while they were waiting for their turn. Ishizaki had already gotten two questions wrong and seemed like he had accepted his fate.

“What on earth is going on in this class…?”

She felt a little uncomfortable, but still, she performed her duties as teacher turn after turn.

7.3

IMMEDIATELY AFTER SAKAYANAGI had informed the teacher about which five targets she had nominated in her second attack against Horikita’s class, Hashimoto stood and walked over to where Sakayanagi was seated. In place of his usual grin was a stern expression. It was bizarrely conspicuous behavior considering everyone other than Hashimoto remained in their seats.

“Whatever is the matter, Hashimoto-kun?” asked Sakayanagi.

“It’s just, I know I gave you information last night, just in case. I’m getting the feeling that you don’t intend to make use of it. Am I right?”

Category: Gastronomy

Difficulty Level: 1

Students nominated by the attacker: Kouenji Rokusuke, Hasebe Haruka, Hirata Yousuke, Yukimura Teruhiko, Onodera Kayano

Hashimoto, pointing at the monitor behind him with his thumb, indicated he was unhappy with her choices.

“Is that how it looks to you?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Yeah, it does,” replied Hashimoto.

“While it is certainly true that your phone call last night was overly meddlesome, the information you gave me was only that—information. I will not ignore it, of course. It has been firmly etched into my hippocampus,” said Sakayanagi.

“Okay. Then, in that case…why did you target Kouenji?” asked Hashimoto.

“You said that Kouenji-kun was one of the targets in Class B that we ought to avoid the most, isn’t that right?” replied Sakayanagi.

“He has that promise with Horikita. He’s a likely candidate for protection, so if you go after him, he’ll probably be defended, and you’ll just be handing them points. I was hoping you could use at least *some* of the information I gave you.”

Hashimoto couldn’t stand being trampled underfoot so quickly. Kitou, sensing that the situation had grown grim, slowly pulled out his chair.

“Don’t worry, Kitou-kun. Hashimoto-kun just happens to have a dry sense of humor,” said Sakayanagi. She chuckled and turned back to Hashimoto. “I’m sure there is an arrangement between Horikita-san and Kouenji-kun. However, that arrangement has two stipulations. First, that she would simply not expel him, and second, that she would allow him his freedom. Yes?” replied Sakayanagi.

“Yeah…” replied Hashimoto.

“There is no advantage to be gained for her in wasting one of her precious protection slots to continuously defend him. At the very least, she would wait and see what happens until he has been targeted once and has answered a question incorrectly. She would need to do at least that much in order to win. Wouldn’t you agree?” asked Sakayanagi.

“But Horikita’s honest. If she won’t protect him, her class will be upset,” said Hashimoto.

“If they’re going to be upset about something as trivial as that, she would sooner let them be upset. While the actual fulfillment of her promise is important, if she wasted her protection slots on Kouenji-kun, she’d be unfit to lead.”

While Sakayanagi was explaining this, Horikita's class had decided on which five students they would protect. The monitor refreshed. It now showed that none of Horikita's protections had been successful, and the five students that Sakayanagi had nominated would be tasked with solving a problem.

"What do you think? As expected, she's left Kouenji-kun undefended," said Sakayanagi.

Hashimoto had to let the matter drop.

"...Okay, sure. But what's the point in forcing ourselves to get a point from Kouenji, anyway? The dude's weirdly smart. He's far more likely to get correct answers compared to some nobody, right?"

"Do you think so? He's a capricious fellow, undeniably. He's such a free spirit that he even defies Horikita-san. He's under no obligation to take these questions seriously. He might even answer them incorrectly on purpose," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi was unwavering in her conviction as she spoke. It was almost like she was claiming she could read the future. Hashimoto waited for the monitor to refresh, wondering if she had that kind of power. The results showed that Kouenji did indeed answer incorrectly, just as Sakayanagi had predicted. He was one step closer to elimination.

"Well, you took a risk, but you got a point. Brilliantly done, Princess," said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto felt momentarily relieved, but that relief was dashed away in the following turn. As soon as their attack phase began, Sakayanagi, without even a moment's hesitation, went ahead and announced Kouenji's name as the first of her nominations. In the same category, to boot. It was as though she were announcing to everyone that she was targeting him. Even Sakayanagi's other classmates stirred. Kamuro raised an objection.

"Hold up, what are you doing? You picked the same category, so it's obvious that they're going to protect Kouenji," said Kamuro.

"You're not saying he won't be protected this time either, are you?" asked Hashimoto.

"Yes, I would bet on it. That's why I nominated him."

It was an absurd prediction on Sakayanagi's part. He peered at the monitor from his seat and waited for the results.

Successful protections by the defender: None

"Wait, seriously...?! What is Horikita thinking?" Hashimoto blurted out.

And once again, Kouenji had answered the question incorrectly. That kind of mistake was unthinkable from him.

"I'm not taking Hashimoto's side in this, but what made you think that he wouldn't be defended the second time?" asked Kitou.

"The logic is the same as it was in the first round. You can make up to two mistakes, so there's no need for Horikita-san to defend him. If she were to, she'd want to leave that until the last possible minute. However, I imagine she would prefer Kouenji-kun to answer correctly."

"...I see. Which means that now Horikita has no other choice but to protect Kouenji, even if she doesn't want to," muttered Kitou, now convinced.

As long as there was room for Kouenji to make a mistake, Horikita would not allocate a protection slot for him. In other words, Sakayanagi took a risk and targeted him so that slot would be occupied in the later turns. That's how Kitou had interpreted what she said. The fact that the problems in the gastronomy category were easy weren't really a problem. Every class was feeling out the difficulty of the problems.

"Sorry I doubted you, Princess. You really did think it through. If that's what you were going to do, though, you could've gone after Kouenji starting from the first turn, right? You could have made them waste their protection slot for eight turns. We basically lost a turn, then," said Hashimoto.

"I was ninety-nine percent certain that she would not defend Kouenji-kun, but the reason I chose to target him on turn two was to ensure their complacency. It was a strategic opening move to lure our opponents into making a second blunder. What would have happened had I made my attack on turn one and Horikita-san had decided to defend him? It would have been harder going."

They would have run the risk of being led around by the nose by their opponent, by a deceptive protection slot. Sakayanagi didn't want to give her opponent any leeway to control the pace.

"He'd answered an easy question incorrectly the first time, so I was able to determine he'd be unlikely to answer the second correctly. At any rate, the results were superb. All thanks to the information you have provided me."

Hashimoto, feeling relieved that Sakayanagi was making effective use of his information, nodded and took his seat.

"Now then, let's finish off Kouenji-kun, shall we?" said Sakayanagi.

On the fourth turn, Sakayanagi nominated Kouenji for a third time. Again, he was the first person in her list of nominees. It shocked the class.

"It is to make doubly sure, you see. This is a threat that I will go after him again if they show me an opening. Thanks to your gathered intelligence, Hashimoto-kun, we know the inner workings of Horikita-san's class. However, our opponent does not know how much has been leaked to you, Hashimoto-kun."

"I got it... You're right. They'll feel they have to protect him," said Hashimoto.

Sakayanagi chose the same category, gastronomy, but she raised the difficulty to 2. She was also checking to see what the increase in difficulty for the problems would be like. Although it'd be a waste if it turned out Kouenji were protected, he didn't dare point that out.

However, one last surprise was in store for them.

Successful protections by the defender: Shinohara Satsuki, Sudou Ken

Horikita did the unimaginable: She'd chosen not to defend Kouenji.

"Why isn't she defending him?!" balked Hashimoto.

"Are you sure you didn't get bad information?" asked Kamuro.

"No! I'm sure of it!" shouted Hashimoto.

Kouenji had given the correct answer himself and thus avoided elimination.

Hashimoto was confused; his head swam. Sakayanagi, on the other hand, looked as if her grasp on the situation had grown firmer after observing Horikita and Kouenji's actions.

"Does this mean that Horikita's abandoning Kouenji...?" asked Kamuro.

"That's an opening. We can crush him in one go," said Kitou. He smelled blood in the water.

"You may be right. And I'm sure trust in Horikita is dropping, along with their morale," said Hashimoto.

But while Hashimoto saw Horikita's decision not to use her protection slot on Kouenji as a sign of internal strife in the enemy class, Sakayanagi had come to a different conclusion.

"I thought she might protect him unconditionally or that this was our shot at eliminating him, but it seems Horikita-san has something else in mind. If we target Kouenji-kun any further, we will only end up playing into her hands." With a giggle, Sakayanagi opened her phone. "At any rate, I'm impressed. It appears you've actually kept your opponent in mind."

Sakayanagi wondered silently if Ayanokouji was lurking in Horikita's shadow. Which one had come up with this strategy?

"I'd guess this wasn't his doing," said Sakayanagi.

If Ayanokouji were pulling the strings, she'd have heard about it. Sakayanagi would have felt the influence of some alien mind. She only detected the faint whispers of Ayanokouji in Horikita's thinking.

She's been watching him more closely than anyone, so I'm sure she's grown, thought Sakayanagi.

The lines were drawn. Sakayanagi was not going to fall behind Horikita in this battle.

"The problem is..."

For Sakayanagi, who held Class A's future in her hands, there wasn't any class in particular that worried her. More than one working in collusion, however, would be a problem—that was Sakayanagi's sole concern. Although Sakayanagi's agents continued to perform reconnaissance after the special exam was

announced, there had been no signs of any such moves from the other classes. However, perhaps they'd been working in secret.

All Sakayanagi could do was look for signs of that kind of an arrangement between classes. As of now, the likelihood that the other classes were working together was nearly zero. Nothing was out of the ordinary.



“Well then, shall we take first place?” said Sakayanagi.

At the end of the first half, Sakayanagi had scored twenty-nine points. Having the lead was gratifying; however, looming right behind them was the specter of Class B, trailing by just a single point. Hashimoto forgot to even get up from his seat. He just stared at the results up on the monitor during their break.

“Masumi-san, would you care to join me for lunch? I trust that since you have been eliminated already, you have time,” asked Sakayanagi.

“Wow, you really don’t pull your punches, do you?” said Kamuro.

Sakayanagi smiled as if it were a compliment and leaned on her cane as she walked away. When the two girls stepped out into the hallway, Kitou silently followed.

“Wait, she invited you too?” asked Kamuro.

“She texted me,” said Kitou.

“Hm. So, are we okay with leaving Hashimoto out?” asked Kamuro.

Whenever Kamuro and Kitou were together, Hashimoto was almost always with them—Kamuro seemed concerned that he wasn’t.

“He, regrettably, declined. He had been targeted by Ryuuen-kun and had answered incorrectly twice, after all. It is only natural that he doesn’t want to be eliminated,” replied Sakayanagi.

A tiny, wry grin appeared on Kamuro’s face as she imagined Hashimoto frantically searching for information on his phone.

7.4

ALTHOUGH THE CAFETERIA was usually crowded, packed full of students from the entire school, it was deserted today. This was because many of the second-year students remained in their classroom, staring intently at their phones, like Kei was doing right now. Desperate to avoid elimination, they were poring over their review material on their phones. The only students who could afford to come to the cafeteria were the leaders or the

students who had already been eliminated and had nothing left to do.

Horikita and I both decided what to eat, made our purchases, and then carried our trays to the usual spot favored by second-year students.

“Looks like we have our choice of seats today,” I remarked.

“Sure does. But it’s strange, isn’t it? You would think that the first- and third-year students would be here at least,” said Horikita.

It wasn’t like there was assigned seating for the classes. The students had, for some reason or another, drawn those lines on their own and followed them by unspoken agreement. Of course, some hardly cared about that sort of thing.

“You don’t sweat the details, do you?” I observed.

“As if you do,” she snapped.

“I’m a conformist, actually.”

“Ha. As if. But I don’t have the time to devote my mental resources to thinking about you right now,” said Horikita.

That felt a little mean-spirited, but hey, whatever made her stop, I supposed. I was just about to break apart my pair of disposable chopsticks when I heard someone call out to us.

“Good day to you, Class B students. May I join you?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Sit wherever you like. I’m not your boss,” said Horikita.

Even though Horikita gave her permission, she was probably surprised. It was unusual for the enemy to want to hang out in the middle of a special exam.

“I don’t mind either, but what about your food?” I asked.

Sakayanagi had arrived empty-handed. If she went to go buy food now, it’d take some time.

“Masumi-san and Kitou-kun are making the purchase. They should be by shortly.”

At the end of my line of sight, I did indeed spot Kamuro and Kitou from behind as they were listlessly waiting in line.

“They must really value you as a friend,” I remarked.

“Yes. They are so helpful,” said Sakayanagi.

As Sakayanagi sat down across from Horikita and propped up her cane, Kitou came over, dexterously balancing a tray in each hand. He was always there to support Sakayanagi.

“Please sit down, both of you,” said Sakayanagi.

“Huh? Eat with Horikita and Ayanokouji? I don’t really feel like it,” said Kamuro.

“What’s the harm? It might be useful for you, Masumi-san, for future reference,” said Sakayanagi.

“Are you trying to get me involved in your nonsense again? I’m really sick of these games,” said Kamuro.

Kamuro’s name appeared on the list of eliminations from Class A, but she showed no signs of worry. While she did have a side to her that rebelled against Sakayanagi, her attitude was one that was only possible because of her absolute faith that Sakayanagi could not lose. The fact they were in first place certainly validated her conviction.

I offered a casual greeting to Kitou, lightly raising my hand to say hello. Kitou didn’t react particularly strongly to that, but he inclined his head, which was enough.

“Please go easy on me in the second half, Horikita-san,” said Sakayanagi.

“You’re honestly asking me that? You went extremely hard on me in the first half,” said Horikita.

“Oh, I was just playing with you. You’re in second place—isn’t that proof I’ve gone easy on you?” said Sakayanagi.

“You must be joking,” said Horikita, irritated by the implication that success was due to Sakayanagi’s grace.

“Hey, lemme in on this too.”

Kitou, sensing the presence of this new arrival, immediately reeled around like he was under attack. This person didn’t seem bothered in the slightest and sat down next to Horikita before bothering to ask for permission.

“A rowdy entrance, Ryuuen-kun,” said Sakayanagi.

“Hah hah! Well, the sheep seemed to be flockin’ together, so the wolf came to check on ’em,” said Ryuuen.

He seemed awfully composed considering he was losing. That being said, there was no way he was up to anything,

considering how worn out he looked.

“Leave,” snapped Kitou with a quiet authority.

“Huh? Like hell you got the right to give *me* orders. ’Sides, the little midget over there didn’t say a word, now did she?” said Ryuuen.

“Say the word. I will remove him immediately,” said Kitou.

Kitou, while looking to Sakayanagi for permission, stood up in anticipation of duking it out with Ryuuen. Now that Ryuuen had insulted Sakayanagi too, Kitou’s transition to battle mode was complete.

“No need for worry, Kitou-kun. He simply came here because he’s hungry. We ought to welcome frail Mr. Wolf with open arms,” said Sakayanagi.

“He doesn’t seem to have any food with him. Having your minions like Ishizaki run your errands for you?” said Kitou.

“No, not hungry for food, but rather points in this special exam. We have only just completed the first half, but he’s fallen so far behind,” said Sakayanagi.

“You’re not wrong,” said Kitou.

Three of the classes were currently locked in close competition, and Ryuuen’s trailed far behind. Sakayanagi’s words were meant as lighthearted teasing, the tension hung thick in the air. Kitou, seemingly comforted that violence wasn’t about to break out, quietly sat back down.

“So, anyway, Kamuro. You sure seem pretty calm for someone who might be sent packing,” said Ryuuen.

Kamuro was just about to bring a piece of deep-fried horse mackerel to her mouth, but her hands stopped midair, and she shot a glare back at Ryuuen.

“You too, Kitou. Next time ya make a mistake, you’ll be joinin’ the others who got eliminated,” said Ryuuen.

“At the moment, my class is in first place. You, on the other hand, are in last. Are you fit to be having this conversation?” Sakayanagi immediately shot back.

“Even if I come in last place, all I lose are small fries. In your case, well, Kamuro and Yamamura are candidates for expulsion. Hell, if Kitou and Hashimoto mess up, that number jumps up to

four of your people. Whoever disappears, you're the one who is gonna be hurtin'. Maybe Horikita will painfully wreck your shit and eliminate even more people from your class, increasin' that number with garbage people that no one cares about?" said Ryuuen.

A statement like *"We will have a few more eliminations, yes,"* was not something you would expect from Sakayanagi. For each person eliminated, you lost a point. Nobody wanted that.

"So is your intention to have someone close to me eliminated?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Too late for me to bother explainin' that to ya now," said Ryuuen.

"I find it hard to believe that would happen. I can only say this: your attempt to target students within your reach has utterly failed. You went after students like Masumi-san and Kitou-kun to upset me, and you can see where that's gotten you," said Sakayanagi.

I got the strong impression that Ryuuen's strategy was to target a maximum of eight people or so, those who supported Sakayanagi: people like Kitou, Kamuro, and Hashimoto. Out of the four classes, Sakayanagi had the highest rate of successful protections in the first half. Despite this weak attack, Sakayanagi could not protect Kamuro and Yamamura. Even if you knew what someone was aiming for, that didn't mean you could defend against it.

"Thanks to your infantile strategy, our class has managed to hold onto first place. I am grateful to you, though at the same time, I am worried for you, Ryuuen-kun. If you do not change the way you fight in the second half, you will simply lose. I trust you agree, yes, Horikita-san?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Yes, I certainly do think that Ryuuen-kun has overcommitted to a clumsy strategy. I would have scattered my attacks across more students once I realized that you tended to protect those students, Sakayanagi-san," said Horikita.

Ryuuen listened with a smile on his face, not having expected them to start discussing strategy.

"I recommend that you fight smarter," concluded Sakayanagi.

Ryuuen didn’t cower. He rested his elbow on the table, like he was issuing a challenge.

“Actually, I think I know ya pretty well, Sakayanagi. Go ahead, put the point difference issue aside for a hot minute. Think about it. Kamuro! Say, hypothetically, if your class were to come in last place, and ya still have just these same two eliminations ya got right now, what decision d’ya think Sakayanagi would make?” asked Ryuuen.

Kamuro’s hands stopped. She didn’t say a word in response, but she seemed mildly rattled. What kind of decision would Sakayanagi make if faced with choosing between the two of them? Even Horikita was listening closely. What was Sakayanagi’s criteria for determining who to expel? However, Sakayanagi’s chopsticks didn’t stop moving. She ate placidly.

“Can’t answer? Actually, wait—ya don’t wanna, do ya? What d’ya think, Horikita?” asked Ryuuen.

“What do I think? Why did you go after Yamamura-san in the first place? It seems like you’ve narrowed down your targets, but she doesn’t seem like the ideal target, does she?” asked Horikita.

Sakayanagi had brought Kamuro with her here, but she hadn’t brought Yamamura. It was natural to assume that Kamuro was more special to Sakayanagi than Yamamura. All the other students Ryuuen targeted were prominent people with outstanding talents, but Sakayanagi and Yamamura had a special connection. There are students who have value in areas beyond just visible abilities, like you might see in the OAA.

“Well, I’m sure all y’all don’t know, so listen up. Yamamura’s just as valuable to Sakayanagi as Kamuro. She really dotes on that girl somethin’ fierce, y’know?” said Ryuuen.

Ryuuen forced Yamamura into the conversation. Sakayanagi finally stopped eating.

“If that’s your opinion, I wouldn’t change it,” said Sakayanagi plainly. She seemed to have no interest in telling him what to think.

“Speaking as a third party, I can’t weigh in. All I can say is that both Kamuro-san and Yamamura-san are exceptional allies to Sakayanagi-san,” said Horikita.

Even if Horikita were wrong, she didn't want to influence Sakayanagi.

"They're both exceptional? Hah! Don't make me laugh. There ain't no way Sakayanagi would evaluate 'em based on shit like OAA ability. She only cares 'bout people as tools."

"Huh." Kamuro looked over at Sakayanagi and quietly sought reassurance.

"Oh, so Yamamura's name was a surprise for Kamuro here, eh?" said Ryuuen.

Ryuuen didn't know everything that went on inside of Class A, either. This had nothing to do with the perception of or the relationship between Kamuro and Yamamura. He was simply provoking them. Even so, his words had real bite.

"Are you and Yamamura close?" asked Kamuro.

"This is just flailing on Ryuuen-kun's part," said Sakayanagi.

"I'm only asking because I didn't know you and Yamamura had a connection," said Kamuro.

Kamuro paused slightly, but I wondered who else noticed.

"I've already told you, haven't I? He's simply trying to provoke us. Ignore him," said Sakayanagi.

It wasn't that she was avoiding the topic; she just honestly thought it was a waste of time. Though Ryuuen had stopped, he seemed to be enjoying watching Kamuro react to his words in a hyper-sensitive way despite his usual strength.

"Go ahead and figure out which one yer gonna expel now, while ya still got time," said Ryuuen.

It would seem that Ryuuen's appearance here wasn't intended as a provocation against Sakayanagi. Rather, his purpose was to imprint a message that the goal was not to increase the number of eliminations in Class A any further. He only wanted to make a few people, like Kitou and Hashimoto, to face expulsion.

"I hope you're not swayed by so little," said Sakayanagi, appealing to her not to adopt Ryuuen's strategy.

"No worries," replied Horikita.

Horikita was fighting to win. She wasn't tackling this exam with the intention of expelling someone from Sakayanagi's class.

Unless she decided that was an effective way for her to win, of course. That would be a different story.

Perhaps deciding that continued cheap provocations wouldn't yield him any further gains, Ryuuen changed the topic of conversation. "Looks like the only one who didn't come here is Ichinose, huh?"

"Her class seems to have a clear policy of not letting anyone be eliminated. When I looked around the cafeteria, I didn't see anyone from her class. It's consistent," said Horikita.

It was true—there weren't any students from Ichinose's class here in the cafeteria. Even before coming here, I didn't see them around, except for the bare minimum necessary activities like stopping by the restroom. They got their food ready right away and weren't wasting any time.

"Heh, seems like she's prepared to lose so she can protect her personal friends. Deep down, she's just stupid," said Ryuuen.

Ichinose really would want to give everyone the best care, even the people who got eliminated in the other classes. However, her own class would suffer if she were to lose the fight. The angel would need to be a demon to protect her classmates.

"She doesn't back down from her principles, no matter the special exam. That is precisely why I have managed to keep her in third place, by exploiting her weakness." Horikita's chopsticks stopped as she reflected on the first half of the exam.

"She's gotta be sick in the head if she's willing to go that far. If she keeps at it, she'll be throwing away her protection slots until the very end. That's a boon for you, huh, Ryuuen?" said Kamuro.

Ryuuen could attack Ichinose's class the same way that Horikita did. Unless he increased the number of students in her class who got two questions wrong, he had a high chance of blowing through all her protection slots. Even if Ryuuen wasn't getting points for his own class, he couldn't avoid holding those above him back so that he could move up in the rankings.

"I will be the one to attack your class next. Even if your success rate with protections increases as more people are eliminated, how many points will you be able to score?" asked Sakayanagi.

Just like how she had laid her trap against Kouenji, Sakayanagi anticipated her other opponent's attack. Depending on how Ryuuen used his protection slots, his attacks might be wasted. It was especially difficult to protect allies who couldn't protect themselves.

Ryuuen violently shot up out of his chair. "Lookin' forward to it." He brushed his hair back with his palm as he turned to depart.

"It appears that the disruption is leaving, so let us resume our meal," said Sakayanagi.

Contrary to what those around him thought, the look on his face contained hidden traces of a strong will. He had a plan. It probably was no mere coincidence I was the only one he'd shown that face to. The message he gave me was an intimidating one: "*Shut up and watch.*"

Maybe he can turn this around. His weak act was just that—an act. Let's see.

The second half was about to begin.



7.5

IN JUST A FEW MINUTES, Sakagami-sensei would give us the signal to begin the eleventh turn. Horikita stood up on the podium and commanded the attention of the students.

“Class A is a formidable opponent. They didn’t hand over first place once in the first half. Therefore, it’s important that we don’t get distracted. Ultimately, all we need to do is rack up enough points,” said Horikita.

Horikita would be attacking Sakayanagi’s class, easily the most formidable. Sakayanagi’s class had many successful protections versus Ryuuen in the first half, and the students in her class also had a high percentage of questions answered correctly.

“How are you going to attack?” asked Sudou.

In response to Sudou’s rather simple question, Horikita looked from one classmate to the next. Some people in this room might’ve been in communication with Sakayanagi—Horikita obviously couldn’t speak openly.

“I’m sure you remember how I asked for everyone’s input when we were preparing for the exam. I’ve sorted through it all and chosen my strategy,” said Horikita.

From the sound of it, she was going to target each student’s respective weaknesses instead of trying to out-wit Sakayanagi. However, my impression was that as little as we knew about Ichinose’s class, we knew even less about Sakayanagi’s class. They’d sealed their lips the moment the special exam was announced, so it hadn’t been an easy task to find their weaknesses.

Only Horikita could sort through what information was useful and what was junk—that was basically what she was saying. It was time for Horikita’s first attack on Sakayanagi, on turn eleven. For her first move, she spent one point and chose the Literature category at a difficulty level of 2. Unfortunately, one student had been protected, but Sakayanagi’s class had only managed to score two points because three of the four students got the higher-difficulty question wrong.

We had earned three points, but after taking away the one point we had used to increase the difficulty level, that made us even. If we scored four or more points, that would help us pull ahead. Horikita had applied a little pressure, but that was all. Then, on Sakayanagi's turn, she suddenly spent two points, choosing the Sports category at difficulty level 3. It was a merciless assault on her opponent, Ryuuen, who was ranked last.

"She's determined to drive Ryuuen-kun into a corner... That's quite confident of her," said Horikita.

Their start in the second half was quite different, with less concern about the point difference between the classes. Immediately afterward, though, there were cries of surprise from our class as they saw the results on the monitor.

Successful protections by the defender: Katsuragi Kouhei, Shiina Hiyori, Tokitou Hiroya, Nomura Yuuji, Ibuki Mio

For the first time in this special exam, someone had gotten a perfect score with just their protection slots—five points in one go. A difficulty level of three would be meaningless if everyone were protected. What a painful blow for Sakayanagi. Ryuuen, who had been lagging behind the rest, suddenly jumped up to twenty-four points, putting him in line with Ichinose, at least temporarily.

"This is strange," said Horikita.

Many had expected Ryuuen's class to have continued to slip further and further away from the rest of the pack. Maybe they would keep this sudden momentum going, but the attack that followed against Ichinose's class showed that their intuition wasn't quite that good. Three students in Ichinose's class were protected. However, one student in her class got the question wrong, so their class had only gotten four points, bringing them to twenty-eight. There was still our class's defense left in this round, but Ichinose had closed the gap between us. Now that she caught up, what kind of category and which targets would she choose?

Category: Sports

Difficulty Level: 1

Successful protections by the defender: Wang Mei-Yu, Shinohara Satsuki

Students nominated by the attacker: Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, Miyamoto Soushi, Karuizawa Kei

Among the attack nominations from Ichinose's class, my name was listed first. And, whether intentionally or coincidentally, Kei's name was also on the list. Her choice of attack, Sports at difficulty level 1, was exquisite. It wasn't something that I could say I was particularly good or bad at. I was confident that I could get the answer right if the question was based on history or rules, but if it had to do with current events, then that would put me at a disadvantage. On the other hand, in Kei's case, she might have seen a current event on TV. She'd mentioned that she often watched things like volleyball.

"In a situation where there are fewer than two outs, there are runners on first and second or on first, second, and third, and a fly ball hit by the batter could be caught by an infielder with ordinary effort, what rule applies?"

Fortunately, I was familiar with sports rules to some extent, so I was able to answer the question without any difficulty. The correct answer was the "infield fly rule." However, Miyamoto aside, I couldn't imagine that Kei would know this. I hoped that this would have somehow been among the things that Kei had managed to learn in these last few days of preparation, but…

Only me and Miyamoto answered correctly. Kei got it wrong. That being said, this was her first time faltering, so she had no reason to panic yet. However, as she returned to her seat, her face was creased with anxiety. Meanwhile, Miyamoto, who had answered correctly, rejoiced with Ike and his other friends, sharing high fives. From what I overheard from their chatter, he'd learned the answer from video games, and that'd come in handy today. You never knew when trivia would come in handy.

This gave us four points. We'd overtaken Sakayanagi's class, at least for the time being. It was time for the next turn, turn twelve. Sakayanagi's class got four correct answers, earning four

points and solidly increasing their score. However, the bigger shock was what Ryuuen's class did. As if we were watching a replay of the last round, we once again saw five names on the list of successful protections. He had managed to get a perfect score with just protections twice in a row.

"Dude, what are the chances of that?! Do they just have, like, *crazy* good luck or something?!" shouted Ike. He held his head in his hands at the shock of it.

"...I wonder if we can really chalk it up to luck," said Horikita.

I sensed a heaviness in Horikita's voice as she calmly stared at the monitor in her seat beside me. She was right. The odds of getting perfect scores twice in a row were quite low. If they got another perfect score next round, then...

While the feelings of shock lingered in our class, in the following attack on Ichinose's class, two people were protected and two had answered questions correctly. The time for Ichinose's next move had come.

Successful protections by the defender: Ishikura Kayoko, Sudou Ken

Students nominated by attacker: Ayanokouji Kiyotaka, Matsushita Chiaki, Karuizawa Kei

My and Kei's names were among the nominations for the second time in a row. The instant Kei saw her name, she shot up out of her chair and, looking rather distraught, let out a shout.

"She's totally coming after me! She is, isn't she?!" wailed Kei.

"Calm down. Just because you've been nominated twice in a row doesn't mean that she's concentrating on you," said Horikita.

"B-but—!"

Her feelings were understandable. She probably would have understood if she felt as if she were a weak target. However, our opponent was Ichinose. Kei must have suspected that she was being targeted for personal reasons. Well, given that I was included among the nominations, the personal nature of the

attack seemed pretty obvious, but in truth, whether it was personal or not, it was certainly meant to shake us.

At any rate, it was a solid move. Horikita wasn't going to use one of her precious protection slots on me. I'm sure that Ichinose must have read what Horikita was thinking there. If the category were something related to academics, there was a possibility that Kei would've been protected, but the category she chose was News. There was a good possibility that even Kei could solve a question in that category, so Horikita left Kei open. As for me, I'd already gotten a question wrong in this same category in the first half of the exam, so I needed to be careful.

"What does 'have a boba' mean?"

I froze.

Wha? Huh? What? Have a boba? A boba...? Boba...?

The clock ran out on me, and I left my answer blank. Most questions in the News categories had been related to politics and recent events. Why were all my questions curveballs? The outcome for this mystery question was the opposite of last time: I got it wrong, and Kei got it right. Kei, relieved that she hadn't been put in range of elimination, seemed to settle down immediately.

Matsushita seemed to have answered correctly too, like it came naturally, and thus our class had secured four points. I, on the other hand, had made two mistakes. I was at risk. The right answer was "to have a drink that has tapioca balls in it."

"Ugh, you... Do you know even *less* about the world than I think you do?" Horikita huffed, pointing her finger at me in apparent disgust after I had returned to my seat.

I could only slump my shoulders.

It was time for Horikita's class's attack on turn thirteen. The category was Kanji, with a difficulty level of 1. Unexpectedly, Horikita fell silent. Although she had smoothly rattled off the names of up to four nominations, she stumbled on the last one. It was an arduous task to keep all the information straight in her head.

Who was good at what? Who was bad at what? The info on Class A was very limited. There was still time left. Horikita took a deep breath to try to calm herself down. Someone came to her rescue.

“Satonaka’s a good choice,” muttered a single student in a bored, detached manner.

That student was Kushida. She was well-rested, having not yet been nominated.

“Thank you, Kushida-san. Sensei, please enter Satonaka-kun as our final nomination,” said Horikita.

Without even asking Kushida the reason, Horikita took her advice; it was like she trusted her completely. And it paid off: Satonaka wasn’t protected, and he had also gotten the question wrong.



“Where’d you hear that Satonaka’s not good with kanji?” asked Makita.

Makita showered Kushida with admiration.

“Where? Around. You just kinda hear stuff,” said Kushida. She looked off in a random direction, appearing disinterested.

“You’ve been a major help. Thank you,” said Horikita.

“Don’t mention it,” said Kushida.

Horikita expressed her gratitude, but Kushida didn’t seem happy. Given her tenuous position in the class, it wasn’t a bad idea for her to make tangible contributions like this. Apparently, that was one of the reasons why Horikita felt confident going into the second half of the exam.

Kushida Kikyou didn’t simply have a wide circle of friends; her hobby was to suss out weakness, and she had a memory for it. Because of that, she had built up an extraordinary information network. Although only one aspect of her information network had been demonstrated here, it was safe to assume that she had passed on a great deal to Horikita in advance. What an incredible asset.

Turn thirteen: Ichinose’s attack. On our third round of defense against Ichinose, Horikita had chosen to defend Karuizawa. I, who was within range of being eliminated, was not protected, apparently abandoned. However, it would appear that Horikita’s read on the situation had been correct, and the name Karuizawa Kei appeared on the list of successful protections. Normally, someone would have been happy to dodge solving a problem, but Kei clearly wasn’t feeling great.

“...She’s trying to eliminate me...! No matter how you look at it, she’s coming after me, right?!”

“Yeah, this is a little intense... Maybe,” replied Satou, sounding like she agreed with her. But entertaining strange assumptions would just amp up her anxiety to worry about it.

“She’s not the type who would try to trap a particular person,” said Horikita.

“Still!” wailed Kei.

Kei looked like she was about to argue that Horikita was only saying that because she didn’t know what was going on, but she

decided against it.

“Anyway, while we can’t read her mind, now that I’ve successfully protected you, you probably won’t be targeted again,” said Horikita.

“Okay…” said Kei.

“Besides, when someone makes the same nomination three times in a row consecutively, like what happened with Kouenji-kun in the first place, it draws attention. I wonder what Ichinose-san is thinking,” said Horikita.

The next turn began: Ichinose’s attack on turn fourteen.

“…What should I do? I wonder,” said Horikita.

Horikita seemed hesitant while allocating her protection slots. All things considered, there was no way that Kei would be nominated four times in a row. I was sure Horikita was wondering whether to go with that assumption, or if she should be wary that Ichinose would outsmart her.

“I think you should try defending her again. Don’t you? I have a feeling Ichinose-san is after her,” said Kushida, offering advice to Horikita while she was thinking.

“You really think so?” asked Horikita.

“Just my intuition based on her track record,” said Kushida.

Kushida was basing her advice on Ichinose Honami’s thoughts and feelings rather than limiting her observations to the exam.

“You’re right. It might be a wiser move to protect her once again,” said Horikita.

Kei wasn’t in range of elimination yet, but Horikita wanted to be able to rack up a safe point if Ichinose was going to target her. The list of successful protections was revealed, and Kei’s name appeared among them once again. She had set a new record in this special exam, being nominated four times in a row, surpassing Kouenji’s three consecutive nominations. While the decision was baffling, it was great news that our class was able to compete with the other classes in an evenly matched battle.

However, the situation started to deteriorate.

While both Horikita and Sakayanagi’s respective classes were scoring points with a good balance between offense and defense,

Ichinose's class had a better hit rate at defense. However, Ryuuen's class showed even more intense momentum. Sakayanagi had fought back with irregular categories and nominations time and time again, but she couldn't change the situation for the better. Ryuuen had ended up getting four perfect turns in a row.

There was no way this was luck. However, there was nothing that Horikita could do. Her only option was to rack up points and keep her cool.

7.6

FOR RYUUEN, LOSING WASN'T A HARDSHIP. Even if he lost once, he'd just win the second time. Even if he lost a hundred times, it'd be fine as long as he won in the end. He lived his life thinking that way, but one day, a big obstacle stood in front of him. That guy hid a beast behind his idiot face. *Nah, that was way too weak a way of putting it,* thought Ryuuen. The answer of how to best describe it escaped him.

However, Ryuuen was sure that that guy was the most powerful, vicious human being he had ever met. He didn't live in the realm of the attainable. It had been over a year since Ryuuen had been defeated by him—Ayanokouji—and had his spirit shattered to pieces. They were in different stratospheres. Perhaps that was why Ryuuen hardly felt any hatred welling up inside him.

It was also true that, whenever he talked to Ayanokouji, he didn't hate it. Perhaps it was because of this that, even if Ryuuen denied it on the surface, he... No, that wasn't right. Deep down in his heart, Ryuuen acknowledged Ayanokouji's outstanding abilities. That was all. But Ryuuen still told himself not to get the wrong idea.

Ryuuen did not intend to bend the knee forever. Before Ayanokouji graduated from this school and they parted ways, Ryuuen was absolutely going to get his revenge. The first thing he needed to do was clear some junk out of his way. He'd decided to shut out Sakayanagi, the queen of Class A, keeping her from scoring. Sakayanagi was his only obstacle.

Then he would defeat Ayanokouji.

That was Ryuuen Kakeru's goal while at this school. Until he did that, he would never, ever stop. Immediately after the second half of the exam commenced, Ryuuen, who had up until that point just been indifferently focusing his attacks on Sakayanagi's chief forces turn after turn, rose from his seat.

"Alrighty then... Well, guess it's time I got this thing started. Outta my way," barked Ryuuen.

"Wh-what are—hey?!"

After shoving the instructor in charge of their class, Hoshinomiya, out of his way, Ryuuen hoisted himself up to sit on the podium.

"We're in the second half. There's only a ten-point gap. We can catch up with just a couple of perfect rounds. I can expect that from you, can't I?" ordered Ryuuen.

The pressure the leader was exerting on his class was this: *I will not allow you to make any mistakes, no matter what task comes your way.* Of course, if such threatening words were enough to increase the percentage of questions answered correctly, they wouldn't have been in trouble in the first place.

"Oh, piss off. We're not the only class with that problem, yanno. You know damn well how hard it is to get a perfect score, even for the other classes, Ryuuen. If you're the leader, then use your head and get the protections right," snapped Tokitou, who was no coward.

"Heh heh. You made two mistakes. Yer back's up against the wall. You get eliminated, and punks like you will be joinin' my top picks to get kicked out," replied Ryuuen.

"...Tch."

"But don't you worry. Startin' now, I'm gonna give ya exactly what yer hopin' for," said Ryuuen.



“What do you mean?” asked Tokitou.

“The part about me expecting perfection from all of you? That was a lie.”

Ryuuen looked over his shoulder and confirmed that the monitor had refreshed. There was a notification that indicated Sakayanagi had finished giving her nominations, and now it was Ryuuen’s turn to say how he would be assigning his five protection slots. The category that his opponent had chosen was Sports. Moreover, Sakayanagi had spent two points to set it at a difficulty level of 3.

Sakayanagi wasn’t going to give Ryuuen’s class a single point. The students were left flustered in the face of such a merciless attack from Class A. Ryuuen alone, however, was chuckling to himself, gloating about his impending victory.

“Katsuragi, Shiina, Tokitou, Nomura, and Ibuki. Hurry up and put ’em in,” barked Ryuuen.

Almost as if to show that he didn’t care one whit about things like the category, the difficulty level, nothing like that, Ryuuen immediately gave his five names.

“H-hey now, hold on just a minute here. Don’t start ordering teachers around, okay? Sheesh,” said Hoshinomiya.

Though she was flustered, she went ahead and input the five names that Ryuuen had communicated to her, thus bringing the defense’s turn to an end. *By making his nominations without even thinking about it, was Ryuuen trying to avoid overthinking it?* While some students were wondering, the results popped up.

Successful protections by the defender: Katsuragi Kouhei, Shiina Hiyori, Tokitou Hiroya, Nomura Yuuji, Ibuki Mio

“Wh-what…?” sputtered Tokitou.

Tokitou, standing stock still as he glared at Ryuuen, was astonished. Perhaps Ryuuen’s immediate action without hesitation had paid off, because he had made good on his words and got a perfect score.

“Gamblin’ is a good thing, y’know? You just roll the dice,” said Ryuuen.

On the following turn, turn twelve, Ryuuen once again gave his five nominations without a second thought. Once again, everyone he nominated had been successfully protected. In a mere two turns, Ryuuen was in hot pursuit of first place. Turns thirteen and fourteen played out exactly the same. Even though Sakayanagi had spread out her nominations, Ryuuen struck them all down like he was sending out guided missiles, successfully executing his defense.

“Heh heh. Doesn’t seem like there’s anythin’ ya can do ’bout this, Sakayanagi,” boasted Ryuuen.

Before this special exam began, Ryuuen was focused on something entirely different from the other leaders. Namely, to what extent could the scent of a beast be removed? How far could he corner his prey without letting them realize that he was directly behind them, champing at their heels? There was nothing the other classes could do about it even if they took steps now. Ryuuen had strategically launched his counterattack when the other leaders became complacent.

“What on earth is going on…?!” wondered Hoshinomiya.

This was some kind of calculated manipulation on Ryuuen’s part, but not even the instructor in charge of the class knew just what that trick was.

7.7

ICHINOSE KEPT REPEATING the same words to her classmates.

“I will never, ever let anyone from this class be expelled. Never doubt it.”

Even though her classmates believed in her, more than a few of them still felt uneasy. That was why Ichinose’s statement was so reassuring—she was choosing her words carefully. However, if she fought in the same way as she had before, the other classes would exploit that opening without mercy.

The fundamental goal was to keep the number of eliminations at zero as a hedge against losing. If there weren’t any eliminations, there wouldn’t be any expulsions, even if they came in last place. It was a defensive strategy.

However, Ichinose was not going to give up on winning. How was she going to fight to win while defending? Not by fighting in her opponent's arena, but rather by dragging her opponent into hers. Ichinose was going to stand her ground and avoid expulsions, and that way, she would lure her opponent into complacency.

As the exam progressed into turns two and three in the first half, Horikita's aim had become clear. She was going after an unspecified large number of people, increasing the number of students in range of elimination by getting as many to two wrong answers as possible. When the number of people with two mistakes swelled to five, Horikita intended to assess what Ichinose would do.

"Thank you, Horikita-san," said Ichinose.

Ichinose was truly grateful for Horikita's wise but merciful actions. Horikita didn't care about whether she eliminated students from her opponent's class, as long as she could score points. It would've been a problem otherwise. Ichinose was fortunate that her first opponent hadn't been Ryuuen, who was cruel and erratic, but Horikita, who attacked in a reliable, steady manner. Ichinose used her protection slots, giving top priority to the students in range of elimination.

"I won't abandon anyone. You believe that, right?" asked Ichinose.



Ichinose's dearest wish was to protect her friends. She calmed them so that they wouldn't make any reckless moves.

"It would be best if no one has to be expelled...not just from our class or grade, but from our school as a whole," said Ichinose.

There was nothing false about that feeling she expressed. However, if sacrifices were required to protect her class, then she would spare no hesitation in eliminating students in Ryuuen's class—to win, someone had to lose. As a result, four people from Ryuuen's class had been eliminated by the end of the first half through Ichinose's attacks. If someone were to disappear from those four in the end, that meant she would be responsible for their expulsion, albeit indirectly. Unavoidable casualties. Though they'd be heartbroken, there would be no other choice.

...However, that was only the case if Ryuuen lost.

"The second half will begin in one minute. Everyone, take your seats and get ready," announced Mashima-sensei.

After receiving that instruction from Mashima-sensei, Ichinose took out her phone. She slowly looked through her chat history in the messenger app, at a conversation with a certain person. It was from right after the first half had started.

"Ryuuen-kun, I know this is sudden, but would you like to cooperate with me? I do not want anyone to get expelled from my class, so I need to finish his exam with zero eliminations. Therefore, I would like to arrange for there to be no eliminations in my class in the second half."

Ichinose had sent that message to Ryuuen as soon as the special exam had begun. He read the message as soon as it came, and his reply came shortly after.

"Well now, you're being selfish. Do you really think I'm gonna just quietly go along with this?"

"I think there's room for negotiation. I'll give you a present that will make you happy."

"First things first: Do you think you can come out of Suzune's attack unscathed?"

For Ryuuen not to eliminate anyone from her class in the second half, she first had to get through the ten turns of the first half with zero eliminations.

“I will.”

“Damn, someone’s confident. You haven’t been negotiating with Suzune already before talking to me, have you? Because if so, discussion’s over.”

A flimsy lie wasn’t going to work against someone cautious like Ryuuen. That being said, Ichinose had no intention of coordinating with Horikita. If she tried, her bargaining power would be reduced. Plus Sakayanagi’s class would make a move. That had to be avoided.

“I want to protect everyone, and I don’t want anyone to get eliminated. My opponent knows that’s how I think. I’m sure that Horikita-san’s move will be to see if she can get five students in the range of eliminations. Then, she’ll want to verify if I’ll continue to protect those five.”

If she didn’t protect any of those people, then her opponent would assume that Ichinose was okay with getting an elimination, and by extension, that she was prepared for someone to be expelled if she came in last place. However, if Ichinose protected them, then it wouldn’t be so easy for Horikita, who attacked head-on. All of Ichinose’s precious protection slots would continue to be applied to those five students. Therefore, Horikita would change her plan to target students who haven’t made any mistakes, refrain from going after those students in range of elimination any further.

“Unlike you and Sakayanagi-san, Ryuuen-kun, Horikita-san doesn’t want to get anyone expelled from the other classes. She just wants to win. She’ll attack the thirty-four other students that aren’t protected in a balanced way.”

Ichinose’s role in the first half of the exam was to create a situation in which she would use the protections at her disposal in the preliminary stages freely, deliberately allowing for five students who were not confident in the category to get in range of elimination, as a means of escape. It wasn’t going to be an easy fight, but it could be gamed.

“So, if it plays out like you say, then I’ll do as you ask in the second half, and you get zero eliminations. What a happy ending for you. What’s in it for me?”

“Twenty-five points, guaranteed. I’ll give you a bunch of names for people that we’re going to nominate. Of course, I’ll make sure to spread them out well so that the other classes don’t realize.”

If she told him in advance who she was going to attack, that alone would give him an advantage in the exam. She got a read receipt back on the message immediately, but it took Ryuuen about three minutes to respond. He’d been mulling it over.

“Pass. Not that it’s a bad offer, but I got my own ideas.”

“I see. That’s too bad.”

Ichinose didn’t think that her proposal had been bad, but she had no choice but to let it go. If she made any further concessions in terms of the number of points, she would lose her chance for first place. More importantly, considering that Ryuuen didn’t even try to negotiate for more points, she had little chance of success.

“Well then, guess that means I need to be careful…” said Ichinose.

Negotiations had broken down. She could think of many ways to make the deal worse for her side, but she wasn’t going to do that. She would just have to fight on her own, going for zero eliminations, even if it were dangerous. However…

“You’re in luck.”

Ichinose received another message from someone she didn’t think she could count on.

“What do you mean?”

“If you can make sure that you get through the first half without getting anybody eliminated, I’ll take you up on half of your proposal.”

“Half?”

“What I mean is I’ll agree not to eliminate anyone. But that part you said about twenty-five points guaranteed? That’s too much. If you make any weird moves in the first half, Sakayanagi will see right through you.”

“Okay then. What do you want from me?”

“After we switch up the order of attacking and defending in the second half, accept points from me if you gotta. I’m not giving a detailed explanation. You’ll just have to decide whether or not to believe me.”

It was a rather puzzling offer, for him to offer her to be on the receiving end of points rather than have her give points. It was a story that another student would obviously think is a stupid joke, and that Ryuuen had no intention of negotiating from the very beginning.

“I see…” mumbled Ichinose, quietly.

Ichinose paused to think. Could she trust Ryuuen? It would’ve been a lie to say that Ichinose didn’t pause for as long as she could to consider it. Even so, Ichinose responded in less than a minute.

“I understand. I believe you.”

No other student would have consented so quickly, but it wasn’t merely the decision of a soft heart. It was Ichinose’s philosophy. Her line of thinking. She intuited the significance of what Ryuuen was trying to do from his messages. The instant her initial message had been sent, it had been marked as read without even a second’s delay. Based on that, Ryuuen had his phone open to wait for her reply.

In other words, there was something, if not exactly the same thing, that’d made Ryuuen want to work with her. They had this conversation right before the start of the special exam. After the second half had begun, the situation changed dramatically between turns eleven and fourteen. On turn fifteen, Sakayanagi’s class attacked Ryuuen’s class. The results were announced, and he had once again executed a perfect defense. Ichinose smiled to herself, stifling it just enough to avoid notice.

“Amazing. So that’s what you were going for.”

“I’m gonna let you live, and you’re gonna be quiet.”

“You didn’t have to work with me, but you did. Thank you.”

“You think I did this outta the goodness of my heart? There ain’t nothing in it for me to have you come in last. I just took control of the score. That’s all.”

Ryuuen’s terms were contingent on Ichinose simply accepting points from him. If her class was losing to Sakayanagi’s, it would be simple for Ryuuen to pump up her score and force her into taking third place or higher. Ichinose, having foreseen the results of this special exam, was relieved that she wouldn’t be losing any friends. Immediately after they had been notified of the

Unanimous Special Exam, Ichinose had chosen not to reallocate the Protect Point in their class, fearing the risk of sparking a conflict over this exam. Ichinose had almost regretted that decision. All that was left now was…

Karuizawa Kei currently had one question wrong. If Ichinose could get her to make one more mistake, she'd be within range of elimination. There was still a possibility that Class B could fall into last place. There were students in their class that had already been eliminated that were even lower in the pecking order than Karuizawa, though, so she couldn't hope too strongly that she would be removed. Even so…there was a chance. To achieve it, the first step was to take a break from consecutive nominations once.

"No… That's a bad move…" said Ichinose.

Ichinose had told herself that she should act for the sake of the class, not her own personal feelings. Ayanokouji hadn't rejected her. Even if he continued his relationship with Karuizawa, he accepted her. In that case, there was a way she could clear a way for herself. While she felt that she was a lousy human being, at the same time, she could live with that.

"Even if we don't take first place, the real way to win is to make Sakayanagi-san come in last," said Ichinose.

Ichinose paused to catch her breath in the few minutes she had. Then, she looked at her phone. The meaning behind aiming for Karuizawa, no matter how many times she had been given protection up until this point—Ichinose was sure she'd gotten per point across. Having successfully restrained herself, Ichinose settled down once again.

"I would like to nominate Karuizawa Kei-san, please."

Turn sixteen was no different from the others; she nominated Karuizawa. With renewed determination, Ichinose didn't hesitate. All she had to do now was hammer away at the same spot.

"I would like to nominate Karuizawa Kei-san, please."

Clutching her phone, Ichinose was convinced that, in truth, she was winning this special exam.

AT THE START of turn fifteen, all four classes were finally neck and neck. Ichinose's class was in first place with forty-two points, Horikita and Sakayanagi's classes were tied for second with forty points, and Ryuuen's class was in third with thirty-nine points. The surplus that Horikita's class had accumulated in the first half had dried up. Ryuuen's class still hadn't taken the lead, but if things didn't change, they would soon pull ahead at this rate. Although the students' anxieties had been kept at bay by Ryuuen's initial rocky start, dark, ominous clouds now began to gather overhead. Horikita's class were now pushed into a situation where, depending on how things played out, they could very well come in last place.

"You're kidding me, right?! This has to be a joke! Seriously, give us a break!"

"I absolutely do *not* want to get expelled!"

"Me, neither!"

With one more person joining those who got eliminated in the first half, bringing the total to four, the students began to feel an impending sense of crisis, and went berserk. Even the other students were too distracted to cram. Horikita pulled out her chair and stood. It was time for her to start giving nominations, but she passed by the clamoring students with calm strides.

"Don't panic."

Horikita, standing at the podium, directed those words at her classmates.

"Yes, it's true that this situation is close to being the worst-case scenario. There are currently four eliminations in our class. Ichinose-san has taken first place, and Ryuuen-kun's class, which had been in last, is continuing to get perfect scores. They're catching up with unusual speed. I can no longer say with absolute certainty that we will win," announced Horikita.

If Horikita could see through Ryuuen's strategy and stop him from getting perfect scores, it would be a different story. But she couldn't hope for that. She couldn't even discern the source of Ichinose's high hit rate.

"All we can do is fight to the end," said Horikita.

Horikita could not give them a guarantee of victory. However, since this was a competitive exam anyway, the leader couldn't even express what kind of uncertainty to expect. A leader couldn't make weak statements or act self-assured for no reason. Her words rang with a truth that stuck in the minds of her classmates. Horikita was telling everyone to believe that she could overcome this. Even so, Yousuke, who normally echoed Horikita, was now only passively listening.



“Believe in me,” said Horikita.

Getting over the situation by a change in mentality. That was the only option left to her. However, looking at Horikita, I felt like she still had some fight left.

Turn fifteen. Ichinose’s class’s attack.

Successful protections by the defender: Karuizawa Kei, Satou Maya, Miyake Akito

Horikita had managed to pull off three successful protections, and the remaining two students had answered the question correctly, thereby earning a perfect score. Those five points had breathed life back into the class. However, the relentless chain of successive nominations had not been broken.

“Wh-what the heck…?!” wailed Kei.

Kei’s terror was winning out over her joy as she pulled away from the monitor. Even the classmates who didn’t know anything about the situation began to feel something unsettling about this unusual persistence. Horikita, who had succeeded in protecting Kei, didn’t seem to feel that way.

The following turn, turn sixteen. Ichinose’s class’s attack.

Successful protections by the defender: Karuizawa Kei, Nishimura Ryuuko

Two successful protections this time. But once again, Kei’s name was among them.

“Stop it… What the hell…?” muttered Kei.

Ichinose nominated Karuizawa over and over again, repeating her attack endlessly. If you targeted just one particular student, it could make people think that it was a vicious attempt to get that student eliminated and thereby get them expelled. Such behavior, the kind that would destroy one’s image, continued.

Turn seventeen. Ichinose’s class’s attack.

Successful protections by the defender: Karuizawa Kei, Hirata Yousuke

Even so, it didn’t stop.

It just didn’t stop.

No matter how many times she was defended.

The nominations wouldn’t stop.

“Why?! Why am I the only one…? I can’t believe this…” despaired Kei.

Turn eighteen. Ichinose’s class’s attack.

Successful protections by the defender: Karuizawa Kei, Hasebe Haruka, Onodera Kayano

Turn nineteen. Ichinose’s class’s attack.

Successful protections by the defender: Karuizawa Kei

Turn twenty. Ichinose’s class’s attack.

Successful protections by the defender: Karuizawa Kei, Sudou Ken

Every turn in the second half. From start to finish, Ichinose had never removed Kei from her list of attack nominations, not even once.

Chapter 8:
New Expulsion

IN SAKAYANAGI'S first attack in the second half of the exam, she shifted her sights from Horikita's class to Ryuuen's class, taking aim. Prior to the special exam, she had no particular plan for fighting Ryuuen's class. That was because she thought there wasn't any need to formulate a meticulous strategy against an opponent whom she could easily crush in any situation, with any method.

As of right now, however, Sakayanagi had extraneous information floating around in her mind. That was thanks to the phone call the night before from her classmate Hashimoto, who had given her some strongly worded advice. There were a few things that firmly stuck in her mind, one of them being that she should explore the possibility of eliminating Shiina Hiyori and getting her expelled.

Sakayanagi wasn't interested in things like Hashimoto's opinions, but when she heard the reason, she changed her mind. How Ayanokouji looked at Shiina, how he treated her. Hashimoto said that he looked and treated her differently than he did with other, regular students. That intrigued Sakayanagi. She wondered, if she could get Shiina expelled from school, would Ayanokouji show any emotion?

"But that's no longer possible," thought Sakayanagi aloud.

In the first half, Ichinose's fighting style carried a stronger determination than ever. In the past, she would have shown hesitation in eliminating students from an opponent's class, even if it were Ryuuen's. However, when the fight began, Ichinose showed no hesitation. In the first half alone, she'd eliminated Ishizaki, Isoyama, Yano, and Morofuji. She was solely looking out for her own class, showing no mercy to the others.

Even if Sakayanagi only targeted Shiina and successfully eliminated her, it would be one of the other students who would be sacrificed. Aiming for Shiina's expulsion, an unlikely result, would be a sacrifice in efficiency. Shiina had only made one mistake at this point. Even if it were possible to hit her directly

with problems she couldn't solve, it would be difficult to do it twice before she'd be protected. It wouldn't be an easy move to pull off.

"Interesting..."

After taking first place in the first half of the exam, the game was growing tedious. Perhaps it was time to have a little fun with it. She changed her decision—it would be interesting to add a little challenge by getting rid of a specific target. After clearing that difficult hurdle, she would then naturally keep the lead and stroll to the finish line. So then, how to formulate a strategy to achieve this? In the few minutes she had before her turn came, she formulated a strategy.

Then, finally, her turn came. However...

On turn eleven, all five people Sakayanagi had nominated had been saved via protection. She had spent two points on her attack, and she absolutely needed that swing to hit. But what happened was the complete opposite of what she expected. One after another, the students in her class said things like "They just had a good round—don't worry about it."

Sakayanagi was not so convinced of that.

It was just one perfect score. However, it was too perfect; it couldn't have been luck. She immediately nixed her self-imposed challenge of taking out Shiina. Abandoning all strategy and theory, she went ahead and chose at random. It was a combination of categories and nominations that nobody could predict.

The results were the same as turn eleven: perfect. Ryuuen had pulled off two consecutive miracles.

Her classmates couldn't hide their bewilderment. It wouldn't be surprising if the first thing they imagined was that they were losing strategically—perhaps their moves had been anticipated. That wasn't even a possibility in Sakayanagi's mind. Someone was up to something. In just those two turns, she was convinced of the only possible answer: there was a Judas in the class—a traitor.

It had to be a leak. There could be no other explanation. Sakayanagi decided to silently observe the students in her class until her next turn came. Some students exchanged looks and lamented Ryuuen's good luck. Others were glued to their phones,

trying not to be eliminated. Eventually, the thirteenth turn came. The class naturally fell silent.

Sakayanagi was also silent. She waited thirty seconds, then a minute. It wasn't as though she were racking her brain to figure out a way to get around Ryuuen's defenses. This silence was a nonverbal command from Sakayanagi to her classmates. She beamed out her intention: *"You're playing with fire, and it stops here."*

After maintaining the silence until the last possible second, Sakayanagi gave her nominations to Chabashira-sensei.

Once again, however, Ryuuen's score was perfect.

"How unfortunate," Sakayanagi muttered softly to herself, her smile fading.

As the information was leaking in real time, the methods by which the traitor was doing this were limited. One method would be via chat or email. But as students were busily studying, merely typing wasn't suspicious. The next possible method was to say the names vocally, via telephone or other means. As soon as Sakayanagi notified the teacher of her nominations, that information could be immediately transmitted to her opponent. The traitor wouldn't even have to touch their phone.

Sakayanagi could ask the teacher for permission to submit her nominations on paper, as a precautionary measure. If that weren't possible, she could switch to a plan that involved whispering her nominations into the teacher's ear. However...

Sakayanagi directed her gaze at the large monitor displayed behind the teacher's back. Even if Sakayanagi prevented audio leaks, there was no guarantee that the problem would be solved if the traitor used a cell phone camera. Was her only hope of defense to physically prevent information from being sent? She could have everyone stop using their phones and tablets. Then, she could employ a method of whispering her nominations into the teacher's ear and have everyone in her class turn around and have their backs to her until Ryuuen finished inputting his five nominations, thereby shutting out all information. If that solved the problem, then that would be a satisfactory outcome. She would be able to stop Ryuuen's rampage after only giving him fifteen points. As Sakayanagi continued to think, a voice reached her ears.

“There’s a leak.”

Morishita Ai had broken the silence, muttering those words dully with a blank expression.

“You may be right, Morishita-san. I think we should have everyone stop using their phones to check. There is a possibility that Ryuuen-kun has a scheme,” said Sanada, speaking up after a slight delay to agree with Morishita. It was an appeal to Sakayanagi to act.

Kitou and Hashimoto stood up immediately.

“There is no need for that,” said Sakayanagi.

“B-but…!” protested Sanada.

“You should all continue to use your phones to prepare,” said Sakayanagi.

While in the middle of this confusion, it was difficult to say whether continuing to study would be effective. They had received an unexpected order from their leader: to refrain from the required course of action.

“You sure, Princess? After seeing him get three perfect rounds in a row, I’m positive that’s what’s happening. No matter how you slice it, I think info is being leaked. We need to do some __”

“I’m not altering course. We will continue with the exam as-is,” said Sakayanagi.

She’d shut them down. No one had the authority to overturn her decision, yet her classmates wondered why Sakayanagi wasn’t doing what needed to be done.

Betraying one’s class wasn’t easy. If your opponent was blatantly getting all their protections right, then it would only be a matter of time before you realized there was a leak. If the traitor knew this and was still doing it, Sakayanagi was concerned that the problem wouldn’t be solved simply by taking away her classmates’ phones and blocking their view of the screen.

What would happen if measures were taken, but the information leakage didn’t stop? Sakayanagi expected that it would lead to a loss of access to information, leaving her classmates confused and bewildered. Even if evidence of the traitor did show up, Sakayanagi reasoned that if she were in the

traitor's position, she would not keep any evidence on her person. The traitor could plant it in a random student's desk, in someone's bag, or elsewhere in the classroom. If that happened, it'd just end up turning into an endless argument.

Students would probably start trying to pin the blame on each other, arguing, "It's not me!" "Well, it's not me, either!" back and forth. Naming a suspect would only lead to turmoil. In any case, the more noise she made now, the more she had to lose. Sakayanagi decided that avoiding coming in last place should be a higher priority than taking first. Even if the information leakage continued, it would not affect her ability to defend and score points.

Sakayanagi tried to parry Horikita's attacks as much as possible and aim for third place, but it was futile. Based on how the exam was going and from what was shown on the monitor, it was also apparent that Ichinose was assisting Horikita. A strategy had been formulated to force Class A into last place. They continued to be at a disadvantage in the second half, and once the twentieth turn was over, they decisively failed. They ended up six points shy of third place.

"I've lost," said Sakayanagi.

The four classes were competing against one another, and then Sakayanagi made a blunder, taking last place. Even if the situation was the result of a betrayal from within, she could make no excuse. Sakayanagi let out a small sigh. As the leader it was her responsibility to accept failure.

"Now that we have suffered defeat, I must choose someone to expel out of those who have been eliminated," announced Sakayanagi.

The five students who had been eliminated over the course of the exam were Kamuro, Yamamura, Sugio, Toba, and Machida.

"The logical choice would be to make a decision based purely on your level of contribution to the class. I will not be doing that. From my perspective, you five are all at the same level," said Sakayanagi.

"W-well, in that case, how are you going to decide...?" asked Machida, one of the eliminated students.

“Shall we have the students draw lots? It would be fair,” said Sakayanagi.

The proposal, which the students hadn’t even considered, elicited shrieks of terror from the eliminated.

“Have I disappointed you? Unfortunately, the most disappointed party won’t be around long to express it,” said Sakayanagi.

Through the silence, Sakayanagi quietly proceeded. Those who had been eliminated wanted to air their grievances, but they also didn’t want to make a bad impression on Sakayanagi and have her seal their fate. That was the outcome they most wanted to avoid.

“It is pointless to raise objections. The leader has the authority to decide who will be expelled,” said Sakayanagi.

“How the hell can you say a lottery is a decision?!” argued one student.

“It’s obvious. Think of it as a situation where a student with low OAA scores accepts the responsibility for it and is expelled. I have decided to judge that the unlucky one in this scenario is that student with no ability. Also, the first student to declare that they will not be participating in this drawing will in effect be stating that they have forfeited, and that person will be the one I will get rid of,” said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi solemnly cut off their escape route and forced them into participating.

“I made the lots for the drawing,” a female student, not reading the heavy feeling in the classroom, called out to Sakayanagi in a laid-back tone of voice.

“You are very quick in your preparations, Morishita-san. Moreover, thank you for anticipating our needs. In that case, I will spare no time. Shall we get this over with? I regret to inform you that whoever draws the slip of paper with color on it will be expelled,” said Sakayanagi.

There were five lots prepared in total. Four out of five were safe.

“Who will draw first? The odds will not change whether you draw first or last,” announced Sakayanagi.

They could either try to avoid expulsion by their own action or wait for someone else to be expelled. Machida, while suppressing his urge to refuse, took the initiative and drew his lot.

“Yeaaaah!” he exclaimed.

Machida drew a blank slip of paper and gave the biggest fist pump he’d ever given. Spurred on by this, Sugio and Toba followed in turn. One by one, they drew their lots, but the slip with color at the end wasn’t drawn. Only two remained: Kamuro Masumi and Yamamura Miki. The former had only been holding back because she felt like this was all too much of a hassle. The latter was too scared to move. Their reasons for hesitating couldn’t have been more different. Though the remaining two had been in her crew, and far more than the three who were saved earlier, Sakayanagi’s face didn’t change a shade. She’d already decided it didn’t matter who was gone.

“You can draw yours first,” said Kamuro.

Even though Kamuro urged her to go ahead, Yamamura didn’t move. She was shuddering at the thought that there was a one-in-two chance that she could be expelled. Her heart wasn’t prepared for it. She couldn’t even think about what would happen after getting kicked out of school. Her legs were paralyzed.

“I-I, I, um…” stammered Yamamura.

“Of for the love of… Fine, I’ll go draw then. You happy?” snapped Kamuro.

Yamamura couldn’t get words out. Just nodding her head repeatedly in affirmation was all she could do. Kamuro walked up to Morishita, the person who was holding onto the lots.

“Please wait.”

Just before Kamuro reached out with her hand, Sakayanagi told her to wait.

“I had said earlier that those who do not draw lots will be expelled. Yamamura-san, who has refused to draw, is now gone,” said Sakayanagi.

“Huh? B-but, wha…?” blinked Yamamura.

“There are no objections, I trust?” said Sakayanagi.

“H-h… Th-that’s…”

“What are you on about? What, are you trying to save me?” snapped Kamuro.

“No, I am not. I am simply stating the facts of the matter,” said Sakayanagi.

“Oh, okay, sure. If Yamamura and I draw out lots at the same time, problem solved, right?” said Kamuro.

Sakayanagi had tried to hastily settle the decision of who would be expelled, but Kamuro put a stop to it. She had calmly tossed aside the opportunity to avoid her own expulsion.

“Come on. Get your ass over here,” shouted Kamuro.

Kamuro walked over to Yamamura, who was unable to take even a single step forward, grabbed her by the arm, and dragged her along.

“All right, this is our first and last chance to see who is luckier, me or you,” said Kamuro.

“Do you think you’re being too kind, Masumi-san? Why would you need to take the risk of helping someone who should have been discarded?” said Sakayanagi.

“It’s whatever. I just did it,” said Kamuro.

“I see… Well then, I will ask you both to draw at the same time,” said Sakayanagi.

Morishita presented the two lots. Yamamura was unable to make a choice. Kamuro took her left hand and forced it closer, and Yamamura reflexively grabbed one of the lots. After making sure that she took one, Kamuro grabbed the other.

“No hard feelings, okay?” said Kamuro. It was awkward, but still very kind to the frozen Yamamura.

“All right, I’m going to pull it out,” said Morishita. With that, she opened her clasped hands.

The two slips of paper swayed lightly from the slight draft. The expelled student held the paper with the colored tip, and that student was Kamuro. None of the students, except for the person in question, were able to speak up. They couldn’t accept the result yet.

“It’s done. Good for you, Yamamura. You survived,” said Kamuro.

“Huh? Wh…”

Kamuro gently patted Yamamura on the shoulder, who still hadn’t wrapped her head around the outcome.

A silence enveloped Class A. The situation was completely different from the time when Totsuka had been expelled; they had lost Class Points because of their defeat, and they had to choose someone. This was the first time Class A had experienced a true setback. What was surprising was that the sole casualty, Kamuro, remained calm and collected throughout. She brushed off the stares from her classmates, seemingly exasperated by the attention, and returned to her seat. Sakayanagi tore her eyes off Kamuro and urged Chabashira, the teacher in charge, to proceed.

“Well…this concludes the special exam,” announced Chabashira.

The Survival and Elimination Special Exam, which had taken quite a long time, was over.



8.1

FINAL RESULTS

1ST PLACE – Ryuuen, Class D – 69 Points

2ND PLACE – Ichinose, Class C – 62 Points

3RD PLACE – Horikita, Class B – 59 Points

4TH PLACE – Sakayanagi, Class A – 53 Points

Ryuuen, who had gotten perfect scores in his defense in all ten turns of the second half of the exam, had won in a come-from-behind victory. With the rankings now finalized, Ryuuen's class had earned one hundred Class Points. Second and third place both lost fifty Class Points respectively, and Sakayanagi lost one hundred Class Points. It was a shock that the class at the top had fallen all the way to the bottom, something that could not have been anticipated from the first half of the exam.

Defeat wasn't something to be joyful about. Yet, there wasn't much in the way of discontent among my classmates. In fact, they seemed to be feeling a great deal of relief over having survived. It was no surprise, though. Those who had been eliminated had been in complete suspense as they waited for the exam to be over. We were told that Chabashira-sensei would report back early next week with more details, such as who was expelled from Class A, and we were dismissed for the day. While the excitement was still dying down in the classroom, a student raced through the hallway and flung open the door with great intensity.

"I'm so sorry, Karuizawa-san!!" exclaimed Ichinose.

"I-I-Ichinose-san...?!" Kei, who had felt the pressure of being nominated ten times consecutively, froze when Ichinose appeared, her face stiffening.

Satou, as if to protect Kei, slid between the two. Upon seeing this, Horikita, who was sitting in the last row, immediately got up from her seat.

"Calm down, Karuizawa-san. Those inexplicable consecutive nominations were Ichinose's way of giving us a helping hand," said Horikita.

Ichinose nodded, confirming what Horikita said, while at the same time still apologizing.

“Huh? What the hell? What does that even…?” huffed Kei.

“She was trying to give us points, in her own way. Isn’t that right?” said Horikita.

“I had thought about sending a message in chat or calling, but I figured it would sound unnatural if I simply told you. So I deliberately decided to nominate Karuizawa-san consecutively to send a clear message. Horikita-san picked up on it and contacted me,” said Ichinose.

It had been Horikita who contacted Ichinose, not the other way around. Ichinose emphasized that piece of information.

“The reason we were able to get several successful protections after that was because Ichinose-san told me in advance who she was going to nominate,” added Horikita.

“Why would you need to do something like that, anyway…?!” huffed Kei.

“To defeat Class A, I suppose. In truth, we were just fighting not to lose,” said Ichinose.

“Yes. We had no choice but to compete head-on with Sakayanagi-san. Your help was a godsend,” said Horikita.

If we hadn’t had Ichinose’s support, that six-point difference between Horikita’s class and Sakayanagi’s wouldn’t have been there.

“W-well, why’d it have to be me, huh?!” exclaimed Kei.

“You’re the leader of the girls in your class, Karuizawa-san. It’s only natural that Horikita-san would want to protect you from being eliminated, right? That’s why I decided to nominate you from the start. I knew that you’d be feeling a lot of anxiety, so I raced over here as quick as I could. I’m really, really sorry!” said Ichinose.

Kei, after hearing justifiable, legitimate reasons and seeing the messages that Horikita had sent to Ichinose, which served as further proof, seemed more or less mollified. Ichinose apologized to Kei several more times, and then left to join her waiting classmates. Afterward, the students began to head back to the dorms, offering words of appreciation and thanks to Horikita as

she stared at the rankings. I figured I should say something to Horikita myself.

“I lost this time. Obviously, there must have been some sort of deal between Ryuuen-kun and Ichinose-san’s class in the second half… Of course, in the absence of proof, I can only speculate. My guess is he gave Ichinose-san’s class points to push them into second place while not eliminating anyone,” said Horikita.

“Yeah. But that’s not what’s important,” I replied.

Nodding, Horikita stood up.

“If the two classes were going to collude, they would have needed to start from the first half of the exam. Only by assisting each other could they share the win. That was why I was relieved when there weren’t any signs of that happening by the end of the first half,” said Horikita.

“It wasn’t just you. Not even Sakayanagi had been able to predict it,” I replied.

It wasn’t clear at which stage exactly Ryuuen and Ichinose started working together, but it would have at least been sometime after the attacking order had been announced. They had prepared quietly, not making themselves known.

“The cornerstone of the strategy was how Ryuuen was able to get wind of all of Sakayanagi’s targets before she attacked,” I added.

“Someone is feeding him information about Class A… There’s no other explanation,” said Horikita.

“Exactly.”

“That student is totally erratic. I cannot even imagine who would betray their own class. And we’re not talking about Class D or Class C, either. It’s someone from Class A, a class that has maintained its position since we started here. What incentive could a student possibly have to do something like that?” wondered Horikita.

“It was probably like ‘Pay me twenty million and I’ll betray my class.’ It would have to be at least that much, or they wouldn’t do it.”

Well, that being said, I was still skeptical that absolutely anyone would’ve gone through with the betrayal. Sure, getting

twenty million points, which would enable you to transfer classes at any time, would in essence be like crossing the finish line, but there was still more than a year left before graduation. If such a massive number of points were to be transferred, the betrayal would be exposed immediately and that student would be the sworn enemy of Class A. Other classes would turn on them too.

That student would be targeted in subsequent special exams, and if they became a candidate for expulsion, they would be unable to protect their Private Points and would have no choice but to give them up. If that happened, it would be a total waste of their efforts. That considered, the traitor's motive might have been something out of the ordinary, something special.

"If I had to say anything, I'll admit, yes, I don't like this turn of events. I can't complain, personally. It's unfortunate that we didn't take first place, but the fact that Class A came in last means we came out with minimal loss. But…it's frustrating," sighed Horikita.

As soon as the other students were in the hallway and out of sight, Horikita vented her true feelings.

"You should let that frustration fuel you in the next special exam," I suggested.

"Yes… I'll do that."

"I'm going to go check on Ryuuen's class now. What about you?" I asked.

"…I'm going to head back to the dormitory for today. I'm not confident that I could sit quietly while his head swells," said Horikita.

That was true; Ryuuen was going to be insufferable.

8.2

I WENT OVER TO CHECK on Ryuuen's class, which I was sure was in a state of jubilation, and as I passed Class D, which was just nearby, I spotted Hiyori. She seemed to be looking downstairs, through the window. I felt like something was off, because she wasn't wearing her usual calm smile, but rather, a hard look. I quietly approached her, looking down the stairs through the window.

What I saw was Ryuuen and some of his cronies.

The standout was Ishizaki, expressing his joy by jumping up and down and gesturing wildly with his hands. I also spotted Katsuragi, who was walking along proudly toward Keyaki Mall as well, paying no attention to Ishizaki’s showboating. I had only caught sight of his side profile for a moment, but what I saw was his usual stern expression, lacking in playfulness.



“They’re off to toast their victory, eh?” I asked.

I wouldn’t be surprised if they had a particularly grand time at Keyaki Mall today, living it up.

“Seems that way,” replied Hiyori coolly.

“You’re fine not going?” I asked.

“I was invited, but I declined,” said Hiyori.

“Why?” I asked.

“ I just wasn’t in the mood to celebrate, for some reason.” In a sea of rejoicing students, Hiyori was probably the only one who wasn’t smiling. “After seeing Ryuuen-kun’s fighting style and his way of thinking today…I can’t help but feel uneasy.”

“This is just speculation, but it sounds like you were at a disadvantage and yet you turned around and came out on top. What’s there to complain about?”

“If you look only at the results, yes, I suppose. But…” Hiyori briefly paused, hesitating to continue, but went on. “I suppose I just have some doubts. Can we continue fighting the way we have and truly win?”

“They’re indirect methods, sure. They don’t rely on a class’s ability,” I replied. Ryuuen’s schemes had improved, but only that.

“We got by this time, somehow. But we weren’t able to build a foundation so that we can win the next time. I’m not telling my class to lose, but we lost a valuable opportunity for growth,” Hiyori lamented.

“Maybe,” I replied. That kind of opportunity would require spilt blood.

“The piece of the puzzle that we need to move up to Class A is, at the same time, our greatest obstacle. It’s troubling,” said Hiyori.

Hiyori saw a clear weakness in her class. Ryuuen’s presence was their strength; however, Ryuuen was also the very thing holding them back.

“If there are students who realize that, then there’s still hope,” I replied.

I had wanted to have a lighthearted interview with the winning class, but I didn’t want to bother her. Hiyori seemed worried and was apparently going to head to the library next. She

asked me if I'd like to join her, but I turned her down. I also wanted to check on Ichinose and Sakayanagi's classes too, after all.

Ichinose's class, for better or for worse, seemed the same as usual. While managing to avoid coming in last place, they had kept their eliminations at zero thanks to the creation of an ironclad insurance policy. Employing a fighting style that involved not abandoning anyone carried with it a level of risk, but they ultimately finished in second place. In the first half, they ascertained Horikita's aims, then allowed Horikita to get five students within range of elimination.

By teaming up with Ryuuen in the second half (after negotiating with him at an early stage), they had avoided casualties. Then, they went on to assist Horikita and dropped Sakayanagi into last place. Ichinose had played the ideal game as a class that functioned as an intermediary for the others.

8.3

FIVE O'CLOCK HAD ALREADY come and gone. Due to the second-year students' special exam, club activities had been canceled for today. Only a very few students remained in the school building. Sakayanagi sat down at Kamuro's seat, which had not yet been taken away, and quietly waited for a certain moment to arrive. Eventually, it came, and the door to the classroom opened.

"I have been waiting for you, Hashimoto-kun," said Sakayanagi.

"So, what's the deal? Going through all the hassle of having us meet in a place like this, and just the two of us? What gives?" asked Hashimoto.

"A postmortem," replied Sakayanagi.

"How morbid."

"The results of this special exam were unfortunate. It was a failure on my part," said Sakayanagi.

"Yeah, it's definitely disappointing, but there ain't no one who can blame you for it, Princess. I can only assume that someone must have been leaking intel about our class to Ryuuen." Hashimoto placed his hand lightly on Kamuro's desk and

looked around the classroom. “It’s ’cause of the traitor that Masumi-chan—I mean Kamuro-chan’s getting expelled. It’s unforgivable.”

“I had thought you were someone who did not care who was expelled as long as you were safe, Hashimoto-kun,” said Sakayanagi.

“Hey now, I’m a fellow second-year, y’know? I have a beating heart, don’t I?” Hashimoto protested.

“I suppose so. At any rate, how do you think the traitor passed along their intel?”

“If ya think it through logically, they probably used their phone. Simple and effective.”

“I am of the same opinion,” replied Sakayanagi.

“Hey, in that case, why didn’t you take countermeasures when Morishita spoke up?”

“Countermeasures? Do you mean something like confiscating phones?”

“Yeah. If you did that, wouldn’t that have saved us a lot of pain?”

“The traitor is no fool. They would have some countermeasures up their sleeve. If we had carelessly searched for the culprit, it would have only led to disorder,” said Sakayanagi.

“So you’re saying that you anticipated what would happen and just observed. That’s the kind of leadership only you possess, Princess.”

Hashimoto slowly walked between the rows of desks, toward the podium, and then looked back over his shoulder.

“Still, I gotta ask, even if people say it was the result of a lottery—didn’t your heart ache when you axed Kamuro-chan?”

“My heart?”

“You were pals. If it were me in your shoes, I would’ve gotten Toba or one of the others expelled instead, even if it meant bendin’ over backward,” said Hashimoto.

“It is inconceivable that I would do something like that. She is nothing special.”

“Well, we’ve been through good times and bad for the past two years or so, and she’s a fighter. She’s strong. I rather liked her,

so I don't think I'll be able to accept it for a while."

Hashimoto said those words while standing some distance away from Sakayanagi, but from the look on his face, he was clearly feeling conflicted about the situation.

"Who do you think was the traitor who caused Masumi-san to be expelled?" asked Sakayanagi.

"Dang, is this an interrogation? 'Fraid no one comes to mind. What about you, Princess? Got any ideas?"

Smiling, Sakayanagi quietly pulled back her chair and pushed herself to her feet with her cane. Then, she motioned for Hashimoto to approach her.

Hashimoto, stepping away from the podium, obeyed and got close enough to hear a murmur.

"It's you, isn't it, Hashimoto-kun? You're the leak."

Hashimoto scratched his head and let out a heavy sigh.

"I figured you'd ask when you invited me here. It ain't surprising that you're suspicious of me, I s'pose. I'm sure that someone well-informed like you would know that I'm constantly on the hunt for a transfer, Princess. I admit that I'm sneaky, but do you think I would do something to undermine Class A while I'm in it? Come on. No matter how you think about it, I'd have to be crazy."

"Yes, you'd have to be. Even I didn't think that such a blatant betrayal could happen."

It was only natural to find it hard to believe that a member of Class A would engage in behavior that would put themselves at risk. Even Sakayanagi, who paid attention to even the finest details, hadn't considered one of her closest allies might betray her.

"I wouldn't do anything that'd put the class in a fix. Besides, what do you think would happen if the most suspicious person went around betraying everyone? I'd be the number one suspect," said Hashimoto. "I'll help look for the traitor. I'll prove my innocence."



“Then I might as well put you to work,” said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi took out her own phone and placed it on Kamuro’s desk with a light *clak*. Displayed on the screen was Hashimoto, walking around Keyaki Mall with Ryuuen.

“You were in contact before this special exam,” said Sakayanagi.

“Ryuuen came up to me, though, not the other way around. He basically forced me. Like, who even got me on camera, anyway? Maybe it was your personal assistant, Yamamura, eh, Princess?”

He didn’t even wait for Sakayanagi to say anything before rattling off questions as a deflection.

“Can we please put an end to this farce now?” asked Sakayanagi, her tone steady.

“No matter how much I try to explain myself, I can’t get you to believe me, huh?”

“If you are going to continue to make excuses, can you show me your history on your phone?”

“And will that convince you that I’m innocent?”

“We shall see. Do you not think that it is worth a try?” she replied.

“It’s true that if someone wanted to leak information during the exam, it’d be quick and easy to just keep a call going. Or, messaging via chat or email on the sly. Which means that whoever has those logs would be the traitor. Are you sure about this? If you check my phone and don’t find anything, you’re gonna owe me a huge apology. A massive apology.”

“If I am mistaken, I will be sure to meet your expectations for an apology. However, it is not your call history nor your chat history that I am requesting. Those sorts of things can be easily erased, after all,” said Sakayanagi. After the exam, Hashimoto had plenty of time to be alone. Erasing those logs would’ve been no trouble whatsoever.

“Then what do you mean by ‘history’?”

“Your Private Points.”

Sakayanagi silently dared him. “*Will you admit it now that I’ve said this much?*” Hashimoto’s voice got stuck in the back of his

throat.

“Though you appear careless and sloppy, you are cautious. Even if you were to work with Ryuuen-kun, there is no guarantee that he would not entrap you. Supposing you were eliminated in the course of the exam, you would have run the risk of being expelled yourself. You could have entered into a contract in the form of a written document to protect yourself, but that would leave behind physical evidence, which I am sure you wished to avoid. It would not be surprising if a large number of Private Points were deposited in your account in lieu of a guarantee. If he fulfilled his promise, you would fully refund him those points. If he did not honor his promise, you would keep those Private Points. In that case, you would not betray one another unless something went very wrong.”

A wry smile appeared on Hashimoto’s face as he clutched his phone in his hands.

“…Dang. Very clever. All right, I give up, I surrender. I admit it,” said Hashimoto.

Sakayanagi’s accusation had been correct. Hashimoto had temporarily held onto a large number of Private Points that Ryuuen had collected from his classmates. That was his insurance policy against being eliminated.

“How much did he buy you for?” asked Sakayanagi.

“The price for the information wasn’t very high, honestly. Just half a mil.”

“That is quite a cheap price for betrayal,” said Sakayanagi.

“It seemed fair to me. I sure don’t mind having Private Points or anything, but that’s not the reason I did it.”

Normally, this would’ve been the point where the detective pressed for a motive, but Sakayanagi didn’t do so. She already understood the reason for his betrayal.

“I suppose I should applaud Ryuuen-kun for recruiting you,” she said.

“Don’t make me laugh. I approached him. He’s not averse to acts of betrayal, and he’d accept it without hesitation if there was something in it for him. Horikita and Ichinose wouldn’t have been able to do this, now would they?” replied Hashimoto.

“A traitor needs someone to cooperate and accept the information, I suppose. He would be the only one who would readily agree to it,” reasoned Sakayanagi.

“Yep. I had a two-in-three chance,” said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto was saying that if Class A had been placed diagonally across from Ryuuen’s class on the organizational chart for the special exam and thus, they didn’t attack or defend, then his alliance wouldn’t have mattered and he would have played on the sidelines. That alone would’ve made an enormous difference in this situation. The rankings for the special exam might have been the same as they had been in the first half.

“Aren’t ya thinking of reprimandin’ me? Not even one little snippy comment?”

“I am not a teacher. It’s not my job to set you right.”

Hashimoto shrugged and slipped his phone back into his pocket. “Don’t ya think you should’ve at least frisked me or something?”

“That would have been pointless. I’m sure your phone was just a red herring, wasn’t it, Hashimoto-kun? It is far too dangerous to conduct espionage with one’s own phone. You must have borrowed a phone from a student in another class and hidden it somewhere in the classroom. Isn’t that right?”

“You got it all figured out, huh?”

“There is no point in even trying to fool me,” said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi had quickly assessed the true situation and beat him at his own game. If he had been suspected, he had planned to have turned over his own phone without hesitation, just as Sakayanagi had pointed out. Even if she had looked at every single person’s phone in class, she wouldn’t have found the traitor—it would have merely wasted precious time. Sakayanagi decided that she’d sooner just let him continue so she could make the best of it defensively. There had been no need to instigate a panic.

“Your hiding places would have been limited to somewhere in the classroom, but it would take time and effort to find it, even if I had everyone searching. Besides, if someone were to kick up a fuss during that time, pretending to be ignorant of the situation, saying, ‘Maybe the spy is in the hallway!’ before someone found

the phone, it would be possible for that certain someone to eliminate the evidence," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi, whose legs were not very strong, couldn't move nimbly enough to be able catch the culprit red-handed. If he saw Sakayanagi go and whisper into Kamuro or Kitou's ear, he would've had plenty of time to destroy the evidence.

"When the students left after the special exam ended, you left the classroom with someone you are not particularly close to: Yoshida-kun. Did you plant it in his bag?"

"Daaamn. Guess you were really keepin' an eye on me, Princess. Looks like I was your prime suspect all along."

"Your recent remarks were very suspicious."

"But why, though? Why ask me to give myself up when you could have just said, 'Show me your Private Point history' the second I set foot in the classroom earlier and been done with it?"

Sakayanagi had not immediately pressed Hashimoto for answers. If Sakayanagi hadn't known, this questioning would have been natural, but she'd been convinced from the start.

"Mercy for the traitor. Including my silence during the exam," said Sakayanagi.

She was giving him time to reflect on what he'd done and confess.

"It is a shame that you did not realize that. Contacting other classes, working for your own selfish benefit, plotting to transfer. If it were only those things, I could overlook what you have done as careless. However, in this case, your actions went beyond that."

"I guess so, yeah. As they say in many special exams, getting betrayed by your allies is fatal. Bein' in class means that everyone's got a shared destiny—we're all in the same boat. Even if you're dissatisfied, and even if you don't follow orders, you don't go as far as betrayal. It's a detriment to the class and to your own interests."

Even if a student were disgruntled, they would exercise self-control, even if they could barely stand it, day after day.

"You have crossed a line that should not have been crossed," said Sakayanagi.

“I won’t deny that.” Hashimoto didn’t flinch. He admitted the truth.

“I’m sure other folks will say that they can’t possibly understand it. They’ll wonder what’s in it for me to hurt Class A. Well, I say no, that’s not right, because this class didn’t have any chance of winning from the start. Even if I didn’t betray you, this class is obviously going to fall to Class B or lower in the future. It’s inevitable. We need to come up with a path to victory, even if that means I have to betray you,” said Hashimoto.

“So you’re saying that you’re fighting in your own way.”

“It hurt me too, y’know. But it was just too tempting. I had to put out a warning. Losing Class Points doesn’t mean despair. The only people who get cut are the ones without the talent to be here anyway. I knew this was the perfect opportunity. It wasn’t to bring the class down; it was to make it stronger.”

“You were prepared to be discovered. No—it sounds as though being discovered was part of your plan.”

“Well, maybe not on the same day, though.”

Hashimoto had assumed that she would have gathered the whole class together for the dramatic reveal—something like that. Being cornered alone was something he would have rather avoided.

“When you realized I betrayed you, you already knew why, didn’t you? Why I took this gamble?”

“Of course. That’s why I arranged this meeting.”

“I had to do things this way or I wouldn’t be able to get you to take me seriously. I even pitched the proposal to you again at the end of winter break, Princess, over and over and over. I want you to poach Ayanokouji for our class.”

“Yes. I have heard your impassioned speech so many times that I’m sick of it,” said Sakayanagi.

Headhunting Ayanokouji and Hashimoto’s betrayal. If you asked another student how they were related, they’d cock their heads in confusion. However, Hashimoto understood completely. He knew Sakayanagi Arisu’s character.

“Even if we lost Class Points this time, even if I had to betray you, even if someone had to be expelled...I didn’t care. I was going

to force you to listen. I had set my mind to it."

This wasn't the end; it was the beginning. This was a threat. Until she said she was going to headhunt Ayanokouji for their class, he would betray her, no matter how many times it took.

"You really seem to think that we will not stay Class A under my guidance," said Sakayanagi.

"I admit that you're brilliant, Princess. Still, I'm convinced that you won't be able to stop Ayanokouji's class's onslaught in the near future. The positions for Classes A and B are going to be reversed sooner or later, and there won't be any chance for us to overtake them afterward. Our current position is an illusion. The strategy that gives us the highest chance of staying Class A is to have you and Ayanokouji in the same class. If we do that, we cannot lose."

"I was right not to let you say these things in front of an audience."

"You don't agree? I'm right, you know."

"I cannot approve," said Sakayanagi.

"Sorry, but Ayanokouji is without a doubt, out of everyone in our grade, the best—"

Tok! Sakayanagi struck the floor with the tip of her cane, forcefully. "What do *you* know about Ayanokouji-kun?!" she snapped.

"Guh...!"

Sakayanagi had been calm until this point, but now, clear feelings of anger were seeping out from behind her mask.

"What is this blind faith in him? Where does this enthusiasm come from?" she asked.

Hashimoto felt intimidated by the petite Sakayanagi, whose temper roiled.

"What? Angry you're not the best?" asked Hashimoto.

It was certainly true that Sakayanagi was angry. However, it wasn't because Hashimoto had determined that Ayanokouji was superior to her. It was because she found Hashimoto's selfish obsession with Ayanokouji unforgivable. What right did an ordinary person, one who had no idea about Ayanokouji's birth, have to speak about him?

“Toss aside your pride and poach Ayanokouji. If Ryuuen does, that’d be the worst-case scenario,” said Hashimoto.

“There is zero chance that Ryuuen-kun will headhunt Ayanokouji-kun. If Ayanokouji-kun truly possesses the abilities you believe he does, that would be precisely why Ryuuen-kun would want him to remain as his enemy, so he can defeat him.”

“That might be true for now, sure. But what if he’s in a situation where he can’t actually win? If he realizes that that he’ll miss his chance to reach Class A, then he might change h—”

“He will not change. Both Ryuuen-kun and I wish to defeat a worthy opponent. We are the same in that we in no way care about staying in Class A,” said Sakayanagi.

Hashimoto closed his eyes and let out a sigh. His assumptions had been all wrong. Sakayanagi had held Ayanokouji in high esteem long before Hashimoto had noticed his ability. It was yet more confirmation Ayanokouji was extraordinary.

“Maybe that’s why you disgust me. When I entered this school, I had a gut feeling that either you or Ryuuen would be the leader to graduate from Class A. No matter what I did, I couldn’t shake the feeling something wasn’t right. But I see it now. Both of you lack the drive to graduate from Class A.”

They would only be in Class A if it helped them beat their rivals. If they found something that took precedence over being in Class A, they would casually toss it aside, without hesitation.

“Horikita and Ichinose do have that enthusiasm. Strange, huh? The classes with the fire to win don’t have the ability, and the ones without the ability have the drive. But if you and Ayanokouji team up, Princess, enthusiasm won’t matter for shit. It would be the birth of a class that can reach victory, without a doubt,” said Hashimoto.

Hashimoto was convinced of it, on his own. Sakayanagi looked at Hashimoto with a cold stare and began to speak. “I understand what you are trying to say, that you think bringing Ayanokouji-kun into our own class is an absolute prerequisite for victory. However, wouldn’t the safest and simplest method for you to take be to win a Class Transfer Ticket and transfer into Horikita-san’s class, the class in which Ayanokouji-kun is currently enrolled?

Seeing as Horikita-san has demonstrated she has that drive to be in Class A and all.”

“Do you really think I’m in a position to make that happen?” asked Hashimoto.

“Of course it can happen. If you had begged me to give you a Class Transfer Ticket, saying that you wished to transfer classes, should the opportunity have arisen, I would have gladly given it to you.”

“Man, I wish I’d asked. Oh, well.”

Hashimoto made a deliberate show of acting like he was regretful, but Sakayanagi quickly brushed him off.

“Be serious. I am sure you would not have accepted the ticket.”

“...Why’s that?” asked Hashimoto.

“You are transparent. You do not want to abandon a class in the lead, even if the future is uncertain. But you are afraid of Ayanokouji-kun. You wish to transfer classes, but there are no guarantees of what would happen after you transfer to Class B. Even with a ticket, you wouldn’t go. If you cannot move yourself, you have to move someone else,” said Sakayanagi.

Students who lacked commitment to a class wouldn’t be seen as trustworthy, and the hurdle in getting another ticket would be much, much higher. Worst-case scenario, he’d be stuck on a sinking ship.

“Don’t worry, traitor, you will get your wish: you won’t be here for long. You cannot escape now even if you wanted to, can you? Negotiate all you want, wheedle, beg, but you’re not worth twenty million, Hashimoto-kun. No one will seriously try to pick you up. If you even try to acquire a Class Transfer Ticket, you won’t escape. And, of course, I will never bring Ayanokouji-kun into my class either.”

In other words, Hashimoto was completely boxed in. But he didn’t shrink back from her anger. From the moment he had decided to betray her, Hashimoto had been committed to this path.

“Well, I wanted you to listen to what I had to say, but I guess I’m outta luck. I’m just gonna keep at it, then. Gonna have to twist your arm to get Ayanokouji into our class, Princess.”

This was Hashimoto's big gamble. If there were another chance for the class to oust one person, he'd be gone. Without that opportunity, it'd be much more difficult.

"Special exams are not the only way to go about getting rid of you. You understand that, yes?"

"You're really determined not to listen, huh? Well, it cuts both ways, y'know. I can get you expelled, Princess. Then I'll take control of Class A and bring Ayanokouji into the class."

Sakayanagi applauded dryly in response to the final breakdown between them.

"Oh, well done. What a luminary you are, Hashimoto-kun. Go ahead. Try to expel me. I want to see you try."

A fault line opened between them that couldn't be mended except by the others' defeat.

Chapter 9:
Harbinger of Awakening

NEAR THE FACULTY OFFICE, Sakayanagi was quietly waiting by herself.

“You waiting? For Kamuro, I mean,” I asked.

“News spreads quickly,” said Sakayanagi.

“Kitou told me when I stopped by to check on Class A.”

“He’s a man of few words, to be sure. I suppose you can never tell who is friends with whom.”

“Maybe it’s insensitive of me, but I decided to come by and check things out. I was never especially close with Kamuro, but this’ll be the last time I ever see her. I thought I’d just say goodbye, even if only briefly.”

“Is that so?” said Sakayanagi.

The truth was that I didn’t care about saying goodbye to Kamuro. I’m not sentimental. It was an excuse Sakayanagi couldn’t refuse. We stood shoulder to shoulder, staring at the door to the faculty office.

“Knowing you, Ayanokouji-kun, I’m sure you’ve figured out what happened just from observing the results.”

“Yeah. I have a pretty good idea. Were you able to identify who was responsible?”

“Yes. That has been taken care of.”

“I see,” I replied.

I was sure she’d take care of the culprit in her usual, exacting manner. Before long, just at the cusp of sunset, Kamuro nonchalantly strolled out of the office. Perhaps she hadn’t thought anyone would be there, because there was a look of bewilderment on her face.

“What are you two doing here?” she asked.

“I was waiting for you, Masumi-san. Am I not allowed?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Not like I could stop you if I wanted, but why?” asked Kamuro.

Kamuro seemed to have accepted her fate more readily than I'd have expected.

"With regret, I bid you farewell today. I wanted to have one last talk with you," said Sakayanagi.

"Oh god, don't tell me—even *you* have pangs of conscience? Yeah, right. No, thanks. And what about you, Ayanokouji?" asked Kamuro.

"I'm here on an educational field trip," I replied.

"Huh? ...Ugh. Incomprehensible until the end, I guess."

"A student that I didn't expect to get expelled is being expelled. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious," I replied.

"Unexpected? I'm a shoplifter. You'd think I would be at the top of the list," said Kamuro.

"That's in the past. You weren't at the bottom of the rankings, and I didn't know what method Sakayanagi would use in choosing who to eliminate. Nothing about this was expected."

I refrained from mentioning it here, but Kamuro was also close to Sakayanagi.

"She was chosen via drawing lots," explained Sakayanagi.

"That's also—"

"You find it unlike me?" interrupted Sakayanagi.

"Not sure. I'd like to ask Kamuro how she feels about it being pure chance." I wasn't sure if she would answer honestly, but it was worth a shot.

"God, you're oblivious."

Perhaps she was taken off guard by being asked about her feelings. She paused to think.

"I dunno, I guess it just feels weird, is all. Up until this morning, things at school were just normal. I was just thinking about stupid, worthless stuff like how I was going to spend my next day off. Then I get expelled in this totally wild way, out of the blue."

She hadn't had any sense of impending danger. She was both safe in her class and had seen other people expelled, so that threat was normalized for her. Even Sakayanagi probably didn't think that she was going to lose.

“The fault lies with me. I did this to you,” said Sakayanagi.

“Uh, no, don’t be like that,” said Kamuro.

Kamuro immediately recoiled at anything from Sakayanagi approaching an apology.

“Look, I have no intention of blaming you for it or anything. I don’t want you to do anything about it. Besides, ever since I got here, I realized I wouldn’t care if I did get expelled,” said Kamuro.

Kamuro started out a delinquent. Perhaps she had firmly resolved herself to be practical about this, because she seemed very easygoing about the entire process. It didn’t seem like she wanted to stand around talking in front of the faculty office forever, because she started heading off without a word. Sakayanagi, who didn’t have strong legs, chased after Kamuro, pushing herself for a few seconds. I was going to be heading in the same direction anyway to return to the dorms, so I figured I might as well follow.

“I had been waiting for you, to let you vent out a complaint or two,” said Sakayanagi.

“Mind your business,” replied Kamuro.

“What do you plan to do after leaving this school?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Seems like there are a few high schools out there that’ll accept you as a transfer student if you pass their exams, even if you’ve been expelled elsewhere. My parents are annoying as hell about it, like ‘You’ve got to go to high school!’ so I guess I’ll give it a shot,” said Kamuro.

Kamuro had committed herself to a new path very quickly. Gradually, the distance between Kamuro and Sakayanagi widened. Sakayanagi tried to walk hurriedly to catch up to Kamuro, but this unfamiliar action caused her to fall forward, throwing out her hands to catch her fall.

“What are you doing?” shouted Kamuro. She looked around, spotted Sakayanagi on the ground, and sighed. After walking back, she gently lifted Sakayanagi to her feet.

“I’m not going to be around anymore to help, so hurry up and find a replacement for me.”

“I understand… Masumi-san?” said Sakayanagi.

“What?” asked Kamuro, sounding like she was annoyed.

“No, nothing,” said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi was about to say something, but she decided against it. Kamuro, narrowing her eyes in confusion, picked up Sakayanagi’s cane, handed it to her, and then went on her way once more. Again, Sakayanagi started chasing after Kamuro, limping.

“Do you have anything you wish to say?” asked Sakayanagi.

Kamuro turned around at the entryway.

“Huh? What, you want me to blame you or something? Like ‘Why’d you expel me?’ Something like that?”

“That’s not what I mean. I have a responsibility to listen,” said Sakayanagi.

“Of all the stupid—”

Kamuro was about to end the conversation right there, but she stopped as she met Sakayanagi’s eyes.

“Ugh, god. You… You’re smart, but you’re also really dumb in some ways, you know?” said Kamuro.

“It is inexcusable to call me ‘stupid’; I cannot let that pass. What do you mean by that?” asked Sakayanagi.

“If you ‘have a responsibility to listen’ or whatever, do you think you could, yanno, *actually* listen?” snapped Kamuro.

Luckily, Sakayanagi clammed up there.

“All right then, I’ve got something to say. I don’t have any attachment to this school or anything, but promise me just one thing.”

“Promise? Promise what?” asked Sakayanagi.

“This isn’t for my sake, but make sure anyone who betrays the class ends up the same way I did. Can you promise me that?”

“Is that what you wish from me?”

“Yeah. Just that. Can you do it?” asked Kamuro.

“I promise. I will never, ever forgive traitors. I promise to eliminate every single one of them, without fail. And, of course, I will ensure that it does not come at the cost of our class standing.”

Kamuro nodded once in response to Sakayanagi’s oath, and then turned her attention to me. I’d been hanging back behind.

“You’re on the hook too, Ayanokouji. You’re a witness. Hold her feet to the fire.”

“I’m not sure why this is my responsibility, but sure, I accept,” I replied.

“Yeah. Okay, then good. Sorry, but I’m done now. I’m not a student at this school anymore, and so I’m not your business any longer, got it?” said Kamuro.

With that, Kamuro walked away, ignoring Sakayanagi who was taking the time to get ready to change her shoes so she could follow. Kamuro disappeared from view, not stopping as she made her way to the dormitory. By tomorrow morning, Kamuro would no longer be here at this school. I’m sure it wasn’t just Kamuro who was in denial. Nobody was prepared to lose her.

“She stayed true to herself until the end,” said Sakayanagi.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“...I will be taking a while longer yet. Please go on ahead and return to the dormitory,” said Sakayanagi.

I left the school building after Kamuro. I supposed Kamuro was more than just a classmate to Sakayanagi after all.

9.1

AFTER WALKING A BIT, I arrived near the bench where I had met Morishita a week or so earlier. Now, it was deserted, so I sat on the bench alone and waited for ten minutes or so. The person I was waiting for appeared, though walking at a slower pace than usual. Normally, she would have been attentive, but her field of vision was narrower today.

“It really took you a long time to get ready,” I remarked.

When I called out to her, she jumped in surprise, but she quickly hid that emotion.

“Were you waiting for me, by chance...?” she asked.

“Yeah. I forgot to ask you how you felt about all this.”

“I see. I suppose you don’t get to see Class A lose often.”

“You did all you could to read your opponents. You spotted the weaknesses in the other classes and exploited them, and your

defensive predictions were great. You clearly outperformed the other three leaders.”

“But I lost,” said Sakayanagi.

“True.”

“It is unfortunate. I haven’t felt any change in my mental or emotional state. Not one. If the reason for my defeat was due to a lack of ability on my part, things would be different, but that wasn’t the case.”

“If it’s just a matter of winning or losing, sure. But don’t you think it’s different when someone might be expelled?”

“If someone got eliminated during the exam and that class lost, one of the eliminated students would be expelled. I knew that from the beginning,” said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi refused to admit it, but I pressed her. “Even so, for you, defeat is… I’m sure that Kamuro getting expelled was unexpected.”

“I hope you aren’t underestimating me. It’s true that Masumi-san worked by my side for the past two years, but she was hardly an exceptional student, much less even an obedient one. Her being expelled has no impact on the class whatsoever,” said Sakayanagi with a smile.

“This isn’t like you, Sakayanagi. You seem nowhere near your usual composed self.”

“Is that so? I disagree.”

“Why would I be here if you weren’t shaken? You should have known I knew the moment you saw me here. I wouldn’t be here pointlessly.”

“I admit your insight is brilliant, but don’t you think you might be overreaching?”

“I wonder,” I replied.

When I refused to budge, even Sakayanagi seemed a little rattled by the fact that I wasn’t convinced.

“Masumi-san’s expulsion has affected my mind. Is that what you’re suggesting?”

“Pretty much, yes.”

“Ridiculous,” answered Sakayanagi.

“I understand that you don’t want to admit it. If you do, then you would have to say you messed up.” And she would have to feel regret that she didn’t choose someone else.

“You’re so strong that you can’t sympathize with the weakness of other people. You’re repulsed by it.”

“I don’t want to hear that from you of all people, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Yes, we have that in common. But you stand between the extremes. You’re still human and only understand yourself so well.”

There were many similarities between us, but there were also many differences.

“What are you getting at? What is it you ultimately want to say to me, Ayanokouji-kun? You don’t think I’d benefit from being weaker, do you? Do you think that I should have acted selfishly, saying that I wanted Masumi-san to stay?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Selfishness isn’t a virtue in a leader, no. But if you had long-term winning in mind, then yeah, you should have kept her. For the sake of your own strength the right choice would have been to have kept Kamuro. You should have laid out reasons to have expelled someone else, whether your metric was by OAA standards or another of your choosing.”

Her own pride had gotten in the way. In the face of an unexpected loss, she made a decision that prioritized keeping her composure so she could act like it didn’t matter to her who disappeared. A hand, when cut off, still itches. Sakayanagi would have to feel it the rest of her time here.

“Don’t trouble yourself. This doesn’t affect me in the slightest. I will not lose again,” said Sakayanagi.

“No, you’ll lose. At this rate, when you go into the final exams at the end of the year, it’ll be a repeat of what just happened.”

There was a big change coming, but Sakayanagi was in denial.

“I see. I understand what you’re after, Ayanokouji-kun. You’re trying to hurt me. That’s why you want me to feel weak, so you’re trying to rattle me… Right?” asked Sakayanagi.

“Why would I need you to be weak, Sakayanagi?” I asked.

“Because it’s inconvenient for you for Class A to remain far, far ahead of the others, isn’t it? For your own ends, you need all of the classes in close competition. That’s your goal, isn’t it?”

“You’re not completely wrong, but that’s not all.”

“What else is there?”

“Whether Class A is in the lead at the moment doesn’t concern me. My objective is to bring out the maximum potential in each class. Whether we’re talking about Ryuuen, or Ichinose, or you, Sakayanagi, I’m going to meddle to fulfill that goal.”

“…I don’t like these comments you’re making. As if I need your help.”

“That’s why I’m here. To help.”

Sakayanagi stopped objecting. She was clever, but here she only pretended to understand.

“Kamuro was a bigger deal than you thought on the surface, and that was your mistake. You assumed that she was no different from the rest of the common riffraff—no, actually, that’s exactly why you had them pull lots. You wanted to convince yourself.”

She should have forged ahead unapologetically. She should have been honest with herself, even if it meant she’d garner resentment for being unfair. Of course, her arrogance had been her downfall.

“I…”

Sakayanagi averted her gaze. She stared off into the distance and exhaled quietly.

“In all my years of compulsory education in primary school and junior high school, I had never made a single friend. I simply couldn’t relate to these simple, crude beings, with their low level of intelligence. It is no different even at this school. Masumi-san, Hashimoto-kun, and Kitou-kun are no different. I keep them physically close, but that was simply so I can use them as extensions of myself, as my hands and feet. They’re only that. I thought they were no different from complete strangers.”

For all of Sakayanagi’s life, she didn’t recognize the people around her as friends. However, the line between a stranger and a friend was a blurry one. No one could truly define it.

“So I thought it would’ve been the same, no matter who disappeared…” said Sakayanagi.

She fell silent. By now, I was sure that Sakayanagi could see the truth.

“Apparently, Masumi-san had been my friend, and I didn’t recognize it until now,” said Sakayanagi.

Even though she used the same word as before, *friend*, the weight of it as she spoke now was so much heavier than it’d ever been. Sakayanagi had just assumed that, clever as she was, there was no way she could have been touched by someone like Kamuro.

“…In any case, this is unlike me,” said Sakayanagi.

“Maybe so. But now you’re aware. Now that you realize losing Kamuro has made you weaker, you can become stronger.”

It would’ve been bad if she were aware, but unable to change.

“You’ve been giving advice to various people behind the scenes like this, haven’t you? It’s no wonder everyone is growing,” said Sakayanagi.

“Everyone has some room left to go, I think.”

Sakayanagi had nothing further to say, so she slowly and politely bowed her head. I could sense a firmness in that action, like *I cannot stay with you a moment longer.* I acquiesced, and as I watched her figure recede into the distance, I sat down on the bench again.

“In the end, Kamuro’s expulsion will do some good,” I thought aloud.

There wasn’t anyone else out of the rabble who could have affected Sakayanagi’s feelings like this. The Class Points were tight, and she no longer controlled the field. Each class was getting stronger, growing in its ability to fight. The rest was up to Sakayanagi herself; she had to think and mature. It was time to grapple with feelings she had never had before.

Ryuuen had pulled off his mask and become something more. Rather than changing his previous approach, he was evolving his old one. He would continue to mercilessly exert his

power over those around him. There were only about two months left until our final exams.

“It’s time to make some careful preparations.”

For Karuizawa Kei.

For Ichinose Honami.

For the classes.

It was time to make an impact. When I was gone, I was going to be remembered.

Postscript

CORONAVIRUS, INFLUENZA, a bone fracture, and a hernia in my neck. Kinugasa here, battered and bruised all over, after making a serious rush to get stuff done in this hectic year. I promise, I'm alive. Yes, this is Kinugasa.

The numbness and pain in my back caused by the hernia is so severe that it's likely to persist for a long time. While I'm glad that I was able to write this manuscript before the onset of my symptoms, I don't think I can promise it won't affect me going forward... Each day since has been an intense struggle. My limit for sitting down in a chair is an hour.

But there's no point in talking about depressing stuff all the time, so let's switch to a brighter topic.

Congratulations, Hanshin Tigers, on winning the league championship for the first time in eighteen years!!!!!!!

Thank you for the passion! Thank you for the excitement! Hanshin Tigers, yahoo!!! Just let me get that out of my system, okay? I mean, 'cause it's been eighteen years. I bought so much stuff. I bought hats and shirts I'm not even sure I'll wear. It's okay, though, right? I mean, it's been eighteen years! Of course, I ended up buying stuff, like decals and stickers and towels and all sorts of junk.

The postscript is one page this time... Sorry, I've run out of room to talk about this volume. I'll do my best next time. I won't let the pain in my back get the better of me!



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