
STORY BY
SYOUGO KINUGASA
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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
NOVEL
3

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
NOVEL 3


ICHINOSE HONAMI
A lively girl from Class B. Her classmates place a great deal of trust in her, and she works as a mediator for Class B.
"I guess I surprised you, huh? Sorry, please don't take any offense."
"Aha ha ha! You're probably right about that, certainly. You are an interesting one, huh?"
"Oh, me? I'm an unimportant teacher. If I do have some information, though, I absolutely won't tell you."
KANZAKI RYUUJI
He possesses the highest level of intelligence and reflexes of any student in Class B. He speaks in a calm, indifferent tone, yet there are things he's passionate about too.
HOSHINOMIYA CHIE
The homeroom teacher for Class B. She was best friends with Sae, the homeroom teacher for Class D, ever since they were classmates.


"I'm sorry…"
"Why are you apologizing?"
"Please forgive me…
I won't force you to do anything any longer…
I'll get up to Class A on my own power,
so it'd be fine if you just watch over me…"

CHABASHIRA
SAE
KARUIZAWA
KEI
SAKURA
AIRI
KUSHIDA
KIKYOU
HORIKITA
SUZUNE
AYANOKOUJI
KIYOTAKA

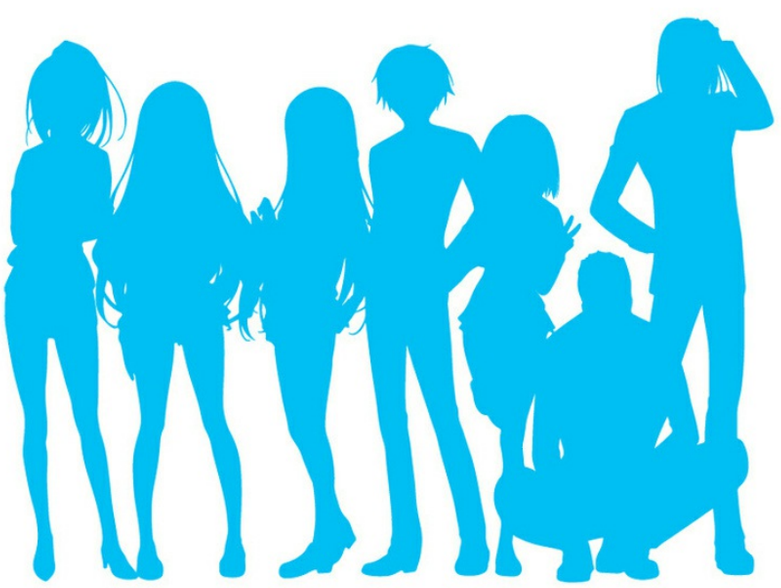
CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

NOVEL 3

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7. THE CURTAIN RISES

POSTSCRIPT



CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

NOVEL 3

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku

Seven Seas Entertainment

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE VOL. 3

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Art by Tomoseshunsaku

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KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
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PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64275-723-1
Printed in Canada
First Printing: November 2019
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 1:
Chabashira Sae's
Soliloquy

Greek mythology deals abundantly with human frailty. Many of its tales involve hatred and jealousy. Have you ever heard of "The Wings of Icarus"? Allow me to summarize. Long ago, in ancient Greece, there lived a great inventor named Daedalus. Daedalus was ordered by King Minos to build a great labyrinth in which to imprison the monstrous Minotaur. However, King Minos soon abandoned Daedalus, confining the inventor to a tower alongside his son, Icarus.

In order to escape their prison, Daedalus gathered together the feathers of many birds in order to fashion a large pair of wings. He connected the larger feathers with thread, and the smaller with wax. Once the wings were completed and the time had come to fly to freedom, Daedalus gave Icarus a warning.

He said, "If you fly too high, the sun will melt the wax holding the wings together. Be careful." With that warning in mind, Icarus leapt from the tower alongside his father. Together, they gained their freedom. But freedom can be a dangerous thing, and can make a person lose sight of himself. With such boundless freedom before him, Icarus started to get carried away. Perhaps it was inevitable after breaking free from such painful restraints.

Icarus, blissful, forgot his father's warning and flew higher and higher. The sun burned the false angel wings that his father had constructed, and in the blink of an eye, the wax melted. Eventually, the false wings were completely burned away. Icarus fell into the sea and died. Was Icarus a brave young man who jumped into the sky to gain his freedom? Or was he an arrogant fool who overestimated his abilities and believed that he could reach the sun? Perhaps no one save for his father, Daedalus, will ever know the answer to that.

For some reason, I thought of Icarus' wings when standing before a certain young boy. Considering what these past few months had brought, I could say that I made the comparison simply because he resembled Icarus. But I

immediately came to realize that the two boys were fundamentally different from one another. This boy possessed neither the bravery nor the arrogance of Icarus.

I had been pushed into a corner. I had no choice but to do it.

Lacking the means to deal with it, I had no choice but to incur this boy's divine wrath. I had no choice but to conduct myself firmly, turning this boy's quiet rage toward me. The die cannot be returned once cast. The gamble had already begun.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Yamauchi Haruki
CLASS:	First Year, Class D
STUDENT ID:	S01T004706
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	May 30th



EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	E+
INTELLIGENCE:	D–
DECISION MAKING:	D+
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	C–
COOPERATIVENESS:	C–

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

There is some discrepancy between his responses during the Q&A portion of the interview and the survey report. He has an apparent tendency to pretend he is more impressive than he actually is. Moreover, we have yet to find an area in which he excels, with respect to both academic and athletic ability. However, being able to inflate one's sense of importance in society can produce results, so we expect that he will find a space in which to thrive.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

I would like to be strict in addressing his behavior because he has a habit of lying to his teachers.

Chapter 2:
The Boundary Between Heaven and Hell

The endless summer sea. The infinite blue skies. The perfectly clear air. Here, in the midst of the Pacific Ocean, we didn't feel the intense midsummer heat, and the gentle sea breeze kissed our bodies. Yes, this really was an oceanic paradise.

"Whoa! This is the beeeeeeesssssst!" shouted Ike Kenji, both hands raised high in the air. His voice echoed across the deck of the luxury liner.

Normally, someone would have grumbled or shouted "shut up" in response. But just for today, no one minded, instead enjoying this moment of bliss. The view from the "special seats" on the deck was exceptionally gorgeous.

"This view is incredible! I'm honestly super moved right now!"

A group of girls led by Karuizawa came out from the ship's cabin. Karuizawa pointed out to the expansive ocean, wearing a radiant smile.

"Seriously, the scenery here is just amazing!"

Kushida Kikyou was also present among the group of girls. It looked like the extraordinary view had stolen her breath away.

After overcoming numerous hardships, midterms, and the final exam, we had welcomed summer vacation with open arms. The Advanced Nurturing High School had arranged for an extravagant two-week trip—a cruise on a luxury liner.

"Wow, Ken, you must be happy you didn't get expelled. I mean, if this were a normal trip, it would've been impossible for us to go. Hey, how did it feel to be on the verge of expulsion, since you had the lowest score on the final? Come on, tell me. How did it feel?"

Even though Yamauchi Haruki was insulting him, Sudou Ken was far from being in a foul mood. In fact, he howled with laughter in response, sounding more like the baying of a lone wolf than a high schooler.

“With my skills, there was nothing to worry about. Didn’t I tell you I’d prove myself, and it’d be easy?”

We had faced oblivion just a short while ago, but this trip completely blew those feelings away. Perhaps the blue seas had washed away our everyday troubles.

“I never dreamed that high schoolers could go on such a luxurious cruise. And it’s for two whole weeks. Two weeks! When my mom and dad hear about this, they’re gonna be so shocked they’ll wet themselves!”

As Sudou had bluntly stated, this was certainly no ordinary trip. At our government-sponsored school, there was absolutely no need for us to pay for tuition or other miscellaneous expenses—which, of course, included this trip. We received the best of special treatment. The cruise liner and its facilities were of the highest possible quality. This ship was fully equipped with everything from prestigious restaurants to a theater, and even an upscale spa. On my own, this would probably have cost me about 100,000 yen, even in the off season.

Our trip, which promised the pinnacle of luxury, had finally started today. According to the schedule, we would spend our first week staying at a fancy summer lodge on a deserted island. After that, we would enjoy the cruise ship for another week.

At 5 AM today, the first-year students had boarded buses and departed for Tokyo Bay. The passenger ships departed from the port once the students arrived. After eating breakfast in the lounge, students were permitted to move freely throughout the entire vessel. Best of all, we were able to use any of the ship’s facilities free of charge. For those of us who’d suffered daily due to a lack of points, this ship was heaven-sent.

Suddenly, Kushida turned toward me. I could tell that something was on her mind. With the vast ocean and the endless blue sky behind her, Kushida looked even more radiant than usual. Even though I didn’t want it to, my heart started to pound. Could it be…?

“Huh? Come to think of it, I wonder where Horikita-san is? Weren’t you two together?” Kushida asked.

Apparently I wasn’t even allowed to indulge in a mere fantasy. Kushida had

Horikita on her mind.

“Who knows? I’m not her keeper.” I didn’t recall seeing her after breakfast.

“She probably doesn’t enjoy traveling, so maybe she’s in her room?”

“Probably.”

“Around noon, we can go onto the island’s private beach and swim around as much as we want. I can’t wait!”

Apparently, the school owned a small island to the south. Our destination.

“Attention, students. Please assemble on the deck. You will be able to see the island soon. This is a good time to take in some rather significant scenery.”

This rather strange announcement issued from the ship’s PA. Kushida and the others didn’t seem to mind, looking forward to what was to come. The island appeared on the horizon a few minutes after several students had gathered. Ike let out a gleeful cry.

Other students noticed, and began assembling on the deck. After a crowd had gathered, some particularly domineering boys showed up and began pushing us out of the way in order to get the best position.

“Hey, you’re in the way. Move it, you defects.”

One of the boys tried to intimidate me, and shoved my shoulder. In a panic, I quickly grabbed onto the deck’s railing to keep from falling. The students laughed scornfully.

“Hey, what the hell are you guys doing?!”

Sudou immediately responded in kind, trying to intimidate them right back. Kushida, looking worried, came to my side. I suppose men who require girls for backup probably look pretty pathetic.

“You do understand how this school is structured, right? Class D doesn’t get any human rights. Defects like you are just that—defective—so you should submit. We’re all in Class A over here.”

The students from Class D departed from the bow of the ship as if we’d been chased out. Sudou looked displeased, but managed to restrain himself. A

fistfight didn't break out, evidence that he was perhaps growing up. Or perhaps he simply understood Class D's weak position here. Although the situation was unfair, we didn't need any unnecessary trouble, so it was best to ignore it.

"Oh, hey, you're all here. Huh? What's the matter?"

Hirata Yousuke, Class D's leader, called out to me. It was the last day of the first semester. The cabin assignments for the trip were decided. I hadn't expected to be called over to hang out with Ike and Sudou and the others; their group was already big enough as it was. Just when it seemed like I would be isolated, though, I was saved by the appearance of my hero, Hirata Man.

"Hey, Hirata, how far have you gotten with Karuizawa?" Ike asked Hirata, who didn't seem to be heading over to Karuizawa's side. "Why don't you try and be flirtier with her, since we're on this long-awaited trip?"

"We just kind of take things at our own pace." Hirata's cell phone rang. "Oh, sorry, Miyake-kun looks like he's having trouble. I'll be going now."

Fiddling with his phone, Hirata returned to the cabins. Popular people were the busiest of all.

"What's his deal? We're on a trip, but he's worried about his classmates?"

"Karuizawa is Karuizawa, though. I guess lately she and Hirata haven't been very flirty with each other… Do you think that maybe they've broken up? If that's the case, that really sucks. It'll mean more rivals to get to Kushida-chan!"

It was certainly true that Hirata and his girlfriend seemed less close now than when they'd started dating. But they didn't appear to have had a fight, and the situation hadn't gotten tense. They seemed to get along well whenever I saw them talking.

"I've decided, Haruki. I…will confess my feelings to Kushida-chan on this trip!" Ike proclaimed.

"A-are you serious? If she rejects you, it's gonna be crazy awkward, though. You gonna be okay?"

"This is just my own selfish reasoning. Kushida-chan is really cute, right? That's why most of the boys want to ask her out. But she's just on a whole

other level, so no one can get the courage to confess to her. That means she's not used to being confessed to, right? I think Kushida-chan's heart could be shaken by my declaration of love. It's like, you know, not entirely hopeless."

"I see. So, you've already made up your mind."

"Yeah!"

Normally Yamauchi would have gotten fired up and opposed Ike, but this time he didn't. Instead, he looked out over the deck as if searching for something.

"What's the matter?" Ike asked.

"Ah, nothing really," Yamauchi responded absent-mindedly. In the end, he never brought up the subject of Kushida.

"Hey, hey, Kushida-chan. Can I talk to you for a minute?" Ike asked.

"Hmm? What is it?"

Ike immediately approached Kushida, who had been looking at the sea. This was obviously a suspicious move.

"So, it's like this… It's been about four months since we met, right? So…I was wondering if it might be okay for me to call you by your first name now. I mean, it makes me feel like we're strangers when I call you by your last name."

"Come to think of it, I guess you and Yamauchi have been calling each other by your first names for a while now, huh?" Kushida said.

"So… I can't, huh? C-call you Kikyou-chan, I mean?"

In response to Ike's inquiry, Kushida simply smiled.

"Of course it's okay for you to call me that. Should I call you Kanji-kun, then?"

"Whoooooaaaaa! Kikyou-chaaaaaaan!" Ike cried out and posed like he was reaching out to heaven, kind of like the guy on the poster for the movie *Platoon*. Kushida chuckled.

"First names, huh? Hey, speaking of, I wonder what Horikita's first name is? Huh?" Sudou asked me as if I was the one who'd know.

"Tomiko. Horikita Tomiko."

“Tomiko, huh? That’s a cute name. Just like I’d expect. It feels perfect for her.”

“Oh, sorry, I was wrong. It’s Suzune.”

“Hey, don’t make mistakes like that! Suzune, huh? It feels like Tomiko, but it’s 100 times better.”

In the end, even if Horikita’s first name were Sadako or Sam or whatever, he probably would have felt it was perfect.

“I’m going to call her by her first name during our summer vacation, too. Suzune. Suzune…”

Well, it seemed the boys wanted to bridge the gap between themselves and the girls. It should be noted that none of the guys called me by my first name, and I didn’t call them by theirs.

“Oh, hey. Let me practice with you, Ayanokouji. Practice saying Suzune’s name, I mean.”

“Practice? What do you mean, practice? That’s not a normal thing to do.”

It was pointless to practice saying someone’s name unless you were saying it to the person in question. Sudou glared at me intently. He wasn’t planning to make me his imaginary Horikita, was he? It was probably because he was imagining me as someone of the opposite sex, but the look in his eyes really creeped me out. In my mind, I started breathing heavily.

“Hey, Horikita, do you have a minute? There’s something I want to talk to you about…” Sudou murmured.

“I’m not Horikita.” Disgusted, I averted my eyes.

“You freakin’ moron! It’s practice! I don’t wanna do it, either, but I got to practice, you know? It’s like I have to practice basketball if I want to get good. In either case, I need to take my shot.”

I really didn’t want to listen to this, but I didn’t have much of a choice. I had to grin and bear it.

“Horikita. Isn’t it weird that we talk to each other like we’re strangers? We’ve known each other for a while now. Other people are calling each other by their

first names. Isn't it time we did, too?"

"…"

I wanted to hit Sudou on the head, but I tried to endure it like an adult.

"Say something! Why aren't you practicing?!"

"What do you want me to say?"

"Answer like how Horikita would. You've known her for a long time, so you'd know how she'd answer, right?"

We had only known each other for four months, so I wouldn't necessarily know that. Even so, Sudou had asked me to play his imaginary Horikita. I clenched my fist in a somewhat threatening manner.

"I'm one step ahead on the path to adulthood. You want me to practice this with you instead of Horikita? Feel free to practice by yourself."

Ike jumped in to substitute for me instead. Sudou seemed kind of weird when he started talking.

"Horikita…is it okay for me to call you by your first name now?"

"Huh? Well, you're not exactly a hottie, are you, Sudou-kun? And you don't seem to have any money, so, like, you're not my type at all, are you? Or it's, like, sorry, sorry, but no thanks, you know?!"

Despite looking nothing like one, Ike was trying to play the part of a gyaru high school girl. Sudou put him in a chokehold until he writhed in agony on the deck. Those guys always seemed so energetic. I felt exhausted just looking at them. Still, they did look pretty funny.

A little while later, the crowd started getting riled up and making noise. The students' enthusiasm increased by leaps and bounds as we sailed closer and the island became clearer.

I'd thought that the ship would have gone directly to the island, but for some reason we passed the pier and started circling around. The island, on loan from the government, had a surface area of about 0.5 square kilometers. The highest point of the island reached 230 meters. In comparison to Japan's total area, the island was tiny, but when seen by one hundred-odd people on a cruise ship, it

looked unbelievably massive.

Eventually, the boat made a complete pass around the island. The ship continued to circle without changing speed, barely making a splash as it moved almost unnaturally fast through the water.

“Such a mysterious sight! It’s so moving! Don’t you think so, Ayanokouji-kun?” Kushida gushed.

“O-oh. Yeah, I guess.”

As I looked at Kushida, whose eyes sparkled as she looked at the deserted island, my heart started to pound. Kushida really was cute. I wanted to protect her smile, and her childlike mannerisms.



An announcement came over the PA speakers. “We will disembark in thirty minutes. Please assemble on the deck. All students should have changed into their jerseys. Make sure to check your designated bag and your luggage, and do not forget your cell phone. Please keep all other personal items in your room. There is a possibility that you will not be able to visit the bathroom for some time, so please do so now.”

Apparently, the private beach was near. Ike and the others went to change in high spirits. I started heading toward my group’s room, too. There, I put on the jersey that I used for gym class, returned to the ship’s deck, and waited until we reached the island. As the island drew closer and closer, the first-years’ enthusiasm reached its peak.

“We will disembark now, beginning with the students from Class A. Cell phones are prohibited on the island. Please hand your phone to your homeroom teacher as you leave.”

Following the loudspeaker’s command, the students went down the stairs in an orderly fashion.

“Come on. Hurry up! Even though we’re wearing thin clothes, we’re all sweating!”

There was no place to hide from the sun on the ship’s deck. No surprise that people were complaining. The Class D students waited on standby in the heat. Horikita finally joined us. At first glance, it didn’t appear as though anything had changed, but there was a slight difference—something felt out of place. Even Horikita, normally so meticulous, was concerned about her appearance. Right now, though, her hair was disheveled.

She seemed a bit cold, unconsciously rubbing her arms as we waited to disembark and set foot on the island.

“What were you doing until now?” I asked.

“I was just reading a book in my room. *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. You wouldn’t know it.”

Hey, come on now, I thought. That book was arguably one of Ernest Hemingway’s definitive works, an unquestioned masterpiece. I’d long been

impressed by Horikita's hobby of reading such acclaimed books. But I had to wonder what her priorities were, since she was reading while on a luxurious cruise. In such a case, I found it a little suspicious that she would shut herself off in her room to read.

She wasn't saying anything, and it would be silly to investigate further. Best just to drop it.

"I'm anxious about what's coming, but since we're prohibited from bringing personal items along there's nothing I can really do," she grumbled, seemingly dissatisfied.

Unusual for someone headed to the beach to say.

Disembarking took longer than I thought it would, probably because the teachers guarded the students on both sides as they got off the ship and checked their luggage.

"Hey. Does it seem like they're being strangely cautious right now? On their guard? I mean, they didn't even confiscate our cell phones during the final. They're really cracking down on the personal items."

"It certainly seems that way. I mean, if we're just playing in the ocean, I can't imagine they'd need to go this far."

Speaking of unnatural, there was a helicopter parked on the stern of the boat. While it was true that some things were bothering me, I was probably overthinking it. If students *did* bring their cell phones to the beach, someone's phone might get wet and break. And they probably didn't want personal items because they were worried about people polluting the beach with garbage. And if someone suddenly got ill, the helicopter was there for dispatch, right?

Soon, it would be our turn to be examined and get off the ramp. I had yet to realize that this place was going to be the boundary between heaven and hell.

2.1

As we got off the boat, chatting amiably with one another, our homeroom teacher greeted us with some harsh words.

“I will now start roll call for Class D. When you hear your name, please respond loud and clear.”

Our homeroom teacher started taking attendance, clipboard in hand, while simultaneously instructing us to form a line. Chabashira-sensei wore the same kind of jersey as her students. This atmosphere was more akin to training camp than summer vacation. Still, not many of the students seemed tense at all.

“Oh, come on! I want my free time already! The sea is right in front of me!” Ike muttered, standing directly behind me.

Most of the students wanted to run off onto the sandy beach. Soon enough, a tall teacher stepped onto a prepared white platform. It was Mashima-sensei, Class A’s homeroom teacher. He normally taught English, and was well-known for having a stubborn disposition. At first glance, he could easily be mistaken for one of those bodybuilder types. He was built like a professional wrestler, but was actually quite intelligent. He’d even taught special courses in the past.

“First, I would like to say that I’m happy you’ve arrived safely. However, it’s unfortunate that one of you was unable to participate due to illness.”

“Oh wow, someone couldn’t come on the trip because he was sick? Poor guy,” said Ike quietly, so the teachers wouldn’t hear. He certainly had a point.

If this were some kind of dinky field trip, that’d be one thing, but such a luxurious vacation was another story altogether. I wondered if that kid would regret not coming after hearing friends talk about it. Even in poor health, I think he should’ve pushed himself and participated. Oddly enough, the teachers themselves looked rather grim. Well, while this was a vacation for us students, maybe the teachers supervising us had to think of it as a job.

No. Somehow, it seemed more than that. While Mashima-sensei surveyed the students in silence, I could see that adults in uniform had started setting up some kind of special tent nearby. I also saw a computer and other equipment

on a long table. This increasingly business-like setup didn't match the natural splendor around us at all, and many of the students looked perplexed.

Mashima-sensei uttered a few cruel words, as if waiting for the atmosphere to change. "Well then. We shall commence the current academic year's first special test."

"Huh? Special test? What do you mean?"

Almost everyone in our class asked some variation on that question. We'd all thought this was just a class trip, only to be hit by this surprise attack. Our summer vacation was a product of the school's goodwill, but that had been an illusion. We plummeted from relief into stark tension.

"The test commences now and lasts for one week, concluding on August 7th at the year's end. This test will determine if you can live on a deserted island together as a group. In addition, I should warn you that this special test is both practical and realistic, designed based on real-world corporate training."

"Living on a deserted island. Does that mean we're not staying on the boat, but the island?"

Some students from Class B and C voiced their obvious concerns.

"You are correct. During the test, you will not be allowed to board the ship without a suitably justifiable reason. It will be necessary for you to fend for yourselves on this island while you are here, from creating a place to sleep to preparing food to eat. Once the test starts, each class will receive two tents, and two flashlights. You will be provided with one box of matches. There is no limit to the amount of sunscreen you can have. Each student will be provided with one toothbrush. As a special case, girls will be allowed to have as many feminine sanitary products as they'd like, without any restrictions. Please ask your respective homeroom teachers for those. That is all."

With that, the teachers began distributing the items.

"Huh?! So we have to live like survivors on a deserted island?! I don't want to hear this kind of insanity! This isn't an anime or a manga or something! We can't all sleep together in just two tents! And what are we supposed to do about food in the first place? This is unbelievable!"

Ike fussed loud enough for everyone to hear. Developing skills of self-sufficiency on a deserted island—hunting wild animals, washing in the river, building bedding from tree branches—it certainly was like something you'd see in a movie or read about in a book. No one could've imagined that the school would put us through a test like this.

Mashima-sensei gave no sign that this was some kind of joke. If anything, he appeared surprised by what Ike had said.

"You may say this is unbelievable, but that's because you've lived a short, superficial life. There is an actual, prominent company that holds training sessions on uninhabited islands."

"Huh? B-but this…this isn't special at all. Is it? Isn't it too much to ask for us to start living on a deserted island with no warning? No way! This is unreal!"

"Keeping on like that would be shameful, Ike, so stop talking. What Mashima-sensei just said is only part of it. There are many companies in the world with many different training activities. There are workplaces where there aren't any chairs in the office, and companies that decide salaries with dice rolls. The world is wider and deeper than you even know."

Chabashira-sensei, as if unable to overlook Ike running his mouth, chided him. She continued, "In other words, you are ill-equipped to distinguish between what is reality and what isn't."

Many of the students appeared unconvinced and wore dissatisfied looks.

"I assume you're all thinking something like, 'What does this test mean?' Or perhaps some of you doubt the existence of such training programs. However, students who remain at such a base level of thought are unlikely to become anyone promising in the future. What is your basis for determining this to be 'unbelievable' or 'ridiculous'? You're just students. In my opinion, you're all equally worthless. What kind of insignificant person determines that they can criticize a leading company? That's bizarre. Were you a president in charge of one such notable business, then you might have some right to deny our claims. However, there shouldn't be any grounds for someone of your station to be able to do that."

As we listened, we did certainly determine that parts sounded unreasonable

or unrealistic. But, just like Mashima-sensei said, we had no basis to oppose their claims. Those who found this beyond the realm of their understanding could call it “bizarre” or “unbelievable,” but for someone who did understand the point, well, it would be absurd to think otherwise.

“But, teacher, isn’t this supposed to be our summer vacation? We were brought here under the pretext of going on a relaxing trip. Don’t you think that bringing us here and then springing this corporate training on us could be considered unfair?”

Some of the students in our class began to protest along these lines.

“I see. I suppose that you’re not wrong about that. I can understand why you would be discontented.”

Mashima-sensei’s response showed that he recognized the soundness of such an argument, unlike Ike’s complaints. There were students who were dissatisfied with the current situation, and those who were dissatisfied with the process as a whole.

“However, please do not worry. It would make sense for you to have complaints if you were being forced into a harsh situation. However, even though we’re calling it a special test, there’s no need to think about it in such unhappy terms. In the coming week, you can go swimming, or hold a barbecue. It wouldn’t be a bad time for you to occasionally have a campfire and chat with friends, either. The theme of this special exam is ‘freedom’, after all.”

“Huh? Huh? The theme is freedom? We can have a barbecue? Hmm? And this is still called a test? I’m so confused…”

Even though this was a test, we were free to play. The contradiction confused the students, and our doubts only increased.

“As a major part of this special test, we’ve decided to distribute 300 points to each class. By using your points well, you might be able to enjoy this week’s special test just as you would a normal trip. We’ve also prepared a manual just for that purpose.”

Mashima-sensei received a booklet that looked to be a few dozen pages thick from another teacher.

“This manual lists all of the ways you can obtain points. It also explains where to get drinking water and food, as well as essential necessities. If you wanted to have a barbecue, it explains how to prepare the equipment and ingredients. We also have numerous tools for you to be able to enjoy playing in the ocean to the fullest.”

Gradually, the students’ grim expressions grew calmer.

“So, we can do whatever we want with the 300 points?”

“That’s right. It’s possible to arrange for anything using your points. Of course, it’s necessary for you to use them in a systematic way, but with a solid plan, you can spend your week without any difficulties.”

If we could really get through the week by using the points we had, then this would be more like a vacation than a test. It might end up feeling like a real summer vacation.

“B-but, teacher. You said this was a test, right? So shouldn’t there be some kind of difficulty to it?”

“No, there’s nothing difficult. It won’t even have any adverse effects on your second semester. I guarantee it.”

“So it’s really okay for us to just have fun for one week?”

“That’s right. You’re all free to do what you want. Of course, there are some bare minimum rules that you need to abide by as a group, but there shouldn’t be anything difficult about that.”

If that were true, then did that mean there really was no risk? In that case, we should ask if he could explain the purpose of this test. Was it linked to some kind of exchange between grade levels? I couldn’t understand the school’s true intentions, but Mashima-sensei’s next statement clarified everything.

“When this special test period is over, each class’ remaining points will be added to their total class points. Your point totals will reflect this change once summer vacation is over.”

As he spoke, a gust of wind blew across the beach and kicked up a cloud of dust.

Mashima-sensei's words were the greatest shock of the day. In previous examinations, they'd measured things like our academic abilities. Naturally, this was advantageous for students with a fundamentally high level of academic ability. Each time, we in Class D were forced into situations where we'd lose class points. However, the rules were completely different this time. This test was designed in a way that didn't create too much of a gap between Classes A and D.

"So if we can endure this for one week, then starting next month we could see a huge increase in our allowance?!" Ike asked.

That's right… This wasn't a competition to test our scholarly abilities, but our endurance. If we managed to curb our basic desires, we might get closer to being the top class.

"Each class will receive one copy of the manual. If the manual is lost, you may have another copy. However, it will consume points, so please be very careful. Also, the student who was marked absent from this trip was from Class A. According to the rules of this special test, should any student have to leave due to illness, there will be a thirty-point penalty to the class as a whole. Therefore, Class A will be starting with 270 points."

Even though it didn't affect our class, the penalty was still merciless. The students from Class A were visibly trembling. The other classes also appeared shocked. As soon as Mashima-sensei had finished speaking, he told us to disperse. Another teacher's voice came over the loudspeaker, telling us that each class would receive supplementary instructions from our respective homeroom teachers. We then gathered around Chabashira-sensei. The four classes had congregated in order to keep some distance from each other.

"Thirty thousand points next month, thirty thousand points next month, thirty thousand points next month. Let's do it!"

Ike and the others struck victorious poses. The girls happily discussed what things they would buy. Class D's dearest wish was to increase our points. We just had to spend one week without any luxuries.

It certainly sounded simple.

"I will now hand out wristwatches to every one of you. You are not to take

them off until the end of the test. If you remove your wristwatch without permission, you will be punished. This watch doesn't just tell time. Its sensors also check your body temperature, your pulse, and even your movements. It's equipped with a GPS. Also, in the off chance something bad does happen, this watch comes equipped with the means to notify the school. If you find yourself in an emergency situation, please do not hesitate to push that button."

The vendor who supplied the watches had stacked them next to Chabashira-sensei. The time had come for Class D to collect our supplies. We were instructed to take the watches out of their boxes and put them on.

"When you say an emergency, do you mean, like, if a bear shows up?"

"Even if that was a joke, the test has already begun. I cannot answer any questions that might possibly influence your results."

"Uh…that's a kinda freaky answer."

"I don't think there are any wild animals here. If one of the students were injured, that would be a big problem. They probably gave us these watches solely to manage our well-being. Don't you agree? We're on an uninhabited island, after all, and the school has to ensure our safety," Hirata said.

Indeed, the school had gifted us these watches to keep us safe. If we were roaming freely about the island, the teachers wouldn't be able to monitor our condition with their eyes alone. Plus, it would be difficult to install cameras here, like inside of the school. They most likely intended to monitor our physical condition so they could respond to any unforeseen circumstances. The helicopter back on the ship was probably there in case of just such an emergency. As people received their watches, they placed them on either their right or left arm, according to their preferences.

"Is it okay for us to get in the water wearing these?"

"There shouldn't be any problem. They're waterproof. However, should they malfunction, immediately report to a test administrator and exchange it for a replacement."

This special test was somewhat eccentric in its design, so it likely wasn't the first time that the school had run it. Clearly, they had planned for various

situations. However, there might have been some oversights.

“Chabashira-sensei. I understand that we’re going to be spending one week on this island, but is it possible to get by without using any points?”

“Hmm. Well, the school isn’t involved in the test process at all. That means that you must prepare your own food and water. Thinking of solutions to resolve the issue is part of the test. I don’t know of any way of doing so without points.”

The girls looked visibly more perplexed than the boys. The fact that a bed wasn’t guaranteed probably made them feel uneasy.

“Don’t worry. If we can catch fish and pick fruit in the forest, then we’ll be fine. We can also use leaves and trees to make tents and stuff. And even if you start not feeling great, do your best!” Ike said, seemingly without any worry at all. He was determined to preserve the 300 points.

Even if Ike would be fine living like that, our class comprised more than thirty students. Obtaining what everyone needed probably wouldn’t be that easy.

“I’m sorry, Ike, but I don’t think things will go as you’ve planned. Open your manual.”

Hirata did as Chabashira-sensei instructed.

“First, I’d like you to read the last page, where the penalties are listed. This is very important information that encapsulates the difficulties of this special test. It will determine whether you live or die.”

On the last page, a line read, “These penalties will be applied to anyone who falls under the following conditions.”

“Anyone deemed unable to continue the test due to significant deterioration in health or serious injury will be penalized by thirty points. That student will then retire.”

“In the event a student has polluted the environment, he or she will be penalized twenty points.”

“In the event students are absent during the 8 AM or 8 PM roll call, five points will be taken for each student absent.”

However, the most serious punishment was detailed in the fourth entry on the list. “In the event a student is found guilty of an act of violence toward another class, robbing another class, or causing damage to another class’ property, etc., the offending student’s class will immediately be disqualified, and the individual will forfeit all of his or her private points.”

It looked like Class A was subject to these same penalties. The fourth rule was totally reasonable, written to prevent students from engaging in harmful behavior, while the other three rules were clearly there so individual students wouldn’t behave carelessly. Because we had roll call in the morning and at night, it was impossible to sleep your time away at camp. It was also meant to suppress rather barbaric behavior, like a student littering everywhere.

Essentially, it was a contest of restraint.

“You are free to behave as you wish. However, if ten students fall into poor health, then all your efforts will be for nothing. Once a student has retired from the test, he or she cannot come back.”

The students who had thought it possible to get through the test by relying on their own endurance now looked perplexed. It would be impossible not to spend a single point, but that was true of every class. However, whether you actively participated or resigned yourself to your fate in this test, endurance alone would not win the day here.

How would we use our points effectively, save them, and get through the week?

Gradually, the shape of this very literal “special test” became clearer.

“In other words, using at least some points is unavoidable?” asked a girl named Shinohara, who’d been following along in the conversation.

“I disagree with the idea of compromising right away. I think that we ought to persevere for as long as we can.”

“I understand how you feel, but it’ll be bad if our health suffers.”

“Come on, Hirata, don’t be so discouraging! This is a test of our patience, right?”

The more we understood the rules, the less we could agree on a course of action. Our opinions were divided. At any rate, there were a wide variety of items for purchase in the manual: essential equipment for surviving, like tents and cookware; machines and tools, like digital cameras and wireless transceivers/walkie-talkies; items for amusement, like umbrellas, floaties, stuff for a barbecue, and fireworks; and food and water, the bare essentials.

We could prepare for anything with our points. Apparently anyone could request something, and just report to their homeroom teacher in order to use points to purchase it.

“Chabashira-sensei, can I ask you something? In the event that someone were to retire after we had already used all 300 points, what would happen?” asked Horikita, her hand raised.

“In that case, all that would increase is the number of people forced to retire. Your points can’t be changed any more after reaching zero.”

“So, in other words, we can’t get into negative points during the test?”

Chabashira-sensei answered in the affirmative. Mashima-sensei had said that there wouldn’t be any negative effects from this test. It looked like that was true. Chabashira-sensei continued talking, occasionally glancing at her wristwatch to check the time.

“Each one of the supplied tents is large enough to accommodate eight people. The tents weigh close to fifteen kilos, so please be careful when carrying them. Also, the school will not step in to help should your supplied items become lost or damaged. In the event that you need a new tent, remember to use your points.”

“May I ask something? Where will roll call be held?”

“Each class will be accompanied by their respective homeroom teachers until the test is over. If you’ve decided where you want your base camp to be, report it. Once the base is set up, I will hold roll call there. Make sure that you think long and hard about it, because you can’t change your base camp location without a justifiable reason once you’ve decided. The other classes are subject to the same conditions. There are no exceptions.”

Did that mean that Chabashira-sensei was going to spend a week together with Class D, as our supervisor? Of course, she probably wasn't going to help us.

"Hey, teacher. I'm sorry to interrupt you when you're talking, but that juice from earlier went right through me. Where's the toilet?"

Sudou appeared before us, like he hadn't heard the announcement.

"The toilet, huh? I was about to get to that point. If you want to use the bathroom, use this."

Chabashira-sensei grabbed one of the cardboard boxes from the stacked pile. She peeled off the packing tape and took out some collapsed cardboard.

"Huh? What's that?" Sudou asked.

"It's a basic toilet. Each class will be supplied with one. Please handle it carefully."

Sudou wasn't the only one perplexed by this. The girls were shocked.

"Don't tell me we have to use *that*?!" Shinohara, from Karuizawa's group, raised her voice in horrified surprise. The girl seemed like an extension of Karuizawa herself, rather than a simple group member.

"Both the boys and girls will use it. But do not worry, it comes with a single button tent that you can use when you want to change. That way, no one will be able to see you."

"That's not the problem! Th-that's just a cardboard box! This is absolutely impossible!"

"It might be a cardboard box, but it's an especially well-made one. It can even be used in a disaster. I'll show you how to use it, so please commit this to memory."

While the girls booed her, Chabashira-sensei assembled the toilet. It seemed she was familiar with setting it up. Then she put a blue vinyl bag on it, and placed what looked to be a white sheet inside.

"This sheet is made of water-absorbing polymer. It covers and solidifies waste. It'll make the waste invisible, and also suppress the smell. After you finish using it, stack another sheet on top. By repeating this process, it's

possible to get around five uses with one vinyl bag. These vinyl bags and sheets will be supplied to you in unlimited amounts. You can even change them after every use, if you want."

The girls listened silently to Chabashira-sensei's explanation. If a disaster did occur, it wouldn't matter whether you were a boy or a girl, or if it was just a cardboard box. But it was probably pretty difficult to imagine this idyllic island as a disaster area.

"There's just no way I can do this! Absolutely no way!"

Starting with Shinohara, nearly all of the girls rejected the idea.

Ike, who'd been silent, pouted and said, "Come on, just deal with it. This isn't the time to fight, Shinohara."

"Don't screw around! It probably doesn't matter to you boys. There's no way *I* can go to the bathroom in a cardboard box."

"The decision is yours. However, you are not permitted to relieve yourselves in the forest, the sea, or rivers. Do not forget that."

Even when giving that warning, our teacher sounded uninterested.

"But, but I definitely can't do it in a cardboard box! Besides, the guys are going to be close, right? That's gross!"

Shinohara, still unaccepting of the situation, directed her anger at the boys, especially Ike.

"What the heck? I don't get why you're treating us like perverts," Ike said.

"It's true though, isn't it? You do seem to be really perverted."

"Huh? Jeez, that hurts! I'm a super gentleman!"

"Don't make me laugh. A gentleman? Get real. You're by far the top contender for biggest pervert."

Sparks flew as Ike and Shinohara got into a heated argument.

"Anyway, it's impossible for me," she said.

Shinohara and half of the girls seemed like unwilling to listen to reason.

“Well then, what are you going to do? It’d be impossible for you to not use the bathroom for one whole week, right?”

“That’s—”

Our teacher, who had calmly watched Ike and Shinohara argue like it wasn’t her problem, suddenly looked behind us with a disgusted expression.

“Yoo-hoo!”

We heard a piercing voice. Its owner rushed at her target, capturing our homeroom teacher and hugging her tightly from behind.

“What are you doing?” Chabashira-sensei grunted.

“What, I can’t be friendly? I honestly wanted to see what you’d do,” said Hoshinomiya-sensei, Class B’s homeroom instructor. She gently caressed Chabashira-sensei’s arms. “Whenever I touch your hair, Sae-chan, it’s always so smooth!”



“Don’t you understand the school’s rules at all? Eavesdropping on other classes when they are giving information is inexcusable.”

“Aw, I’m just an unimportant teacher, though. Even if I *did* hear something, I’d never tell. But doesn’t this feel like fate? I can’t believe that we both came to this island together.”

Fate? Chabashira-sensei ignored the hidden meaning in Hoshinomiya-sensei’s words.

“Shut up. Just hurry on back to Class B.”

“Ah! Isn’t that Ayanokouji-kun? It’s been so long!”

Unlike the other teachers, who occasionally popped into class, I didn’t normally get many opportunities to interact with Hoshinomiya-sensei. I gave her a slight bow.

“Summer is the season of love. If you want to confess your feelings to a girl you like, perhaps it’d be more effective while standing before the beautiful ocean?”

“The ocean may be beautiful, but I can’t afford to do that during class.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. Since everyone was staring at us, I really wished she’d disentangle herself from my romantic life.

“You need to be more carefree!”

“Hey. Should I report you to the school authorities for behavioral problems? Besides, I don’t have any more time.” Chabashira-sensei said.

“Ooh, don’t glare at me like that. Fine, fine, I get it. See you later!”

Hoshinomiya-sensei walked away with a sad look on her face. Chabashira-sensei immediately started on a new topic.

“Well then, allow me to explain some additional rules.”

“A-additional rules? There’s more?”

“Soon you will be permitted to roam about freely, but there are several designated ‘spots’ on the island. In these spots, there is what’s referred to as right of exclusive possession, and only the class that occupies that spot may

exercise those rights. The class that obtains those rights is entirely free to determine how they wish to exercise them. However, rights of exclusive possession are only valid for a period of eight hours after being invoked, after which they are automatically revoked. That means that another class can acquire those rights at that time. Also, you gain one bonus point if you occupy a spot once. However, that point is provisional, and cannot be used during the testing period. Therefore, bonus points are calculated and added to your total after the test has ended. Because the school is constantly monitoring you, there is no room for fraud. Please be aware of that fact."

"Huh? Huh? Well…wait, isn't that super important, though?! Getting to add a point is awesome! Leave everything to us!"

"Let's go looking right away!" Ike said to Yamauchi and the others, his eyes shining.

The manual went into the bonus point in great detail. Apparently, there was some kind of apparatus installed near each spot, one which showed rights of exclusive possession. It was unclear how many spots were on the island, but they were clearly important. However…

"I can understand your impatience, but be aware of the risks. After you take those risks into account, then you have to consider what to do. Everything is written in the manual."

A specialized key card is required to occupy a spot.

You can earn one point by occupying a spot each time. Occupied spots can be used freely.

You will receive a fifty-point penalty if you use a spot occupied by another class without permission.

Only a designated leader can use the key card.

It is impossible to change the leader without suitable justification.

The manual outlined those rules. While Chabashira-sensei explained, I noticed details such as how the rights of exclusive possession were reset every eight hours; how if a space wasn't occupied, you could take it immediately; how it was okay for the same class to occupy the same space repeatedly, etc. So if one

class successfully managed to repeatedly hold onto three spots for eight hours at a time, that class could obtain fifty points or more by the end of the test. However, there were big risks associated.

With the rules established thus far, it looked like a simple matter of the early bird getting the worm. It seemed like a good system, if you were able to forcibly occupy spots over and over again.

But that was impossible. The final rule detailed why.

On the seventh day, the last day of the test, you had the right to guess at the identity of the other class' leader during roll call. If you managed to get it right, then you could obtain fifty points for each correct guess. Conversely, the other class would have to pay fifty points as compensation. If you moved to acquire a spot without caution, and your leader was discovered, then you could lose a great number of points. So, high risk, high reward.

However, the guesses couldn't be hazarded without risk. If you happened to be mistaken, you would suffer a fifty-point penalty for being incorrect. In addition, a class whose leader had been found out would lose all of the bonus points they'd saved up until then. This rule made it so if you didn't have much confidence, you would be hesitant to join the battle to occupy spots.

"One person must be chosen as the leader, no exceptions. However, you are free not to participate. Please tell me once you've selected someone. At that time, I will provide you with a key card stamped with the leader's name. You have until roll call today. In the event that you do not decide by then, we will decide for you. That is all."

In other words, the leader's identity would be discovered if you only managed to glance at the card. With that, Chabashira-sensei seemingly finished with her explanation. The die was cast. Hirata immediately started taking action.

"We'll have time later to think about who should be the leader. First, where will our base camp be? Do we camp somewhere around here, on the beach? Or do we go into the forest? We need to think carefully about our spot."

The manual included a simple map of the island, with only its size and the shape drawn. Things like the total area of the forest and the topography were completely unknown. It was more like a blank sheet of paper.

“It looks like we need to fill in the necessary parts ourselves.” A ballpoint pen had been given to us as well, for that exact purpose.

“It’s good to have a spot near the boat where lots of teachers are, right?”

“No, I’m not too sure. There may not be anything here.”

If there was no water, then there was no food. Building a base in this location could possibly mean being as far away as possible from convenient resources. On top of that, the sunlight would be intense during the day, making the environment harsh. On the other hand, there would also be risks if we went too far into the forest.

“More importantly, I need to use the bathroom. I can’t hold it anymore.”

Sudou grabbed the simple toilet that Chabashira-sensei had made. We assembled the one-button tent and set it up a short distance away. Shinohara and the others observed the situation while huddled tightly together. Chabashira-sensei retreated. She probably meant to imply, “I’m not getting involved anymore. Do whatever you want.”

“Hey, Hirata-kun. Isn’t it better to decide ahead of time what we should do about the toilet?”

The toilet was definitely going to become an issue before long. The girls’ opinions were reasonable.

“Well, we can talk about a decision, but in the end don’t we just have to grin and bear it?”

“No, there could be another way.”

Hirata looked at the manual, and then looked back up.

“It says that temporary toilets can be purchased and installed using our points.”

Shinohara and the other immediately gathered around the manual. The functions of the temporary toilets appeared impeccable. The reference pictures made it look like a flushable toilet you’d see at home. If that were the case, then the girls would be well on board with it. However, the problem was that we needed to spend twenty points per toilet. It was difficult to judge whether

that was expensive or cheap.

“We absolutely need it! I mean, I really don’t like that we have to spend points… But if we don’t, it’s just impossible!”

A lot of girls, triggered by Shinohara’s remarks, agreed. For the girls, having a toilet might outweigh having food or water. They didn’t intend to budge on this issue.

“W-wait a minute here, you guys! Twenty points?! Just for a toilet?!”

Ike reacted with horror. His desire to be economical and save points was all-consuming. Also, some of the guys could put up with using a cardboard toilet. They probably wanted to refrain from making unnecessary purchases as much as possible.

“Yes, as a toilet, that one’s good. But we already have this one! Right? We still have a lot of time left to use our points. It’s bad for us to splurge now!”

“You don’t get to decide that. Hirata-kun is going to consider all of our opinions and decide. Right, Hirata-kun?” Shinohara ignored Ike and pleaded with Hirata to buy a temporary toilet.

“I see. At the very least, having a toilet for the girls would be—”

“You’re free to consider everyone’s opinions, but that doesn’t mean you get to make decisions,” said Ike, frantically trying to stop Hirata, who appeared to be about to buy the toilet.

“Ah, shut up already! Karuizawa-san, say something, will you? We need a toilet!” Shinohara begged Karuizawa, the girls’ representative.

“Really? Well, I suppose it’ll be tough, but I really want class points. I guess I’ll just grin and bear it.” An unexpected response from Karuizawa, who seemed like she would’ve been first to complain. “The school has already prepared for our needs. I can endure it. If we take baths in the river and use what we have here, don’t you think everything will be fine?”

“But…Karuizawa-san!”

If Karuizawa said as much, then even the strong-willed Shinohara couldn’t oppose her openly. Many of the girls followed Karuizawa, after all. However,

Yukimura suddenly joined the fight.

“It’s not as though I don’t understand the girls’ desire to have a temporary toilet. However, I’m not convinced that we ought to arbitrarily spend our points, whether it’s for boys or girls. I suppose if you want the toilet, then I’d like to at least make a decision after collecting a majority vote.”

He slid his glasses up his nose, voicing his disagreement in a rather aggressive tone.

“I’m just making a natural request for a girl, that’s all. It doesn’t involve boys at all.”

“A natural request? Doesn’t involve boys? I can’t understand that. Isn’t that simply a form of discrimination?”

“Discrimination? Ah, this is giving me a headache. Hirata-kun, please make them leave me alone.” Shinohara, unable to give up on the toilet matter, frantically pleaded for help.

“This test is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to bridge our point gap with the other classes. We can’t use valuable points on things like temporary toilets. I have no intention of being in Class D forever. I don’t agree with Shinohara-san, who’s making arbitrary requests based on her personal wishes. I would like for us to uniformly decide upon a clear policy.”

“Huh? Are you trying to say that I’m not considering anything?” she asked.

“Even money can move based purely on instinct. I hate that women argue so emotionally.”

“Huh? That doesn’t mean that I want to use our points indiscriminately. What I’m saying is that we should have at least the bare minimum. Do you not understand that?”

“Both of you calm down. Yukimura-kun, I understand what you mean to say, but if you speak so belligerently we’re not going to resolve anything, are we? Let’s do this calmly.”

“Calmly? Don’t you agree that we should, under no circumstances, use our points arbitrarily?” Yukimura asked.

“Well…”

Hirata was caught in an increasingly fraught situation. He didn’t know what to do, yet frantically tried to mediate while doing his best not to show mounting concern.

“Class D has no leadership, which worries me. Besides, Hirata’s a pushover. He can’t even make one decision, can he?”

I stood a short distance away, watching the situation unfold. Horikita stood next to me. After realizing that it was unlikely any progress would be made, she sighed heavily.

“It looks like this test is going to be more complex and challenging than we thought…”

Horikita, oddly enough, looked perplexed.

“It’s a chance for us to get a lot of points. Are you okay, Horikita?”

When I looked at her in profile, she appeared a little annoyed rather than conflicted.

“I wonder. At this stage, I’m not optimistic enough to say it’ll be easy. I’m the same as the others. I’ve never lived in such an environment before, so I can’t really make any predictions. I realize now that this test is more complicated than we thought, and our position more precarious. I *do* want to increase our points, but I can’t come up with a good solution. What an unpleasant test.”

One group wanted to use points, one group didn’t want to use points, and one group wanted to use points only when necessary. Those were three fully split groups right there. Furthermore, there were some minor differences even within those separate factions.

This week would not be easy in a class of more than thirty people. The manual seemed to represent every difficulty we would face in uniting as a class, while simultaneously laying out our freedom. From a little further away, Chabashira-sensei watched our confrontation with cold eyes. She wasn’t going to appraise her students, though. After all, Class D was a collection of failures; we existed solely to fail. Was that the focus of this exercise?

“Horikita, what do you think?”

“Like Yukimura-kun says, I would like to get by without using unnecessary points. However, I’m not confident that I can make it through the week without satisfactory equipment. That’s just my honest opinion. However, I think that we ought to challenge ourselves, see how much we can endure. What do you say?”

“I think the same. There’s too much we don’t know,” I replied.

“Hey, look. Did Class A and Class B perhaps already decide what they’re doing?”

We turned toward a girl’s flustered voice. Although only a few minutes had passed, several students had gathered together and were heading into the forest. They were probably looking for the best place to set up base camp. It was almost symbolic of their superiority. Meanwhile, Classes C and D still lacked cohesion. We couldn’t even get off to a satisfactory start.

“Ah, damn it! This isn’t the time for a long, leisurely chat about toilets! I intend to do anything to protect our points. I’ll go look for camp areas and spots. Yukimura, Shinohara, and the rest of you, don’t start spending any points.”

“Got it. We don’t intend to.”

You couldn’t call Ike and Yukimura the best of friends, but apparently they could cooperate with a shared goal.

“Wait a minute, Ike-kun. It’s dangerous to go into the forest without a plan.”

“Will staying here and worrying solve anything? It won’t.”

The desire to go and the desire to stay clashed. However, Hirata wasn’t persuasive enough to stop Ike and the others.

“I’ll come back once I find a spot we can use. Then, after everyone moves there, we can talk. A simple plan, right?”

Did Sudou and Yamauchi also intend to search for spots? They gathered around an impatient Ike.

“Are you going too, Ayanokouji?” Sudou asked looking me in the eye. I casually shook my head.

“I don’t want you three to ever do anything alone. If you get lost, it’ll be trouble.” Hirata seemed to realize that he couldn’t stop this.

“We get it. All right, we’ll look for lots of stuff!”

Just as I’d thought, with no shade to block out the sunlight, it got really hot. While we’d spent time sitting here discussing things, we had all grown dehydrated.

“It’d be really tough to try building our campsite here.”

The intense heat made some of our classmates started whining. Hirata also seemed to realize just how difficult camping on the beach would be. If this were a genuine camp with an umbrella, a beach tent, and plenty of options for swimming in the ocean and protecting ourselves from the sun, that’d be one thing. But our current situation made that difficult.

“For the time being, how about we find a place in the shade? We can talk while we move.” Hirata took the initiative and started carrying the tent. The other guys followed suit.

“By the way. Did Sudou-kun tidy up the toilet properly?”

One of the girls looked anxious as she pointed to the toilet. It was true that Sudou had been empty-handed when he exited after going in to do his business. So at the very least, the inside was…

We left the toilet under the scorching sun. The inside of the tent would’ve been like a steam bath.

2.2

We walked from the beach toward a gigantic forest. One of the boys looked visibly shaken.

“Is it really okay for us to go in there? We might get really lost. I can’t see into it at all.”

That was precisely why we had the roll call rule and the emergency button installed on our wristwatches. We had to cooperate. If we didn’t work together, then we’d probably end up panicking and spending our points like they grew on trees.

“Wow, Karuizawa-san. Hirata-kun is really amazing, isn’t he? He takes on everything that comes his way, even if he dislikes it.”

“Oh yeah. The other guys are pathetic, so it’s good to just leave everything to Hirata-kun, right?”

Hirata, still carrying the tent, walked ahead of Karuizawa’s group, who looked at him with admiration. Incidentally, I was helping carry the luggage, too. I also carried the simple toilet made out of folded cardboard. I’d determined that if I didn’t help now, extra work might come my way later. For the time being, I wanted to preemptively give the impression that I was helping.

Horikita, who was isolated from the other girls, calmly followed the group from the back. She would occasionally act as though she were going to stop, but then immediately started walking again. I slowed down a little bit until I was walking side by side with her.

“Not in a good mood?” I asked.

“To be honest, I’m depressed. These kinds of things just aren’t for me. Life on an island seems primitive, and worst of all, I can’t be alone.”

Enthusiastically joining in a group effort was far beyond Horikita’s capabilities. I thought it would’ve been good to make an effort to fit in, but it would’ve been pointless to say that to her. I relented.

“You know, what you said to me before might end up being true.”

Horikita wore a look of slight amusement.

“This test will likely fall outside of my academic abilities. I’d determined that Ike-kun and Sudou-kun would be hindrances, but they took the initiative to go out searching. I wasn’t able to do anything, because I kept debating what action to take. If they’d started moving quicker, they probably would’ve been able to find something useful.”

“Maybe. More importantly though, are you okay?”

“What do you mean?”

She glared. I quickly said “Nothing,” and averted my gaze. While talking with Horikita, I felt someone watching my back. Looking over my shoulder, I saw Sakura, who was walking way in the back. When she noticed that I’d turned around, she got flustered and looked away.

“What’s the matter?” Horikita asked.

“Oh, nothing.” Maybe I was being too nosy. I turned back around.

“I wonder what the other classes will do. I’ve been curious about their movements. If Classes A and B intend to obtain as many points as possible, then we’ll need to prepare as well. We can’t let the difference between us widen.” Horikita wore a serious expression on her face. In that respect, she had extraordinary resolve. Currently, we were separated from the other classes by a wide margin based solely on our academic abilities. For Horikita, who aimed to reach Class A, this was a fight she absolutely could not afford to lose.

“Aiming for the top is tough,” I said.

“I thought what Chabashira-sensei said back then was a joke, but are you really not at all interested in moving up?” Horikita asked.

Chabashira-sensei had probably said something about that back when she encountered Horikita and me in the guidance room.

“It’s not particularly weird or anything, is it? It’s not like Ike and the others are gunning for Class A or anything. If we got an increase in our allowance each month, that’d make me happy. If I’m lucky, maybe we can even reach Class A.”

I couldn’t speak to others’ true intentions, like Hirata and Karuizawa.

“People who come to this school do so to make use of the privileges it offers.” Rather than dissatisfied, Horikita appeared puzzled. At the time of our enrollment, access to elite universities and job opportunities were supposed to be guaranteed. Many students expected it.

“Why did you choose this school?” she asked me.

“Well, can’t I just say the same thing? To shamelessly make use of the privileges the school offered me.”

“I see.” This time she sounded blatantly dissatisfied, and regarded me with a sharp side-eye. I thought that Horikita had enrolled here to be at the same school as her older brother. She wasn’t aiming for Class A for her own sake, but rather, sought her older brother’s approval. Her ambition differed from most others.

“It doesn’t feel good to have someone pry into your past,” she said, forestalling me. I’d intended to dig deeper, but it looked like she’d immediately understood my true intentions. *I’m trying to understand my past, or should I say this person’s past, by thoroughly analyzing and breaking down people.*

“I’ll tell you this: Chabashira-sensei leaked the information. Don’t misunderstand me. All right? Besides, we’re still not friends. Don’t forget that.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not really thinking about friendship, anyway.”

Shortly after, Hirata and the others stopped.

“If we stop here, there’s foliage blocking the sunlight, and it doesn’t seem like we’ll have to worry about anyone hearing us.”

Some of the boys began teaming up, and it wasn’t long before they had their own opinions that clashed with Hirata’s.

“We ought to be moving, too, not leaving everything to Ike and the others. Don’t you think? If another class captures one of the main spots, the point difference will widen.”

“Yeah, you’re right. We do need to get moving right away, but it’s not a good idea to neglect our problems and scatter. First of all, we need to resolve the toilet question.”

“That’s why *I’m* saying we should just use the toilet that they gave us.” Yukimura glared at the girls’ group.

“I’ve thought it over, and I believe we should install one toilet first,” Hirata said forcefully. Apparently, he was done being pushed around.

“You don’t just get to decide. Ike also had an opinion.”

“Installing a toilet might be a necessary expense. To begin with, we have one simple toilet that our class, which has thirty or more students, isn’t used to. I have to wonder if we can really take turns effectively without any trouble?”

“That’s… If we use it well…”

“It’s unrealistic. We have to consider the worst-case scenario. If everyone took three minutes to use the restroom, then it would take an hour and a half or more for everyone to go. Can that possibly work?”

“That’s pointless. Not everyone would need to use the toilet at the same time. The school provided us with just one toilet because it was realistic. We should be able to effectively take turns, right?”

“I don’t think so. From the beginning, I thought using only one toilet would be impossible. If you reason it out, I think it’s less about refraining from spending *any* points, and more that we need to spend our points effectively. You should know that, Yukimura-kun. The other classes have most likely come to the same conclusion.”

No matter how we used our points, this was a critical junction for determining whether we’d win or lose. All of the supplies we’d been given seemed insufficient. By giving us a tent that only about half our class could use and a small flashlight, the teachers seemed to be suggesting that we would need to use points.

“That’s all just speculation on your part. Besides, if the other classes *did* install the toilets, we’d be twenty points ahead just by doing without them. So that’s precisely why we shouldn’t install one.”

“You’re right about that, but it’s unlikely that putting up with a faulty toilet will work out in our favor. It’ll add unnecessary stress and anxiety. I’m also worried about sanitation. Objectively, we should install at least one toilet.”

It looked like after taking time to calm down, Hirata had come to a solid conclusion. It wasn't just to provoke arguments; he was convinced that he'd get their approval eventually.

"I think this'll grant the girls peace of mind."

Not even Yukimura could deny Hirata's impeccable reasoning. Hirata understood wanting to preserve our points, but he'd also deduced the downsides of a single toilet. Truth be told, our classmates had been given so much information in one go that they'd overlooked obvious things. Yukimura, who couldn't bear being stared at in silence, broke.

"Fine. In that case, let's install one toilet."

In the end, Yukimura had been beaten. Shinohara, Karuizawa's group, and even Horikita all looked relieved.

"Teacher. If we wish to install a temporary toilet, can we decide where to have it installed?"

"As long as it's not on impossible terrain, it can be put anywhere. It's also possible to have it moved after installation, but it would take some time. It weighs about 100 or more kilos, thus requiring quite a bit of labor."

With one problem resolved, Hirata sighed in relief.

"Next. We've already heard some opinions, but I think we need to search around and decide where our base camp will be. Where we settle will impact how we consume our points," said Hirata, obviously trying to head another argument off at the pass.

We recruited volunteers, but barely got anyone to help. We ended up with only two guys. Most people weren't willing to enter such a sprawling forest. That was only natural.

"I wonder if anyone among us has expert survival skills?" said Hirata, holding onto a sliver of hope. According to manga clichés, there was always that one person you could depend upon in times like these. Hirata checked our classmates, but everyone seemed reluctant to step forward. Just then, the Professor, who thus far had silently watched, raised his hand.

“Since childhood, my father trained me in a particular set of skills. He taught me to survive, even alone in the jungle…is precisely how I would describe the type of character needed for this situation.”

Everybody booed. The Professor got flustered and apologized, but it was too late. We all hated him.

“Um, if you don’t mind, I’ll go.”

Kushida volunteered herself. Suddenly the boys’ eyes lit up, even though they’d refused to participate before. The formerly reluctant fellows stepped forward and volunteered, saying, “Me too, me too!” Some were probably motivated by goodwill for Kushida, while others might’ve been embarrassed that a girl had taken the initiative before them.

I raised my hand as Hirata started counting people.

“Okay, so eleven people, huh? If we had one more participant, we could make four teams,” Horikita said.

“Are you going, too?” I asked.

“I have to hang back. But it’s unusual to see you be so proactive.”

“Well, without a role to fill in the class, you’ll get cut off.”

Just then, someone raised a rather shy hand. When Hirata saw her, he smiled in relief.

“Thank you, Sakura-san. That makes twelve. Let’s go in four teams of three people. It’s 1:30 right now Regardless of results, I want everyone to meet back here by 3:00.”

With that, the twelve volunteers began to form up into teams according to their preferences. In the blink of an eye, I became one of the leftovers.

“N-nice to see you again, Ayanokouji-kun,” said Sakura, who’d also been overlooked. And then…

“The sun certainly is refreshing. My body needs energy.”

Kouenji Rokusuke. That guy was actually going to join our search party. Fortunately, I’d been paired with a free spirit and a quiet girl. With these two,

I’d be able to move without any difficulty.

2.3

The forest's verdant, overgrown foliage surrounded us. The further in we went, the thicker it became. It was preferable to the scorching beach, but the damp heat was agonizing. I grabbed the neckline of my shirt and fanned myself to cool down. It was as steamy as water over hot stones.

As I thought about it, all I could think was how hot it was. It was *way* too hot. Would talking be enough to distract myself from it?

"Kouenji?"

"Ah, so beautiful. As I stand here amongst such vast nature, with an air of composure, I really am too beautiful. The pinnacle of beauty!"

It was no use. I couldn't hold a proper conversation with him. There was really only one person I could talk to.

"Amazing, isn't it?" I asked.

"Huh?!"

Sakura, who was walking a bit behind me, jumped in surprise. Perhaps she hadn't expected anyone to talk to her.

"You raised your hand when Hirata said he wanted one more person, didn't you? There are lots of things you can do now."

"Well, I don't think that's particularly amazing or anything. It's really not. Even now, I'm still a little confused."

Rather than calling her meek, I'd say that Sakura was pensive and bad at talking with others. She was probably pretty passive when it came to things like being on a group trip. I'd thought that she would move away from me, but we continued to walk side by side. Hiking from the beach to the forest had put a serious drain on our stamina. Not only was the footing unstable, but the path was on a bit of an incline.

"So why did you raise your hand to do something as difficult as exploring the forest?"

“Well, that’s… I felt kind of uncomfortable when everyone else in the crowd got so fired up…”

“Well, I don’t know how you feel, but even with a small number of people, this won’t be easy.”

Now I was definitely in this conversation, even if it became unpleasant.

“But Ayanokouji-kun, you raised your hand, so…” Sakura raised her head in surprise, growing flustered and making frantic gestures. “Th-that’s not what I mean! It’s just that since there isn’t anyone I can talk to, that’s why… That’s what I mean!”

With this feverish denial, she hurried forward.

“H-hey, watch ou—”

“Wh— Aah!”

As she turned around to look at me, Sakura’s foot caught on the roots of a large tree. Panicked, I tried to grab her, but didn’t make it in time.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Oh, ouch…”

Fortunately, she’d landed on her butt and hands. It didn’t look like anything serious.

“You’ll get hurt if you’re not careful in the forest. Here, take my hand.”

“Th-thank you.”

Sakura sheepishly reached for me, but then noticed that her hands were dirty and quickly withdrew. I didn’t particularly care that her hands were dirty, though, so I grabbed her and helped pull her up.

“S-sorry.”

“You don’t need to apologize.”

I brushed the dirt off Sakura’s hands. This was probably the first time any of us had set foot in such a wild forest. I thought we’d be fine so long as we walked in one direction, but I was wrong. First of all, walking in a straight line was impossible. There were natural obstacles we couldn’t cross, which

forcefully changed our path and veered us right or left.

If we kept going like this, we'd probably get lost. I had to make sure not to lose sight of Kouenji, who'd been pushing forward relentlessly. Meanwhile, Sakura kept silent and absentmindedly stared at the palm of her right hand.

"Hey, Sakura, come on. Hurry up a bit."

"Huh?! A-ah, o-okay."

At my words, Sakura panicked and rushed forward. She was probably going to trip again.

"Ah, Kouenji-kun sure walks fast, doesn't he?"

Kouenji ventured further and further into the forest without once considering a girl's pace. I honestly admired his stamina and his strong legs.

"In the first place, I can't believe he'd…"

"What's the matter?"

"No, I…"

What in the world was he up to? Was it a coincidence? No, Kouenji walked without hesitation. Even if our team was free to choose the base camp's location, you'd expect him to be looking around as you went. Kouenji walked straight ahead, almost as if he had another purpose.

More than anything else, his progress surprised me. It was possible that Kouenji wasn't simply pushing ahead recklessly. Maybe he had a goal in mind. However, the problem was that Sakura, in trying to keep up with Kouenji, was running out of breath.

"Kouenji. Don't you think it's a bad idea to rush forward like this? We'll get lost."

I was feeling anxious about both my teammates. Kouenji remained with his back to us and started fixing his hair.

"I am a perfect human being. I would never foolishly lose my way in a forest. If any problem occurs, it would most likely be because you two lost sight of me. When that happens, you should give up."

Just as I'd expected, he was the sort of guy to declare that he wasn't interested in anyone other than himself. Was he really this inconsiderate, given our circumstances?

"By the way, I'd like to ask you ordinary people something. Don't you think this is truly beautiful?" Kouenji flashed an audacious smile, showing us his white teeth.

"Well. I do think that the forest…well, nature…is quite mysterious, or rather beautiful." I tried telling him what I thought, more or less. However, Kouenji sighed in disappointment.

"What on earth are you talking about? That's not what I meant. I mean how *I*, with my perfect physical beauty, shine in such a place. Do you not understand?"

So he wanted me to compliment him on his self-proclaimed "perfect physical beauty." I see.

"He's probably acting a little messed up because of the heat. It's best you don't pay him any mind, Sakura."

"Y-yeah. Kouenji-kun has been acting pretty funny from the start, so it's okay."

Wow. That may have been the truth, but it was unexpectedly harsh. Anyway, Kouenji, seemingly satisfied with his own beauty, started walking again. From that point onward, I decided not to get my hopes up with regards to our third teammate.

"There's no need to worry. Even if something happened in a forest like this, there won't be a problem."

"What do you mean by that, Kouenji?" I asked.

"I wouldn't call this a natural forest. The probability of getting lost during the day is extremely low. It's precisely for that reason that I'm a little curious."

With those mysterious words, Kouenji continued quickly forward, seemingly having lost interest in us. He was so fast that Sakura couldn't keep up with him.

"Hey!" I called.

"U-um, I'll be okay. I'll do my best to follow."

Even though she was all sweaty, Sakura tried to give a small fist pump. She still looked uncertain, like she was going to trip and fall, but I supposed that she'd hardened her resolve to do her best. Kouenji, clearly taking no notice of Sakura's efforts, got further and further ahead. I'd thought he'd keep going until we passed through the forest, but he suddenly stopped. Turning, he flashed another audacious smile while stroking his hair.

"May I ask you common folk another question?"

Before we could reply, Kouenji continued.

"What do you think of this place? What do you see when you look around?"

"Huh? Wh-what does he mean? Ayanokouji-kun?"

In the face of Kouenji's sharp gaze, Sakura hid behind my back. What did I think about this place? I tried scanning my surroundings. While I did so, Sakura also looked around. However, nothing seemed especially notable. It was just forest. What in the world was he trying to get at?

"Good. I understand. Please, do not worry. Common folk are simple, after all."

When Kouenji realized that he wasn't going to get the answer he wanted, he walked quickly forward into the forest again.

"What? Did something change?"

"No…"

If you honestly believed everything Kouenji said to you, you'd go mad. He was the sort of man who would play any number of games. However, it was possible we were missing something. In any case, we didn't have the time to search at our leisure.

"Sakura, do you have a handkerchief with you?"

"Oh, yeah. This okay?"

Just as I'd expect of a girl, she seemed to be prepared.

"If it's all right with you, could I borrow it? It might get a little dirty, though."

"Sure, that's perfectly fine," replied Sakura, without any hint of objection. She handed me her handkerchief.

I tied it to a nearby tree branch, one that didn't seem like it would break easily. It would act as a sort of marker for us later on.

"Ah, we're going to lose sight of Kouenji-kun. Let's hurry, Ayanokouji-kun."

Sakura was flustered, and increasingly exhausted. It seemed likely she was about to trip and fall. After all, she was probably close to her physical limits. Even if she forced herself onward, she wouldn't be able to keep up.

"Sorry, but this is a bit too physically demanding. Do you mind if we slow down?"

With that, I slowed my pace. That way, Sakura wouldn't feel like the problem. She probably saw through my ploy, but I didn't mind. It wasn't as though she could call me out on it. By this point, we'd lost sight of Kouenji. Far ahead, I could occasionally make out the rustle of grass and the footsteps on the earth.

"Wow, he's a man of many talents. Kouenji, I mean."

He possessed a brilliant mind and outstanding physical ability, which he'd perfectly adapted to the forest without hesitation. If only he had a personality like Hirata's, he would be a perfect superhuman.

"…"

Sakura seemed to have been silently looking over at something for some time. I was curious, but she didn't bring it up, and the two of us continued our search.

"It would be great if we secured some drinking water. Or maybe a place where we could take shelter."

Since I had nothing to do, I tried making light conversation. If we managed to secure a spot that made it possible to save points, our lives would get much easier.

"Oh yeah. I suppose that two tents probably won't be enough… But I can't find anything."

No matter how much I tried or how far we walked, I couldn't seem to find even one man-made object. Well, while I say we walked far, we'd only really covered a fraction of one percent of the island. The school probably wouldn't

be kind enough to go easy on us. After tromping through wild terrain, a pathway appeared before us.

“This is a path, isn’t it?”

“Looks like it.”

In the middle of a forest on an uninhabited island, someone had created a path. It wasn’t paved or anything, of course, but trees had been chopped down and the path was well-trod. If the school had prepared this, then perhaps a spot lay further ahead. Sakura and I pressed onward.

“Wow. Amazing!”

Soon we arrived at what appeared to be a large hole in the mountainside: an entrance into a cave. At first glance it appeared to be a natural cave, but upon closer inspection the inside appeared properly reinforced. Perhaps the hole itself had been created by human hands.

“Could this possibly be…a spot?”

“Maybe.”

Since ancient times, caves have provided outstanding dwellings for people. If this place had been designated as a spot, there should have been proof. I tried to approach the cave to check, but then saw some guy coming out of it. I immediately grabbed Sakura’s arm and pulled her to hide in the shade. I felt bad, but I didn’t understand the situation. Hopefully she’d forgive me.

The person stopped at the entrance, and quietly looked to the southwest. He stood there for a minute or two. He’d wasted absolutely no time in securing this spot. It seemed like he’d gone straight to this cave without any hesitation. That aside, the man was tightly holding onto what looked to be some kind of card. Then, we heard a voice coming from inside the cave. Panicked, I hid my face.

“In a cave this size, we should have enough room for two tents, Katsuragi-san. We sure were lucky. We secured a spot really quickly.”

I listened carefully, trying to grasp the situation.

“Luck? What are you talking about? I figured that there was a cave here even before we landed. Finding it was inevitable. Be mindful of what you say and do.

We don’t know if anyone is out there listening to us. As the leader, I have a responsibility. Be sure you don’t make even the slightest mistake.”

“S-sorry. But when you say ‘since before we landed’, what do you mean?”

“Before the ship docked at the pier, it had already taken a trip around the island as a detour for some reason. That was probably a deliberate move by the school to give the students some hints. From the ship’s deck, I noticed a path that cut through the forest. All I had to do was take the shortest route from the pier after we’d landed to the path.”

“B-but it might’ve been just a chance for us to enjoy the scenery.”

“That was far too long of a roundabout for sightseeing. Besides, the announcement was strange, too.”

“I didn’t notice anything at all, and yet… Katsuragi-san, you managed to see the school’s true intentions. Because of that, you understood there was a cave here. Just as we’d expect from you!”

“Let’s go to the next one, Yahiko. It’s pointless to linger here after we’ve claimed the spot. There’s a path to two other places that I noticed from the ship. There should be some kind of facility up ahead.”

“Y-yeah! If we leave it like this, Sakayanagi will have no choice but to be quiet!”

“If you only look straight ahead, you might overlook things.”

“You say that, but isn’t it enough just to be cautious of Class B? I mean, Class D is just an assortment of failures, right? They’re defective. Considering the point difference, it’s probably fine to ignore them, right?”

I’d heard talk like that on the ship earlier—that Class D was basically beyond Class A’s consideration. They treated us like pebbles in their path.

“That’s enough chit-chat. Let’s go, Yahiko.”

I waited until I could no longer hear their voices or footsteps, and then waited two minutes more.

“Did they go?” Sakura whispered.

I peeked out to check, but I didn't see them. As I caught my breath, I noticed that my hands had grown comparatively warmer. I must've kept hold of Sakura's hands after I grabbed her in a panic.

"Sorry, Sakura. Sakura?"

"Whaa?!"

Sakura was all right, though for some reason she seemed almost comatose.

"A-are you okay?"

"I-I-I-I'm o-o-okay…"

Her face turned so red I was afraid steam was going to start rising from her body. She sat weakly right down. Perhaps I'd held onto her more forcefully than I thought.

"Ah, ah, ah… I-I thought I was going to die. My heart stopped…"

Hopefully that was an exaggeration. Sakura's breathing stabilized as she adjusted her glasses.

"Those two guys seemed like they were from Class A, based on what they were saying."

I worried about abandoning this place. With no one here keeping watch, this spot could be intercepted. After waiting for Sakura's strength to return, we approached the cave entrance once again. Those two had left without any hesitation…

Inside the cave, some kind of terminal device with a monitor was embedded into the wall. The words "Class A" were displayed on the screen, along with a countdown timer that showed seven hours and 55 minutes remaining. Was this the proof that they owned this spot? We couldn't do anything to interfere until the countdown reached zero, and we couldn't force our way in.

That's why those two had left this place without worry. But that wasn't the only problem. As long as the rights of ownership weren't snatched by another class, Class A would keep acquiring one point every eight hours. Although they'd lost thirty points because of one student's illness, they were earning it back. Besides, that Katsuragi guy seemed to have determined there were a few

other facilities. If a spot happened to have food and water, could they widen the gap between the other classes?

“He said he’d noticed something even before we landed on the island…”

They’d memorized the island’s topography and used that to find a spot. Brilliant. I supposed that Class A students saw the world differently. However, that way of thinking led to some depressing conclusions.

“H-hey, Ayanokouji-kun. Could that person from before have been…the leader?”

She was right. This incident had proved to be a fatal mistake. Class A had to use their key card in order to maintain rights of exclusive ownership to the cave. They had clearly made their leader known to us. Of course, he probably hadn’t considered that someone from another class could be watching him, but that had been careless of them. I considered investigating the entire cave, but there was no sign of anyone hiding.

“Wh-wh-what should we do? We just found out an incredible secret!” said Sakura. She sounded impatient, perhaps because she was excited to have delivered a huge blow to Class A.

“I’ll report it to Hirata later.”

Sakura appeared relieved. She had poor communication skills, and by taking that responsibility, I’d helped her.

2.4

Things started to move when we returned to Hirata and the others, who hadn't achieved any results. The Idiot Trio seemed to be in surprisingly high spirits, and were speaking rather enthusiastically to Hirata about something.

"A river, a river! What an incredible feeling! And there was some kind of mechanism installed around there! It could be a gadget to get right of possession, or whatever! It's only a ten-minute walk from here, so let's hurry!"

It seemed like Ike and his group had made some headway, and wanted to stand guard so another class wouldn't snatch the spot.

"This is huge. If we can secure the river, our situation might take a turn for the better."

It seemed we'd decided on the base camp's location. Of course, it would depend on the terrain and environment, but this likely was going to be our first step forward.

"But there are two teams that still haven't returned. Someone should wait for them, right?"

It was a little before three o'clock. If they hadn't returned by the appointed time, there was a good chance they were lost in the forest.

"I'm sorry, Hirata. Kouenji isn't back yet, either. We got split up."

"Ah, Kouenji-kun actually came back a little while ago. He left to go swimming."

So he hadn't gotten lost, but had instead slipped away. I should have expected it.

"Split up? Didn't you take the lead?" Horikita asked with a sigh, as everyone began moving toward the river.

"I can't control that guy. You know that."

Had he been trying to start trouble? Kouenji had run off at a quick pace, suggesting that he was already familiar with the forest.

“I see. You can’t really complain about his abilities, though the same can’t be said of his personality.”

“Just like you.”

“Did you say something?” she growled.

“N-nope, I didn’t say anything.”

Our class was rife with personality issues, myself included. Poor Hirata.

“What?”

Horikita suddenly turned and looked behind her, staring sharply at Sakura.

“Eh?!”

“Were you looking at me just now?” Horikita asked.

“I-I-I-I wasn’t looking at anything!”

Sakura, flustered, ran off to put some distance between us.

“Don’t scare her like that. You can be a monster, Horikita.”

“So I should freely let her poke around and misconstrue things?”

“There! We found the spot! It’s amazing!”

We finally arrived at Ike’s chosen land. Inside the cave, the mechanism had been embedded into the wall, but here at the river’s edge, the equipment was installed on an unnaturally placed boulder. Hirata and his team started setting up the tents and other necessities for camp near the river.

“Okay. The water is beautiful, and there’s shade that blocks the sunlight. The terrain is level. This might be the ideal place for our base camp here. Amazing, Ike-kun!” Hirata said.

“Heh heh heh, I know, right?”

The river was about ten meters wide, and the water flowed gently. It was amazing. Deep forests and sandy roads surrounded the river, but this place looked as if it had been maintained. I doubted this location was so naturally perfect. Our school had likely set it up for this purpose.

“So how do we show that this is ours now?”

The river was pretty wide, and flowed downstream for quite a ways. At first glance, our flat piece of land was surrounded on all sides by the trees. There may not have been another favorable location like this, but it did seem like this was a natural entranceway to the area. Perhaps following the river might lead you here. Or was use of the river a privilege only given to those occupying this space?

I was a little concerned as I walked along the river toward the forest. Horikita tagged along for some reason.

“The school seems to know about this area, too. It looks like we’re the only ones who can use the river.”

In the middle of the path, a signboard was affixed to a tree. A message read that the river was a designated spot, and that unauthorized use was prohibited. After casually looking about, we returned to the others.

“So if we make this spot our base camp, the problem is whether or not we can occupy it.”

“We already decided that this would be it! If we don’t choose this spot, what’ll we do?”

“We have other choices. If we claim this place, there are obvious merits; we can monopolize the river, for one. Also, we can gain some points by holding this area. However, that requires us to update it once every eight hours, and since the designated leader is the only one who can handle that operation, it’ll be serious trouble if he or she is seen. We still don’t know if someone might be watching.”

We were surrounded by forest on all sides. We couldn’t notice a spy in the brushwood.

“Hmm, so if we stay hidden and protected, it’ll be fine, right? We can keep the area surrounded.”

Although there were risks, Ike was correct. If we made our base camp in this area, there was no way to pin us down. If students from another class took this place, it would become impossible to use the river. Both guys and girls agreed with Ike on this. I think that Hirata had wanted to agree anyway, but being a

font of neutrality, he'd wanted to collect a lot of opinions.

It was true that obtaining the rights of exclusive possession was something of a double-edged sword, with both risks and rewards. However, as with Class A occupying the cave, it was possible for the class to act together to protect ourselves. It went without saying that Classes B and C would most likely have done the same thing. In other words, it was an acceptable risk.

"Okay. Well, the next question is, who will be the leader?"

More than whether we'd take possession, the leader was key. A mistake here could prove fatal. While everyone wanted to avoid a role with such important responsibilities, Kushida asked everyone to form a circle.

"I thought a lot of things over. I have to say, Hirata-san and Karuizawa-san just stand out too much, like it or not. However, a leader's no good unless that person has a sense of responsibility, right? I think that Horikita-san meets that criteria. But, what do you think?"

Horikita looked like she hadn't expected such a recommendation, but her expression didn't change. I'd wondered if she were perhaps the least risky choice, since she was so desperate to reach Class A. That was crucial. I calmly observed everyone's reactions.

"I agree with Kushida-san. That is to say, I also think that Horikita-san would be a good leader. So long as Horikita-san is okay with it, then I think it'd be good for her to take over. What do you think?" Hirata said.

With everyone's eyes fixed on her, it didn't appear that Horikita was going to refuse.

"You don't want to do it though, right? Don't make her do it. I can do it in her place."

Sudou stepped forward, seemingly to protect Horikita's wishes. However, Horikita then calmly accepted the decision, almost as if Sudou's remarks had triggered her to do so.

"I understand. I accept."

Personally, I was relieved that someone like Sudou or Ike wasn't the leader.

Hirata immediately went over to Chabashira-sensei to pass on Horikita's name. Before long, he returned with a card and entrusted it to Horikita. Taking into consideration the possibility that we were being watched, we had everyone touch the device without it activating. This was to camouflage the leader, so a spy wouldn't know who he or she was.

"Okay, so we've resolved the problems of bathing and drinking water! Right?" Ike's eyes sparked brilliantly as he dreamed of saving points.

"Huh? Drink from the river? Are you insane?"

Apparently Ike intended to use this as an all-purpose river. However, Shinohara and the other girls did not appear to agree, glancing at the river in disgust.

"Well, it'd be great for swimming, but…to drink from?"

"What the heck? It's perfectly fine. The water's clean and pure, right?" Ike said.

"Well, yeah. It certainly seems like you *can* drink it, but…"

Shinohara tugged on Hirata's sleeve, asking her champion to defend them against Ike's frugality.

"Hey, Hirata-kun. Is it really okay? It's not normal to drink from a river, is it?"

Several uneasy girls gathered around Hirata to ask his advice. They shook their heads, as if signaling that such a thing was impossible.

"I don't think we can drink from that."

Ike, visibly frustrated, had had enough. "Really? Look how inviting the water is. How it flows. It's like perfectly natural spring water!"

Even though the water didn't look muddy or cloudy, the girls were not the only ones to hesitate. The boys also looked unsure.

"What the heck, you guys? What's wrong with you? There's no reason not to use the river after going through all the trouble of finding it."

"Then you drink it, as an experiment."

"Huh? Well, fine, whatever…"

Pressured, Ike scooped up some water with his hands and drank.

“Ah! Whew, that’s ice cold. It feels great! It’s damn good!”

“Okay, that’s a major turn off. No way, no way! There’s no way I’m drinking that. Gross!”

“Huh?! You’re the one who told me to drink it, Shinohara!”

“No way! Ugh, I hate barbarians like you most of all, god!”

“What the hell?”

The two of them exchanged glares hot enough to send sparks flying.

“I’ve heard that hatred is close to love. Could that be true with these two?”

“That…really doesn’t seem to be the case here.”

With the toilet resolved, the next issue was drinking water. Even with the river, it didn’t appear as though everything had been settled.

“For the time being, let’s table the water issue. It’s only going to be painful if you fight,” said Hirata, apparently desperate for peace.

Our problems would likely grow if we delayed things, but no one was really going to object to Hirata. Or so I thought, until a certain guy butted into the conversation.

“Shinohara, don’t complain. We gotta cooperate on this test.”

That came from our class’ number one problem child, Sudou, who chided Shinohara in an unusually calm tone.

“Oh, don’t make me laugh. Cooperate? That’s funny coming from you, Sudou-kun.”

Shinohara laughed, seizing at her stomach as if it hurt. It was only natural she’d poke fun at Sudou. Since Sudou had started at our school, he’d repeatedly caused problems for our class. He was far from being a model of cooperativeness, though in a different way from Horikita. It seemed that Sudou himself was aware of this.

“I know I’ve caused trouble for the class. That’s what I’m saying. If you keep antagonizing people with trivial crap, eventually it’s gonna come back to bite

you, er, you know where.”

“What? You’re saying that because you don’t want to use any points, Sudou-kun.”

“No one said anything about that. Kanji, calm down a little. If someone suddenly told you to drink from the river, you’d put up some resistance, right? I would. Hey, if we boil the water, it’ll become sterilized, right? So right now, why don’t we try that?”

“Boiling? This isn’t some kind of chemistry experiment. Stop coming up with such unexpectedly thoughtful suggestions!”

Shinohara was being rather aggressive toward Sudou, as if she were prepared to fight against anyone who displeased her. Hirata once again tried to calm everyone down as the fight got heated.

“Let’s try breaking apart for a bit. We still have some time. It’s not necessary to decide things in a panic.”

Calmed by those words, Shinohara fell silent and withdrew. Shortly afterward, Hirata went over to Chabashira-sensei to request the temporary toilet. Ike, unable to contain his anger at Shinohara, just kept biting his lip in frustration.

“Damn it! What the hell is Shinohara’s deal? It’s like she won’t even try.”

Upset, Ike skipped a pebble across the river. He got five or six good skips before it effortlessly hit the other bank. For an accident, it was still beautiful. If I tried to do that, it probably wouldn’t have gone so well.

“Hey, you’re surprisingly really good at outdoorsy stuff.”

“Hmm? Oh, I wouldn’t really say that. It’s just that I used to go camping together with my family back when I was little. I’m not opposed to drinking river water. I can tell if the water source is clean just by looking.”

Ike sounded honest rather than boastful.

“Well then, wouldn’t it have been a good idea to tell us about your camping experience from the beginning? If you’d gained people’s trust, things might’ve gone more smoothly.”

You had to give an explanation for your actions. Especially since this wasn’t

something that could be observed easily, unlike a test score.

“If I’d been in the Boy Scouts, I’d have legitimate bragging rights. But just going camping isn’t anything to brag about. Even if I said anything, it would’ve been pointless, anyway.”

He’d apparently gotten rather discouraged after being so harshly criticized by the girls. For Ike, who normally only cared about being attractive to the ladies, that had to hurt. However, if he’d only changed the way he handled things, the situation might’ve gone differently.

But then…Ike said something unusual.

“It seems like it’s everyone’s first time camping out. I thought that everyone had at least a little experience. I guess the stuff I said was probably a little unreasonable.”

He’d realized he made a mistake. That was the first time Ike had ever expressed regret.

“Sorry. I gotta think of how to take care of this. I’m gonna go for a swim in the river.”

Ike stood and turned his back to me. I thought that was probably fine for now. The heat had likely muddled his head, and searching around had probably tired him out.

“Ayanokouji-kun. Can you follow him?”

“Huh? Why?”

Horikita stood next to me. After Ike left, she spoke.

“It’s possible that his knowledge will prove useful. He might be instrumental to Class D. In addition to his outdoor knowledge, he seems to know his way around the forest. Also, since Kouenji-kun is basically useless, the class will need Ike to pull them forward.”

“You don’t think you can persuade him yourself?”

“Me? Persuade *him*? You think *I* can?” She sounded nonplussed, almost as if she couldn’t believe I’d asked her such a thing.

Even though she had smugly appealed for me to handle something she couldn't…she had a point. In truth, Horikita's interpersonal skills were well below that of an average person.

"I'm relying on you because I know I can't do it. Can I count on you?"

"Well sure, I guess. You don't have anyone else to rely on but me?"

Even if I wasn't great in this area, I was certainly better than no option at all.

"I suppose it must be relaxing to be unreliable and underachieving. Isn't it, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Amazing that she could so brazenly ask a favor while being so condescending.

"I'll talk to him, but leave the timing to me."

"Fine. I'm not entirely certain if now is the best time anyway."

We left it at that, with my acceptance and the realization we had nothing left to say to one another. I wondered if this week would show Horikita how difficult it was to live life as a hermit. Alone, she was amazing…but only alone.

In an academic setting, she could quietly continue her race to the top without relying on anyone. But this test proved that there were some things you couldn't do alone. Horikita now probably felt powerless for the first time. It was probably why she'd come to rely on me so quickly, at this early stage. If you didn't have any friends, you'd have no one to talk to. Without communication, there could be no cooperation or trust. An academically brilliant girl was less useful than a normal student in a situation like this.

"The school probably factored that into their calculations, too," I muttered.

This week would test Horikita Suzune's limits, and show her at her worst. The school had made her isolated life impossible.

2.5

Further away, two tents were set up next to each other. Shinohara and the girls had decided that they would occupy both tents. In other words, that meant that the boys would have to completely rough it by sleeping out in the open. The majority of our classmates had likely never slept outdoors before in their lives. Fortunately, because it was summer, I didn't think we'd catch a cold, but we were definitely going to have a hard time.

Getting mosquito bites on our arms and legs was bound to become annoying, and once night fell our visibility would get worse. The grass was crawling with all kinds of unfamiliar insects, which was just creepy. Being a city kid myself, I was pretty disgusted, and spending an entire week sleeping rough seemed impossible. That said, people like Ike, who absolutely opposed spending points as much as possible, were moving to take action.

Several boys tried using pulled grass as a substitute for bedsheets, and talked about whether or not they could cut down some trees. It was nice that they were trying to figure things out; I just prayed that they wouldn't do anything unreasonable. Hirata came over to us after setting up the girls' tents, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"Excuse me, Ayanokouji-kun? Can I talk to you for a minute? I have something I wanted to ask."

He appeared sheepish and apologetic.

"It's going to get scary tonight with just a flashlight. Whether we use points or not, securing some light is necessary. However, I can't force you to agree, Ayanokouji-kun."

It was certainly true that I'd rather not go through the night without any source of illumination. It'd make going to the toilet a nightmare. When I asked what we should do, Hirata thought about it, and then answered.

"We could make a bonfire. I was hoping you'd collect branches."

Apparently I'd been singled out as the most qualified guy for this task, somehow.

“Well. I’ll pick up ones that look good.”

“Thank you! Ah, but, it’s dangerous to do it alone. I think you should invite someone else to come along.”

Fair point. I set out to look for a partner. Horikita was standing completely still, gazing up at the sky. She must have noticed that I was looking at her, because she came over.

“You’re normally incredibly uncooperative, but you’re being rather generous by going along with his favor,” she said.

“Didn’t you just ask me for a favor, too? Besides, this is just something to help Hirata. The work isn’t really a big deal or anything. Just picking up branches.”

Some of the students voluntarily acted to help the class. One’s position within the caste system changed depending on whether or not you took initiative.

“For someone like Hirata, who’s positioned as the center of the class, to rely upon you is kind of pathetic.”

“Class D’s real leaders are Hirata and Karuizawa, for better or worse. No one else has their ability to rally others. No one else is as qualified.”

Horikita appeared quite serious. She certainly had the competence and skills to rally the class. However, her charisma and leadership were sorely lacking, to the extent that I didn’t even think those two qualities existed within her. Kushida probably couldn’t stand all the harsh words that erupted when the class got into an argument, but she said she’d do her best. Even now, she was probably off somewhere putting forth all her effort into whatever she was doing.

“So how about working as Hirata’s assistant? For yourself, rather than for the class.”

“Me, his assistant? Don’t joke around. I’d rather dance with a mongoose.”

“Dance with a mongoose?”

Whatever that expression meant, it was probably an insult to Hirata. No, not probably. It was definitely an insult.

“I’m joking. Well, his differences from a mongoose aside, there’s nothing I can

do to help. If there were a clear enemy and a goal, I might be of use. Besides, I'm still unsure whether or not we should use points, or even to what extent we should use them."

With that, we quietly split up. Horikita went into the tent. For the time being, I needed a congenial partner who would go with me. Hunting through the available guys, I saw Sudou just staring up at the sky while standing by the river's edge. He helped Ike earlier. Maybe he'd become a reliable guy. He'd probably help a friend in need.

"Hey, Sudou. I'm going to collect branches for a bonfire. Want to come?"

"Huh? If it's a hassle, I think I'll pass."

He looked as if he had no intention of helping. But since I wasn't going to find anyone else, I persisted.

"Probably won't be a hassle. I'm just going to collect them from nearby."

"That sounds exactly like a hassle. Sorry. I'm gonna go swimming." Sudou stood, grabbed the bag next to him, and headed for the water.

"Well. Guess that's that."

I saw Yamauchi chatting up some girls near the tents, and decided to try again.

"Hey, I'm going to get some branches for a bonfire. Could you help me?"

"Eh, sounds like work. Look, I found a good spot with Kanji, right? We're pretty beat. Sorry, but I gotta pass."

"I see. Got it."

There was nothing I could say to that. Well, I was in trouble. All of my possibilities had been shot down. Horikita wasn't exactly in any state to help right now, and Kushida was off somewhere with the girls' team.

"Guess I'm alone in the end, huh?"

Yamauchi continued happily chatting with the girls, and didn't show any support. Just as I resolved to head into the forest by myself, Sakura stepped forward, like she'd been waiting for her chance.

“Um… I-Is it okay if I…go with you?”

Apparently she’d been listening to my conversation.

“Huh? Oh, I’m really grateful, but are you sure? I mean, you look pretty tired. Maybe it would be better for you to rest.”

Sakura had already searched the woods with me. I didn’t want to force her.

“I’m okay. Besides, if I stay here, well…it’ll be…a little uncomfortable.”

She glanced at the other girls. If Sakura was anything like me, she probably had a really hard time engaging with others.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Because Kouenji wasn’t with us, I could match Sakura’s pace.

“Hey!”

Just as we were heading into the forest, Yamauchi called out and rushed toward us.

“I’ll help you after all!”

Apparently he’d changed his mind.

“Uh. Are you sure?”

“Hey, come on now. I mean, you gotta help a friend in need. Right, Sakura?”

“Uh… Y-yeah.”

Sakura shied away behind my back and nodded. She hadn’t really ever talked with Yamauchi before. Maybe this’d be a good friend-making opportunity for her.

2.6

We decided to collect branches from nearby so we didn't stray too far from base camp. After a short walk, the three of us spread out to pick up branches.

"H-hey, Ayanokouji. I got something that I want you to keep just between us," Yamauchi whispered. He was standing close to me, a few branches in hand.

"I think…I'm gonna go for Sakura."

"Huh?"

"I mean, don't you think Kushida-chan's out of my league? Her communication skills are top-notch. I'm thinking of giving up on her as my main target. Compared to Kushida, it's like, Sakura's just not good with people, or like, she doesn't know how to deal with guys, you know? To be perfectly honest, I was thinking about seeing how far I could go on this trip. I think she might fall for a guy who's gentle and attentive. I mean, until I at least get a kiss or something. Yeah, seriously. I think Sakura's fine. No, Sakura's great."

"Great? You haven't hung around Sakura before now. Isn't this really sudden?"

"Nah, man. Like, I actually regret not seeing it before, you know? She's plain, so she didn't catch my eye at first, but she's actually super cute. And an idol? Plus, her boobs are incredible. Even when she changes into jerseys, you can still see 'em. I can't help noticing."

He started rubbing his hands together and chuckling.

Apparently this explained his sudden interest in helping. Sakura was being treated as a backup plan after he gave up on his favorite, Kushida. I couldn't imagine Sakura would be pleased to hear that. I'd hoped that maybe Yamauchi had come to like Sakura for real.

"So please, help me out. For example, leave me alone with Sakura for a while."

"I wouldn't say that counts as helping you…"

"What? Wait, you're not after Sakura too, are you? Those boobies!"

Why did so many guys look at things in such simplistic, nasty way? It's not that I didn't understand his desires. I mean, woman's breasts were attractive, and there was a biological explanation for why guys liked them. Normally, I wouldn't mind helping him out. But Sakura wasn't like Kushida. She was unused to dealing with guys. It would've been a different story if he'd wanted to become her friend, but I couldn't leave her alone with some guy who only wanted to get into her pants. Besides, if Yamauchi got carried away, Sakura wouldn't know how to resist.

"Give it up for now. I'll help you when you get to know Sakura better. Besides, I'd like to go back and start the bonfire while it's still early. All right?"

Yamauchi slumped his shoulders in disappointment, but his spirits recovered immediately.

"Jeez, you're stiff. Well, fine. You have Horikita anyway, Ayanokouji. You don't have to worry, right?"

Since when did I have Horikita?

"Come on, just start picking up branches. I'll head over here."

With that, he shoved his branches at me. I dropped a few, and they rolled across the ground. Honestly, I still felt a little bad for Sakura. Between our hike today and this foraging expedition, she was probably sick of spending so much time with me, but she wasn't the type to voice such a thing. In the end, Sakura seemed wary of both Yamauchi and me, working in almost total silence.

"Isn't this enough? This is probably good," Yamauchi said.

It was certainly true that we had enough for a full day. We finished up and headed back to the camp site.

"Hey, hey, Sakura. Do you want me to help you carry that? It's gotta be tough for a girl. You might hurt yourself."

Yamauchi must've planned to ask her that from the very beginning, even though she was carrying only about half the amount I was. I supposed he wanted to play the role of a caring and attentive guy. I wondered if Yamauchi's kindness would stand out, especially in comparison to me.

“I-I’m fine… Ayanokouji-kun is carrying a lot, though. I’d like you to help him.”

“Oooh! Sakura, you’re so kind! Jeez, aren’t you being greedy, Ayanokouji, carrying that much by yourself? Here, I’ll take half, hand ’em over.”

With that, he grabbed about half of the amount he’d thrust toward me earlier. Despite Sakura’s refusal, it looked like this was part of his strategy to win her with kindness. Yamauchi, looking satisfied, walked off in high spirits. As we walked, something appeared on the path ahead.

A lone girl sat with her back up against a large tree. She wasn’t a Class D student. When she noticed us, she looked up and then quickly averted her eyes. Since she was from another class, it’d be fine for us to leave her alone, but the state she was in suggested that this was no trivial matter.

There was a red, swollen mark on her cheek. Someone had hit her pretty hard. When Yamauchi started to pass the girl, I grabbed him by the shoulder.



“What?”

“Oh, uh…sorry. It’s nothing.”

I was going to say something, but he finally noticed the girl.

“Hey. What’s the matter? Are you okay?” Yamauchi called.

“Just leave me alone. It’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t look that way. Who did this to you? Should I call a teacher?”

Considering the swelling, it was easy to see that she was in a fair amount of pain.

“Just a class dispute. Don’t worry about it,” answered the girl, laughing in self-deprecation. Her voice was low and even, but it was clear she wasn’t feeling well. She seemed rather shaken.

“So, what are you going to do? We just can’t leave you here.”

This was not our school campus. We were surrounded by jungle on all sides. In a couple hours, the sun would begin to set. If she were out here alone in the dark, it could be disastrous.

“We’re Class D students. Why not come to our base camp?”

Yamauchi turned to Sakura and me for approval. We nodded in agreement.

“Huh? What are you saying? There’s no way I could do something like that.”

“Well, I mean, wouldn’t you say it’s only natural to help someone in trouble?”

She seemed to not want to listen to us. She turned away and fell silent. In most situations it would’ve been easy to leave her, but we couldn’t leave an injured girl in a place like this.

“I’m from Class C. In other words, I’m your enemy. You understand that, right?”

That wasn’t any reason not to help.

“But we just can’t leave you. Right?”

Both Sakura and I nodded. Still, the girl didn’t seem to want to move. Since we were students at the same school, it seemed natural and right for us to help

each other. Whether or not it was the right thing to do in this special test was another question entirely.

“We can’t leave you, so we’re going to stay here until you move.”

Yamauchi was resolved. In that case, we had to wait on standby. The girl didn’t want to speak to us; she probably thought we wanted to trick her.

“Besides, the forest is all humid and muggy. The heat’s really intense. Sakura, you’re hot, aren’t you?”

“Well, I’m actually… I’m okay.”

Though standing here could be quite boring, this was a dream come true from Yamauchi’s point of view. He could spend time together with Sakura until this other girl gave in. Yamauchi spent his time meaningfully, peppering both the girl and Sakura with a ton of questions. After about ten minutes, the girl lost her patience.

“You guys are really stupid. You’re not acting logically. You aren’t thinking about your own class.”

“Well, it’s just that we can’t leave a girl alone when she’s in trouble.”

Yamauchi gave a thumbs-up. Sakura’s impression of him was probably improving, though she didn’t seem to pay attention to Yamauchi’s great efforts. She just gazed at the forest and the sky. For a shy girl like Sakura, this unexpected situation was likely uncomfortable.

“But is that really okay? To tell me where your base camp is, and moreover, to guide me there?”

“Huh? Is that wrong?”

Yamauchi didn’t understand what the girl was saying.

“I can’t believe what an incredible idiot you are! Seriously, I can’t believe it,” said the girl, looking shocked.

Yamauchi was taken aback. If you knew the location of someone’s campsite, you could start to get a read on how they planned to conduct themselves throughout the test. You could get into their heads and anticipate their strategies. In Class D’s case, announcing our spot was a reason to be concerned.

But I spoke up.

“Don’t worry. I don’t think it’ll be a problem,” I said.

“Right? Yeah, there shouldn’t be a problem. My name’s Yamauchi Haruki. Nice to meet you!”

“Well, you seem like you’re a good guy. But you’re an idiot.” The girl appeared shocked by Yamauchi’s self-introduction. “I’m…Ibuki,” she said in a clear voice.

She lightly caressed her red, swollen cheek. It must’ve been painful. She didn’t look us in the eyes as she spoke. Maybe she wasn’t good at social contact or something. I noticed a small amount of dirt under Ibuki’s nails. If you looked to where she’d been sitting, you could see disturbances in the soil.

“Whoa, so do girls, like, slap each other across the cheek when they fight or something?”

“That’s not your concern. Leave me alone.”

Despite her words, it wasn’t like we could do that, considering her obvious pain. She seemed to be dealing with it, but her agony occasionally registered on her face as she stroked her cheek. Ibuki slung a bag over her shoulder, wincing at her burden. Upon seeing that, Yamauchi’s eyes lit up.

“Well, at least let me take your bag for you. Huh? Huh?”

Yamauchi wanted to display his manliness in front of Sakura by any means necessary, so he once again thrust his branches over to me to hold. How gentlemanly.

“It’s fine. H-hey, it’s fine. Knock it off!”

She flatly refused to let Yamauchi carry her bag, perhaps because she didn’t want to rely on us. She let go of the bag, which fell and struck a tree, making a dull *thud* sound. The awkwardness increased as Yamauchi frantically apologized.

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do anything bad. I apologize.”

“It’s fine. It’s just that I still don’t trust you guys. You understand?”

Ibuki, with nothing further to say, fell silent. Yamauchi gave up and started

walking. If he wasn’t going to carry the bag, then he could’ve carried those branches. They poked me thoroughly on the way back to base camp.

2.7

We gathered up the branches and returned to camp. Being from a different class, Ibuki didn't want to cause any trouble, so she sat further away. It would've been impossible for her to blend in, so we appreciated her honesty. If she stayed within our sight, she probably wouldn't cause trouble. Hirata was gone, unfortunately. That meant Yamauchi, Sakura, and I had to get the bonfire going. We wouldn't be able to get a fire going in the dark, so we had to hurry.

"Leave it to me. I'll show you an easy way."

Yamauchi produced a matchbox he'd received from Hirata, and crouched before the stacked branches. He took one match, and quickly scratched the tip against the rough strip. We heard repeated scratching sounds, like "tch", but the match didn't light.

"Damn, this is pretty hard…"

Sakura stood next to him and watched. Yamauchi tried to look cool, but for someone unused to matches, it probably wasn't easy. Still, he struck the match over and over, until suddenly it lit.

"Oh, oh, there! Got it!"

Finally. In a panic, Yamauchi brought the match down to the bundle of sticks. But only light smoke came out, and after waiting a really long time it didn't seem that the fire was going to start.

"Huh?"

"Maybe we need to carefully get the fire onto the branches themselves? Right now it seems impossible."

"Okay, I'll try that next time. Ah, jeez, that one failed too. Are these matches defective or something?"

We were having such a hard time lighting a fire with one match, we wondered whether we'd be able to light a bonfire at all. Yamauchi was getting increasingly frustrated, and began striking the matches more forcefully against the strip. As a result, he broke several.

“If I keep messing up, we’re gonna be in trouble.”

Three broken matchsticks lay at Yamauchi’s feet. He tried to regain his composure.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry. It’s going to be all right. We still have more.”

He opened the matchbox and showed it to me. It looked light, but there were about twenty or more in there. However, at this rate we might run out before the week was through.

“All right! This time I got it for sure!”

He carefully lit the match and slowly brought it toward the branch. Though it seemed like the fire was desperately trying its best, it didn’t develop as desired. It ended up only smoldering a little, causing more smoke.

“What the hell?! What am I doing wrong? I’m going to go ask the teacher.”

Yamauchi had wanted to look cool in front of Sakura, but that was over with now. He started frantically searching for Chabashira-sensei. He should have thought this through before trying it, obviously. I crouched down and jostled the branches.

“Why won’t the fire start?”

Sakura crouched next to me, looking at the burned branches with a puzzled expression.

“I thought since they’re wood they’d burn easily, but I guess fire is weaker than I initially imagined,” I said.

She didn’t seem to understand what I meant by that, so she tilted her head slightly quizzically.

“Well, when you see bonfires in movies, you typically see these large branches, right? That’s why we picked these up. But maybe you can’t start a fire with large branches?”

I separated the branches, snapped off a thin one, and showed it to her.

“I feel like next time, we should line up branches of this size. Also, a lot of the branches are damp.”

Trying to set a fire with damp wood was the mark of an amateur. Even if Yamauchi had used dozens of matches, the fire likely wouldn't have spread.

"It's going to require a little work on our end, but I think we should head back into the forest to get dry, thin branches, and leaves that'll burn easy."

"Huh? What are you guys doing over there?"

Ike, who'd gone for a swim, had returned just as we ran through our trial and error.

"We're in the middle of trying to start the bonfire. It's not going so well, though. We're having a tough time."

"A bonfire? Wait, these thick branches aren't going to catch on fire. You need to start with smaller branches, you know? The branches you got here are way too big. Also, a bunch of 'em are damp, too. This is no good at all!"

"Ah, but, Ayanokouji-kun…"

I interrupted Sakura as she attempted to speak up for me.

"I see. If you don't mind, could you tell us what to do?"

"Jeez, guess I don't got a choice, huh? Okay, time for a brief lecture. Wait a second, I'll go collect some good things from around here."

Ike set down his swimsuit bag and went into the forest. He returned soon after. He'd picked up a bunch of branches of different sizes, from thin to medium thickness. Also, he'd collected a bundle of dead leaves.

"I got some good branches. I think we'll be able to manage with these."

With that, he picked up the matchbook that Yamauchi had set down, and quickly set fire to the dead leaves. As the leaves kindled, he started adding some small twigs. Then, watching the fire carefully, he gradually added in thicker branches. In the blink of an eye, the flame turned into a typical bonfire.

"And that should do it."

"That's amazing. I'm really impressed. Someone with real camping experience is on another level."

"It's just the basics. Starting a bonfire, I mean. Once you know how, anyone

can do it.”

Since so few students in Class D had that kind of experience, Ike was becoming crucial to our success.

“Ah, damn it! The teacher didn’t tell me a damn thing. Whoa! Hey, how’d the bonfire get going?!”

Yamauchi had returned, and was astonished to see such a splendid bonfire. Perhaps he felt frustrated that he hadn’t been able to show off, because he started complaining. I decided to leave the bonfire issues to Ike and Yamauchi, and left.

“H-hey, Ayanokouji-kun… Even though you’d figured it out, was that okay? To not tell them?” Sakura asked.

“I didn’t know whether I was correct or not, so it wouldn’t have mattered. Besides, building up Ike and displaying his usefulness will be more helpful to the class.”

Maybe I was rambling, but I just said what I was thinking. Sakura gave me a certain look, like she was moved by my words. For some reason, I felt stupidly embarrassed.

“Sorry. I’m a little tired, so I’m going to rest. Thank you, Sakura.”

I went a short distance from the campsite. Chabashira-sensei, who was preparing a personal tent for herself nearby, stared in my direction. I pretended not to notice.

2.8

Once five o'clock arrived, Kushida and her group returned. Hirata had apparently joined up with Kushida's group. Since this was the return of our class' central figures, nearly half the class began to gather together. Apparently, they'd gone out searching for food. We could see they'd been successful. From a distance, I saw little red fruits, like strawberries, and maybe tomatoes. They also seemed to have grapes and kiwis.

"Is this… Can we eat these, I wonder? I mean, that looks like fruit, but…"

The students didn't seem too confident.

"Even so, I'm really thirsty… I'm hungry, too."

"I'm getting thirsty, too…"

When evening came, it was understandable that the students would start saying those kinds of things. I was one of them. As dinnertime drew near, our food and water problems were highlighted.

"Oh hey, this is bog bilberry! Did you find these, Kikyou-chan? That's amazing, y'know!"

Ike came over, checking out the fruit and telling us what was what.

"Kanji-kun, do you know what this is?"

"Yeah. It's a fruit, a bog bilberry. I've eaten 'em before when I went camping in the mountains. As you can tell, they look and taste like blueberries. It's the akebia quinata. It's sweet and tasty. Oh wow, this really takes me back, man."

He was being genuine, not trying to appear cool. Everyone watched Ike with interest as he smiled, enjoying the nostalgic fruit. Shinohara bombarded Ike with questions, and he answered her directly.

"Ah. Let's see. Ah, that feels better than I thought."

Despite countless disturbances, at least we were organized with this one small thing. Even though it was only a small amount, the fact that we'd found food was a relief.

“Looks like you were able to get the bonfire going. Thanks, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“You should be thanking Ike, not me.”

The smoke billowed, large enough to make a good smoke signal. Ike explained, “If you can see the smoke, you’ll be able to find the campsite even if you get lost, right?”

“Yeah, that’s how we returned to the camp so quickly. It’s all thanks to you, Kanji-kun!”

This also meant we ran the risk of other classes finding us, though. Kushida and several others realized this, and nodded in understanding. I would’ve thought that so much attention and respect would’ve given Ike a big head, but he wasn’t looking for praise from Kushida. Instead, he looked at Shinohara.

“Hey, Shinohara. I spent some time thinking about how I acted today, about the toilet and stuff and how stubborn I was. I was pushy because I wanted to save points. I’m sorry.”

“Wh-why are you apologizing to me all of the sudden?”

“I just remembered the first time I went camping. The toilet was awful, and of course there were bugs crawling around everywhere. Just about everything was dirty. I remember going to my parents, complaining how much I hated going to the bathroom and telling them I wanted to go home. I’m sure it’s even worse for a girl…”

Ike was amazing. He’d grasped the situation himself and handled things calmly. He had the potential to go far, unlike an ordinary person like me. It definitely took courage to say what he’d said. The courage and the apology came slowly, but Shinohara responded apologetically as well.

“I’m…sorry for earlier, too. For saying that I couldn’t drink from the river. I think I got way too emotional. We won’t be able to keep any of our points if we don’t learn to adjust.”

Even though neither of them looked the other straight in the eyes, it seemed they’d made up. Perhaps Class D might end up with points after all. The other students probably took this as a good sign. Hirata, determined not to let this opportunity pass, raised his hand and gathered everyone’s attention.

“Everyone, I have an announcement. This special test is a first for all of us. I understand you’re confused. Also, everyone sees things their own way, so it’s only natural that there’ll be some disputes. However, I want us all to push forward and trust in each other until the very end, without panicking.”

Hirata spoke those words clearly. After composing himself, he continued.

“After all, everyone here wants to end up with at least one point, right? Therefore, I tried to come up with a number that we can realistically aim for. By the end of the test, we could have 120 points or more left over. That’s what Class D is fighting for.”

“In other words, you plan on using 180 points? I’m not sure I agree, Hirata.”

Yukimura glared as if using more than half of our points were an unforgivable crime. Hirata, sensing the potential danger ahead, placed the manual on the ground and explained.

“I’d like you to listen to everything I have to say. First, let’s suppose that we’re going to use points for all our meals. If we try to spend the least amount possible, that means purchasing the nutritious meal and mineral water sets.”

The food and drinking water normally cost six points per individual unit, but as a set it only cost ten points. Ten points per meal eaten twice a day came to a daily loss of twenty points. If we ordered one meal tonight and one on the final day of the test, that came to a total of twelve meals. That would be 120 points altogether. If we managed to put up with it on the last day and skip a meal, then the deduction would equal 110 points. If we added the twenty points we spent on a temporary toilet to that, as well as the cost for two tents for the guys, which was also twenty points, then we’d have 150 points. The remaining thirty points had probably been factored in to cover any miscellaneous things we might need, bringing the estimated total to 180 points.

Everyone silently listened to Hirata’s explanation.

“I understand that when you hear we’ll have 120 points remaining, you probably feel that’s not enough. However, we’re dwelling on these 300 points too much. If you look at the results of the midterm and the final exam, then the reason will be easy to understand, I think.”

We'd received an increase in class points before vacation. Even Class A, regarded as our superior, didn't see an addition of more than 100 points. You certainly couldn't call 120 points a small number. In addition, because we could gain points depending on the number of times we were able to occupy a space, we might end up with more than 120.

"Besides, I'm talking about our lower limit for points. If we can find food and water to make it through the day, we adjust our calculations and save as many as twenty points. If we can find drinking water for the week, we'll save fifty points or more."

Hirata looked at the river as he spoke. Its value instantly increased in our eyes.

"I see… So if we can endure it, that alone would change things a great deal…"

Anyone else could have come up with this, but Hirata's tone and presentation sold it. He'd performed flawlessly. First he told us about the lower limit, and then explained that we could end up with nearly 200 points. In that way, he succeeded in motivating everyone to reach a high goal. If we did our best, we could end up with lots of points. More than that, we could greatly increase the number of points we had by making an effort.

"That's good, right, Hirata? We can earn at least 120 points. If we work hard, we can even earn additional points, right? Then we should definitely try!"

Ike, who'd thus far been the most confrontational, shouted in agreement. Sudou and Yamauchi both looked as though they agreed because they didn't really have another choice. Yukimura still appeared reluctant, but seeing Ike join with Hirata made him fold.

"Ah, that reminds me, Hirata. I wanted to check something," I said.

Because Yamauchi had forgotten to report on Ibuki, I didn't have any choice. However, our classmates continued their excited discussion, and I didn't have any chance to butt in.

"That's the fate of a popular person, I guess. Well, I'll try giving it a little time."

I approached Ibuki, who'd been watching from further away.

“Sorry. Can you wait a little longer? I’m going to talk to him about you.”

“You don’t need to force yourself. I’d probably end up just getting in the way.”

Ibuki pulled up a handful of grass, looking pissed.

“After all, they’ll chase me out anyway. Am I wrong?”

“I don’t know. Hirata is an exceptionally good guy.”

I couldn’t imagine that Hirata would kick her out if he knew about her situation.

“Oh, I never introduced myself before. My name’s Ayanokouji.”

“So, should I introduce myself once more then?”

“Nah. You’re Ibuki, from Class C. I remember.”

We faced each other through the introductions, but Ibuki wouldn’t look me in the eyes.

“For future reference, can everyone here who’s okay with drinking river water please raise your hand?” Ike asked.

The discussion moved on to the next topic, leaving Ibuki and Class C behind. Ike wasn’t forcing anyone to drink the water, but he did want to see what everyone’s opinions were. Of course, he took the initiative and raised his hand in support of the river. Nearly half of the guys raised their hands in apparent agreement. Shinohara looked a little perplexed, but Ike gently told her that she didn’t have to force herself.

“I-I want to do my best, but…I’m a little scared, I think.”

“If it’s about what Sudou said about boiling water, it’s really not that bad. If you’re scared of drinking it directly, how about we try it out first?”

A few more students agreed. Gradually, a matter that had once been strongly rejected was now edging toward acceptance. Shinohara still appeared fearful, but raised her hand.

“I don’t know if I can drink it, but…I’m up for the challenge.”

“I agree. If the first person who tries can drink it, then it should be fine.”

Other students looked amenable to that, and then Kushida followed suit and raised her own hand. Perhaps she was trying to influence the group? Soon everyone had their hands raised except for Horikita and me. Everyone stared at us, and we slowly raised our hands as well. However, it was still difficult for people to start drinking from the river. In order to have some emergency supplies, we had decided to buy some water, just in case.

“I have a request, Ike-kun. I want you to lend me your talents from here on out. It looks like you’re the only one with camping experience here. Can you help me out?” Hirata asked.

“W-well, I guess if you ask, I gotta cooperate.”

“Thank you!”

Hirata practically jumped for joy at Ike’s curt reply. Shinohara, who’d complained the most before, didn’t object. Hirata started gathering opinions about food.

“Well, it’ll be dark soon, so for now all we can do is order food. However, I ask you to think a little about tomorrow onward. There might be various foodstuffs nearby, so I wanted to explore.”

“What do you mean, nearby? Do you mean other than where Kushida-san and the others found the fruit?”

“Yeah. The river. It’d be great if we can catch and eat fish. It looks like there are quite a few freshwater fish in there. We’d be able to limit our point spending to some extent. Also, catching fish and cooking them over the bonfire sounds really tasty.”

“Well, putting aside whether or not they’d be tasty, how do you plan on catching fish?”

“I’ll dive in the water. I haven’t done it before, though.”

Ike made a swimming motion, but it probably wouldn’t be easy to catch fish by skin diving.

“Even though it might sound impossible to catch a fish with your bare hands, there are lots of tools,” said Hirata, pointing to an entry in the manual. “Fishing

rods.” They had a variety, too.

“It’s one point for fishing rods with bait, and two points for fishing rods with lures.”

It wouldn’t be difficult to recover the cost. It might even be a big win for us, if we could earn food for one or two days by spending just one point. And even if we didn’t happen to catch anything, the cost was so minimal that it couldn’t really hurt us. There were no objections.

“Well, I guess it’s decided. Let’s get ourselves a fishing rod and catch some fish! Of course, we’ll go with the cheaper one.”

And so we settled on our goal of catching fish from the river and foraging for berries in the forest. If we were successful, we’d decide whether or not to purchase a set of cooking utensils for an additional five points. Also, we decided to spend another twenty points to install one shower. We expected opposition, but our health might worsen if we only used cold water. The guys were only allowed to use the shower in the middle of the night, though. All of the girls seemed to agree that they’d drink water from the river. So, with the opposition convinced, the motion passed.

“By the way… That girl, Ibuki-san from Class C? I’ve seen her before.”

A girl named Satou, who had finally noticed the interloper, eyed Ibuki with suspicion. Ibuki continued to quietly sit far away. Apparently there was no need for me to break the ice.

“Well, it sounds like there’s been some kind of trouble in her class…” Yamauchi, a little flustered, explained why Ibuki seemed to have been isolated from her classmates.

“I see. Your judgment was correct. We can’t just leave her.”

“But, Hirata-kun… Couldn’t she be a spy? I mean, if she can spot the leader…” Yamauchi asked, hands over his head for attention.

“Ah, that’s right. I suppose it’s possible. I’ll check on it. Is that okay, Yamauchi-kun? Ayanokouji-kun?”

Hirata headed over to Ibuki. Had he excluded Sakura because of his pretty-

boy thoughtfulness? Sakura seemed relieved to not be noticed.

“Do you have a moment, Ibuki-san? I wanted to talk to you,” Hirata said.

“I’m probably just getting in the way. You’ve already taken good care of me.”

She quickly stood, as if she wanted to run.

“Wait a minute. I wanted to ask what happened. I want to help.”

She stopped at Hirata’s words. After seeing her swollen face, Hirata had likely surmised that the issue wasn’t trivial.

“Nothing will change if I stay. I don’t want to waste time just sitting around.”

“This is a test, so of course some students will doubt you. However, you’re hurt. I don’t want to chase you away if you can’t go back to your own class. I think that’s why Yamauchi-kun brought you here. So, tell me about your situation.”

“This isn’t something I can just talk about. Besides, I’ve heard all your plans. You’d hate it if more of your strategies were leaked, right?”

Ibuki started walking away. Hirata stopped her in her tracks.

“If you really were a spy, you wouldn’t want to be chased out, would you? Am I wrong?”

“Enough. I’m just looking for a place to sleep.”

As I expected, she wasn’t going to return to Class C. The sun was setting, and it’d be night soon.

“It’s crazy for a girl to sleep alone in the woods.”

“Even if it’s crazy, I don’t have a choice. Helping me won’t gain you anything.”

“This has nothing to do with losses or gains. We can’t just leave someone in trouble. We all think so.”

Her expression cleared, and she turned toward us without hesitation. Something like that was designed to melt even the toughest exterior. Ibuki seemed to believe Hirata, and it gave her confidence.

“I had a fight with a boy in my class. He hit me and chased me away. That’s

all.”

“That’s horrible. Raising a hand against a girl, I mean.”

I hadn’t expected it, either. I’d thought for sure she’d been in a fight with another girl.

“I won’t say anything more on the subject. I didn’t think you’d take me in and give me shelter, anyway. See you.”

“Wait. I understand that you’re really in trouble. Please give me a little time. If you can do that, I’ll tell the other students about your situation and see if we can find a place for you. Ayanokouji-kun, can you watch Ibuki-san? I’m going to go talk to everyone.”

Hirata left us and returned to the group. I wondered if Hirata had left me with her because he trusted me, or at least trusted me more than Yamauchi. I was a little curious.

“He’s seriously a good-natured guy, isn’t he?” Ibuki asked.

“I think everyone here is, more or less. Are there not people like that in your class?”

“Not at all… There isn’t really anyone in Class C like that.”

Ibuki sat down, bunched her knees against her chest, and lowered her head. Thanks to Hirata’s persuasiveness, Class D agreed to look after Ibuki. Though some students were strongly opposed, every time Class C held roll call, they’d hemorrhage points. Once everyone saw it as an opportunity, they were finally convinced. Hirata’s intentions had been pure, but the same wasn’t true for others. The incentive of potential profit motivated them to take the chance.

However, maintaining exclusive possession of this place was an extremely delicate issue. We explained to Ibuki, and she promised not to wander near the device. If anyone realized that Horikita was the leader, the damage we’d suffer would be great. After that, we decided to purchase the necessary food and water sets for tonight, along with the guys’ tents. Thanks to Hirata and Ike, the tents were set up smoothly. Just before the sun set, we finished all of our preparations, and the students began eating their meals.

“Hey, Ibuki-san. Eat this.”

Kushida approached Ibuki, who’d been quietly sitting some distance away by herself. Kushida offered her one of the nutritious meal seats and a bottle of water.

“What? Why are you giving me this?”

“Well, you’re probably hungry, right?”

“Food is provided based on class numbers. There shouldn’t be any spare sets left.”

“Yeah. But don’t worry, we decided to share everything with our group.”

Further away, the four other people from Kushida’s group waved and smiled at Ibuki. In other words, four people had shared three portions of food and water, and the leftover portion went to Ibuki.

“Are you guys stupid? You’re all being way too nice.”

“Don’t be shy. Eat up. Let’s talk later, okay? I’ll be waiting in the tent.”

With that, Kushida returned to her group. It had seemed easy to help a girl from another class until we had to reduce our own food portions. Then it wasn’t so simple. But Kushida, who wished for everyone’s happiness, had charity to spare.

“Wow, when you look at them like this, the girls’ groups are kind of remarkable.”

Yamauchi, in the middle of eating, pointed to each group individually.

“There’s the Empress Team, led by Karuizawa. Then there’s Kushida-chan’s Friendship Team and Shinohara’s Arrogant Team. Then you have Horikita and Sakura, who are by themselves.”

All of the guys huddled relatively close together as they ate, but the girls sat in their individual teams. There was a clear wall between them, like they were groups from other classes. Maybe Kushida’s team was the most neutral of all of them, or just held a lot of influence?

“Poor Sakura, all alone. I wonder if I should eat with her,” Yamauchi said.

“You’re probably better off giving up, don’t you think? You’d just scare her.”

“Damn. I want to get to know her better, but she’s way too introverted…”

In addition to being shy, Sakura probably found it difficult to deal with pushy types like Yamauchi. Despite being warned, Yamauchi seemed impatient to go over to her.

“What the hell, Haruki? That’s no fair, stalking a lone beautiful woman like that. Come on, let me join in!”

Ike, seeing Yamauchi’s glances, misunderstood and approached him.

“I have to say, Sakura’s breasts are really something else. You don’t often see breasts that big on a first-year high school student. Her clothes are just bulging. She’s way too sexy. Her boobs alone make her even more attractive than Kikyou-chan.”

Ike stared intently at Sakura’s breasts, like he wanted to devour them. Yamauchi blocked Ike’s line of sight.

“Hey, what the hell, dude?”

“Don’t just look at Sakura like a pervert. Besides, you’re aiming for Kushida-san, aren’t you?”

“Well, yeah. But it’s all right, isn’t it? I mean, an idol belongs to everyone, right? Haruki, could you be… Ooh, are you Sakura’s—”

“I-It’s not like that. Come on, let’s eat.”

Apparently Yamauchi wanted to hide the fact that he was changing targets and going after Sakura. Besides, it was night, with nothing left to do. It was only natural that the flow of the conversation would lead to the opposite sex. I noticed Hirata nearby, distributing food.

“Come to think of it, where’s Kouenji-kun?”

Everyone had gathered, but it looked like Kouenji was absent.

“Oh, Kouenji complained about being in poor physical condition and returned to the ship. Of course, that means that you’ve had thirty points deducted. Those are the rules, so there’s nothing to be done. Kouenji has retired, and he’s

obligated to stay onboard the ship for one week for medical treatment," said Chabashira-sensei.

"Whaaaaat?!"

Screams sounded throughout the night.

"Oh, you've gotta be kidding me! Kouenji, you jerk! What the hell were you thinking?!" The normally silent Yukimura shouted and kicked the ground. I knew Kouenji was a free spirit, but I never imagined he would just up and retire. Maybe he didn't care about reaching Class A. If it made his life easier, losing thirty points didn't matter at all.

"Goddamn it! We lost thirty points! This sucks!"

Both the boys and girls were furious over Kouenji's actions, but could do nothing about it. Kouenji's loud, haughty laughter reverberated in our minds.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Hirata Yousuke
CLASS:	First Year, Class D
STUDENT ID:	S01T004698
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	Soccer Club
DATE OF BIRTH:	September 1st



EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	B
INTELLIGENCE:	B
DECISION MAKING:	B+
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	B
COOPERATIVENESS:	A–

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

During junior high school, he gained a tremendous amount of trust from his fellow students and teachers, and was seen as a central figure in his class. He was an excellent student who never displayed any problematic behavior. However, we have received testimony that he was involved in a newsworthy incident. We have decided to revoke his assigned placement in Class A and instead have put him in Class D.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

Both the boys and girls in Class D place a lot of trust in him. I will continue observation.

Chapter 3:
Rivals on the Move

I woke up much earlier that morning than I'd anticipated. The heat and humidity had made me toss and turn in my sleep. It finally roused me, and I wasn't very well rested. My bed felt warm, and I remembered that we'd kept the lamp on throughout the whole night. Our tent stank like sweat. Fortunately, we'd formed the tent with a mesh material because it allowed for the night breeze to blow through. But once the night had ended, the temperature rose significantly. I carefully slipped out of the tent so as to not wake anyone else, and approached our mountain of piled luggage.

We'd kept the luggage outside in order to make the tents as spacious as possible. After looking around to make sure I was alone, I found a singularly colored piece of luggage. It was Ibuki's bag. Since her bag was different, it was easy to spot. I grabbed it without hesitation and checked inside. If someone saw me doing this, I'd be instantly labeled a pervert. Inside, I found the same kinds of things that everyone else had, like towels, a change of clothes, underwear, etc. However…

"A digital camera, huh?"

That explained the dull sound I'd heard yesterday when she dropped the bag against a tree. This item wasn't appropriate for a deserted island. On the bottom of the camera, I found a rental sticker. Why did Ibuki have this? I considered the possible reasons, trying to think from her perspective. After conjuring up an image of her in my head, several possibilities suggested themselves.

I checked the camera's power source. It had no data, and no sign that it'd been used. After I finished my inspection, I returned the item to the bag, and went back to the tent.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-kun. Heading to the bathroom?"

Hirata was awake. He turned around as he greeted me. Maybe he noticed that I was sweatier than usual.

“Ah. Did I wake you, by any chance?”

“Oh no. I can’t exactly sleep soundly in this environment. Ouch, ouch… Ah, my back hurts. Well, I guess that’s only natural without a proper mattress.”

It certainly wasn’t easy to sleep when we were so crowded together, and without real beds to boot. But somehow, everyone else was still asleep. They were probably tired out from yesterday’s activity.

“If you include Kouenji-kun’s penalty, we spent almost 100 points yesterday. I told everyone that in the worst possible outcome we’d be left with 120 points, but now I’m not even sure about that. I guess the anxiety woke me.”

Hirata took out the manual to confirm his fears. Kouenji’s retirement had been a pretty serious blow.

“This is tough, even for the class peacemaker.” I couldn’t possibly fathom carrying this kind of responsibility. I peeked at the manual, and Hirata adjusted his position so that I could comfortably look at it. I was grateful for such small acts of consideration.

“I’m only doing this because I like it. If my hard work makes everyone in class happy, then I’m satisfied. But it’s surprisingly difficult. How many points we have after this special test will have a huge impact on our lives. I think it’s wrong to freak everybody out.”

Make everyone in class happy, huh? If such a thing were possible, it would be amazing. But it was probably close to impossible. The school’s system dictated as much.

“So, if we have students who want to aim for Class A, and students who want to stay in Class D, what do you do?”

While I knew that was a meaningless question, it accidentally came out sounding rather unkind. I guess I wanted Hirata’s opinion, since he was basically just a mass of good intentions.

“That’s hard to answer. Aiming for the upper classes means forcing everyone… I’m sorry, I need to think on it.”

I wondered how often he’d thought about it. Hirata smiled faintly.

“So Ayanokouji-kun, do you want to get into Class A? Or are you fine as long as life at school is fun?”

“I guess if I had to pick, school life’s my priority. Besides, I don’t think it’s possible to reach Class A.”

“I see. I also don’t think it’s simple. Even if our class came together as one and aimed for Class A… I just think our first month’s losses did too much damage.”

Hirata was probably thinking about all the other students’ limits. If Class A didn’t fall in the rankings, making up the difference wouldn’t be easy. Even if Class D managed to live conservatively during this exam, we could only gain 100 to 150 points. Right now, even overtaking Class C seemed like a pipe dream.

“Don’t be impatient. First of all, Class D needs to come together and make it through this test. After that, we can focus on the next goal.”

Most of us had decided to let Hirata take the lead. If we worked hard in the short term, we’d earn class points. Right now, ignoring the severe chasm between us and the other classes wasn’t a bad idea. Hirata politely excused himself and quietly headed to the toilet. I stretched out in the space left behind by his absence.

At the very least, Class A had the cave. It was likely that Classes B and C also had spots somewhere. Even though we held the river, that alone might not be enough. Once everyone was asleep, I neatly cut out one of the manual’s five blank pages. Then I took a ballpoint pen.

After I replicated a simple map of the island, I folded it into a small square and put it in my pocket. Soon after, Hirata peeked in the tent’s entrance.

“Want to come wash your face together with me?”

I accepted his offer. The tent’s temperature was rising as the sun climbed higher in the sky. We took towels from our vinyl-wrapped luggage and headed to the river. Hirata put the manual inside his pack. The jingle of plastic accessories banging together sounded from Hirata’s bag.

“Gifts or something from Karuizawa?”

“Spot on. How’d you guess?”

Who else would give him little heart-bedazzled presents? As we headed to the river, we came across an unexpected person.

“What are you doing here?”

A student from Class B, Kanzaki, looked our way. Some other boys I didn’t know were with him, but they were probably Class B students, too. They appeared surprised, as if they hadn’t expected us at such an early hour, but quickly regained their composure.

“First day’s over, so I wondered how you were doing. I thought I’d check on you. Your location’s great.”

He seemed legitimately impressed by our base camp. He didn’t appear to have a hidden agenda.

“You’re Kanzaki-kun, from Class B, aren’t you?”

Hirata seemed to remember him.

“Did I surprise you? I’m sorry, I’m not here to cause trouble.”

With that apology, Kanzaki walked away.

“Kanzaki. Where’s Class B camping?”

Maybe he wouldn’t tell us, but I thought I’d try asking. Kanzaki answered without hesitation.

“There are large broken trees along the path from here to the beach. If you enter the forest to the southwest and walk a bit, you can find our campsite. You shouldn’t get lost if you enter by those large trees. If you need something, go ahead and tell her you can come by.”

With that, Kanzaki left. Hirata gave me a strange look.

“I’m guessing he’s your friend, hmm? What’d he mean by ‘go ahead and tell her’?”

“Hmm, I wonder.”

Kanzaki, Ichinose, and Horikita had recently worked together in a false accusation case. He probably thought they were still on good terms.

“I wonder if they came here to do some reconnaissance, see how we’ve spent

our points.”

Doubtless that was one reason, after seeing Kanzaki’s slightly apologetic expression. You could estimate the number of points spent just by the number of toilets, showers, and tents. However, that was probably not the only thing Kanzaki and the others wanted to know. They must’ve wanted to discover our class leader. After all, the rights of exclusive spot possession expired every eight hours.

Perhaps they’d calculated the renewal time and hoped to see the spot updated. However, we’d planned for that. That’s why we postponed the second update yesterday, so the rights of ownership were adjusted to expire right after eight o’clock. That way, it was possible to use the big crowds from roll call as a kind of camouflage for the update.

Hirata seemed to be more anxious. He muttered while drying off.

“I wonder if our strategy’s wrong. Even if we can’t beat the other classes, I thought it’d be good for us to unify on this test. That’s the real reason I don’t want them to discover our leader.”

His hair glistened with water. A splendidly handsome man faced such constant trouble.

“Don’t worry so much. You should relax a little.”

“Thank you. Coming from you, that honestly makes me really happy.”

After I washed my face, I scooped up some water for a drink. Even though the forest was insanely hot, the river water was cool and delicious. The water here was groundwater that flowed into the river as spring water, making it naturally resistant to warming or cooling. Since it came from upstream, the water’s temperature was resistant to heating. We’d been lucky to secure this place as our base.

“First, I think we need to adjust our sleeping arrangements. Since the ground’s so hard here, this week will be tough without proper back support. When everyone wakes up, I’m going to take a poll. We have to cooperate and do our best.”

3.1

After morning roll call, we began to explore. Hirata provided roles to the more reliable students, starting his plan to save us points. Meanwhile, the less helpful students and the more independently-minded like Horikita and I did as we pleased.

“What the hell, you guys?!”

Ike’s angry voice boomed throughout the campsite. I looked in his direction, and saw two male students wearing wide, smug grins. A pained expression flashed across Ibuki’s face for a moment, but then she quickly ducked behind the tent to hide herself.

“Komiya and Kondou, huh?”

Like Ibuki, I recognized those guys. They were from Class C.

“Wow, you Class D rejects are really living frugal, eh? I guess that’s what I’d expect from a class of defectives.”

They were stuffing their faces with potato chips and drinking bottles of soda. Not water. Soda.

“Looks like you’re living the high life, Class C.”

“Do you know Ryuuen?” Ibuki asked.

“He’s a Class C student. I’ve heard various rumors about him. He’s pretty crazy, I hear.”

“Not just ‘pretty’ crazy. Everything that guy *does* is crazy.”

Ibuki sounded irritated, as if she were discussing a family enemy.

“Those two are Ryuuen’s friends. I’d say they’re more like his underlings, though.”

I recalled the time those two had fought with Sudou. It’d seemed like they were acting on orders from Ryuuen, rather than just looking for a fight.

“What did you even eat for breakfast? Grass? Or maybe bugs? Here, you can have some snacks.”

They took a bag of potato chips and tossed it near Ike's feet as he drew nearer. Though it was obvious that they were trying to start something, we couldn't help getting irritated.

"We have a message from Ryuuen-san. If you want to enjoy your summer vacation to the fullest, come to the beach right now. Don't hang back. If you're sick of living like idiots, then we're happy to share our luxuries."

They didn't leave, but continued snacking as if trying to harass us. Ike snapped at them, but they didn't seem to care. The provocation continued for at least ten more minutes, until Hirata's group returned and Class C decided to call it quits. They headed back toward their campsite.

"I don't think they were looking for me," Ibuki said.

"Yeah. Guess they wanted to harass us."

Their bizarre visit aside, we'd obtained valuable information about Class C: they had luxury items, snacks and soda and so on. They'd been burning through points. In a test like this, where frugality was crucial, what in the world were they thinking?

"They said something about sharing their luxuries. Any idea what they were talking about?" I asked.

"I wonder if things are heading toward that worst-case scenario I imagined…"

Ibuki said nothing more, but headed toward a tree on the camp's periphery. The worst-case scenario she'd imagined, huh? Telling Horikita about this seemed like a good idea.

"Hey, Horikita, you around?"

After breakfast, Horikita had immediately returned to the tent, and I saw no sign of her. I called for her in front of the girls' tent. Although she didn't reply, the tent shook slightly, and I heard the sounds of cloth rubbing together. Horikita slowly stepped outside.

"Did you hear those voices earlier?" I asked.

"The cheap provocation coming from Class C? Yes, I heard."

"I'm a little worried. I want to check out the situation. Care to come?"

“It’s rather unusual to see you taking initiative. Are you feeling well?”

I’d have loved to throw those words back in her face.

“Well, I’m free for a week. I don’t have anything to do today, so I’ve just been killing time.”

“I don’t want to move too much. Since I’m the leader, if I stand out too much, we’ll be in a bad spot.”

“That’s a definite risk.”

Even if someone didn’t know a leader’s identity for certain, they might guess correctly if they noticed suspicious behavior. The more conspicuous a person, the more attention they would draw.

“I understand how you feel, but even if you stay in here, the situation probably won’t change, right? You’ve got eyes on Ryuuen, and you’ve even been observing Ichinose. People will remember that you’re the student council president’s younger sister. No matter what you do, you’ll be a target.”

At any rate, the penalty for a wrong guess was fifty points. When we’d appointed someone as leader, we’d taken a gamble, and precautions were necessary.

“You’re right. I suppose I can’t say what’s correct. Fine. I’m rather concerned about the state of the other classes. Let’s go.”

Horikita and I set out for the beach, where Class C awaited. Her heavy footsteps seemed to belie her casual indifference.

3.2

As we neared the edge of the forest, we saw the beach, and the large group of Class C students on that beach. Horikita and I could never have imagined the situation we beheld.

“No way… All this stuff… Is it even possible?”

Even beholding the very real spectacle, Horikita kept repeating the word “impossible.” I felt the same. They had installed temporary toilets and shower rooms. But they also had a tarp to protect against sunlight, a barbecue, chairs, and a parasol. They had snacks and drinks. Everything required for a good, relaxing time was here. We smelled the smoke of cooking meat, and heard laughter. Jet skis whizzed past the shoreline. Students were enjoying themselves in the ocean, screaming with joy. Based on a rough calculation, they’d likely spent 150 points or more.

“What in the world is Class C doing? Do they not plan to save points?”

That was the sole explanation. This went beyond splurging.

“Let’s check things out. I wonder what Class C is thinking?”

We came out from the bushes and walked to the beach. One of the male students noticed us, and called out to another male student nearby. We couldn’t see his face too well, since he was leaning over in his chair. One of the boys rushed over to us.

“Um, Ryuuen-san has requested your presence,” he said. Judging from the timidity of his voice, he was either frightened or naturally listless.

“He rules his classmates like a king. It’s like a royal welcome. What should we do?”

“It’s up to you, Horikita.”

“Fine. I’m interested in learning his intentions. Let’s go.”

We accompanied the boy. As we approached the ocean, the delicious smell of cooked meat wafted by our noses.

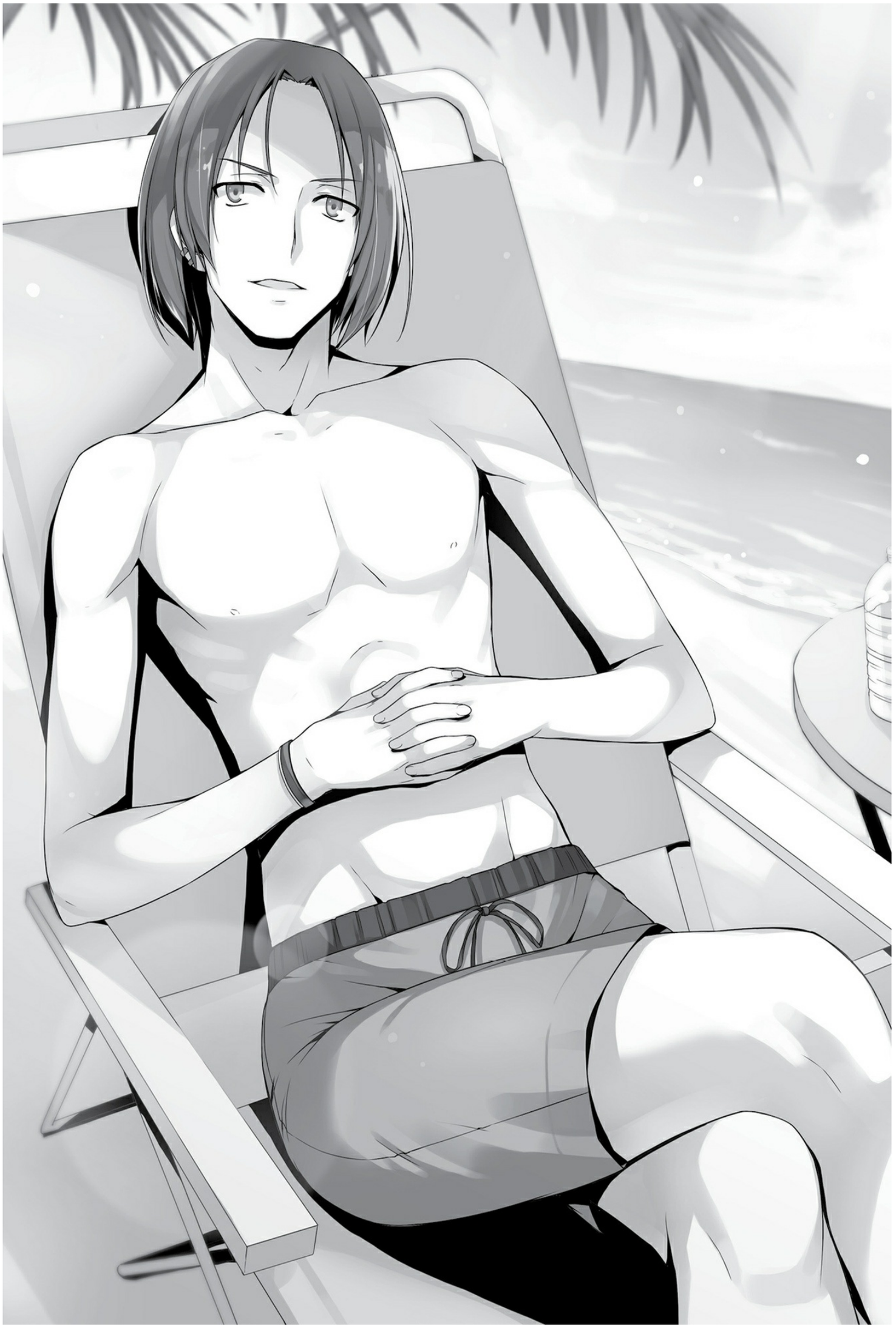
“This is absolutely outrageous.”

Our class didn’t seem to know how to have a vacation. We approached the man in command of this hedonistic paradise.

“I *thought* someone was sniffing around. It’s you, huh? What business do you have with me?”

“You seem to be doing well for yourself. This looks like quite the extravagant party.”

Ryuuen, tanned and clad in his swimwear, laid back in his chair. He flashed his white teeth at us.



“Just as you see. We’re enjoying our summer vacation.”

He spread his arms wide, proudly showing off the extravaganza.

“This is a test. Do you understand what that means? You don’t seem to understand the rules…”

Ryuuen didn’t seem happy being told about his apparent ineptitude. Actually, he looked disappointed. “I’m shocked. Does that mean you’re offering help even to an enemy like me?”

“If the person on top is incompetent, those below him will suffer. This is pitiful,” Horikita said.

Ryuuen simply smiled, grabbing the bottle of water placed next to the radio.

“How many points did you use? To be able to enjoy this level of entertainment, I mean.”

“Hmm. Well, I didn’t make a precise calculation,” Ryuuen responded guilelessly. “Tch. Already getting warm. Hey, Ishizaki. Bring me some cold water, right away.”

Ryuuen poured out his remaining water on the sand, almost in provocation. Ishizaki, who’d been playing volleyball nearly, panicked and rushed to get Ryuuen another water. A mountain of cardboard boxes were piled up inside the tent, likely filled with food and water. Sakazaki peered into a cooler beside the boxes.

“As you can see, we’re enjoying our summer vacation. We’re not your enemies. Do you understand?”

Horikita, finding his behavior incomprehensible, pressed her fingers against her forehead and wrinkled her brows as if she had a headache.

“We’re trying to *warn* you. You’re an idiot.”

“Which one of us is the idiot? Me? You?”

Ryuuen would accept no insults, and threw them back at Horikita.

“You want to try surviving on this deserted island in this shitty heat? Don’t joke. Class D, the lowest of all, has to put up with starvation, heat, and futility

just to save a measly 100 or 200 class points. It makes me laugh.”

Ishizaki ran over, dripping with sweat as he brought the water. He handed a cold bottle of water to Ryuuen. However, Ryuuen threw it back at Ishizaki.

“I said to bring me *cold* water. This water’s warm.”

“I… B-but…”

“Hmm?”

Ryuuen’s pupils were just like those of a snake. Ishizaki’s body stiffened. He picked up the bottle and ran back toward the tent.

“This test is about perseverance, ingenuity, and cooperation. It would likely have been impossible for you from the start. You can’t even establish a satisfactory plan.”

They couldn’t possibly hold on for a week after having spent points so lavishly. Eventually, their lives would become hell. The tarps, parasols, chairs and other things would become obstacles.

“Cooperation? Don’t make me laugh. People betray each other with ease. People lie. Relationships built on trust just aren’t viable. You can only trust yourself. If you’ve finished your reconnaissance, leave. But if you wish, we’d welcome you here. You’re free to enjoy yourself, whether it’s to eat meat or play on jet skis. Or perhaps you would prefer to have a different kind of fun with me? I can prepare a tent for personal use.”

“That’s not the kind of answer I’d expect to hear from someone who declared war on us.”

“I absolutely loathe hard work. Patience? Saving? You must be joking.”

Ishizaki returned once again, and handed over another bottle of water. Ryuuen opened the cap and chugged.

“This is the way I do things. No more, no less.”

“Right. Well then, do as you please. It’s convenient for us, anyway.”

Horikita had changed her mind. Class C wasn’t going to be our enemy here, so they weren’t a problem.

“Working up a sweat in order to evaluate other classes is such a pain.” Horikita turned on her heel to walk away, but paused. “There is one more piece of business. You know Ibuki, of course?”

“Yeah. She’s a member of our class. What about her?”

“Her face is swollen. Who did that to her?”

While Horikita was nearly convinced he was the culprit, she purposefully asked in a roundabout way.

“Ah. She ran out of here rather suddenly. She went looking for help from another class in the end? Pathetic girl.”

Ryuuen snorted in disgust, then laid back in his chair.

“There are helpless idiots in this world. A ruler doesn’t need subordinates who disobey orders. We determined that I would use our class points to my liking. That’s the fact of the matter. Besides, it’s pointless to raise the banner of revolution against the ruling class.”

“In other words, Ibuki-san clashed with you when you wanted to spend points.”

“Well, you could say that. That’s why she got a light punishment.”

He made a gesture like slapping someone’s cheek. Ryuuen had indeed hit her.

“Another boy defied me as well, so I had him driven out. I heard he didn’t die, so he’s probably off somewhere eating grass and insects to survive.”

I couldn’t imagine that was something you could say about a friend. But now I fully understood. Even if Ibuki were absent during roll call, Class C wouldn’t care. That’s why Ryuuen didn’t care about his classmates or trying to find them.

“You…used up all your points on the first day, didn’t you?” Horikita asked.

Even if you used all of the 300 points you were given, there wouldn’t be any penalties. The effect was nonexistent.

“Yes, as you said. I used all of our points.”

His strategy was to be at zero points to negate negative elements. It was certainly unexpected, but it came at a high price. With no points, Class C would

have the lowest rank. Even if they managed to guess every other class leader's identity, they could only achieve a maximum of 150 points.

"If Ibuki is with you, you're better off chasing her away. If you shower her with your awkward sympathies, you'll have one extra person to prepare water, food, and bedding for. Anyway, if you can't deal with it, she can return here. If she grovels on the ground, I'll forgive her. I've a tolerant heart."

He'd forgive her defiance if she returned to being under his control. He seemed pretty sure that she would. It would be difficult for Ibuki to live alone on a deserted island for one week.

"What short-sighted thinking. You're happy right now using your points, but what are you planning to do after the party's over?"

"Ha ha ha. What should I do, I wonder? Well, I suppose that plain, ordinary people can only engage in plain, ordinary thinking. You're desperate to protect the points you were given. Looking around for the leaders, desperately holding spots, working up a sweat running through the forest. Absolutely worthless."

Even though we'd confronted him with facts, Ryuuen laughed and showed no sign of panic.

"Fine. Let's head back, Ayanokouji-kun. If we stay here any longer, I'm only going to start to feel ill."

"See you later, Suzune."

"I don't know where exactly you found that out, but do not call me by my first name so casually."

Ryuuen had clearly done some investigating.

"Well, I rather like forceful women. I'll make you submit to me eventually. When that time comes, it will be the ultimate pleasure."

When he said that, Ryuuen touched his crotch under his bathing suit, clearly to provoke Horikita. Horikita, eyes full of contempt, turned her back and walked away. As I started running after her, I stopped to look at a passenger boat anchored by the pier. I saw students swimming in the ocean, playing volleyball and beach flags on the shore, celebrating with barbecues. Also, I saw the tent

where they were stockpiling food.

Ryuuen seemed content to mock the school rules, apparently.

“Class C is irrelevant. Their self-destruction will help us.”

“Seems that way. They’ve used up all their points, anyway.”

Even if they had some saved, it could only be a few dozen at most. The two students’ absence at roll call would swallow those.

“I can’t wait to see what they’ll do once trouble hits.”

“Unfortunately, Class C probably won’t face any trouble during this test.”

“Why wouldn’t they? How can they endure this test without any points?”

“That was Ryuuen’s original goal. We were given 300 points as funds to enjoy our vacation for one week, which is not at all impossible. No matter how much we economize on our food, we have to give up on luxury items. The school made these rules accordingly.”

Horikita nodded.

“So, we should try to save where we can,” she said.

“Yeah. But Ryuuen’s different. He can’t see past the end of his nose, much less a week.”

“He can’t see past what now?”

“Suppose the test ended today. What then? Do you think this trip would transform into a perfect vacation?”

“That’s… Well, okay. So what? If you have zero points—”

“That’s simple. He’d just do what Kouenji did.”

“Huh?”

“His physical condition was poor and he was mentally unstable. In that case, it’s better to just retire. If everyone did that, they could return to the passenger boat and go about their lives. That’s what they meant by fully enjoying their summer vacation: without hardship.”

Granted, the school might turn us away if we feigned sickness. 300 points

were enough to use freely for a one-night, two-day vacation. But sooner or later, the bill would arrive.

“So he really gave up on the test from the very beginning?” Horikita murmured.

Maybe this was just a theory. Perhaps Ryuuen simply hated troublesome things, or perhaps he wanted to avoid mental exhaustion and preserve his physical strength. Or perhaps he wanted to improve morale.

“The test is literally about freedom. Ryuuen’s way of thinking is one way to approach it. It seems like Ibuki and another student rebelled, and because of that Class C will lose twenty points a day. Since he knew he’d be losing that many points every day no matter what, he came up with a drastic strategy.”

Since I didn’t know when Ryuuen had decided to spend all of Class C’s points, I could only guess.

“We ought to think of a way to get points back without giving up. Ryuuen is most definitely wrong. I cannot possibly understand him,” Horikita said.

I suppose that was true. It was certainly true that we couldn’t predict the actions of Ryuuen, whose plans were likely geared to a very unusual purpose, if his words earlier were true. Any rational person would regard Ryuuen’s bizarre schemes with some anxiety. After we passed the beach, I turned back and scanned the shore once more.

“A zero-point strategy, huh? I see. That’s really interesting.”

If we could simply shut down dissenting views from our classmates, it’d be a rather interesting method. After all, this test wasn’t just about saving points within our own group. We had to strategize if we wanted to win.

3.3

In order to make effective use of the extra time on our hands, we decided to check out how Classes A and B were doing. We went deeper into the forest, past the roots of the big, broken tree, just as Kanzaki had instructed. When I thought on it now, though, the tree looked as though the school had broken it intentionally, to use as a landmark. It hinted that there was a spot just further ahead.

The moment we set foot in the deep forest, I noticed a slight change. Quite a few students' tracks stood out on this path, which made it easier to walk. If we simply followed the path, we'd probably arrive at Class B's campsite. That might be why Kanzaki hadn't provided a detailed explanation. So far, of all the ordeals on this island, the blood-sucking mosquitoes that went for our arms and legs were the most irritating. Soon, we arrived at Class B's base camp.

"Well, I suppose it's just what we'd expect from Class B…"

Their way of living was entirely different from ours. Their class had made practical use of their spot, with many trees surrounding a well. They didn't have enough space to spread out three or four tents, so they'd made good use of the space by putting up hammocks. Despite starting in much the same way, our class had chosen completely different items. I was rather curious about some unfamiliar equipment near the well, but what surprised me the most was the atmosphere.

"Huh? Horikita-san? And Ayanokouji-kun?"

Someone called to us, almost as if she'd sensed the arrival of sudden visitors. Ichinose was trying to tie a string around a tree to put up a hammock. She wore a jersey, which really suited her, and appeared lively. Kanzaki sat a little further away from her.

"Your class seems to be functioning well, despite obstacles."

"Ha ha, yeah. It was really difficult at first! But we tried a bunch of different things, and it worked out. Though the list of chores just keeps on increasing. There's still a ton of work left," said Ichinose with a big smile.

“I’m sorry if we’re getting in the way.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. That probably sounded like I was trying to drive you guys away. I think it’s all right if you hang around for a while. You probably came here to ask me something, right?”

Ichinose welcomed us without any hint of protest. She invited us to sit on the hammock, but Horikita declined the offer, so Ichinose sat instead.



“I was wondering if it might behoove us to tentatively enter into a cooperative relationship, like last time,” Horikita said.

“I think so, too.”

“Well, how many points have you used so far? What did you purchase? Also, if you could tell us the value of your tools that would really help. We would disclose information in return, of course.”

I wondered if Kanzaki could have deduced that information about our class just from this morning. Ichinose, with a grin, took out a manual from a bag near her feet. She showed us a white sheet of paper, which itemized what they’d purchased, and read aloud.

“Hammocks. Cookware. Small tent, lantern, and temporary toilet. Fishing rod, a water shower… If we combine those items with the food we purchased, the total comes to exactly seventy points.”

Excluding the fact that Kouenji had retired, we’d applied our points with the same rigor as Class B.

“What’s a water shower? I’m a little curious about that.”

From the name, I deduced it had something to do with a bath, but since it was five points cheaper than the temporary shower we decided it probably wasn’t as effective and passed.

“Well, let’s go over the situation bit by bit, shall we? Since there are various places in the woods where we can find fruits and vegetables, we can compensate for deficiencies in points by foraging for food. We can also head out to the sea and fish. That’s what I was thinking we’d do for food. We’re not worried about water, since we have a well.”

Had Class B just naturally obtained those things, like when Kushida and her group found all that fruit? Since she’d said the word “vegetables”, they probably had better results than Class D. Ichinose took us to the well, and showed us the pulley system used to bring up a bucket of water.

“At first we were worried whether the water was safe to drink, but when we looked around at the surrounding environment and the cultivated food items,

we determined that the well must have been all right. To be on the safe side, I tried drinking the water yesterday. I waited for some time, but never got an upset stomach. Starting this morning, we had everyone use the well to get water."

They hadn't jumped right in and used the well from the beginning. They'd started using it only after properly checking it out. Most people would rather drink from something convenient that could save points.

"Also, there's enough natural water that we can use it for showers. That's what a water shower is."

She indicated some kind of large apparatus placed next to the well. That explained it.

"After we put water in the tank here, we get hot water in only a few seconds. It's really convenient. We use a gas can for the heat source. When we run out, I plan to request another."

Horikita calmly listened to Ichinose's explanation.

"Did you already know about them? Water showers, I mean," I asked.

"No. This is the first I've heard about or used them. The school's rules are rather scary, aren't they? There weren't any details in the manual, and we can't ask the teacher, either. Thankfully we have some kids who are familiar with the outdoors in our class."

Next to the water shower was a simple toilet set up with a one-touch tent. Nothing seemed to be inside.

"We set up this temporary toilet instead of getting a shower room. We got it so that the people who dislike being seen by others when they shower could have privacy. The fabric is also waterproof."

So that's why it was empty.

"So, you don't struggle with sleeping on the hard ground?"

"Ah, yeah. At first, I wondered what we were going to do, but then we took appropriate measures. Want a look?"

The grass crunched underfoot as Ichinose made her way to the tent. After

giving a heads-up to the girls inside, Ichinose lifted the bottom flap. Underneath the tent was a thick bunch of vinyl sheets, which looked to be about two centimeters thick.

“When we paid for the temporary toilet, we were told we had access to an unlimited number of vinyl sheets. So I might have asked for too many, but we received a large number of them. Of course, I don’t want to waste resources, so I plan to put any unused vinyl sheets into one sheet, and return them in the end.”

“By the way, what precautions have you taken against the heat? For some reason, it feels cooler around here…”

“I wonder if it’s because we sprinkle water around. We’ve sprinkled water near our beds, because they’re close to the well. We put some water in the plastic bottles that people drank from, and then everyone carries them around so they can sprinkle water efficiently. The water soaks into the soil quite easily, and since it takes some time for it to evaporate, the effect lingers and removes the heat.”

Ichinose and her class weren’t just relying on tools; they were making good use of their knowledge to improve the campsite. After receiving this information, Horikita carefully explained our situation. She left nothing out in the spirit of fairness.

“I see… Having someone retire sounds like it really hurt you guys.”

“Yeah. There’s a lot to make us uneasy right now, but we have to try and make it through.”

“I see. Well, can we continue our cooperative relationship? I thought it would be a good idea to ignore the rule about trying to find out the leader’s identity. What do you think?”

“I was thinking that we should talk about that, too. If we didn’t have to be on guard with even one class, we’d really appreciate it. As long as you don’t mind, Ichinose-san, I’d like you to accept the proposal.”

“Of course I’m okay with that.”

After we reaffirmed our mutual information exchange and resolved to stay in

a cooperative relationship, Horikita sighed in deep admiration while looking around. There was a feeling of true solidarity here, with no disorder at all. Each individual student carried out his or her role. Additionally, everyone seemed to be fulfilling their duties happily. Normally, you'd find someone who hated their job or trying to skip out on it.

"This class has fallen in line far better than I could have imagined. I suppose that's because you're the one taking command, right?" Horikita said.

"Yeah. For the time being, anyway."

Ichinose had managed to unify her class both in and out of the school.

"Is there anyone in Class D who can bring everyone together? Is that you, Horikita-san?"

"No. We do have a boy named Hirata, though. Everyone in class clusters around him."

"Ah. From the soccer club! I know him, I know him! He's really popular among the girls."

Horikita seemed disinterested in talking about Hirata, so she changed the topic.

"Ichinose-san. I'm terribly sorry to keep asking you questions, but we want to confirm Class A's status. Can you tell us anything that will help us capture their base camp? Even something you know about the area might really help."

"Well, if you're okay with something that *might* be useful, I can tell you something about their place. However, obtaining information is going to be tough."

Just like I'd expected from Class B…or rather, what I'd expected from Ichinose. She'd already done her research on Class A.

"Just after you cut through this area, there's an opening. Turn right and go straight until you see a cave. That's probably where the Class A base camp is. I went there myself to investigate, but I don't know for sure. It's because they're so thoroughly defensive…or rather, secretive."

"Secretive? What kind of measures has Class A taken?"

“Honestly, seeing is believing. If you take a look yourselves, you’ll understand right away. Since you two are going to check on Class A, does that mean you already understand Class C’s situation?”

“Yeah. We just went there earlier. They’re doing some unbelievably stupid things.”

“They seemingly have no intention of taking this test seriously. There are five days remaining, and they’ll run out of points well before the test is over. I can’t imagine they’ll be able to change their situation even if they enter into ‘point-saver mode’ right away. They’re not even looking for a spot. I can’t even begin to understand them.”

Ichinose didn’t seem able to come up with the answer, either.

“You can’t use any sly tricks in this test. Ryuuen has most definitely spent almost all of their points. They might be having fun right now, but they’re going to regret it later.”

Horikita deliberately didn’t tell Ichinose about the potential withdrawal plan I’d discussed earlier. I didn’t think she was hiding it; rather, Horikita had probably determined that Ichinose would come to the same conclusion herself.

“Pardon me, Ichinose-san? I’m sorry to interrupt. Do you know where Nakanishi-kun is?” asked a male student in a rather reserved voice.

“I think Nakanishi-kun headed down to the shore. Why do you ask?”

“I thought I’d offer to help. Is that unnecessary?”

“Oh no, not at all. I’m really happy you feel that way, Kaneda-kun. Can you head over and follow Chihiro-chan’s group? If you tell them I told you to do so, it’ll be okay.”

“Okay. Thank you very much!”

Horikita looked a little perplexed after watching that short exchange.

“He sounded incredibly formal for a classmate, didn’t he?”

“Ah, he’s—”

“A Class C student?”

I spoke before Ichinose could finish answering. She confirmed with a nod.

“Do you know him? It looks like he had some kind of dispute with Class C. He said he’d get by on his own, but I couldn’t just leave him. I haven’t asked him about his situation yet.”

One male student had been estranged from Class C because he’d supposedly resisted Ryuuen. It looked as though Class B had taken him in. Perhaps he felt ashamed about his situation, hence his offer to cooperate?

“We also picked up a student yesterday. Another student who escaped from Class C.”

Horikita filled Ichinose in on the details about her meeting with Ryuuen. She told Ichinose about Ibuki, one of the rebel students, who’d defied Ryuuen for just doing whatever he pleased. She also explained that Ibuki had been hit. After hearing that, Ichinose’s eyes hardened, as if strengthening her resolve to protect her class.

“I think it’s about time to get going, Ayanokouji-kun. We’ll be a bother to Class B if we linger too long.”

We all said farewell, and Horikita and I left Class B’s camp.

“In general, I think we’re all on the same page, but they’re further ahead. I can’t deny it,” said Horikita, after we’d left and there weren’t any other people around.

Her words sounded like a declaration of defeat. My impression was the same as hers. There was a big difference between D and B, and not just in points.

“Well, I guess there’s nothing we can do about it. Class B just has those special qualities that Class D lacks.”

“That’s their teamwork, right? Class B is the superior class because they’re being led well, so when the time comes to make decisions, they don’t fight or break apart.”

Class D had selfish students like Kouenji, who ran off on his own, and no one in our class had the power to step in. Meanwhile, Ichinose had brought Class B together, and there wasn’t a hint of disorder. They had a real sense of unity,

probably the biggest difference between Classes D and B right now. The longer this conflict continued, the starker that difference would become.

3.4

We saw a cave opening that looked like it cut deep into the mountainside, like a demon's mouth. There were two temporary toilets and one shower room near the entrance.

"I can't really see the inside from here…"

Trying to confirm what was in the cave while keeping our distance was probably next to impossible. Neither Horikita nor I knew anyone in Class A. Even though we intended to sneak around, stay hidden, and gather information, we wouldn't get anywhere. I stepped over Horikita and headed up the road to the cave.

"W-wait."

"Let's go. I mean, it's Class A, so of course we're going to be scared. There's nothing we can do about that."

Horikita and I both headed toward the base camp.

"What are you planning? We gain nothing by carelessly exposing ourselves."

"And what do we gain by trying to peek from our hiding spot? We can barely see, and there's no one around. There's not much we can see unless we enter the cave."

"You're awfully calm, aren't you? Did you have something in mind?" Horikita asked.

"I haven't thought of anything. Come on, don't worry."

"Ugh, what an unintelligible, half-assed answer."

She glared at me with cold and frightening eyes, but I pretended not to notice. Naturally, some Class A students hanging around the cave's entrance discovered us. I thought I could salvage the situation so long as I could see the cave's interior.

However, inside the cave were several vinyl sheets joined together into one giant tarp, which blocked my view. I couldn't see inside at all.

“Who are you guys? What class are you from?”

This guy was definitely one of the two guys who’d found the cave quickly on the first day. Yahiko. The other guy, the sharp-witted Katsuragi, appeared to be absent.

“We came to snoop. You have a problem?” Horikita responded, in an imposing manner. It was like a daring switch had been flipped in her brain. She continued, “I mean, I would’ve thought that since you’re in Class A you’d be clever, but…”

She looked at the vinyl covering the cave’s entrance, and let out a rather forced sigh.

“Well, rather than clever, I’d say you’re underhanded. What cowardly methods.”

“What?”

Even though it was plain to see she wanted to provoke him, Yahiko sounded irritated, as if she got on his nerves.

“I’m Horikita, from Class D.”

“Hah, it’s obvious you’re from Class D. You’re a bunch of stupid failures, after all.”

“Stupid, huh? In that case, there’s no harm in us seeing what’s inside, right? Or does that make you feel uncomfortable?”

“That’s not it at all!”

“So it’s not a problem if we look? You’re in the way.”

“W-wait! Hey! Wait, I said! Don’t just do whatever you please!”

Yahiko moved in front of Horikita to block her, but Horikita’s words cut him off.

“We’re just going to look inside. That itself isn’t a violation of the rules, right?”

“Stop screwing around. Class A occupies this spot. Class D doesn’t have permission to use it!”

“Oh? So you occupy this place. I didn’t know that. Is there a device inside?”

“Y-yeah. So back off.”

“Well, there definitely aren’t any rules that say we can’t go into the cave. It’s certainly true that we cannot use the cave while it’s being occupied, but that’s not the same as the right to monopolize it or anything. We should have the right to look inside, or at least to verify if there’s equipment, right? If we couldn’t do that, then people could just forcibly monopolize every spot. That’s not what this test is about.”

“Huh?!”

Her sharp argument skewered Yahiko without any trouble. Horikita’s hair fluttered as she tried to peel off the veil that hid the cave entrance. However…

“What are you doing? I don’t recall giving you permission to invite guests.”

A particularly tall boy passed behind me and continued walking ahead to Horikita. This was definitely…

“Katsuragi-san! These two came to snoop around our camp! They’re a bunch of filthy losers!”

“You’re exaggerating. It’s just vinyl. Show me around a little.” Horikita, turning to confront the two boys, didn’t seem scared in the slightest.

“Well then, it should be fine for you to look inside. However, prepare yourself. The moment you touch anything, I will notify the school and report your actions as obstruction toward another class. I can’t guarantee what will happen to Class D as a result.”

Katsuragi was probably bluffing. There was a very low chance that we’d be disqualified for touching vinyl. And yet, there seemed to be some genuine danger hidden in his words.

“You’re forcefully monopolizing control of the spot. The rules don’t protect such actions.”

“You’re right about that. I cannot argue the point. However, it’s something of an unspoken rule. You in Class D have a spot by the river. Class B has a well. You live in and surround the occupied space, so it’s halfway monopolized. Have you

taken any forceful measures in dealing with trespassers to your area?”

Katsuragi’s calm words stopped Horikita in her tracks.

“One class occupies one spot. Then, they continue to protect that spot so they may obtain points until the end of the test. If you violate this unspoken rule, it creates chaos. Naturally, Class A will trespass upon Class D’s base in retaliation. We should avoid trouble.”

It was possible to ignore what he said, but we couldn’t. Like Katsuragi said, the other classes had all unconsciously occupied one area each. If we broke that rule, our troubles would grow. Horikita turned on her heel and walked away from the cave.

“Well, fine. I look forward to seeing the results, and Class A’s abilities.”

“We are quite capable. We also expect things from you, Class D. By which I mean, your futile struggling.”

After that short exchange, Horikita had the wind knocked out of her sails. If Katsuragi hadn’t appeared, Horikita probably would have stepped through to the other side of the vinyl sheet.

“Yahiko, don’t respond to cheap provocation. Her goal was to force her way in and look around. If you thrust your righteous superiority in their face, the other side will back off.”

“S-sorry.”

They’d stripped Horikita of all other options except retreat. Wonderful, wonderful.

“It seems like we have to leave Class A alone. We definitely can’t investigate them.”

Once they’d claimed the spot, they hid much of it away behind an impregnable wall. However, despite their efforts, we were able to glean something from the interaction.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Karuizawa Kei
CLASS:	First Year, Class D
STUDENT ID:	S01T004718
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	March 8th



EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	D–
INTELLIGENCE:	D–
DECISION MAKING:	C–
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	D
COOPERATIVENESS:	E+

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

Although her results were below the standard level in all respects, she's a student with a particularly attractive quality that can't be measured by basic academic aptitude alone. She spent her elementary and junior high school days as a central figure in her class. Though there are many who dislike her somewhat domineering personality, it can be presumed that she brings order to the group.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

She seems to be trusted by the other girls and she has quite a few friends. I hope her basic academic aptitude will see improvement.

Chapter 4:
The Meaning of
Freedom

Kouenji's questions weighed on my mind for quite some time. On the third day, I left the base camp before noon and made my way toward the forest entrance.

"Ahh, ahh, ahh… Wh-where are you planning to go now, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Sakura was out of breath, her breasts heaving as she breathed. She must've been looking for me and given chase.

"Didn't I tie a handkerchief around a tree? Anyway, I thought I'd just go and check something out."

I wanted to confirm something much earlier, but didn't had the time.

"I-It's probably not okay for me…to come along, is it? I'd only slow you down, probably, but…"

"Isn't it better for you to stay back? Won't it bother you if people start spreading rumors?"

"That doesn't bother me at all. Besides, I…."

Sakura mumbled so quietly that I couldn't have heard anything even if I'd put my ear close.

"It's not going to be particularly easy, right? I mean, after we went through all the trouble of coming to this island, I think you should have a little fun… Though I'm not one to talk about fun, myself." I thought I'd turn Sakura's offer down with an appropriate excuse. However…

"Th-this *is* fun, though!"

Sakura offered more resistance than I would've imagined. After her surprisingly forceful reaction, our eyes met in shock. Then, Sakura crouched and hid her face.

"Ahhhhh! N-no, that's not what I meant! Ahh! I mean!"

I had no idea what Sakura was trying to say. All I knew was that she was an interesting girl. It'd be great if she could just show that part of herself to others.

"Well then, how about we go together? But I have a condition. If we get into trouble later, you won't blame yourself. Okay?"

"Really? It's okay?!" she cried, still hiding her face with her hands.

What kind of conversation was this? It felt kind of odd to just stay silent as we walked, so I killed some time by bringing up a familiar topic. Anything was less awkward than listening to the crunch of our footsteps on the path.

"Are you getting along well with the other girls? I mean, you can't really do things alone in this test, right?"

"No, not at all… We don't really talk or anything," Sakura muttered, twirling her hair with her index finger. It was like she felt embarrassed about herself.

"I'm just worthless, really. I can't do sports, or study. I'm not really growing as a person in any area."

"That's not true. You're making progress, Sakura-chan."

"Huh? Me, progress? Ah ha ha… That's not true, though."

"It *is* true. Maybe you can't see it, but you're definitely making progress little by little."

I tried to convey that with both words and my attitude. It was really effective for people like Sakura, who lacked confidence in themselves. It was the first time I'd appealed to someone from the bottom of my heart like that, and I hoped it would resonate with her. Sakura stopped walking and looked at me, her eyes trembling. She was trying to discern the true meaning of my words.

"It's okay. You'll make some friends really soon, Sakura. Then school will become much more fun."

When our eyes met, Sakura panicked and averted her gaze downward. Even the fact that she was able to look at people for just one moment was a huge difference from when we'd first met.

"That reminds me… That guy, from the incident before…it seems like he resigned."

The man who'd worked at the electronics store on campus had been an extremely passionate fan of Sakura from her gravure idol days… No, in truth, he was just a stalker. He hadn't been satisfied with hanging around Sakura's homepage, and had schemed to meet up with her personally.

"Thank you for everything… Everything worked out thanks to you, Ayanokouji-kun."

"I didn't really do anything. You were saved because you got close to Kushida, and because Horikita and Ichinose helped out. I was just a bystander. Anyway, more importantly, nothing else weird has happened, right?"

Even though the stalker had left the school premises, there was the possibility that he'd try and reach out online.

"No, everything's been fine. Actually, I've been taking a little break from the bulletin board, too."

That was for the sake of precaution, most likely. Probably a wise decision.

"Besides, even though you usually act nervous, you always had this really confident expression when you were an idol."

"Well, that's…that's because I did the photography myself."

"A long time ago? But when you were featured in magazines you probably didn't take the pictures yourself, right?"

Sakura answered with a wry smile, looking sheepish.

"I didn't do well, and I also took way more time than the others. A cameraman would take pictures of the girls to make sure there were as few people involved as possible. Besides…back then, I was able to bear it because I made myself empty. It was like I erased myself, eliminated my feelings. But I eventually reached my limit, so I had to take a break."

Sakura said this all in one go, stopping at the very end to take a deep breath. The incident with the stalker seemed to have left her scarred, but now things were headed in a better direction. A mass of trees waited right ahead of us. I went ahead of Sakura, proceeding to the opening of the path just ahead.

The way forward began to get rather steep. Since we'd walked for a while, I

decided it was time for a break. I looked back. Sakura was trembling, her shoulders shaking. Maybe she hadn't thought I was going to look back.

"How about we take a short break? It'll probably take a while longer to reach our destination."

Sakura was probably exhausted after walking such a rough trail for half an hour. She looked relieved. I searched for a big tree that could provide shade against the extreme heat, and the two of us sat between the roots, where there was enough space for two people. However, Sakura decided to sit a little further away, perhaps due to her reserved nature. But the ground was all rugged and uneven, so it probably hurt her to sit there.

"Sit down over here."

"Is that okay?"

"Yeah, of course. You aren't comfortable over there, right?"

"Y-yeah…"

Sakura, still reserved, plopped down next to me. She sat at such a distance that the sleeves of our gym clothes barely touched.

"Nature sure is amazing, isn't it? I like to spend a lot of my free time out in nature, even if it's just walking around," Sakura said.

"Considering even Kouenji's satisfaction, the school has probably been really good about keeping up the place. Normally, an overseas jungle would be more dangerous."

"When we left for the trip, I felt depressed at first. I didn't have any friends, and I don't really like traveling. I thought it would be fine if I could just stay in my room. If I did that, my life would have been the same as always. But then, all this happened. We were told this was some kind of test…"

Sakura looked up at the sky, her back against the tree.

"But now I'm kind of glad that we came here. That's because I never really had the chance to talk with you like this before, Ayanokouji-kun…"

Together, deep in the forest, we were embraced by nature and a feeling of serenity.

“I wish we could stay like this forever…”

“Yeah.”

In the three days since we’d come to the deserted island, this was the longest time I had been alone with Sakura. I wondered if this was some kind of karmic meeting between two friendless people. It didn’t feel like it was strange or pointless. Like Sakura said, I felt like the distance between us had shortened a bit. I wouldn’t say we were falling in love or anything, but it was like we’d become friends. This was probably the first time I’d felt a relationship tilt toward friendship.

“Oh… It’s too bad. If I had my digital camera, I probably could have taken the best photos, but…”

Sakura used her thumb and forefingers to make a frame, and placed both herself and me in the frame several times. Then she made an embarrassed face, like she regretted doing so. It was certainly true that a camera was essential for preserving memories. Since Sakura was always carrying her digital camera around at school, I imagined that this moment was probably the perfect photo opportunity.

Preserving memories, huh? So that was why Ibuki had a digital camera.

“But if I’m in the picture, wouldn’t that spoil the scenery?”

“No, if *you’re* in the picture, Ayanokouji-kun, it will be the best photo… Ah! No! I mean, that is, I’ve never taken a picture with a friend before!” cried Sakura, shaking her head.

Sakura was absolutely genuine. While we sat side by side, I suddenly stared at her. Sakura didn’t notice my gaze at first, but after a long period of silence, she finally did. Our eyes met.



“Wh-what?! What is it?!”

“Calm down. Be quiet.”

Sakura had fallen into a state of panic. I placed my hands on both of her shoulders and held her firmly.

“Eek!”

I brought my body closer to Sakura’s, sidling up next to her. When I did so, Sakura froze like a frog trapped by a snake’s glare. My eyes focused on her hair, where a bug was crawling around. Even someone like me, who didn’t know a lot about insects, could identify it. People commonly referred to it as a “hairy caterpillar.” Honestly, it grossed me out.

The way its body squirmed and the fact that it had countless legs sent a shiver down my spine. It had probably fallen off the tree we were resting against. *What should I do?* I thought. If I told Sakura she had a caterpillar in her hair, she might panic and start screaming. If the caterpillar got into her clothes, that’d be an even worse disaster.

“Sakura, there’s something I want to ask you…”

“Wh-what is it?”

“You…are you okay with bugs?”

“B-bugs?”

“Yeah. Bugs. Like grasshoppers and dragonflies, those kinds of things”

“N-not at all. I absolutely can’t stand them. Ants either.”

“I see. Well, all right then.”

I couldn’t point it out here, then. I needed to think of another way. I wished I could just quickly snatch it away, but being a city boy, I hated insects, too. Even if I tried to remove the bug with a branch or something, Sakura would undoubtedly notice.

“Hmm. Anyway, don’t move for the time being, okay?”

“O-okay. Sure…”

With that careful warning, I let go of Sakura's shoulders. Meanwhile, the caterpillar squirmed like it was starting to go somewhere. I'm sure it just wanted to escape, and I had to think of a way to remove it safely.

"What's the matter?"

As I tried to come up with a plan, Sakura tilted her head with a bewildered look. Perhaps sensing that Sakura's movement meant danger, the caterpillar frantically tried to escape. Ah, this wasn't good! Don't be reckless, bug!

I couldn't delay any longer. I had to save Sakura even if it meant sacrificing myself. With my trembling hand, I courageously reached for Sakura's hair. There! I touched the caterpillar, grabbed it quickly, and threw it into the bushes. Sakura probably didn't understand the situation, but I'd managed to protect her.

"Ugh…I feel like there was something gross on me…"

After our break, we chatted amiably and arrived at our destination with the help of my handkerchief acting as a marker. It had taken less time than I thought to get there, only about twenty minutes in total. At any rate, I carefully retrieved the handkerchief and returned it to Sakura, then observed the surroundings from where I thought Kouenji had been standing before.

Nothing in these woods stood out at first glance. There wasn't anything else here. What in the world had he been looking at?

"Did you notice something?" I asked.

"Umm… What's different?"

If your sense of sight did not work, you had to rely on your other senses.

"For the time being, let's investigate the area, but don't go too far. Then let's check on each other regularly. If we don't concentrate, it's likely we'll get distracted."

We searched the soil and the big tree's roots on our knees, and tried touching the lush green leaves and branches above our heads. Our sense of smell was sharp as we breathed warm air through our noses. We also tried to open our ears and listen. We made use of all five of our senses and checked the area

thoroughly, careful not to overlook even the slightest change.

“Wha—?!”

Sakura, who’d been searching in the bushes away from me, shrieked in surprise. The bushes were so thick that I could only see part of her body, and wondered if she’d fallen over again.

“Hey, look! I found something amazing!” Sakura’s voice was full of eager excitement.

As I tried to figure out what she was talking about, I saw a different variety of green leaves sprouting from the bushes. Some yellow parts peeked through as well.

“Is this…corn?”

“It seems like it.”

I wondered if the corn only grew in this area. I didn’t know much about plants, but it was obvious that this was unnatural. The soil here was a different color from the surrounding forest soil, proof that the corn had been cultivated artificially. It was also strange because bushes surrounded the corn on all sides, making it difficult to find due to the weeds.

“So, this is what Kouenji saw…”

He’d noticed the corn at first glance, and said nothing due to his awful pride. In any case, I was absolutely certain that school officials had been coming and going on this deserted island. This cultivated spot made that clear. I inspected the corn, which was rather beautiful thanks to careful management and cultivation.

“It would’ve been nice if we brought bags… We probably can’t, but I wonder if we should try taking it all back with us.”

There were about fifty ears of corn, but carrying them unaided was impossible. We would inevitably need to make several trips if we wanted to bring them all back. I took off my shirt.

“Huh?! Wh-wh-wh-what are you doing, Ayanokouji-kun?! It’s way too soon for that!”

Sakura dropped the corn as she covered her eyes with her hands.

“Sorry, sorry. I thought it would be okay. Wait, what did you mean by ‘it’s too soon’?”

I didn’t think a girl her age would mind seeing a topless guy, but maybe I hadn’t showed enough consideration.

“If we tie up the openings of my shirt, we can use it as a bag. That way we could carry more at once.”

I was afraid that if we left and other classes found this place, they’d harvest the corn. I wanted to minimize that risk.

“We’ll tell everyone when we get back, and then come harvest more.”

“Okay.”

The unexpected harvest had made both of us gleeful, until we spotted some unexpected visitors.

“Wow. Look, Katsuragi-san! There’s an incredible amount of food here!”

Sakura, her attention focused on the corn, jumped in surprise. She hid behind my back. When Katsuragi saw this, he apologized.

“I’m sorry. We didn’t mean to surprise you. He had no bad intentions, either. Please forgive us.”

He shot Yahiko a stern look, compelling him to apologize. Yahiko, in low spirits, apologized. I’d encountered these two before. Katsuragi showed no reaction, but Yahiko immediately noticed me.

“Hey, you’re the spy from yesterday!”

Yahiko raised his voice, shouting angrily. Sakura once again jumped in surprise and curled into a ball. Seeing this, Katsuragi dropped his tightly clenched fist onto Yahiko’s head. We could hear the dull, painful thud from where we stood.

“My name’s Katsuragi, from Class A. He’s Yahiko. Since this is the second time we’ve met, a self-introduction should be fine, yes?”

“I’m Ayanokouji, from Class D. This is Sakura.”

After we’d exchanged a brief greeting, Katsuragi glanced at the large amount

of corn.

“You found this. Don’t worry, we have no intention of snatching it away from you. But if someone else finds this spot, they’ll likely take it away.”

“There’s nothing we can do. There’s only the two of us here.”

We had no choice but to pray that no one else found this place. One idea was to hide it all, but that didn’t lessen the potential danger.

“You idiots. One of you two can stay behind and watch the stuff! Isn’t that right, Katsuragi-san?”

“You’re the one who doesn’t seem to understand the situation, Yahiko. Don’t dismiss the danger of moving through the forest alone. It’s difficult enough in groups of men, but when men and women are together, no matter what, there will be certain limitations to what you can do.”

That was why Katsuragi didn’t go alone into the forest.

“We’ll help you.”

“A-are you serious, Katsuragi-san? But, working together with Class D is—”

Yahiko obviously wanted to refuse, but he stayed quiet after Katsuragi shot him a sharp look.

“We appreciate the offer, but our class told us to be careful. They’ll get mad if they find out we relied on Class A for help. I’m sorry, but we have to decline.”

It was a lie, but Katsuragi had no other choice but to withdraw.

“I see. We can’t force you. However, can you trust us? After you leave here, there’s a chance we’ll make off with all of this, right?”

“In that case, I’d have no choice but to give up what I’m carrying right now.”

Katsuragi quietly cleared a path. Sakura still looked worried as we sped away. Afterward, when Sakura and I returned to base camp, we reported to everyone about the corn.

“What an amazing find, Ayanokouji! You too, Sakura! Let’s go get it, Yamauchi!”

Ike called out to Yamauchi, who was nearby. After spotting Sakura and me

talking with Ike, Yamauchi dashed over with incredible intensity. He grabbed my arm and shoved me away from Sakura.

“H-h-hey, you! Why were you all alone and shirtless with Sakura?! Why?! Huh?!”

“Calm down. This is a misunderstanding, that’s all. We didn’t do anything.”

I didn’t know what kind of delusions Yamauchi was having, but now wasn’t the time to get into it with him.

“I have to go talk with Hirata. Sorry.”

“I trusted you, Ayanokouji!”

Yamauchi ranted and raved while I went to report to Hirata. Soon afterward, we organized students into a team, which departed from the camp to bring back the corn. In addition, we set the goal of exploring other places and looking for more food. Around one o’clock in the afternoon, everyone returned from harvesting the corn.

“We’ve got lots of food!”

The bag appeared to be absolutely filled.

“It was pretty dangerous, though. That guy from Class A, Katsuragi, was nearby.”

Apparently Katsuragi hadn’t made off with the corn after we left. Instead, he stayed there so that he could watch us. Whether Katsuragi had good or bad intentions, we didn’t know for sure.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Kouenji Rokusuke
CLASS:	First Year, Class D
STUDENT ID:	S01T004668
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	April 3rd



EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	A
INTELLIGENCE:	C
DECISION MAKING:	C
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	A
COOPERATIVENESS:	E–

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

Although our institution has turned out many students who have achieved high grades and excelled in physical activities, once every few years there is a student with incredible abilities who possesses a level of potential comparable even to our graduates. However, with regards to his intelligence and decision-making abilities, which cannot be measured using the information we've already collected, his evaluation is still pending. His exceedingly selfish behavior is an exceptional problem, so we expect to see marked improvement in that regard.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

He has no friends at has all and absolutely no sense of cooperation. Currently looking into remedial measures.

Chapter 5:
The Quiet Outbreak of War

On our fourth day, we reached a turning point. The shouting and complaining died down and were replaced by the sound of laughter. Along with the corn we'd found, Ike and the others had caught some fish. There was no more resistance about drinking the river water, either. Thanks to the fruit our classmates had found, we'd saved more points than anticipated, and were making it through this test.

Currently, we'd spent a total of about 100 points, including setbacks like Kouenji's retirement. If we kept things going like this, we'd end the test with a quite a few points left over. If you looked at the state Class D was in before, the numbers were simply phenomenal. Even Yukimura, who'd resisted the most at the start, had no complaints. Every single person was satisfied with our results.

I started to get a prickly feeling in my head, which was throbbing. I borrowed a ballpoint pen, put it in my pocket along with the folded-up piece of paper from before, and left base camp.

I'd started to figure out more about this test. If I were to break it down, eighty percent of it was defensive, determining whether your class could form cooperative relationships. Therefore, I determined that the remaining twenty percent of the test was offensive, judging whether you had the ability to scout around and gather information. However, this 8:2 proportion wasn't reflected in the test results. Rather, that twenty percent influenced the outcome even more.

We already understood each class' plans. In that case, we knew what we had to do, which was attack the other classes. So, I began to move toward Class A's area. As Class D was based around the river, Class A had most likely centered their activities around their cave. The true appeal of that spot wasn't just that it offered shelter from the elements; the place itself had meaning.

As I wandered through the forest, I heard the faint sound of ocean waves. I

picked up the pace, and successfully pushed through the trees and toward the coast.

“Whoa…”

I applied the brakes and came to a full stop before a cliff’s edge.

“I definitely saw something from the ship. It was below here.”

I spotted several facilities located rather close to the cave. It didn’t seem like there was any kind of detour route, but as I walked along the cliff, I noticed a ladder set up in a blind spot. Anyone would’ve missed it upon first glance. I grabbed onto the ladder with all of my strength. It seemed sturdy, so I used it to climb down to the bottom of the cliff.

Shortly after getting down, I found a small hut. Near the entrance, I saw a device—proof that this was a spot. When I peered through the window, I saw fishing tackles. In other words, occupation of this spot meant you would able to catch fish without having to borrow equipment from the school.

When I checked to see whether the spot had been occupied, I saw the words Class A displayed on the device. It seemed they had four hours remaining. I didn’t doubt that Katsuragi and the others had come here and taken possession of the area after they’d held down the cave. You wouldn’t have known about the spot’s existence unless you discovered it back when we were on the boat. Since the small hut was located right under the cliff, you didn’t have to worry about anyone in the surrounding area seeing you.

The tools inside looked unused. Dust had accumulated on them. I took the map out from my pocket and wrote down some notes about the little hut’s location. I only wrote down the approximate position, of course. Measuring it accurately would’ve taken an insane amount of time.

After I finished marking it on my map, I refolded the piece of paper and put it back in my pocket. Since there didn’t seem to be anything else, I climbed the ladder back up the cliff.

“When we circled around the island, I saw a tower over there…”

While scanning the area, I relied on my memory. I shifted my gaze toward the ground that had been trodden on by people. Then I continued into the forest,

following the path. Eventually, I reached higher ground. Was a spot here, I wondered?

Although it seemed possible to look out over the whole beach by going up the installed ladder, the facility didn't seem that useful. It seemed like some spots were better than others.

I drew closer to confirm the equipment on the wall of the facility. Unlike the last place I'd checked, this place didn't seem to be occupied. The facility itself was rather large, so even though the place was well in the backwoods, it would've been easy to find. In other words, that meant I didn't know who had been monitoring the area. The fact that no one was occupying the tower showed that holding it ran the risk of being observed by the enemy.

Katsuragi was a cautious man, reliant on solid, secure strategies. He wouldn't carelessly take the bait, even bait this sweet and this close. The bushes nearby rustled despite the absence of wind.

"So, you won't occupy this spot out of more than a sense of prudence?"

"What are you doing here? This place is being used by Class A."

Two guys sprang out of the bushes as if they'd been waiting for someone to fall into their trap. I was surrounded. One of the guys immediately went over to the terminal to check on its status. He was likely checking to see whether I'd claimed the spot or not.

"Who are you? I haven't seen your face before."

He probably wouldn't know a Class D outcast, a self-proclaimed pill-bug who hid under a rock. The guy in front of me brandished a tree branch like a weapon, thrusting it toward my throat. He was trying to threaten me.

"I'm Ayanokouji, from Class D."

Of course, I instantly buckled and offered my name.

"Search him. See if he's got anything suspicious."

They put their hands in my pockets, and even checked my ankles for anything hidden, like I was a suspect surrounded by policemen.

"This isn't an act of violence. Understand?"

There was probably only one answer for such a question: to just nod. They searched my body, and took my ballpoint pen and folded-up map.

“What’s the pen for? And a hand-drawn map?”

The map had a rough sketch of the island, as well as my notes about the occupied points.

“Give it back.”

I reached out, but they didn’t offer it. I ended up only grabbing at the air.

“What’s your goal? Are you acting alone?”

As they barraged me with questions, I fell silent. Three seconds, four seconds. I cleared my throat.

“I can’t say.”

“I see. So you can’t talk about someone in Class D who’s pulling the strings? Is Class D as a whole planning something? Or are only some of the students plotting?”

They asked me a series of rapid-fire questions, like an interrogation.

“I can’t say. If I did…I may not be able to return to my class.”

“Being an underling sounds tough, Ayanokouji. Well, whatever. I don’t know what you were asked to do, but don’t make unnecessary trouble. It’d be better for you to just quietly sit back at base camp.”

They threw the ballpoint pen at my feet, but kept the paper. These guys had no right to issue orders, but they were coercive.

“There’s one more thing I talk to you about. If you tell us the identity of your leader, we’re prepared to offer a generous reward. 100,000 or 200,000 points.”

“You’re asking for me to sell out my class for money?”

“You’re free to interpret my statements however you wish, but I’ve made the same offer to other people. This offer is first-come, first-serve. You’re better off coming forward and telling me right away.”

Class A’s strategy essentially had no risks. It was a simple method, which you could implement so long as you possessed an abundance of funds. Although the

possibility of it working was low, you couldn't dismiss the possibility that some students might be dazzled by the money and sell out their friends.

"Sorry, but I don't believe it. How would you pay someone? We don't have any cell phones here, right?"

"It's certainly true we can't do it now. If necessary, we wouldn't mind writing a memorandum."

In other words, they intended to sign a contract now, and transfer private points after the test.

"A memorandum, huh? Let me ask you something for my own reference… Can you tell me how many points I'd get if I did tell you something?"

"That depends on your attitude."

"Could I have someone trustworthy settle things? For example, someone like Katsuragi. Or perhaps Sa—"

The moment I said the former's name, one of the boys' expressions changed.

"Why did you say Katsuragi?"

"I've heard rumors that Katsuragi is Class A's representative."

"Don't make me laugh. Sakayanagi is the representative of Class A. Not Katsuragi. You can go now."

From what they'd just said, it sounded like they had no more use for me. They made way for me to pass. It seemed like those two guys were Katsuragi's enemies. If that were true, were they working under Sakayanagi's orders? Was Sakayanagi the one leading, not Katsuragi? I needed to clarify that.

5.1

I went down to the beach to check out how Class C was doing, and see their base camp. Yesterday, this place had been filled with raucous noise. Now it was a ghost town.

“Oh wow, this is seriously a surprise! I knew he wasn’t normal, but I didn’t realize to what extent.”

I heard voices behind me, as two other people arrived.

“Did you come here to spy around too, Ayanokouji?”

It was Ichinose and Kanzaki from Class B. I wondered if they had come here to see how Class C was doing, too.

“I’m in charge of finding food. I was searching around the forest, and ended up here.”

“Even though it’s the middle of the day, I think it’s dangerous to be running around alone.”

After hearing Ichinose’s gentle warning, I nodded in agreement. While the two of them hid in the shade, they’d observed what kind of state Class C was in. As for why they were hiding, well, they had a reason.

“Oh wow, there’s no one around anymore. It’s just like you said, Kanzaki-kun. Seems like their strategy was to retire.”

Ichinose scratched her cheek and sighed in disappointment.

“We thought we could at least find out who Class C’s leader was. Was it pointless, though? If they’ve all withdrawn, we won’t be able to find any hints.”

“Didn’t Class C already use up all of their points? Even if we found out who their leader is, doesn’t that mean they won’t get a penalty?”

“They said that we wouldn’t see any negative effects during the second semester, so our points shouldn’t be able to go below zero.”

Ichinose pursed her lips, looking bored. All we could see in the former campsite was a big empty space. The only thing left was the tent the school had

provided. There were some students left playing around in the water, but it was just a question of when they'd leave.

"I don't want to compliment a strategy where you use up all your points, but it's pretty amazing."

"No matter how I look at it, it doesn't seem like it's going to work. This test is about stockpiling points so you come out positive. Ryuuen lost when he abandoned that idea."

Ichinose and Kanzaki both looked sad as they gazed upon the uninhabited beach.

"So, trying to find out who their leader is will be incredibly difficult. It's just impossible. Impossible!"

"I think that it would be a good idea to see this test through quietly, and stick to a solid plan."

"Yeah, yeah. Solid strategy is best."

I didn't know if those two were lying or telling the truth, but they weren't hiding their plans from me at all. Ichinose and Kanzaki had realized that spying on Class C was meaningless. This was the perfect opportunity. I'd reluctantly planned to ask Hirata and Kushida about Sakayanagi, but those two didn't seem well informed on the subject. Also, I wanted to avoid the students in Class D knowing about my movements as much as possible.

"I just happened to hear a little bit about this, but do Katsuragi and Sakayanagi in Class A have opposing groups?"

"It's said they really don't get along. It seems like they've quarreled pretty intensely. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing. Horikita just gave me an order. She said if I had time, to go and find out something. She wondered if this would be our chance to get back at Class A. Well, even though it's said they quarrel intensely, I imagine they'll come together during the test."

"Well, rather than coming together, I think Sakayanagi-san is taking it easy during the test. That's why everyone thinks Katsuragi-kun is the leader. Right?"

Ichinose tilted her head, seeking Kanzaki's opinion. Who could have imagined that Sakayanagi would be an absentee?

"Katsuragi is a clever guy. But even though Sakayanagi isn't around, there probably won't be anyone under her who'll put up resistance. They probably wouldn't do anything to deliberately cause a rift. There wouldn't be any merit in doing so."

If I accepted that story without question, then the two guys I ran into before were doing exactly as Katsuragi had instructed.

"Yeah. That seems like it's true. But wouldn't the students working under Sakayanagi-san be really unhappy? I mean, those two are complete opposite types. I would imagine their opinions would be clearly different, too."

"Complete opposites?"

"Liberal and conservative? Offense and defense? Persecute and protect? Those kinds of things. That's why they always seem to be clashing with each other. It's scary to think about Class A going all out in that situation. If they managed to come together, Class A would really demonstrate their true powers."

"I see. Well, I'll tell Horikita later. Ah jeez, she told me to investigate on my own. She gets flustered working with others. Well…please pretend that you didn't hear that last part. It's going to be bothersome if she gets angry with me."

"Ha ha, don't worry, we'll keep it secret. But I have to say, Horikita has a point. Supposing that two people are completely opposed to and in conflict with each other, it wouldn't be strange for them to end up destroying each other. Well, it's not like we can really do anything at this stage."

Kanzaki checked his wristwatch to confirm the time, and then suggested to Ichinose that they head back.

"It's about time for me to look for food. They'll be angry if I return empty-handed."

"Well, let's both be careful not to get hurt. Please don't do anything reckless."

I thanked Ichinose for her concern.

5.2

Let's go back to before the start of our special test on the deserted island. Let's talk about the closing ceremonies for the end of the first semester. I was feeling elated, because I was savoring the joy of being able to fully enjoy summer vacation for the first time in my life. However, the Grim Reaper appeared before me with scythe in hand to snatch away my happiness.

"Ayanokouji. I have to talk to you before you leave. Come to the faculty room." Chabashira-sensei said immediately after homeroom had ended, before she left the classroom.

"Why? Did you do something?" asked Sudou, who was ready to leave with his bag slung over his shoulder.

"I don't remember doing anything."

"Yeah. You're not good or bad. You live a plain, boring, steady life."

"Why did you sound all sarcastic?"

"Sarcastic? I didn't mean to. Did it feel like it?"

What an awful person… My wounded heart wept bitter tears. I heard someone call out to me, and supposed it was Sudou, worried about how he'd hurt me. He was a good guy.

"Hey, Sudou!"

"Hey, Horikita. Um, well, since it's summer vacation…are you free? Maybe we can hang out a little."

Sudou was crazy about Horikita, my desk neighbor.

He wasn't worried about me at all.

"Why?" she asked.

"Well, because it's summer vacation, you know? It'd be too bad if you didn't have fun. We can watch movies or go shopping."

"How stupid. It doesn't matter at all that it's summer vacation. Why are you even inviting me out in the first place?"

“‘Wh-why’? Why are you being so obtuse?”

Sudou scratched his head. He didn’t understand Horikita’s feelings, but then it was like a switch flipped.

“Well, it’s just like that, you know? Right? Guys invite girls out when it’s a holiday…”

Although I wanted to see Sudou’s efforts bear fruit with Horikita, Chabashira-sensei had called for me. It was best to get unpleasant things over with as soon as possible.

“Hey! Where are you going?” Sudou called, stopping me.

“Where do you think? I got called over by the teacher, so I don’t really have a choice.”

“Can you wait just a little? Just a bit?”

That expression grossed me out. He grabbed my wrists with his thick, meaty hands and didn’t let go.

“You’re gonna watch me do battle. Be my wingman.”

“Don’t say such nonsense—”

“Bye.”

While we bickered, Horikita finished getting ready to go and stood up from her seat. She left the classroom without any hesitation. Sudou simply watched her go, completely dumbfounded.

“Damn. Guess it was useless after all. Well, guess I’ll go do club stuff.”

Horikita’s absence meant I wasn’t needed, so I left. As I arrived at the faculty room, I saw Chabashira-sensei waiting in the doorway.

“Come in.”

“I don’t understand why you called me over.”

“We’ll talk inside.”

My “incoming depression” meter rose steadily as she met my questions with such short answers. I’d hoped she’d called me here as a joke.

“You might expect bad things when you’re asked to come to the faculty room, but contrary to your expectations, it’s a fine place. There aren’t eyes all around in here. Many things are better said with some personal privacy.”

I noticed that the security camera, which should’ve been installed in a room like this, was missing.

“So what did you want to talk to me about? I’m busy planning my summer vacation right now.”

“That’s funny. I thought you didn’t have any friends?”

“No, no, I was exaggerating when I said that. I have at least a few friends.”

Although I could count the number of friends on two hands, the quantity wasn’t important. Or at least that’s what they say. Besides, wouldn’t it have been just fine if I spent summer vacation by myself?

“I’ve called you here today because I wanted to tell you my personal story.”

Chabashira-sensei’s story? This was headed in a very different direction. I didn’t understand why she’d called me over by name and wanted to tell me her story. Nor did I have any interest.

“It’s something I haven’t talked to anyone about since I had become a homeroom teacher. It’s silly, but please listen.”

“Before that, should we have tea? You must be thirsty,” I said.

I stood up from my pipe chair and opened the kitchenette’s door. No one was inside, right?

“Don’t tell this story to anyone else. If you can do that, please return to your seat.”

“Okay.”

I closed the door and returned to sit with Chabashira-sensei.

“How do I appear to you as Class D’s homeroom teacher?”

“Another abstract question, I see. Is it okay if I say I think you’re beautiful?”

She didn’t even twitch an eyebrow when I made that joke. But I could feel her bloodlust rising.

“Umm… Well, if you don’t mind being compared to other teachers, I think you don’t care at all about Class D’s future, and that you’re a cold teacher with no interest in her students. That’s my answer.”

She wasn’t as friendly as Class B’s homeroom teacher, Hoshinomiya-sensei, nor was she as willing to help out her students like Class C’s homeroom teacher, Sakagami-sensei.

“Am I wrong?”

“No, it’s as you say. I won’t deny it. However, the truth is different.”

Chabashira-sensei paused and looked up to the ceiling, as if she’d just remembered something.

“I was once a student at this school. I was in Class D, just like you.”

“I must say that’s surprising. I would’ve thought you were more capable, Chabashira-sensei.”

“Huh… Well, in my time, the class difference wasn’t as extreme. You could say that we were in a four-way battle, not a three-way one. Up until we approached graduation in the third semester of our third year, the difference between A and D wasn’t even 100 points. It was a close battle, where even one trivial mistake could knock you off balance.”

I didn’t feel as though she were bragging. Rather, her story felt like one of regret.

“I’m guessing someone made a trivial mistake, right?”

“Yes. It happened rather unexpectedly. Class C went to hell because of my mistake. In the end, my goal of reaching Class A and my dreams were shattered.”

I felt really sorry for her, but having her bring up her past was really troublesome. If anything, it felt uncomfortable.

“I’m not catching your drift. What does this have to do with me?”

“I feel that your presence will be vital to reach Class A.”

“What am I supposed to say to that? You’re joking, right?”

I felt happy to have been praised so unexpectedly, but I didn't know how to answer.

"A few days ago, a certain man contacted the school directly. He said 'expel Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.'"

Chabashira-sensei made a complete change of topic. She was getting to the true issue.

"He said to expel me? Well, that's nonsense. I don't know who it was, but you ignored his request and won't have me expelled. Right?"

"Of course. We can't just expel someone on a third party's whim. As long as you are a student at this school, you are protected by the rules. However…if you cause any problems, that's a different story. Smoking, bullying, stealing, cheating… If you cause any scandal, expulsion is unavoidable."

"I'm sorry, but I don't intend to do anything."

"It has nothing to do with your intentions. If I determine that something seems like an issue, it will become reality."

"Are you threatening me?" I found her wording suspicious.

"Here's the deal, Ayanokouji. You are going to aim for Class A for me. I will follow up as extensively as I can in order to protect you. Don't you think that sounds like a good offer?"

I'd thought she had changed a lot from when I first met her, but I never could've imagined she would blackmail a student. I laughed.

"Can I go now? I won't listen to any more of this."

"That's too bad, Ayanokouji. You will be expelled, and once again, Class D won't reach Class A."

Her speech and behavior weren't just for show. She seriously intended to cut me. She was placing her unachieved dreams on my shoulders.

"Let me ask you once more. Will you aim for Class A? Or be expelled? You choose."

With my left hand, I reached over the desk and grabbed Chabashira-sensei's

collar.

“I remember when Horikita said you made her feel uncomfortable. I wonder if she felt like this. It’s like entering someone’s home with shoes on.”

“Right.” Chabashira-sensei, who’d behaved with confidence until then, laughed in self-deprecation. “I surprised myself. I realize now that I still haven’t given up on reaching Class A.”

Her eyes had gotten slightly misty. Her usual cold indifference was gone. When she grabbed my left arm, my hand still grasping her collar, I saw the forceful determination had returned to her eyes.

“I’d thought you would lead Class D voluntarily, but we don’t have any time to waste. You have to decide here and now. Will you help me or not?”

Luke, *Star Wars*’ protagonist, originally chose to return to his uncle’s farm and reject the call to adventure. However, he was eventually dragged into the horrors of war. That was his destiny. You might say I should’ve taken this woman’s story with a grain of salt. I didn’t know how much of it was true.

“You’ll probably regret trying to use me.”

“Relax. My life is already full of regrets.”

That was the troublesome event that launched my summer vacation. It was something I didn’t like to think about. At any rate, I couldn’t lose my current school life. Throwing away your freedom in order to protect it… How ridiculous.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Ryuuen Kakeru
CLASS:	First Year, Class C
STUDENT ID:	S01T004711
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	October 20th



EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	D
INTELLIGENCE:	B
DECISION MAKING:	A
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	B
COOPERATIVENESS:	D–

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

Although it's said that he's caused numerous problems since middle school, there isn't any reliable evidence, so there are some doubts regarding the extent of that claim. However, as far as academic abilities are concerned, he doesn't appear to work seriously, nor does he seem to be demonstrating his true abilities. He's a good student, and he has brought Class C together thanks to his decision-making skills and his unique brand of charisma. We hope to see improvement both in his strong and weak areas.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

Although I myself have had doubts regarding his behavior, I expect much of him as a central figure in Class C.

Chapter 6:
False Teamwork

While I was sleeping, I could hear girls' voices from outside the tent. They sounded like they were in a bad mood.

"Hey, boys. Can you all gather around?"

The voice sounded rough, like she'd meant to say, "Hurry and wake already!" I'd just gotten to sleep at dawn, so I rose slowly and rubbed my eyes.

"What the hell? God, I'm so goddamn tired…" An irritated Sudou appeared from the tent and looked around.

"What's wrong?" Hirata asked.

"Ah, Hirata-kun. I'm sorry, but can you please wake all of the boys? It's serious," said Shinohara, sounding apologetic.

Whether she was flustered or angry, the issue didn't seem to be hers alone. A little further away, the girls glared at us.

"I understand. I think if I shout, they'll come."

Within two minutes, the boys came out of the tent rubbing their sleepy eyes. When the half-asleep boys looked around, they inferred that this situation was especially alarming. The girls all looked unusually scared.

"What's going on? Why did you wake us up so early?"

"Sorry, Hirata-kun. This doesn't involve you, but…we've gathered everyone to confirm something."

Shinohara gave everyone except Hirata a look of complete contempt.

"Well, this morning…Karuizawa-san's underwear went missing. Do you know what this means?"

"U-underwear?"

Even Hirata, usually calm and collected, appeared visibly shaken. Speaking of Karuizawa, she was missing, along with some of her friends.

“Karuizawa-san is crying inside the tent right now. Kushida-san and others are comforting her right now, but…” Shinohara looked over to the girls’ tent.

“Huh? Huh? What? Why are you glaring at *us* over her underwear being missing?”

“Isn’t that obvious? Someone went through her bag in the middle of the night and stole them. Our luggage was outside the tent, so if someone wanted to steal something, they easily could have!”

The boys, still in a state of drowsiness, all exchanged looks.

“No, no, no, no! Huh?! Huh?!”

Ike, in a complete panic, looked back and forth between the boys and girls. One of the boys who’d been observing all this grumbled calmly.

“Come to think of it, Ike, you were pretty late getting back from the toilet yesterday. You took a really long time.”

“No, no, no! That was just, well…I was struggling because it was dark!”

“Is that so? You stole Karuizawa’s underwear, didn’t you?”

“Y-you’re wrong! I didn’t do it!”

The boys started blaming one another for this particularly nasty crime.

“Anyway. This is a huge problem, don’t you agree? It’s impossible for us to camp alongside a bunch of underwear thieves,” said Shinohara, her arms crossed. She looked as though she was going to lose her temper.

“Hirata-kun, can you find the culprit?”

“Well, there’s no evidence that the boys stole it. Maybe Karuizawa lost it.”

“Yeah, that’s right! We have nothing to do with this!” The boys shouted behind Hirata, proclaiming their innocence.

“I don’t want to think there’s a criminal among us.”

Doubting our classmates seemed wrong.

“I know that you’re not the culprit, Hirata-kun. But for the time being, let’s check the boys’ luggage.”

Apparently, the girls weren't changing their minds on this. They had decided that the culprit was on the boys' side. Well, I supposed that it was only natural to think that.

"Huh? Don't give us that crap. We don't need to do that. Hirata, tell them no."

"For now, we'll try gathering the guys together and talking it out. Can you please give us a little time?" Hirata asked.

"If you say so, Hirata-kun. I understand. I'll try talking to Karuizawa-san. But if the culprit can't be found, we have some ideas."

With that, everyone scattered. Hirata quickly gathered all the boys in front of the tent.

"Let's just ignore what the girls said. I hate being treated like a suspect. I'll fight it!"

Ike had managed to get some degree of trust from the girls on the first day, but apparently it wasn't meant to last. It was only natural that the boys would be unhappy about being unjustly accused.

"Exactly. It's not like we stole Karuizawa's underwear or anything."

Yamauchi exchanged looks with everyone individually. It wasn't as though Karuizawa wasn't cute or anything, but since Karuizawa was Hirata's girlfriend, it would've been a much better idea to go after Kushida and Sakura.

"I don't doubt you guys, but we won't solve the problem like this."

The girls, who were talking together in their cliques, looked like they were about to jump on us.

"It might be better to just accept the baggage inspection with dignity and prove your innocence." With that, Hirata brought out his own bag.

"As miserable as this might be, I think you guys'll have to do it. Are you okay with that?"

"B-but…"

"Of course. I'll open up my luggage first," Hirata said.

In order to get us all to move, he had no choice but to take action. Still, there probably wasn't even one person here who thought Hirata was the culprit. Besides, you could say that stealing his own girlfriend's underwear made no sense. However, if one person opened his luggage, then the rest of us couldn't help but follow. Inevitably, the students who wouldn't open their bags would be suspected. Hirata's bag naturally didn't have the underwear.

"Guess we don't have any choice…"

All the other boys began pulling bags out, one after another. Ike and Yamauchi hated it, but couldn't resist being pulled in. The three of us were the last to go. I reluctantly headed into the tent, following after Ike and Yamauchi.

"Damn, I'm so pissed. Men are always being suspected of stuff. It's way too unreasonable."

"Well, let's prove our innocence." Ike grabbed his bag, but suddenly froze.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing…"

He turned his back on Hirata and the others, checked the inside of his bag, and frantically closed it back up.

"Kanji?"

Ike's face was pale, his body stiff. He was completely paralyzed. "Hey, come on. Let's hurry and get going."

"What, you're the one that really stole them?" said Yamauchi, half-jokingly.

"Th-that's crazy talk!"

Ike frantically denied it, shaking his head while clutching his bag. What a blatant overreaction. We weren't dumb enough to believe nothing was wrong.

"Wait, don't tell me…" Yamauchi said.

"What? You don't believe me?!"

"No, I'm not saying that. Show me what's in your bag."

"Ah, wait!"

Yamauchi snatched Ike's bag to check inside. When he did, he saw…white underwear, definitely not a man's, balled up and hidden.

"Th-that's not mine! Someone put it in my bag or something, somehow!"

"Come on, don't give me that excuse…"

Yamauchi looked at Ike with pity.

"I'm telling you, I don't know how it got there! Why would there be underwear in my bag?!"

"This is shameful. Let's go explain things to Hirata and the others."

"Huh?! But if I do that, they'll make me out to be the culprit!"

"There was no culprit…right?"

Why was Yamauchi asking Ike? Ike had Karuizawa's underwear in his bag, making Ike the culprit, right? Putting aside when and how he stole the underwear, the thief likely wouldn't have hidden the stolen goods in his own bag. It was obvious that in the case of an uproar, a search for the criminal would begin. If Ike was really guilty, he should've been panicking when he was told to open his luggage. But I hadn't seen the slightest hint of that.

I concluded that someone other than Ike was the culprit, and that person had planted evidence to frame Ike. Unless Ike really was that stupid and simple…but he couldn't be, right?

"Ayanokouji, you believe me, right? That I didn't steal them?!"

"Well, if I think calmly, no solid evidence suggests you're the culprit, Ike."

"Ayanokouji!" he cried.

"It's unlikely that Ike is the culprit. If he were, this would be far too stupid of him."

"Well, that sounds right, but… Wait, what? You mean someone put the underwear in Kanji's bag?"

"We just have to figure out who!" Ike cried.

"Hey, hurry up!" one of the boys by Hirata cried.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-what am I gonna do? I’m in serious trouble!”

If the stolen item were found here, the girls would probably determine that Ike was the culprit.

“We have no choice but to hide them. Now.”

“Hide them? Where?! We can’t hide them!”

It was certainly true that we currently lacked storage options. If the girls saw us hurry to the toilet or into the tents, they’d become suspicious and demand to search that area. Most importantly, we were spending too much time in here. It wouldn’t be surprising if we were already under suspicion.

“We have no other choice. You have to put it in your pocket.”

That was the only advice I could give. There wasn’t any time to hide the underwear anyplace else, and we didn’t want to draw attention to ourselves.

“I-I can’t do it! I-I’m already panicking!”

Still, hiding the underwear was our only option.

“I’ll leave it to you, Ayanokouji!”

Ike removed quickly thrust the balled-up underwear into my hands.

“Huh?”

“If you think it’s better to hide them, you can do it. Right?”

“Well, that’s…”

“Hey, hurry up!” someone called.

“I’m coming now!”

Ike muttered, “I’m counting on you,” and scurried off. Yamauchi, not wanting to get dragged into it, quickly apologized and hurried away.

“Hey, are you serious?”

I broke out into a cold sweat. The longer I stayed, the worse this would get. If I’d had a minute, I’d have hidden it someplace difficult to find, but there was no time. Impulsively, I stuffed the underwear into my back pocket, took my bag, and headed back to the others.

“Sorry, sorry. My bag got a little dirty, so I cleaned it off.”

With that excuse, Ike tossed over his luggage.

“Search it if you gotta. I’m innocent. Right, Yamauchi?”

“Y-yeah.”

The two proudly placed their bags down. Hirata, after lightly declining the duty, inspected the inside of the bags. I also set my bag down and moved away. After everyone’s luggage had been inspected, Ike called over Shinohara, who was waiting with her arms crossed.

“We searched everyone’s bags. None of us did it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. There’s no doubt. None of the boys are the culprit.”

“Wait a moment.”

Shinohara drew nearer and checked the inside of the tent. She seemed suspicious, as though we’d hidden something. Of course, there wasn’t anything there. After inspecting the two tents, Shinohara went back to the girls once again and discussed the situation.

“Hey, Hirata-kun. Could they have hidden it in their pockets? Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun, and even Ayanokouji-kun were whispering a little earlier. It’s got me curious.”

Of course we were being sneaky. The girls had demanded to check every nook and cranny.

“Jeez, enough is enough!” Ike cried.

The girls began to attack him.

“Wasn’t Ike-kun acting all suspicious earlier? Maybe he *is* hiding something after all?”

“Huh?! I-I’m not hiding anything! Search me if you gotta!”

He spread his arms wide as he proclaimed his innocence. *Hey, Ike… If you tell them to do that, then…*

“Let’s search him. Hirata-kun, can you do it?”

“Okay. If it convinces the girls, fine. However, if I don’t find anything, I want you to stop investigating the boys.”

This was the worst possible outcome. While the girls watched Ike, Yamauchi, and me, the pat-down commenced. Of course, they wouldn’t find the underwear on either Ike or Yamauchi. They kept still throughout Hirata’s careful search, and he checked them thoroughly. Finally, it was my turn.

It was already too late to escape. Perhaps it was better that it was me. No, that wasn’t true. There wasn’t anything I could do now. Hopefully Hirata might overlook it, even if there was only a one percent chance he would. I decided to be perfectly still, like a dead fish.

“I’m sorry. It’ll be over soon,” Hirata said.

Hirata, who didn’t doubt me whatsoever, slowly started to search me, starting with my upper body. Then, Hirata put his hand into my back pocket, where I’d stuffed the underwear.

It was all over, wasn’t it?

I resigned myself. I felt Hirata’s hand touching the underwear. Well, I couldn’t be completely sure Hirata was touching was the underwear, but I suspected he was touching that rolled-up piece of cloth in my pocket. Hirata’s body stiffened, and he looked me in the eyes. After a brief glance, Hirata examined my jersey without taking the underwear out of my pocket. Finished, he turned back toward the girls.

“Ayanokouji-kun doesn’t have them either.”

He walked toward Shinohara. Ike and Yamauchi exchanged shocked looks.

“Those three didn’t take them.”

“That’s weird… I thought for sure it was one of them. But if you say so, Hirata-kun…”

If the overwhelmingly honest Hirata said something, Shinohara had no choice but to believe him.

“It should be fine once I tidy up the luggage. We can discuss it more after.”

After the inspection had come to an end, I hurried back inside the tent. Hirata followed me.

“Hirata. Why didn’t you tell them?” I asked, straight out.

“That was the underwear in your pocket, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you…take Karuizawa’s underwear, Ayanokouji-kun?”

“No. I didn’t.”

How would this fine young man respond to my denial?

“I believe you. You’re not that kind of person. But why did you have them in your pocket?”

There was no way I couldn’t tell him the truth after he said that he believed me. I told him they came from Ike’s bag. Hirata looked momentarily lost in thought.

“I see. So it definitely wasn’t you. But I don’t think Ike-kun or Yamauchi-kun did it, either. If they were the culprits, they probably wouldn’t put the underwear in their own bags. They would have hidden it in another place.”

Hirata’s usual quick-wittedness had saved me. I didn’t need to go to the bother of trying to explain.

“If it’s all right with you, may I hold onto the underwear?” he asked.

“Sure, but…is that really all right?”

Holding the underwear was exactly like holding the Joker in a deck of cards. They were both trouble to deal with.

“In the worst-case scenario, if I’m made out to be the culprit, I would take the least amount of damage. I am her boyfriend, more or less.”

After saying that, he took one of the vinyl toilet bags and put the underwear inside. I wondered if it would be painful for Karuizawa to know people were touching her underwear with their bare hands.

“But we did find out one piece of bad news here. If the underwear came out of Ike-kun’s bag, then there’s a high chance that the culprit is someone in our

class.”

“Yeah…”

No matter how you looked at it, if a student from another class had been loitering around, we would’ve seen them. After exiting the tent, I scanned my surroundings. Our bags were individually wrapped in vinyl and placed in front of our tent. The girls’ tent was a few meters away, where Karuizawa and the others slept. Until this whole incident, the girls’ luggage had been piled up out front, unprotected, like ours. If you wanted to steal something, you easily could do so. I was easily able to rifle through Ibuki’s bag on the first day.

When had the underwear been stolen? Since there were no problems up until it was time to take a shower, the crime had happened sometime between eight o’clock last night and seven o’clock this morning. If that were the case, anyone in our class could have done it. However, I doubted that the crime had been carried out in the middle of the night. If the culprit were rifling through luggage with a flashlight, someone would have noticed.

In that case, it was very likely that the crime had been carried out around sunrise, after five o’clock in the morning. Even if I’d narrowed down the crime’s timeframe, it was still difficult to narrow down the list of culprits. What if I tried changing my perspective? Say Karuizawa stole her own underwear and hid it in Ike’s bag. But what reason would she have for doing that?

“I believe you’re not the culprit, Ayanokouji-kun. That’s why I saved you.”

“O-oh. Thank you.”

“But that’s not all I want to say. I want you to help me find the real culprit, Ayanokouji-kun.”

Hirata took my hand as he made his request.

“You want *me* to find the culprit?”

“I think people, both guys and girls, will be uneasy until the thief’s found. To be honest, it would probably be best if *I* found the culprit, but it looks like it’ll be difficult to get everyone together…” A class star like Hirata had certain restrictions.

“I don’t think it’ll be easy to find someone who would hide things in Ike’s bag.”

Hirata should have known that finding the criminal would be difficult.

“Well, I’ll do what I can. Just don’t expect too much of me.”

“Thank you! Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun!” said Hirata, almost hugging me and bowing his head deeply. I understood Hirata was thankful, but felt his reaction was a bit excessive. Perhaps the underwear theft was really bothering him, in particular. As a leader, he had to respond seriously to the crisis and try to find a resolution for the class.

“If you do happen to find the culprit, I want you to tell me first. I definitely do not want you to tell anyone else.”

His ability to widen his eyes while making such a sincere appeal pretty much destroyed my ability to say no. He looked almost too calm. It was a little eerie.

“If that information becomes public knowledge, our class will suffer a huge blow. I want to avoid that. That’s why I want to find a peaceful method of settling things with the culprit. If it’s coming from me, I think that we’ll be able to resolve the issue through talking.”

“So, in other words, you’re going to hide the truth?”

“Hide it? That’s a poor choice of words, but there’s nothing I can do about it if people take it that way. Even if one of the guys turns out to the be the culprit, I think it’s better that the truth be concealed.”

He focused on me. It was almost as if he meant to protect the culprit.

“I understand. I’ll report to you first. Is that good?”

“Thank you. Well then, I’ll be getting back to work.”

Upon exiting the tent, Hirata called out to the other students. I saw multiple silhouettes on the other side of the sheet begin to recede.

“Hirata Yousuke. Are you Class D’s hero?”

There was one contradiction in Hirata’s story. Right after he said he believed in me, he immediately said the truth ought to be concealed even if the culprit

was one of the guys. In other words, even if someone had the underwear, we'd hide it from the girls.

Hirata didn't have complete trust in me. He probably assumed there was a high chance I was the culprit. That was only natural, of course. From an outsider's perspective, I was the one holding the underwear, and I'd offered up Ike's name as the culprit. Hirata assigned me, a potential suspect, the role of detective to offer me a lifeline. At the same time, he'd issued a warning not to commit the offense a second time.

Thinking this way, I was able to get a grasp on the story. I was certain that he just wanted to cover up the truth. I had also tentatively considered that Hirata might be the culprit, but…well, I supposed we would know soon enough.

6.1

“Could everyone please gather around?”

When I exited the tent, Hirata’s meeting had begun. I saw Karuizawa trembling with anger, her eyes puffy and red.

“We can’t trust the guys. It’s absolutely impossible for us to stay in the same place as them!”

“But there would be problems if the guys and girls lived apart, don’t you think? The test is almost over. Because we’re all friends, we need to believe in and cooperate with one another.”

“You might be right. But we can’t stand being in the same place as underwear thieves!”

Karuizawa shook her head, dismissing the notion as impossible. If the victim said so, Hirata couldn’t really force her. Shinohara took a tree branch and drew a line.

“We think the culprit is a boy, so we’re drawing a dividing line between boys and girls. Boys are absolutely prohibited from entering our side.”

Shinohara’s proposal was gender-based separation to an extreme.

“What the hell? You’re just arbitrarily treating us like criminals. Didn’t we let you check our bags and give us pat-downs?”

“It might not have been hidden in a bag, though. Men are perverts. Anyway, don’t enter the girls’ territory until the culprit has been found. Go over there.”

With that, she demanded that the boys move their tent. As expected, the guys were not convinced. Booing commenced.

“If you doubt us, then move your own tent. We’re not moving ours, and we’re not helping you, either.”

“Ah, I see. Yeah, you only pretended to help out while you fished through our luggage.”

“Oh, and you aren’t allowed to use the shower anymore. We’re not joking.

We're not about to let a perverted thief use it."

Our class unity had completely broken down.

"Heh. Can you guys even drive in the tent stakes?"

Shinohara, feeling like the situation was taking a turn, looked to Hirata to save them.

"Hey, Hirata-kun. Can you help us, for Karuizawa-san's sake?"

"Okay. I'll help. It might take some time, though. Is that okay?"

"Thank you, Hirata-kun. Aren't you glad, Karuizawa-san?"

"Yeah, Hirata-kun is the only one we can trust."

Karuizawa, looking happy and a bit bashful, blushed.

"Heh. Hirata might even be the culprit."

"Huh? Hirata-kun is *not* the culprit. What a stupid thing to say. Why don't you go jump off a cliff?"

"What?! Don't give me that crap, Karuizawa. Just because he's your boyfriend doesn't mean he's not the culprit!"

Naturally, more and more complaints came from the guys, but their words fell on deaf ears. Everyone except for Hirata was a suspect, so there wasn't anything to be done about it. We quickly reached an impasse, with Karuizawa and Shinohara in complete control.

"Wait a minute. I'd like to raise an objection—especially against you, Karuizawa-san." Horikita spoke up, calmly and firmly opposing Karuizawa.

"What is it, Horikita-san? Are you not satisfied with what we're saying?"

"I don't particularly mind dividing up the living areas for men and women. As long as the culprit hasn't been found, it *is* certainly a good idea to keep our distance from the men, considering the likelihood that the culprit is among them. However, I don't trust Hirata-kun. I cannot dismiss the possibility that he might be the underwear thief. Also, I'm unconvinced that he should be excluded from the ban on men."

"Hirata-kun would *never* do such a thing. Can't you at least understand that?"

“That’s just your personal belief, isn’t it? Don’t force your way of thinking on me.”

Karuizawa stepped closer to Horikita, looking like she didn’t approve of Horikita’s attitude.

“Hirata-kun is definitely not the culprit. You don’t even have friends, let alone a boyfriend. You probably wouldn’t understand.”

“Don’t make me repeat myself. Nothing you can say will convince me.” Despite provocation, Horikita was unperturbed, responding in a detached manner.

“Well, let me ask *you* something. Would you say there are no other guys as trustworthy as Hirata-kun? Or are there?”

“I won’t speak impulsively. Simply put, I would be fine if you increased the number by one more guy. If you did, they’d be effective in watching each other’s backs.”

“This isn’t a joke. *My* underwear was stolen, right? I’ve been humiliated! Don’t you understand? I don’t know what we’ll do when the culprit is found.”

“Might this be happening due to your naïve handling of crisis management? Maybe there is an ulterior motive for stealing the underwear that we don’t yet understand.”

“What the heck do you mean, crisis management?! We searched everyone’s bags. What’s naïve about that?!”

“I don’t care that your underwear was stolen. That kind of thing happens every day, and there’s nothing you can really do about it. It’s likely someone here bears a grudge against you.”

Horikita was considering the possibility that the culprit’s ultimate goal hadn’t been Karuizawa’s underwear. The culprit wanted to lash out at Karuizawa and deliberately humiliate her. Horikita was free to reason things out as she liked, but wasn’t airing that idea out in public in front of Karuizawa kind of a bad move? I suppose you could call socializing Horikita’s weak point. She was smart, but had difficulty relating to other people.

If Karuizawa were provoked in front of such a large crowd, she'd grow more hurt and irritated. Then, her ire wouldn't be directed at just the boys, but probably at Horikita, too.

"Listen here, you!" Karuizawa looked like she was on the verge of losing her temper, until Hirata jumped out beside her in a dashing manner.

"Karuizawa-san, it would be great if we could have another guy here help me out. Is that okay?" He'd adopted the role of mediator once again.

"B-but…how can I trust anyone other than you, Hirata-kun?"

"How about me?" asked Ike, raising his hand.

He'd just been fighting with Shinohara, and now he was raising his hand?

"Wait. If it's physical work, I'll do it!" Sudou quickly raised his hand.

"Wait. If you're looking for the guy with the skills, then I'm your man!" said Yamauchi.

No matter how heated their arguments with the girls, they couldn't help but want to get closer to them.

"S-stop joking around. We can't just casually invite a pervert to help us. I wouldn't be surprised if one of you were the culprit. Or do you think these guys are okay, Horikita-san?"

"I agree with you. Considering how these three behave on a daily basis, they are completely untrustworthy. I've thought it over very carefully, and I intend to choose someone who can't be the culprit."

"Who? Is there someone other than Hirata-kun?"

I regarded the male students. Was there any guy who could put her at ease, next to Hirata? Yukimura was brilliant, but had his share of disputes with the girls. Who could it be?

"You. Ayanokouji-kun."

Huh? Why me? *How* me? My mouth fell open, and I stood there, flabbergasted.

"Ha ha ha! Don't make me laugh. He's your only friend, isn't he? There's

absolutely no way I can trust such a gloomy, lecherous wallflower," Karuizawa said.

I didn't especially care what people thought about me, but it seemed like many had written me off as "that guy" or "a gloomy lecher." Was this the pathetic fate that awaited a loner who couldn't even make friends in his first semester of school?

"If anything, I think Ayanokouji-kun is the culprit. He was acting all sneaky this morning, which was pretty suspicious."

Upon finding the underwear in Ike's bag, I had been pretty inefficient and slow. Well, it was true that I'd had Karuizawa's underwear in my hands at the time, which *did* make me pretty suspicious.

"It's possible… Ayanokouji-kun *was* at the bonfire until late last night…"

The girls' doubts had intensified, and I had become their next target. Doubters began to appear from the boys' side, too. Ike and Yamauchi feigned ignorance. Even if I stayed silent or tried to explain, the situation was going downhill. I opted to just keep silent. No matter how much the girls doubted me, Hirata was holding the evidence, and wouldn't make me out to be the culprit. However, despite knowing the truth, being suspected certainly felt terrible.

"Ayanokouji-kun really *is* the underwear thief, isn't he? He's not making any excuses. He's gazed at Karuizawa-san with lewd looks before, hasn't he?"

I heard a doubtful voice from the girls' side. I couldn't recall having looked at Karuizawa in a lewd manner before, but right now there wasn't anything I could do to conveniently modify my memory.

"Um… I don't think that A-Ayanokouji-kun would do such a thing…"

I'd thought that all the girls doubted me and no one would back me, but someone rather unexpected spoke up for me. Sakura, cowering behind everyone with her back arched, fidgeted bashfully while she spoke out in my favor. I couldn't have imagined a girl who disliked being noticed more than anything doing such a bold thing.

"Huh? What do you mean? Why would you say that?" answered Karuizawa, seemingly upset about Sakura speaking out.

The sheepish, nervous Sakura was an easy target for such a popular girl. Sakura was definitely easier to confront than Horikita. In an instant, Karuizawa changed her target, lashing out at Sakura with her words as if sinking her teeth into prey.

“Huh? Why? How do you know that? How do *you* know Ayanokouji-kun isn’t the culprit?”

“Well…that’s because…he isn’t that kind of person.” Sakura was backed into a corner, and barely managed to squeak out her fearful answer.

“Huh? I don’t understand what you mean. That’s not an answer.” Karuizawa folded her arms and laughed mockingly at Sakura. “Oh? Could it be that Sakura-san *likes* someone plain and invisible like Ayanokouji-kun?”

Rather than saying it contemptuously, Karuizawa said it as though it were reasonable to assume. It would’ve been fine if Sakura had just shrugged off such remarks, but she took them on.

“Y-you’re wrong!” Sakura stumbled back in a panic, her face completely red.

“Whoa! That’s such an obvious reaction. It’s like what an elementary-schooler would do!”

The other girls joined Karuizawa in laughing out loud.

“That’s…! W-well… Ah!”

“Heh, isn’t that a good thing, though? You like him, and no one else does, right? Hey, will you confess to him here? I’ll even help you out!”

“Ah!”

Sakura, unable to bear this attention any longer, ran off into the forest. Kushida chased after her, wisely judging it dangerous for someone to go into the woods alone.

“What was that about? I was just teasing her. Jeez, that’s why she can’t make any friends.”

Horikita, who had silently watched Karuizawa’s public excoriation of Sakura, sighed and brushed a hand through her hair, as if she’d observed something completely boring.

“Is it okay for us to continue the discussion now? This farce is a waste of time.”

“Hey, Horikita-san. The way you talk is hurtful and annoying.” Karuizawa, losing interest in Sakura after she’d run away, made Horikita her target once again. “Okay, Horikita-san. Why are you so cold to me? Did something happen?”

“Something? What ‘something’?”

“Well, isn’t Hirata-kun so cool? He’s smart, too, and he’s even kind to a girl like you. Any normal girl would fall for him.”

Giggling, Karuizawa tugged on Hirata’s arm and pulled him close, as if to boast.

“I suppose I’d say that Ayanokouji-kun is… Well, as for his looks, he’s probably better than most other guys, but isn’t he awful in every other way? You’re probably just jealous. That’s what I think.”

“You’re naïve, Karuizawa-san.”

“It’s shameful to be so jealous.”

I’d heard that the behavior of the collective could bring out an individual person’s position, personality, and psychological state. Some things that couldn’t be voiced in our daily lives at school had started to come to the surface here. This was especially true for Horikita, who was often alone. The other girls in our class treated her poorly, but she managed to get along because, well, she just didn’t care. Both parties ignored each other. Since everyone had to live together now, a clash of tempers was inevitable.

“It’s certainly true that Ayanokouji-kun has many unlikable qualities,” Horikita said.

Hey…I thought you would’ve backed me up…

“But we need to ask if Hirata-kun can trust Ayanokouji-kun. It would only be awkward and uncomfortable if you endorsed someone meaningless to Hirata-kun. The truth is, there is not one thing that I trust about him, but I have no intention of inserting my own personal feelings into the matter. By process of

elimination, I've concluded that he is the most trustworthy boy in the class. Or is another boy in our class preferable? If there is, I'd like for you to tell me."

After Horikita finished, Karuizawa glanced over at the boys as if to evaluate them, and sighed.

"Well, I suppose that out of all the guys here, he seems the most harmless. He has no presence."

I couldn't help but agree with that point. The girl's perception was too harsh.

"Well, isn't that good? I have my doubts, but if Hirata-kun is comfortable with this, it'll do."

It seemed as though Karuizawa and the other girls had chosen me, but I wasn't really convinced. Of course, I didn't dare breathe a word of that. There'd only be another fight. Immediately after the discussion had ended, everyone started to disperse. Our class unity had broken down.

"I understand what everyone wants to say here, but I disagree with suspecting a classmate without evidence. There shouldn't be anyone in our class who'd do such an awful thing," said Hirata, unable to stay silent about our worsening situation.

"You're way too kind, Hirata-kun. So you're saying someone else stole it?"

"I don't know, but I don't want to doubt my classmates."

The guys probably felt lousy being thought of as criminals by the girls.

"Hey. What if it was that girl, Ibuki?" someone muttered, shooting a look over at Ibuki, who sat at the far edge of the camp.

Instantly, everyone's doubts were aimed at Ibuki. The collective had found new prey.

"Ibuki-chan is from Class C, right? It wouldn't be strange if she were working to sabotage Class D. She could be using tricks to make us doubt each other."

"Knock it off, you guys. The boys are without a doubt the prime suspects."

Shinohara remained highly suspicious of the boys. She kept her distance, gesturing with her hands for us to leave.

“Until the culprit is found, we definitely can’t trust the boys. Right, Karuizawa-san?”

“Naturally. One of the boys definitely did it.”

And so it was decided that the guys and girls would live separately.

6.2

I've said it again and again, but Hirata Yousuke is a really cool guy. I don't even mean his appearance, but rather, his principled actions. He took the initiative to do troublesome things that ordinary people didn't want to do, and he conducted himself respectfully even when responding to opponents. Hirata, in cooperation with the girls, was setting up their two tents further away from the guys. Meanwhile, I was tasked with carrying the stakes for the tent, driving them into the ground, and fixing them in place.

Although I had a hard time at first, what with the stakes slipping loose, I'd soon managed to secure the first tent. It was surprisingly easy. Currently, I was sweaty and pounding in the stakes for the second tent with a hammer. Hirata came around and helped by stretching the rope out and giving me a hand driving in the stakes.

"I'm sorry. I've put you in a tough spot again."

The other guys were outside, either playing around or fishing.

"Ah, it's okay. You don't have to apologize, Hirata. If anything, I'd feel bad to leave it all to you."

"Oh, it's not all bad. I do it freely." His sincere smile only enhanced his coolness.

"This question might come off as weird, but why do you work so hard?"

"Work so hard? I don't intend to work all that hard. I just do what needs to be done." Hirata said that in a way that wasn't boastful. He was dripping with sweat, and wiped himself off with the towel he had hanging around his neck. "I think this special test isn't actually some kind of battle, but more an important opportunity for us all to become closer. That's why I want to cherish this moment. I'm glad to work hard for that."

I wondered how it was possible for an ordinary person to be so overflowing with good intentions without actually being two-faced. Wanting to be liked by others, wanting to be showered with attention—most people would think like that, but I didn't get that impression from Hirata at all. I felt that he just wanted

to be good.

“All right, we have about half left. Let’s hurry up and get this done.”

The two of us went over to the other side to hammer in the remaining stakes.

“Hirata-kun! Come here for a minute!”

Karuizawa and the other girls called Hirata’s name. In an instant they’d surrounded him, and began tugging on his arms.

“Hey, come on, come here!”

“Ah, I still have work left to do, though,” he said.

“Isn’t it okay to just leave that to Ayanokouji-kun? Can’t you?” they said, yanking him forcefully.

Seeing Hirata’s troubled face, I let him go, even though I thought it’d be a bother.

“I can do this. Go.”

“No, but it’s hard for one person to¾”

“It’s okay, there’s only a little left.”

“S-sorry. Thank you. I’ll be right back.”

Although I kind of got the impression the girls had an ulterior motive, they went ahead and pulled Hirata into the woods so fast he didn’t catch my words. He probably wouldn’t be back right away. I watched Hirata walk off, then took the hammer in hand and hoped I’d get another chance to plumb his many mysteries. I continued my work, and managed to finish it all myself before Hirata returned.

“It took more time to finish it alone than I thought it would…”

There were a lot of things that concerned me, like the tent’s orientation, the stake placement, and the tension of the rope. It was nearly ten o’clock. What should I do now? I couldn’t afford to make a mistake now that the situation was getting dicey. But first, I needed to refresh my physical strength. Working under the blazing sun was way too harsh.

“Do you have a minute?” Ibuki asked.

I'd thought I'd rest for a while, but I guess that wasn't to be.

"What you were talking about this morning sounded really serious. The underwear incident, I mean. I mean, Class D isn't a monolith."

"Well, I guess. Our various troubles are never-ending."

"Whatever the reason, stealing a girl's underwear is unforgivable."

Right, but why was she talking to me about this? Yamauchi had taken Ibuki in, not me, and Kushida's group was looking after her. We'd only spoken a little before, so there shouldn't have been any particular reason for her to talk to me.

"Do you doubt me, by any chance?"

Ibuki had apparently seen Shinohara and the others treat me like a criminal this morning.

"Are you the culprit?" she asked.

"No, I'm not."

"Okay, that's good. Well, it's not like I had any evidence or anything. It looks like some of the girls trust you and that boy Hirata. I think the chance of you being a villain is low."

She'd probably come to that conclusion after hearing the exchange between Karuizawa and Horikita.

"Do you have any idea who the culprit is?"

"Right now, no. I really don't want to doubt the other guys."

"So who do you think did it?"

She'd asked that question as if she were testing me. Ibuki glanced at me out of the corner of her eye when she said that. When I didn't respond, Ibuki continued talking.

"If a boy isn't the culprit, then they'll suspect me—the stranger—next. I'm absolutely certain some people have already said something about me. After all, I could've just made it look like the guys stole the underwear. Right?"

Ibuki laughed self-deprecatingly, perhaps because she was fully aware she was already a suspect. In response to that, I spoke impulsively.

“I think I trust you, at the very least. I doubt you’re the culprit.”

I’d answered Ibuki without hesitation. She looked a bit surprised, like she wanted to verify what I said was true. When our eyes met, she looked away.

“Thank you. I didn’t think you would say something like that.”

“I just gave you an honest answer.”

I was able to understand Ibuki just by looking into her eyes.

I concluded that Ibuki had stolen the underwear from Karuizawa’s bag and hidden it in Ike’s luggage.

6.3

It was the end of the special test's fifth day, and Class D was depressed. It was like we were holding an all-night vigil over a dead body. A whole day had passed with everyone jumping at shadows. Everyone was suspicious, and no one knew who the culprit was. Despite the oppressive atmosphere, it was my turn to get the fire going. As I watched the fire's condition, I occasionally tossed in some branches. It was monotonous, easy work. We had other problems, though.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun! Didn't we tell you to move the tent properly?"

"I moved it like I was told."

"It needs to be more to the left. Otherwise we're too near the guys."

"Okay."

The girls made unreasonable requests of me, and I had to reluctantly accept. The girls seemed resentful.

"It must be really *tough*, being forced to do routine chores," Horikita said.

"That's rich, coming from you. This wouldn't have happened if you hadn't had recommended me unnecessarily."

"There was no other way. Hirata-kun can't be trusted, and I needed insurance."

"You're the only one in class who doesn't trust Hirata. Life's better when you stop believing that all people are two-faced."

"I suppose that's true. I'm certainly not two-faced."

That was an understatement. Horikita lived her life completely true to herself. She threw my criticism back at me rather skillfully.

"However, most create a distinction between their public persona and how they really are on the inside. You do it, too. I do not trust anyone because good intentions and hypocrisy are two sides of the same coin."

I doubted her words were solely aimed at Hirata. She seemed to refer to

Kushida as well.

“At any rate, you seem to trust Hirata-kun very much,” she said.

“Yeah. Well, I can count on him, at the very least. He’s really reliable.”

“Count on him? Can you say that he’s had a positive effect on the class just by being around?”

Horikita must have had something on her mind, judging by her snappish words. She probably thought I was holding onto information she didn’t have. I answered her with an audacious smile.

“Well. Hirata is a man of many talents. He helps when we can’t bring guys and girls together during a dispute. Don’t you think that he’s working hard to bring students together when no one else can?”

“It’s certainly impressive that he’s able to take on such a role without being sullen about it. However, without good results, the action is meaningless. Depending on the situation, such actions might even lead to the worst-case scenario. Let me ask you something. Do you know how many points Class D has now?”

“Well, it seems like there were some unexpected expenditures. I can’t give an exact number.”

“Exactly. Trustworthy Hirata-kun has kept his mouth shut about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come with me.”

I wondered what in the world she wanted to show me so badly that she’d leave the fire unattended. As I wondered where she was taking me, I noticed we were at the front entrance of the girls’ tent. Horikita opened the main panel and shoved me inside.

“This is…”

Unlike the boys’ tent, which was Spartan-like in its lack of comfort, the girls’ tent was completely different. It was spacious, with a floor mat on the ground so that they wouldn’t have to sleep on the hard earth. There were several pillows inflated with air. On top of that was a battery-powered cordless fan.

“The tent on the other side has the exact same things in it, too. A total of twelve points.”

“I *thought* the girls were putting up with the heat unusually well. So this is how you’re getting through it.”

They hadn’t sacrificed anything from the very start. They’d simply bought whatever they needed.

“Karuizawa-san and the others asked for these.”

Apparently, they’d secretly indulged themselves quite well.

“I only found out after they’d already ordered everything. It’s difficult to do anything when the rules say anyone may buy an item and spend points.”

Just like how Kouenji had withdrawn so early in the test.

“Karuizawa-san reported this to Hirata-kun, so he definitely knew about it. But *you* didn’t know, nor did he inform anyone else. I think he absolutely should have shared this information.”

Horikita had her arms crossed. She did have a point, but I doubted Hirata had stayed quiet out of malice. Maybe he’d just wanted to avoid unnecessary confusion? If Karuizawa had reported properly to Hirata, then the amount could have been evaluated.

“I understand what you mean, but there’s nothing I can really say about it. We can’t get spent points back, and there aren’t many days left before the test ends. Karuizawa and the others probably won’t spend any more points,” I said.

I’d thought she’d be angered by such a short, blunt response, but Horikita seemed to have anticipated my words. She promptly ignored me and kept talking.

“If things stay as they are and nothing happens, people will probably stay quiet. But things could get bad if the case of the stolen underwear isn’t resolved. If the culprit is nearby, he or she might be trying to hinder us. That’s why I want to find the culprit as soon as possible.”

“So, you want me to work with you?”

“Yes. Now that there’s a divide between us and the boys, there are many

things I can't do by myself."

The guys and girls were in the midst of a cold war, cut off from obtaining new information.

"Understood. I don't know if I'll be useful, but I'll help."

Horikita seemed confused by my frank answer.

"I'm trying to understand you… Do you have some other intention?"

"It's better for you to just accept favors in a straightforward way. As a guy, I'm rather upset that the guys are being treated like thieves. That alone should be sufficient motivation. We're united in a common goal."

Earlier, Hirata had asked me to help him, too.

"Well, whatever. It's settled then."

The culprit wasn't stupid. It wasn't likely they would show their true colors while suspicions ran high. Horikita probably thought that things would turn out all right. Any more disturbances during this test would probably start affecting our points as well.

About the culprit, though… Well, Ibuki would most likely take action again. No, she would *definitely* take action. She hadn't yet reached her goal.

"You have such a serious look on your face. Do you really hate being treated like a criminal that much?"

"Our class is all messed up because of this. It's a shame, because we were doing really well."

"Our cooperation was a complete coincidence. Class D didn't really have any sense of teamwork to begin with. It's ending rather badly, though, especially because of the broken trust between the guys and girls. Of course it would've been better to stay united until the end of the test."

"I wonder what the culprit's goal is, whoever that may be. Did they intend to steal Karuizawa's underwear, or did they want to throw our teamwork out the window? I feel like there's a hidden agenda."

When I said the words "hidden agenda," Horikita crossed her arms. After

considering it, she shook her head.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves… Sorry, but I’m going back into the tent.” Horikita turned away, sweeping her hair aside. Her breathing was shallow.

“Hey Horikita, don’t you think it’s about time you confessed?”

“Confessed? Confessed what?”

Although Horikita pretended to be calm, she was sweaty. Enough was enough.

“Your health has gone rapidly downhill since the test started.”

She’d looked ill even before we started traveling, but it hadn’t been that noticeable. Due to Horikita’s loner personality, she’d likely planned keep to her room and avoid socializing.

“Not really any more than usual.”

“Liar.”

I’d caught Horikita in a lie, and extended my hand to touch her. Feeling her forehead, it was clear she had a fever. Horikita tried to escape, but her movements were dull. I was easily able to stop her.

“When…did you notice?”

“On the deck of the ship, when I asked you what you’d been doing.”

“Yeah, and I told you I’d been reading in my room.”

“You were really sick then, so you were actually sleeping, right?”

“And on what evidence do you base that conclusion?”

“When you joined us on deck, your bangs were all disheveled. Proof you’d been lying on your side. Also, it was incredibly hot on the boat, but you seemed like you were cold. Even now, you’re wearing long sleeves, and you’re zipped all the way up. Even an elementary school student could figure it out”

Horikita, who usually would have responded with strong words, instead fell silent.

“If you could apply that sharp wit toward reaching Class A, you’d get a little

more recognition.”

“I definitely don’t plan to do that. Anyway, do you intend to hide your condition?”

It was pretty clear that she had a fever, close to 38°C. Still, she was hiding it for a pretty simple reason. If you reported illness, the class would be hit with a bigger penalty. The test’s timing was rotten luck on her part.

“I just need to hang in there for another few days. If I give up now, it’ll all be for nothing. Goodnight.”

So she intended to soldier through to the bitter end. She had an iron will.



6.4

I felt something strange on my cheek, warm and stiff. The warmth instantly grossed me out. I tried to get stretch my neck and move my face away, but I couldn't move. Someone's arm was holding me tightly in place.

"Wh-what?"

I woke up uncomfortable. Instantly, I found myself in a terrifying situation. Sudou was asleep, with both of his legs laid across my face.

"Suzune…I can't hold back anymore…" he moaned.

"Aahhhh!"

I shrieked, and escaped from Sudou's iron grip.

"Gah, shut up… The hell? Ayanokouji, don't wake me up like that."

This guy had just tried to force a scarring experience upon me. He had definitely mistaken me for someone else. Still, this wasn't the type of thing to scream about in a crowd of guys in the middle of the night…

My wristwatch showed that it wasn't even six in the morning yet, but my drowsiness was gone. I exited the tent to get out of that humid, steamy air. Once outside, I noticed that the scenery had changed drastically from yesterday.

"So, am I lucky or unlucky?"

Trouble seemed to be at hand as the curtain rose on the sixth day of our special test. It was overcast outside, the skies cloudy and gray. It must have rained last night, because puddles and patches of mud were here and there on the ground. It looked like it was going to start raining hard, probably in the early afternoon.

Of course the weather got stormy right at the end of the test. Just a light rain would have been fine, but there might be heavy rain and strong winds. In the worst-case scenario, we'd have to move. Many things would need to be done, like re-checking the tent stakes and handling our luggage.

As more people noticed the weather, they began to panic. Eventually, we combined the food we'd collected with the emergency food we bought using points. There'd been a lot of grumbling over living such a frugal life, but since it was the penultimate day, everyone appeared to want to power through.

"I'm glad. We haven't had any incidents," Hirata said.

That was certainly true. If we'd had another incident like the underwear theft, we probably wouldn't have had such a helpful atmosphere. The guys who'd been standing watch out in front of the boys' tent were now sleeping like logs. It was a deterrent we came up with to prevent a repeat of the underwear theft. Hirata gathered up a large group of students and gave them a last bit of encouragement.

He also started sorting people into teams to go out and search for food one last time, so we could get through the day. If we got enough food today day, we wouldn't need to use points. You could call this a critical moment. We all gathered around Hirata.

"Would it be better if we went, too?" asked Ike, sitting on the riverbank with a fishing rod already in hand.

"No. Ike-kun, Sudou-kun, I want you two to continue fishing. We don't have enough time to instruct the other students how to do it."

After settling on a course of action, Hirata set up groups by having volunteers raise their hands. Of course, I didn't raise my hand, but he decided that I would participate as a backup. The members of the group were Horikita, Sakura, Yamauchi, and surprisingly, Kushida. Horikita's physical health still seemed to be as poor as ever, but she held up well. The people around her weren't aware that she was feeling ill.

"Why were you left behind? What about your usual group of friends?" Horikita asked Kushida.

Come to think of it, I didn't see any of Kushida's girlfriends.

"Ah, yeah. Well, it's…"

Kushida whispered something into Horikita's ear, as if she was worried about the boys overhearing.

“Well, to tell you the truth, Mii-chan is having her time of the month. She always feels awful when it happens. So her other friends are with her in the tent.”

I’d been standing next to Horikita, so I happened to overhear.

“Even if she’s not feeling well, it’s a natural physiological phenomenon. She should be fine. I suppose that’s to be expected, though. However, why did you deliberately choose *our* group? You must have had other options available.”

Horikita was grilling Kushida like that because she detested her. Horikita fundamentally disliked people in general, but especially Kushida. Why? Well, for the simple reason that Kushida apparently hated Horikita. I’d always felt a uniquely strange sense of discomfort between those two.

Kushida Kikyou had a hidden side, a dramatic change from her usual persona, to the point where she could calmly abuse other people. However, I’d only chanced upon this discovery. The everyday Kushida was a fundamentally kind, cheerful, and cute girl who loved to help others. You wouldn’t think there’d be any students who disliked her, unless they were jealous. However, I knew Horikita wasn’t the sort to be jealous of someone like Kushida.

Philosophers wrack their brains over the tough questions like, “What came first, the chicken or the egg?” The chicken is literally born from the egg, but doesn’t that mean the egg came first? I didn’t know whether it was Horikita who hated Kushida first, or the other way around, or when this all started.

“I wanted to talk to you, Horikita-san, and thought this was a good chance. You know, we haven’t really talked at all during this trip, have we? Well, as soon as it gets dark out, let’s head to bed.”

Even though Kushida understood that she was disliked, and disliked Horikita in turn, she wanted to try making friends with her. If Kushida’s goal was to make friends with everyone in class, she couldn’t avoid dealing with Horikita.

“I don’t have enough free time to spend it with you unnecessarily.”

“You’re so mean, Horikita-san. Even though your face is so cute when you’re sleeping.”

Horikita seemed a little annoyed by Kushida’s odd teasing. At any rate, I was

going to search for food with the rest of the group.

“Hey, Ibuki. Why don’t you come with us, too?” Just as we were about to depart, I called out to Ibuki, who was resting under a tree.

“Me?”

“Today’s the last day. If you don’t want to, I won’t pressure you.”

“Okay. I owe Class D a debt of gratitude… Sure, I’ll help.”

Ibuki slung her bag over her shoulder. Yamauchi looked happy about this.

“Hey, that’s great, that’s great! You know, this kinda feels like a harem or something!” he cried.

The greater the girl to boy ratio, the happier Yamauchi was. Horikita didn’t have any reason to refuse, so she stepped into the forest without a response.

“The forest is kinda eerie… Or maybe I should say that it’s scary, plus hot and humid.”

The sky was cloudy, and the forest was completely different from yesterday. Visibility was especially poor. Yamauchi, with great sweat stains under his armpits, dejectedly flapped his gym clothes to fan himself.

“Aren’t you hot, Sakura?” he asked.

Yamauchi had been scheming for a way to talk to Sakura. But his eyes were focused on her breasts, and it was easy to see that he simply wanted to look at her boobs.

“Eh? O-oh, it’s okay. I’m fine.”

Sakura leaned forward, as if to indirectly avoid Yamauchi’s gaze. It’s said that girls are sensitive to the lascivious male gaze. In Sakura’s case, she’d had a lot of experience in that regard, so she was especially sensitive to it.

“Karuizawa was so mean yesterday, wasn’t she? And even though you were being so kind by sticking up for Ayanokouji, Sakura.”

“Ah, oh…”

Yamauchi intended to appear kind when speaking to Sakura, but his gaze and topic of conversation had the subtlety of an exploding bomb.

“Yamauchi. It’d be good if you paid attention to the treetops. They might have fruit. Also, we’re pretty tall, so we need to be careful around here,” I said.

“Y-yeah. Of course.”

Thus I prevented Yamauchi from gazing lustfully at Sakura, at least somewhat. Still, a supremely horny guy wasn’t going to run out of steam.

“Rain clouds are approaching from the southwest. The storm will be here even sooner than we imagined.”

Depending on how things went, it would be better to get out of the rain if at all possible. Rain would make our foraging mission more dangerous. If we did happen to get caught in the rain out in the middle of the forest, we could be stuck or injured. If that happened, we’d lose a great deal of points.

“Hmm…”

We looked for food while walking quietly. Kushida alternated between looking at Horikita and me, while appearing lost in thought. Of course, Horikita ignored everything.

“What’s the matter, Kushida-chan?” asked Yamauchi, who’d noticed Kushida’s odd behavior.

“Ayanokouji-kun and Horikita-san have been on pretty good terms from the beginning, right? I was trying to think of what the reason might be.”

“Good question. Why *are* you two close, anyway?”

Kushida had opened a troublesome subject.

“We don’t really get along well, though,” I said.

“You always deny it, but you *do* get along. You’re walking side by side right now.”

They could say it, but it wasn’t like I was particularly aware of it or anything.

“Ah. I think I might have found something that Ayanokouji-kun and Horikita-san have in common,” Kushida said.

“Something in common? What’s that?”

“Well, look at them closely, Yamauchi-kun. Notice anything?”

“Hmm?”

Yamauchi got in really close, until he was about a centimeter away from my face. After that, he rushed over to Horikita, and peered into her eyes. *You idiot, if you get too close…*

Slap! Yamauchi’s cheek got smacked. It was a wonderfully vicious slap, the kind you’d see from a humiliated actress in a searing drama. After being hit with such force, Yamauchi shuddered and shouted. He squatted low, cowering, and cried in pain. He didn’t use any words, but his eyes seemed to ask Horikita, “Why would you do something like that?!”

“Wh-what’re yuh doin’?!”

“You got too close. Remember to stay out of my personal space.”

This was like the time Ike made a pass at Horikita. Really, anyone would feel uncomfortable if a guy you didn’t like got extremely close to your face.

“Ha ha… S-sorry, Yamauchi-kun. I started trouble. Are you okay?” Kushida asked.

“Y-you’re so kind, Kushida…”

Yamauchi took Kushida’s outstretched hand and stood, his cheeks still red. Ibuki watched the scene with a slightly surprised expression. She probably didn’t see this kind of idiotic exchange in Class C very often.

“Wh-what’s the thing in common that you noticed, Kushida?”

“Well, don’t you know? I hardly see the two of them laugh! That’s it. It’s like, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Ayanokouji-kun or Horikita-san smile.”

Kushida had pointed out something rather unexpected, thinking that we’d merely accept her word. Regarding Horikita, though, I’d seen her smile many times before when making fun of someone, but her smile never contained any kind of affection.

“It’s certainly true that I’ve never seen Horikita smile before. But *I’ve* smiled, haven’t I?”

“I’ve seen you with a bitter smile, sure, but never a genuine grin, something from the bottom of your heart. I’ve never seen you laugh so hard you had to

clutch your stomach, Ayanokouji-kun. Or perhaps you've just never shown that side of yourself to me?"

She looked slightly dissatisfied as she peeked up at me. My heart started pounding. My pulse spiked. Even though we were on a deserted island, a lovely, perfumed scent tickled my nostrils. Embarrassed, I averted my eyes.

"A lot of it's due to genetics. It's the difference between people who smile often and those who don't smile at all."

"Hmm. I don't think I really like that reason, even if it's true."

Well, genetics probably weren't everything. Happiness could also be influenced by the environment in which someone grew up.

"How about we practice smiling just once? What do you think?"

"For the time being, let's begin with the area," said Horikita.

"Huh? Of smiling?"

"How long do you want to travel? We need to search for food, right?" said Horikita sternly. Her tone was forceful. She'd instructed us all to spread out immediately.

"Don't make any moves alone. Search in pairs. Be especially careful. Let's go, Ayanokouji-kun."

Horikita called me, and I started walking with her.

"Ah… Ah…"

"Hmm?" Sakura seemed to be trailing behind us with her shoulders slumped.

"Come search with us, Sakura!" Yamauchi yelled.

He flashed me a thumbs-up gesture. I guessed he dreamed of taking advantage of this opportunity.

"I'm looking forward to working with you, Ibuki-san!"

Kushida, the last one remaining, paired up with Ibuki. Ibuki was a rather blunt, antisocial girl herself, but if she were with Kushida, there likely wouldn't be problems.

“Horikita, how are you going to handle the key card issue?” I asked.

“I always have it on me.”

Horikita put her hand in her coat pocket to show me she had it.

“When we update the device, I’ll slip in among the students Hirata-kun’s gathered so I can be undetected. Ibuki-san and the other students aren’t supposed to know.”

Well, I wasn’t really worried about her handling that part. Since it required being conscientious, she’d probably handle it well.

“Can I see it for a second?”

“Huh? Here?”

“It’s actually convenient to do it here. It’d be too suspicious at base camp.”

“Maybe, but what do you plan to do after I show you?”

I explained the situation to Horikita while she looked suspiciously at me.

“To be honest, I’d been keeping quiet. I was with Sakura earlier so she can back me up, but on the first day we saw students who had something like a key card.”

I told Horikita about seeing Katsuragi in front of the cave, and his card.

“But I don’t know if that was really the key card. I didn’t see it well. I mean, you’d probably laugh if I made a joke about him picking up a telephone card, right?”

“Er, right. If you have proof, that would be a huge achievement.”

Horikita, satisfied with my reasoning, turned her back on Ibuki and stealthily took out the card. I accepted it, and checked the front and back. The reverse side sported a typical magnetic strip. Just as Chabashira-sensei had said, on the front side was the name “Horikita Suzune”, proof that she was the leader.

Even if I tried, I wouldn’t have been able to peel the name off and substitute another.

“Well? Is this the same card that Katsuragi-kun had?”

“No. I wonder, though. I thought I’d know by looking, but…it seems like it’s a different color than I remember.”

“The keycards might have a different color scheme based on the class.”

“Yeah, but we don’t have enough evidence to make a solid judgment. If we make a mistake, we won’t recover from it.”

When I tried to return the card to her, I accidentally dropped it. The card hit the ground.

“Ah!”

I let out a panicked shout, but Horikita quickly snatched it up. She slid the card back in her jacket, but we’d attracted attention.

“What’s wrong?”

Kushida looked worried. Ibuki, too.

“Oh, it’s nothing. There was a bug that surprised me. Sorry, sorry.”

While I apologized, Horikita shot me a terrifying glare.

“S-sorry…”

Horikita furiously kept her distance from me.

“Did she dump you?” Yamauchi asked with a grin.

“Look, Yamauchi. I need to ask you something. Could you come here for a second?”

“What is it? You know my love consultation fee is high, right?”

“The ground in this area is all muddy because of the rain, right? I want you to take this mud and smear it on Horikita’s hair. Can you do that for me?”

“Huh? B-but if I do something like that, I’ll be killed! No way!”

Of course, I knew he wouldn’t immediately agree. But this was far too unnatural for me to do myself. I’d thought that a prankster like Yamauchi would try pulling this stunt.

“Listen here, dude. No matter how angry you say you are at Horikita, trying to get revenge on her is uncool!”

“If you do this, I’m prepared to offer you Sakura’s e-mail address.”

“Whaa?!”

“Well?”

“S-Sakura’s e-mail address? Man! I-I guess I have to do this now, huh?”

The boy who lived for love had decided to die for love. That decisiveness was amazing.

“You’re absolutely going to do it? If you’re lying, I won’t agree.”

After I nodded, Yamauchi gathered up a lot of mud and approached Horikita from behind. Had she not been feeling ill, she probably would’ve noticed him, but right now she couldn’t pay attention to her surroundings. Kushida and Ibuki noticed Yamauchi’s strange behavior and watched him with quizzical expressions.

Yamauchi did it. He covered Horikita’s beautiful black hair with mud. Then he patted and smeared it on her with both hands. Well, he didn’t really need to go *that* far…

“Ha ha ha ha! You’re all covered in mud, Horikita! Hilarious!”

Yamauchi laughed and pointed at Horikita, like a little kid. Horikita, almost as if she weren’t able to grasp the situation, didn’t move for a little while. Then she stood up, grabbed Yamauchi’s pointing arm, and acted without saying a word.

Yamauchi let slip a quick, confused “Huh?” as Horikita threw him.

6.5

We returned to the base camp before noon with nothing to show for our efforts. Although the sun hadn't come out, it was even hotter here than inside the midsummer forest. It was impossible not to see a thin layer of sweat even on Horikita, who insisted that she wasn't sweaty.

"You'd better wash up right away, Horikita-san. You're really muddy…"

"Yeah… This situation is rather painful."

Horikita, her hair and clothes completely covered with mud, couldn't help but be uncomfortable. It would've been uncomfortable even if she weren't sick.

"I'm going to hold a grudge against you for the rest of my life. You'd best prepare yourself."

Yamauchi, who'd been viciously beaten, cowered behind my back as he trembled in fear.

"I, I, I d-did it! S-so, you have to keep your promise!"

"Don't worry. When the test is over, I will tell you."

I felt bad for Sakura, but I needed to reward Yamauchi for his act of bravery.

"Oh no, looks like it's impossible to use the shower room…"

The girls who'd returned from exploring were gathered in front of the shower, waiting in line. Unfortunately, the three people in line were Karuizawa and her group. If Horikita got in line now, she would have a pretty long time to wait. Due to being covered in mud, she didn't want to yield. But getting in line behind a hostile Karuizawa make it difficult to cut in.

"What about the river? That'd be easy and fast, right?" I asked.

"Right. Looks like I don't have any other choice."

"I think I'm going to go for a swim. Ibuki-san, do you want to go for a swim with me? I got pretty sweaty. If we get permission, is it okay for someone from Class C to use the river?"

Using the spot without permission wasn't allowed, but there shouldn't be any

problems.

“I’ll pass. I don’t really like swimming, so I’ll just wait to use the shower room,” Ibuki said.

“W-well, I will, too…”

Sakura, following Ibuki’s lead, refused to go swimming. Probably she didn’t want the boys to see her in her swimsuit. Undoubtedly, taking a shower with warm water was best, but since it was quite cloudy outside, it was also fairly hot and humid. Horikita probably wasn’t confident that she could continue waiting in her poor health. Yamauchi, who’d been beaten black and blue, headed with me toward the tent.

“I’m going to rest for a bit. The parts where I got punched really hurt…”

Yamauchi wept a bit as he hobbled inside. Although he’d been a suitable person for the job, it was a horrible task. As for Horikita, I couldn’t see her, so I guessed that she’d already started changing into her swimsuit. Meanwhile, the number of people waiting to use the shower had gradually increased. Behind Karuizawa’s group was Sakura, and behind her was Ibuki. Then another girl lined up behind them.

Quite a few students were swimming in the river, and it looked as though they were having fun. A few minutes later, Horikita and Kushida appeared in their swimsuits. I went to the boys’ luggage pile, then wandered around looking for privacy. When I returned about five minutes later, I saw Horikita washing herself while standing in the river. The cold river water must have felt horrible on Horikita’s sick body, but she must have been happy the mud was gone.

“Whoa, looks like it’s moving now.”

I nodded at Ibuki, who was waiting at the tail end of the shower line.

6.6

I'd been waiting for about fifteen minutes in front of the boys' tent before Horikita appeared. She kept her eyes downcast, as if something was wrong. Then she slowly looked up and scanned the area. When her eyes met mine, her pupils trembled, like she was frightened. She approached me with heavy, plodding steps. Despite her seeming frailty, I couldn't think of her as simply weak.

"Ayanokouji-kun. Could you please come here for a moment?"

First, I turned around and checked to see if Ibuki was still lined up for the shower.

"What's wrong? Did something happen?" I asked Horikita.

"Follow me. We can't talk here."

With that, Horikita walked toward the forest.

"What's wrong? Are you planning to search for more food?"

Horikita walked without answering me. She stopped once we'd gotten far enough away that we couldn't see the camp anymore. Horikita turned around and looked ready to speak, but then hesitated as though having second thoughts.

"This happened because of my carelessness. I am aware that I made a mistake. Okay?"

"A mistake?"

"It was stolen."

"W-wait, your underwear was stolen, too?"

"No. This is much, much worse. The…key card. A complete blunder on my part."

Horikita looked completely disgusted with herself, a look I had never seen her make before.

"I wanted to talk to you because I trust you. I absolutely couldn't consult with

someone who might be the culprit. This is so humiliating. I want to die…”

I felt honored that she trusted me, but I couldn’t exactly rejoice in front of someone so depressed.

“Such a huge failure.”

“No, the one who stole it is to blame. Right?”

“Even so, this is an issue of responsibility. It has nothing to do with me being sick or covered in mud.”

Horikita hung her head. If this got out, it could cause us massive damage.

“I wasn’t supposed to let go of the card for a single second. But I…”

“Don’t blame yourself. I doubt this’ll be any consolation, but I think you did your absolute best.”

I didn’t know if she heard me. She merely bit her lower lip, as if overwhelmed with regret.

“It’s probably better if we don’t make this information public. We should get to the truth first.”

“Yes. I think so, too.”

Everyone would panic if they knew. I wanted to avoid that at least.

“I suspect two people. Either Karuizawa-san, or Ibuki-san.”

The former might have done it simply out of hatred. Karuizawa could have stolen it because she wanted to see Horikita panic after losing the card.

“Unfortunately, the chances of that are low. Karuizawa was in front of the shower the whole time.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yeah. Same goes for her flunkies, too.”

“If that’s the case, it’s highly likely Ibuki-san is the culprit. It’s possible she came to know about the card this morning, and the timing is just far too good. But, wouldn’t stealing it be an extremely dangerous gamble? Since the leader’s name is engraved on the card itself, just looking at it would be enough. Maybe

she carried out the crime so she'd get a penalty."

She looked at me, her eyes full of anxiety, as if searching for an answer from me. I placed my hand on Horikita's shoulder.

"If we examine the timing and talk with Ibuki, we can understand what happened. If we suspect Ibuki, we shouldn't take our eyes off of her. Her escape would probably be the worst-case scenario, right?"

"That's right. I'm sorry, but can you go back to camp first? That way you can start following her immediately."

"Sure. I understand. I'll keep an eye on her."

I felt like Horikita probably wanted to be alone to throw up. I left her and returned to the base camp.

6.7

Horikita returned about ten minutes later, rejoining the campsite's unsettling atmosphere. The cause was dark smoke coming from behind the temporary toilet. It was far too early for the bonfire to be lit, and the location was rather strange.

"What's that smoke? What in the world happened?" Ike cried.

As I joined up with Horikita, I also caught up with Ike, who was clearly in a panic. I asked what was up.

"This is serious. There's a fire! Fire! Something is burning behind the toilet!"

All of the girls who'd been lined up in front of the shower room were gone now. They must have left as soon as they heard the uproar.

"I can't see Ibuki. The fire might have been her handiwork. Where is she?" Horikita asked.

"She noticed the fire, and now she's just walking around."

I rushed toward the area behind the temporary toilet and saw Hirata and some of the others. Ibuki was also there. Horikita looked ready to call out to Ibuki, but hesitated when she saw her. Ibuki's expression was just so genuine. She couldn't hide her confusion about the fire.

"Does this mean she didn't do it?"

Horikita was overwhelmed by doubt. If the keycard had indeed been stolen, Ibuki must've done it. If a fire had started, then Ibuki must've caused it. Even so, Ibuki remained at the scene, and appeared surprised by the fire. When I examined more closely, the source looked like a bundle of paper. Some of it was still legible, but most of it had turned into soot. I didn't know what it was for a moment.

However, looking at the legible parts, I finally understood.

"Did the manual get burned?" Horikita asked.

"Yeah. It looks like it. Who would do this?"

“It’s just one thing after another…” Horikita muttered in a low voice, lowering her eyes.

“I’m responsible for this. The manual was in my bag. We piled the bags up in front of the tent and I didn’t think that someone would steal anything in the daytime. But first, we need to extinguish this fire properly…”

Rather than searching for the culprit, Hirata headed to the river to douse the fire. While he drew water in our plastic bottles, he muttered to himself, his expression dark.

“Why? Who could do something like this? Why can’t we all just get along?”

Hirata spontaneously crushed the plastic bottle with all his might. The shift in his personality was rather terrifying. Hirata, the eternal leader of our class, the one who toiled tirelessly to play peacemaker, was carrying a terrible burden.

“I don’t think you need to take so much on yourself.” I tried comforting him. He stood and responded with a quiet “Thank you.”

“We need…to discuss this incident properly.”

“Right. Most of Class D witnessed the fire. I’m sure they’ll want to know the truth.”

Depressed, Hirata took the water he’d scooped up and returned to the campsite.

“Hey, who did this? Is there a traitor in our class?” Karuizawa asked.

When we returned, we found her leading the confrontation between the guys and girls, who glared at one another.

“Why do you suspect us? Isn’t this a completely separate issue from the underwear incident?”

“I don’t know about that. Isn’t it possible you burned something to mislead us?”

“Stop jerking us around. As if we’d do something like this!”

“Wait a minute, everyone. Please, calm down. Let’s talk about this,” Hirata cried.

He gave me the water and I took his place, extinguishing the remnants of the fire. Hirata immediately went to the center of the circle and tried to play mediator. This might have been residual stress from yesterday's underwear theft incident, but both sides were heated up and showed no signs of settling down. It seemed like quite a few people in Class D wanted to start hunting the culprit right here.

"At any rate, we don't have to worry about the fire spreading."

I shook the empty plastic bottles twice, then three times. A few water droplets plopped onto the smoldering remains of the fire. I looked up.

"Rain, huh?"

Raindrops dripped onto my cheeks. The clouds were even darker than they'd been before, proof that heavy rain was about to start. Once, we'd have all come together as one to make it through this last pinch. Now, the guys and girls were locked in a tense confrontation. They stood, glaring at each other.

"This is pointless. Seriously, this is the worst. We have underwear thieves and now arsonists in our class. This really is the worst."

"We keep telling you it wasn't us! How long are you going to keep suspecting us?!"

The fight would never be resolved. It would just keep going on forever. Hirata should've stepped in and stopped this, but for some reason he just stood there in a daze. Was he wondering who the culprit could have been?

"Hey Kanji, I can't see Ibuki anywhere."

Yamauchi had noticed Ibuki was gone. I noticed that one of the bags was also gone.

"Perhaps the person who started the fire…"

"It's rather suspicious. If a fire broke out then, that would mean…"

The guys directed their suspicions at Ibuki, and even the girls began to voice their doubts. However, before we could reach a resolution, the rain started to fall, and fall hard.

"Oh no, this isn't good. Let's discuss this later. It'll be awful if we all get

soaked.”

Ike and the others, panicking, began shoving food and luggage inside the tents.

“Hirata, tell us what to do!”

Ike called for Hirata, but he just stood in the same place. Hirata continued staring off into nothingness and didn’t budge an inch. Meanwhile, the sound of rain kept growing louder and louder. I was a little worried about the situation. I approached Hirata, but there wasn’t any sign that he noticed me.

“Why…why is this happening? It’s just like back then…”

He muttered something in a low voice. I couldn’t understand what it meant, but it certainly wasn’t trivial. This wasn’t like the calm and composed Hirata at all.



“Why was I doing this? Why was I doing all this until now?”

“Hey, Hirata! What are you doing?!” Ike shouted.

It wasn’t clear if Hirata heard him at all. I gently placed my hand on his shoulder. He looked surprised, but slowly turned around.

“Ike’s calling for you,” I said.

“Huh?”

Hirata’s face was drained of life. He was pale. The second time Ike called, Hirata slowly started to regain his sanity. He finally noticed that it had begun raining.

“Rain…”

“It’d be good for you to help Ike and the others. We have to keep our stuff dry.”

“Y-yeah. We need to take care of everything quickly.”

“Ayanokouji. Is Hirata okay?” Sudou asked.

“Looks like he’s in shock. I suppose it’s probably because of all these things going wrong one after the other.”

“You know, in junior high there was this rich kid honor student. He had a lot of really heavy responsibilities, y’know? Anyway, he took so much on himself that one day, he ended up having a breakdown. After that, his class became a complete mess.”

“You think there are signs of that with Hirata?”

“Well, saying he’s gonna have a breakdown would be an exaggeration, but I think there’s danger there.”

I wondered if this was just Sudou’s wild imagination at work, but it seemed surprisingly accurate. Since this special test had started, Hirata has taken on a lot of responsibilities. These issues made the troubles we’d faced at school seem easy. Hirata’s carefully maintained environment had definitely begun to change. The theft of Karuizawa’s underwear and the uproar over the fire had turned Hirata as unhinged and stormy as the weather.

“For the time being, let’s take care of the luggage.”

We joined up and helped the students put things away. Thankfully, everything got secured pretty fast.

“Okay. All of the preparations are made.”

It didn’t surprise me that Ibuki disappeared, but Horikita had vanished as well. By my calculations, the possibility had been fifty-fifty, but it seemed things were progressing favorably. I fixed my eyes on the road that led straight to the beach, and stepped onto the path.

6.8

I forced my heavy, sluggish body to chase after Ibuki-san while the hard rain fell. The sky was covered with rain clouds that blocked out the sun, so visibility was poor. Even though I couldn't see Ibuki-san, she'd left footprints in the muddy ground. If I just followed them, they'd lead me right to her.

She'd walked about a hundred meters from the base camp, sometimes veering off to the right or left. Rather unexpectedly, I found her waiting, as if expecting me. I instinctively hid myself, though there probably wasn't any point.

"What are you doing, Horikita?"

Ibuki spoke without even turning around. Her calm voice cut right through the sounds of the falling rain.

"I noticed you following me. Why don't you just come on out?"

"When did you notice me?" I asked.

"Right from the start."

Her short answer felt ominous. My impression of her as being quiet and taciturn didn't change, but something was different.

"Why were you following me?"

"Do you really not know?"

"No, I don't know."

It was almost like I was the villain here.

"You clearly know why I was following you, don't you?"

"I really have no idea what you're talking about."

Ibuki-san faced me, looking me straight in the eye. I saw no deception in her eyes whatsoever. It almost made me want to apologize. After all, I had no proof. I only had my intuition.

"Why should I lie?" she pressed further, as if she noticed my hesitation. "I'd at least like to hear why you followed me, from your own lips."

“The underwear theft and the fire. Misfortune continues to befall Class D.”

“So what?”

“Do you realize that some people suspect you?”

“Ah. I suppose since I’m an outsider, there’s not much I can do about that.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.”

“You’re saying I’m the culprit? Do you have any proof?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t have a single shred of evidence related to the underwear theft. But I think it was you.”

“That’s a pretty terrible thing to say. You don’t have any evidence, yet you suspect me?”

I had to admit, I was impressed by how she was handling this. She’d laid low until day five, and she’d kept her distance from Class D. Contrary to normal expectations, she wasn’t suspected.

“I suspect you because of today. You don’t need me to explain that, do you?”

I wanted to hear it from Ibuki-san herself. If I explained all of the reasons for my doubts, that would almost be the same as admitting my identity as the leader. Even if I was 99% confident, so long as there was a 1% chance of her being innocent, I needed to avoid being direct.

“Let me cut to the chase. I want you to return something you took from me,” I said to Ibuki-san, while I stood and stared her in the eye.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

After giving that short answer, she walked away quickly. I followed, matching her speed. Ibuki-san changed course and headed toward the center of the forest.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Who knows?”

It was difficult to walk straight. I’d realized this over the past several days. That was even truer in this weather, which impaired visibility. However, Ibuki-san didn’t seem to care. I couldn’t pull back, though, not after coming this far to

find the truth. Since I'd made the mistake, I had to take responsibility and solve the problem.

I have to make up for my mistake. I have to make up for my mistake. I repeated those same words over and over again in my head. I couldn't fail here. Besides, I also needed to take responsibility for my mistakes with Karuizawa-san, with whom I had been really aggressive. My heart beat fast. I was breathless. Little by little, I closed the distance between Ibuki-san and myself. Depending on the situation, I might need to retrieve the keycard by force. Considering my considerable skills, I could handle it well. *I can handle it well. I can do it. I can do it.*

I understood all too well that I wasn't calm, but I had to do something. I didn't have anyone else to rely on. I'd handled things on my own up until this point, and I could continue just the same. The rain and winds were a bit easier to deal with in the middle of the forest than on an open road. But the visibility had become that much worse, and the footing even more terrible. Also, as I went right and then left, I lost my sense of direction.

But my biggest problem was my physical condition. With every second that passed, I grew worse. Up until now I'd only had a slight fever, but as the rain came down I reached my limits. My sickness grew steadily worse.

Ibuki-san stopped, and then unexpectedly looked up at a tree. She gazed at a single handkerchief, wet from the rain and tied to the tree.

"How long are you going to follow me? Don't you think enough is enough?"

"Once you return what you stole from me."

"Why don't you calm down and try thinking? If I stole the keycard, would I have held onto it? If someone saw me with it, that would mean immediate disqualification. I'd only end up losing points myself, right?"

I had only asked she return what she stole. I never once said anything about a keycard. Ibuki-san had just confessed. As I was about to press her on that point, Ibuki-san gave a thin smile that showed her white teeth.

"You thought I confessed to something, didn't you? You're wrong."

"What do you mean?"

“I’m tired of talking with you.”

Ibuki-san crouched, and started digging in the ground using both hands.

“Ah, agh…”

Wracked by intense dizziness and nausea, I leaned my back against a nearby tree.

“Your condition has gotten a lot worse, hasn’t it?”

Ibuki-san turned to look at me. However, she quickly returned to work.

“Ah… Ah… Ugh…”

Although I was trying to manage my breathing, I couldn’t anymore. My jersey, soaked from the downpour, leached my body heat away. I’d tried to resist wanting to lie down and rest, but I could no longer hold my head up.

As I thought about my physical strength, I had no choice but to fight.

“Ibuki-san. I’m going to investigate you with everything I’ve got. You don’t mind?”

Ibuki-san stopped digging, stood up, and approached me.

“With everything you’ve got? Could you be a bit more specific? You mean you’re going to resort to violence?”

“This is your last warning. Return it…”

I’d wanted to avoid coercive methods, but there was no other way. I didn’t want to show this side of myself to anyone…

I remembered the incident before, with Sudou-kun, where he’d punched some students from Class C. It had led to a trial, with the school getting involved. Back then I’d condemned Sudou, who had dealt with many unexpected difficulties. I’d abandoned him then, and was getting my just desserts now. That I would consider solving things with violence was ridiculously funny.

“My last warning, huh? Oh, I get it. I get it. Why don’t you get your wish?”

She dropped the bag to the ground and raised her arms in the air, posing as if surrendering. She was obedient, but I saw no resignation in her face. Still, I

couldn’t let this opportunity pass. I reached to check the bag.

Instantly, Ibuki-san’s slender leg went right toward my face. What little alertness I had left saved me. I flew backwards, avoiding her kick. Mud splashed me, and I struck a defensive posture with both arms raised.

“Oh, you’re good,” she said.

“An act of violence means immediate disqualification…”

“Someone might see us here, you mean? Weren’t you willing to use violence, too?”

While I wondered why she had such a sly grin on her face, she suddenly grabbed my shoulders and threw me down. I wasn’t able to react in the face of such an unexpected action, and collapsed onto the muddy ground.

“Would you like a moment to rest?” she asked.

As I was on the ground, already wounded, she sneered at me from above. Her face looked all blurry. Ibuki-san grabbed my collar and yanked me up. If she hit me, I would definitely lose consciousness. I slipped out of her grip and rolled, escaping from her. I desperately tried to raise myself out of the mud. That was the first time I was really thankful that I practiced martial arts.

“Oh? You can really move, surprisingly. You practice or something?”

Ibuki-san, without panicking whatsoever, seemed genuinely impressed as she sized me up. She’d perceived my knowledge of martial arts, and probably wasn’t an average practitioner herself. How could I respond without telling her that I was in the worst condition?

“I’ve…been nothing but a complete and utter failure in this test.”

I hadn’t contributed a single thing to Class D. If anything, I was probably a hindrance. The rest of them, all trying their hardest, were held back because of my poor physical condition. I wished I’d told them from the start. I could have requested that another person become the leader since I wasn’t feeling well. It would have been fine had I just refused. But my pride got the better of me, which was unforgivable.

I mocked people. I hated useless things, labeling them incompetent, while I

was useless myself. *Ha ha*… I laughed dryly in my mind. Was I really still making excuses for myself?

“It was you, wasn’t it? You stole the keycard.”

Ibuki-san stopped moving. I shortened the distance between us. She pretended like she was going to strike with her right arm, only to instead go with a high, fast kick. I avoided her attack, and then stretched out my arm as a counterattack. Ibuki-san was aware of the danger and avoided my strike. She then switched into her next attack, a dizzying back-and-forth of offense and defense.

The footing around here was bad, but she wasn’t worried about her footwork. Clearly she had a degree of skill. In addition, she showed no hesitation in hurting people. Ibuki-san smiled, flashing her white teeth as if she were enjoying this. I never thought I’d see such a big smile on her face.

Because I’d been moving around so much, I was wracked by intense cold and nausea. I was barely able to stand.

“You’ve been trying really hard until now. I’ll tell you the truth, as a reward. I stole the card.”

Ibuki-san thrust her hand into her pocket and slowly took the card out. She showed me the side with my name engraved upon it.

“You gave up the truth pretty easily.”

“It doesn’t matter if I admit it or not now. There’s no evidence I used violence against you. It’s not as though the school can make a judgment here. Isn’t that right?”

Ibuki-san had the right read of the situation. Nothing could conclusively make the school perceive this as it really was. Even if I was the only one who got hurt, Ibuki-san could say whatever she liked to get out of it. Even if I complained, we’d both be punished. And Class D had points to lose.

But if I managed to get the keycard back, we might be saved. If we got our hands on such reliable evidence, Class C would be forced to admit what they’d done.

Her fingerprints were on the card. Maybe we could assert that it was legitimately stolen. If we brought the truth to light, the school might investigate the matter thoroughly. I couldn't abandon that hope. However, I couldn't get the keycard back unless I bested Ibuki-san. But I doubted she was stupid enough to make bold actions.

If she got away, the card probably wouldn't ever be found. If that happened, we couldn't prove it had been stolen. I didn't have enough energy to run after her any longer. On top of that, I lacked the strength to even clench my fists. But I had to make use of all the strength I had left.

I wasn't sure if Ibuki-san had a reason to hurry or if she was underestimating me, but she rushed over and attacked, a hunter enjoying an easy kill. Her eyes glanced at my feet, but it was a fake-out. While she was concentrating on the lower half of my body, she instantly swung at my face. I narrowly avoided getting hit, but it got so incredibly close that it grazed my hair.

I took advantage of her momentum and applied a little force. Ibuki-san lost her balance, but not enough to make her fall over. I tried to grab onto her arm, but she understood what was going on and slipped through my grasp. She probably realized I was trying to use her power and speed against her. I mustered up the last of my strength and drove my left fist into her solar plexus.

"Ah!"

Ibuki-san couldn't breathe, and fell to her knees in apparent agony. At the same time, my physical strength had reached its limits, and my field of vision grew distorted. I couldn't chase after her, so I kept her pinned down.

"This is the worst… I'm already… At my limit…"

My condition was bad before, but pushing myself so intensely had made things hopeless. But I couldn't collapse here. My attack was superficial, not enough to knock her down.

"I don't understand… I thought you were involved."

Ibuki-san stood, wiping mud off her face.

"Involved? In what?" I asked.

Ibuki-san seemed to hesitate, but then muttered, “I didn’t burn the manual.”

“You intend to keep lying even now?”

“What would I gain by burning it? It was inevitable that people would begin searching for the criminal after the uproar. Besides, people would suspect me rather strongly. There was nothing to gain and a lot to lose.”

“That’s…”

I certainly agreed with what Ibuki-san said. She’d stolen the keycard before the fire broke out. There wasn’t enough time for her to deliberately burn the manual and fan the flames. But then, who did? What did burning the manual mean?

“I talked to you in a roundabout way to confirm something. You seem different. But I suppose this is probably really hard for you to swallow. Do you think he’s in Class D? There’s a guy who figured me out before you did.”

Ibuki-san sighed as if exasperated.

“So. You can’t mean…”

Right after I conjured the image of that person, I noticed that Ibuki-san had disappeared. In the next instant, a blunt instrument slammed me in the head, knocking me down hard.

“This conversation is over.”

I had to get up, so I started to push myself. Ibuki-san lightly swept my hand with her right foot, causing me to fall back down. Ibuki-san grabbed my bangs and yanked me up.

“L-Let me go…”

“Sorry. I’ve got a lot to do.”

She lightly slapped my cheek with her right hand. My mind and body were at their limit, my movements clumsy, and it was impossible for me to stop her. I shook off the hand grasping my bangs. I tried to stand and close the distance between us. But my feet got all tangled up and my strength was exhausted, causing me to collapse again.

“Do you think they’ll permit such coercive methods?” I muttered.

“Come on, now. I don’t feel like answering that.”

When I drew nearer, she raised her leg high and kicked me in the face. How many times would I repeat this same sentence? I…made a huge mistake. By attempting to fix that mistake myself, I ended up turning it into a situation that couldn’t be fixed.

6.9

I let out A deep breath while I stood over Horikita, who was unconscious. It had been a long since I'd gone up against such a tough opponent. Had she been in better health, the match could've gone either way. She really was that strong. I resumed my work, and soon I'd dug up a flashlight and a wireless transceiver wrapped in vinyl. I would have rather gotten by without using them if I could, though.

"What?"

Right after I took those two items out of the hole, I was overcome by some mysterious sensation. I didn't know the cause of it. Somehow, the items seemed slightly different from when I had buried them.

"Is it because of the rain?"

I decided that I was probably just overthinking things, and used the transceiver. I reported my current location to the man who'd been waiting to hear about my whereabouts, and sat down to rest. About half an hour or so passed before I saw the gleam of a flashlight. It blinked twice, then three times. It was just like Morse code.

I responded with the same signal, using the flashlight that had been near my feet. The guiding light had gotten stronger, as if both lights were resonating with each other. Then I saw an irritating face that I didn't want to see. Ryuuen appeared.

"Yo. Excellent work, Ibuki. You did well."

"Naturally, yes?"

"Naturally? If you hadn't made any mistakes until now, I wouldn't have had to risk coming over here."

"That couldn't be helped. I hadn't planned for the digital camera to break."

If only the digital camera hadn't broken, I would have taken a picture of the keycard and that would have been the end of it. I would have had my definitive proof. I wouldn't have even needed to call Ryuuen using the transceiver. But

instead, I'd had to take a huge risk and hold onto the card, which led to Horikita discovering me.

"So, where's the card?"

"It's here."

I took it from my pocket and handed it over. Ryuuen shined his flashlight on the card and confirmed that the name "Horikita Suzune" was clearly engraved upon it.

"You come over here and confirm it, too. That was your condition, remember? Relax, it's dark out, and this weather is horrible. There shouldn't be anyone here. It's great to be cautious, but don't waste time."

A man appeared from the shadows. Katsuragi, from Class A. He was definitely the calm and dependable type, the complete opposite of our leader. I pretended to be calm, but in my mind I couldn't help but be reminded again of Ryuuen's awfulness. Immediately after the test had started, Ryuuen told me that he would coax Class A into helping us. Apparently he'd done it. But how in the world?

Katsuragi took Horikita's card from Ryuuen and looked it over it carefully. You couldn't have made a fake or anything on this uninhabited island.

"It looks like the real thing," he said.

"Are you convinced now?"

Although he'd been shown definitive proof, Katsuragi's stern expression didn't change. I'd heard he was a cautious man, but to be this paranoid seemed like a unique kind of illness.

"You managed to infiltrate Class D quite well. Weren't you suspected?"

"Under normal circumstances, I would have been. But as for my methods, that's a trade secret."

I unconsciously rubbed my cheek. When we began our spy operation in Class D, Ryuuen slapped me to turn a lie into the truth. But the pain and the hatred I felt toward him were all quite real. Naturally, the students in Class D misunderstood, and thought I'd been beaten and chased out of my class.

Maybe if I hadn't been injured, they wouldn't have swallowed the lie so smoothly.

"Don't sit there and think about it forever. The situation is black-and-white, so make your decision. You're already halfway there. Don't do something as stupid as pulling out here."

"You're right."

Despite that, it didn't seem like Katsuragi had given his consent. Ryuuen noticed this, but rather than get annoyed, he smiled. As if he were getting ready to attack his prey, he whispered, "If this wasn't an honorable deed, then what are you going to do? Did you know that Sakayanagi's faction has dominated ever since rumors spread that you failed to get on the student council despite your best efforts? This might be your chance, right?"

"You bastard. Why are you telling me this?"

"Class A maintains its position by forming alliances. If you can form those, even those who have double-crossed you will return under your wing, won't they? Or you could make me your enemy, I suppose? If you do, I wonder what would happen?"

Katsuragi hadn't signed a contract with the devil, but this was much more than a simple negotiation. Well, perhaps that line of thinking was naïve. Once you discussed terms with the devil, you ended up making a contract one way or another.

"Sakayanagi is absent. It's impossible for someone indecisive to rule Class A."

"We've established negotiations, as promised. I accept your proposal."

With that, Katsuragi stretched out his hand to Ryuuen, who smiled audaciously.

"That's good. You've exercised sound judgment."

"Wait, what negotiation? Would you explain?" I asked.

They were free to do whatever they wanted, but I had a right to know the details. When I aimed for Class A, I had to decide if being close to Ryuuen was the right thing to do.

“To form an alliance. With Class A.”

“I’ll be heading back now. I don’t want to risk things by lingering for too long.” Katsuragi returned the card to me, and disappeared into the darkness.

“What about the negotiation? What was discussed? What are we getting in return?”

A flash of white lightning crackled through the air. Thunder came crashing down immediately afterward, a roaring sound coming from the sea. Ryuuen didn’t even twitch an eyebrow. He told me the details of the contract with a creepy smile on his face. The details weren’t really complex, but they weren’t simple, either.

Even with our problems piling up one after the other, making it really difficult to achieve anything, there was the promise of a huge return. Everything was going according to Ryuuen’s plan, including the fact that most of our students had retired. None of us had imagined this situation before the test had begun, when we were enjoying our holiday on the boat. I hated him so much that I wanted to die, but I supposed he was probably the man with abilities closest to those of Class A, after all. I had to acknowledge it.

“But…is there any guarantee Katsuragi will keep his promise? He might renege.”

“I have that covered, of course. He will have no choice but to honor his promise.”

I walked toward Horikita and, after carefully wiping my fingerprints from the keycard, stuck it back in her hand. There was nothing this girl could have done. All she could do now was endure and keep silent until the end of the test, all while knowing that Class C had discovered she was the leader.

This girl didn’t trust anyone. Even after she knew the keycard had been stolen, she hadn’t reported it to her classmates. Even though she’d opened up her heart to Ayanokouji alone, he was a loner, too. If we factored in her current incompetence, she wasn’t any threat.

Besides, if she had the keycard, then her mistake might not have been leaked to Class D yet. I understood her nature, to a certain extent. She was patient and

stubborn, the type of person who didn’t listen to other people’s opinions. In other words, no matter how painful something was, she would endure it silently.

“Use your smarts to protect yourself.”

Then we disappeared quietly into the dark woods.

6.10

I kicked off from the wet ground and chased Ibuki. The weather was a bothersome problem. If it got much worse, I might get stuck or have an accident. Also, the fact that the sun was going down earlier than I'd anticipated made it difficult to push forward without a flashlight. The passing showers grew even stronger, and the winds started to howl more violently. The weather was just negative all around, no favorable points at all.

I could only see a few meters ahead because of the pouring rain. Also, if I wandered onto any of the side roads, I'd probably get lost. Thankfully, two pairs of footprints remained in the muddy ground and made it easy for me to follow after them. The footprints just suddenly stopped, though. No, on second glance, they didn't stop; they continued deeper into the forest.

The fact that the footprints suddenly took a sharp turn meant they hadn't gotten lost, but rather that they'd intentionally ventured deeper into the forest. When I pointed my flashlight toward the depths of the forest, I saw the two pairs of footprints going deeper and deeper. There was no reason for them to intentionally enter such a dangerous place.

Just to be sure, I tried shining the flashlight on the route that led to the beach, but there weren't any footprints. The ground was clear. I wiped away the rain dripping from my bangs, and followed the footprints deeper into the forest. Naturally, my visibility got even worse. It was like night had already fallen. The atmosphere was creepy and dark, but I pushed forward, relying only on the footprints.

I continued forward for about thirty meters. Suddenly, a bright light entered my field of vision. I immediately turned the flashlight off and held my breath. Looking in the direction of the light, I saw it shine once, then twice more. A flashlight. It was almost as if someone were sending a signal. Was it Ibuki and Horikita? No, that wasn't it.

Neither Ibuki nor Horikita should have had a light source on them. I quietly turned in the direction of the light and drew closer to the source. I heard people's voices, muffled by the rain, and hid myself. Their conversation

sounded trivial. So as long as they didn’t find me, getting a grasp on the situation was secondary.

Soon, the light moved further away. It was over, apparently. Just to be sure, I approached cautiously.

Near a large tree lay a muddy Horikita. She’d collapsed, unconscious. A single keycard lay on the ground near her hand. On her injured body were traces of excavated soil. After examining the situation, I confirmed that more people than Ibuki had discovered Horikita’s position as leader. After picking up the keycard, I lifted Horikita into my arms.



“Ngh…”

Horikita let out a small sound. Slowly but surely, her eyes fluttered open.

“Are you awake?” I asked.

“Ayano…kouji-kun?”

She sounded dazed, as if she couldn’t understand the situation.

“Agh… My head…hurts…”

“You have a high fever. Don’t push yourself.”

“I see… I-Ibuki-san… But, why are *you* here?”

Even if I told her to sleep, Horikita wouldn’t listen, all while her fever grew worse. She started to understand the situation little by little.

“I knew it…Ibuki-san stole my card.”

“I see.”

“I can’t be dumber than Sudou-kun and the others.”

She chastised herself and closed her eyes, as if lamenting a situation in which she was powerless.

“This isn’t a test where you can just hide for twenty-four hours a day, right? No matter what you do, you can be open to attack.”

I’d intended to keep going, but it seemed like anything more would just make the heartbroken Horikita even more depressed.

“I could’ve avoided this if I knew how to rely on someone…”

To seriously protect the leader’s identity, it was necessary to depend on allies that you trusted from the bottom of your heart. If you did that, you could protect the card twenty-four hours a day. However, Horikita hadn’t made a single friend.

She kept muttering, “I’m so pathetic” to herself quietly over and over.

“When I was losing consciousness, I felt like I could hear Ryuuen’s voice… It’s strange, I thought he’d already retired…”

“You were losing consciousness. Maybe you had a dream?”

“If it was a dream, it was a nightmare…”

I wondered if she really had heard Ryuuen’s voice. Even if she were asleep or losing consciousness, her brain had probably heard something. It wouldn’t have been strange if she picked up Ryuuen’s voice when unconscious.

“I’m sorry…”

While I was silently lost in thought, Horikita apologized.

“Why are you apologizing to me?” I asked.

“There’s no one I can apologize to except for you…”

Hmm. That made me think pretty hard.

“If you think things are bad, then make some reliable friends. Start there first.”

“That’s difficult advice… No one would want to be with me.”

It sounded like she’d resigned herself to unhappiness. Perhaps there was a trace of masochism in her. I laughed.

“It’s unpleasant to be made fun of, though…”

“No, no, that’s not it,” I said. “It’s just that you’ve started to sound like you need allies.”

“Nobody would say that…”

Normally, Horikita would have been insulting me, but right now her words carried a different weight. She was blaming herself, or she wouldn’t have said something like that. Still, it wasn’t going to be easy. Horikita’s hollow eyes seemed to look through rather than at me.

“I should have understood this a long time ago…”

You can’t live alone in the world. School and society are composed of a great many people.

“Don’t talk. You’re sick.”

I tried to convince her to be quiet, but Horikita didn’t stop. For Horikita, there

had never been any choice but to rely on herself. She could have chosen no other option.

“I’m going to try to get up to Class A using my own abilities. I’ll definitely recover from this failure…” Horikita weakly grabbed my sleeve as she appealed to me. “I’m prepared to be hated by everyone else… This was all my mistake.”

“According to this school’s system, if you fight by yourself, you won’t reach Class A. We need to cooperate with our classmates. It’s unavoidable.”

Horikita closed her eyes, as if lacking the strength to keep them open. Her grasp might have been weak, but I still felt it.

“I can’t accept that. No matter how hard it is, I’m still…alone.”

“Ah, shut up already! Stop talking. Right now, you won’t be able to convince anyone.”

I embraced Horikita tightly.

“You can’t bear every responsibility. You’re not that strong, unfortunately.”

“So you’re telling me to give up? I have a dream to reach Class A, a dream for my brother to acknowledge me.”

“No one said you have to give up.”

I looked down at Horikita, who lightly groaned against my chest.

“If you can’t fight by yourself, it’s better to fight with a partner. I’ll lend you a hand.”

“Why? You’re not the kind of person who would say such things…”

“Well, why then? I wonder.”

Shortly afterward, her energy was spent, and Horikita lost consciousness again. I had to carry her without anyone noticing. It would be easy to have her retire, but I didn’t know which button on the wristwatch was for emergencies. Besides, if the helicopter were suddenly dispatched, the sound would reverberate in the area.

“Hmm… Did I pick the wrong path? Oh no, oh no!”

My route had ended in a steep, sheer slope. If I took one step further, I would

fall. I tried shining a light below to see what it looked like about ten meters down. Unfortunately, I'd been walking in the wrong direction. Should I go back to the original route?

I tried to change direction slowly, so as not to burden Horikita, but then right after…

The soil underneath me collapsed, and I lost my balance. Alone, I could have braced my legs and grasped the tree, but unfortunately, both of my hands were occupied. I couldn't avoid falling. I curled up into a ball so I could protect Horikita as we went tumbling down the slope. For several seconds, it was like flying. I don't remember very clearly what happened afterward.

At least Horikita hadn't been hurt, somehow. I looked up the slope, but with the way things were now, it didn't seem like I could crawl back up while carrying Horikita.

"Well, I sure messed up."

However, this wasn't the time to accept defeat and die. Carrying the unconscious Horikita on my back, I ventured into the pitch-dark forest with a single flashlight. The rain poured down on us, mercilessly robbing me of my physical strength. More than anything else, the heat radiating from Horikita wasn't normal. If she were exposed to the rain for any longer, it would become dangerous.

However, we were deep in the forest. There were no caves or man-made shelters. We had no choice but to rely on the power of nature. Fortunately, the trees were lush and overgrown, and their branches might keep our bodies relatively dry. I looked around the area, found a remarkably big tree, and moved right under it. Of course, it didn't block the rain completely, but the overgrown leaves did stop a lot of the rainfall.

I gently laid Horikita down. Her jersey was probably going to get dirty, but we had bigger problems now. I sat there, with Horikita's head in my lap. If only the area were cool… But the temperature was so high, hot and humid. Horikita occasionally trembled, like she was trying to curl into a ball.

Trying to lessen her burden even a little, I held Horikita close to my chest. After some time had passed, Horikita woke up, sputtering out ragged breaths.

Still in a daze, Horikita wasn't able to understand our situation.

"Why are you? I…?"

She didn't seem to remember what had happened. I explained the whole sequence of events. I had some doubts about whether she understood everything.

"I see… I remember."

"That's good."

"I remember my mistake, so it's probably awful."

Well, if she was able to crack self-deprecating jokes, then I could probably relax.

"It's already almost six o'clock, Horikita. You might think this will sound harsh, but you should retire. Your body is probably at its limit."

She had made it this far by pretending to be okay, but it wasn't possible for her to carry on.

"I can't do that. We can't afford to lose thirty points because of me… I was the one who confronted Karuizawa-san and the others about using points, right? It would make me look like such an idiot…"

The penalty for poor physical condition was severe. In points alone, it was more than what Karuizawa had used herself. Horikita covered her eyes with her arm, probably to hide her tears.

"Not just that… The keycard was stolen from me, too. You understand what that means?"

"Class D will lose another fifty points."

Horikita gave a slight nod. Class D would only be left with a few points.

"Just leave me here and head back. If you do, I'll be the only one absent from roll call."

"What are you planning to do?"

"By tomorrow morning, I'll…try to return by myself, somehow. If I can deal with my poor health during roll call, then I'll do something about retirement."

That way, we would be left with a five-point loss.

“Things aren’t that easy. You’re feeling really weak now, and our teacher isn’t kind enough to let you act your way past her. It will be impossible for you to get back to camp on your own.”

“Still, there’s nothing else I can do… This is so Class D will have some points left.”

Putting aside the keycard incident, we might retain some points for roll call and retirement. That certainly wasn’t a small number.

“Go.”

Although Horikita was weak, I felt her indomitable will behind her words. She could bear whatever burden she placed on herself, but couldn’t seem to bear involving others. I rose, and rested her head against the tree. She wanted me to leave her.

“Well then, I’ll leave. But if things continue like this, our classmates will blame you.”

“Yes. That’s the correct decision. Everything was my responsibility.”

Horikita praised my cold, calculating decision. She was ashamed of herself for being weak. Trembling, she forced herself to endure the cold. This was the kind of hardship that solitary people faced. The weather was still stormy, with no signs that the rains and winds would stop.

“Can you really make it back alone by tomorrow morning?”

“Yeah… I’ll be fine.”

“Horikita. Do you really think that not retiring is the right decision?” I couldn’t help blurting those words out.

“Of course I do. Retiring isn’t an option for me.”

She was free to exercise her indomitable will as much as she liked, but it didn’t mean anything if she lost in the end.

“Hey. Why do you think that we’ve been backed into such a corner?” I asked.

“I failed due to my negligence. That’s all.”

“You’re wrong. You’re completely wrong.”

Horikita Suzune had fought as hard as she could, and had tried to get to the end of the test without making mistakes.

“Go… Because I think of you as my friend, please listen to my request…”

After Horikita said that, she covered her mouth in surprise.

“I’m going to make this right… As if it didn’t happen at all.”

“No, this is the wrong choice.”

“It’s fine. I can… By myself… Ugh…”

Horikita suddenly stood, but the burden was too much. She closed her eyes in pain.

“Go, please…”

She lost consciousness again. I gently took Horikita into my arms and shifted my position to make her a little more comfortable. Standing, I looked up at the boundless darkness and let out a sigh.

“It would have been easier if you’d just retired of your own free will.”

The stubborn princess didn’t seem like she was going to throw in the towel. Wonderful. Yes, I thought it was wonderful. *You were almost right. But unfortunately, Horikita, you were wrong about one thing. Right now, just for this moment, I’ll tell you.*

I have never thought of you as my friend. I’ve never cared about you as a classmate. In this world, winning is everything. Your methods don’t matter. I don’t care what I have to sacrifice. As long as I have my victory in the end, I’ll be fine.

You, Hirata—no, all other people are nothing more than tools. I was complicit in what drove you to this. So, don’t blame yourself, Horikita. You were useful to me.



I walked down the muddy road, shining my flashlight on the path. My shoes were already covered in mud and filled with water. But I didn't care about that. First, I needed to get an understanding of the location.

When I went down the slope, I'd undoubtedly gotten further away from Class D's base camp. But I was sure that if I turned the other way, the beach would be near. I could press on and walk through the woods for several days, relying on the map in my head.

"It was close, after all."

Eventually, I arrived at the beach. The ship was floating in the water, and the lights were on. It took a few minutes, but I returned to the place I'd left. Horikita had collapsed. She remained unconscious as I picked her up in my arms. Her beautiful face was splashed with mud.

I started walking toward the beach, rather than our base camp. Somehow, I had managed to make it on time. It was just around seven o'clock in the evening. The teachers' tents had been taken down to avoid being blown away by the wind.

I went up the ramp to the pier and reached the ship's deck. One of the teachers noticed and raced up to me.

"You're prohibited from entering here. You'll be disqualified."

"This is an emergency. She's got a high fever and has lost consciousness. Please let her rest right away."

Once I explained the situation, the teacher skipped the instructions and brought out a stretcher. I laid Horikita down.

"Is she okay with retiring?"

"Without question. However, allow me to confirm one thing. Because it isn't eight o'clock yet, this shouldn't have any effect on roll call, correct?"

It was 7:58. I was cutting it close, but we should be safe. I needed to get the teacher's promise, though.

"You are certainly right. It is quite close. However, you're out."

“I understand. Oh, one more thing. I’d like to return this keycard.”

I took the keycard from my pocket and handed it over.

“Well then, I’ll be heading back.”

I couldn’t stay any longer, so I went back to the beach while the rain was still falling. With this, Class D would lose thirty points due to Horikita’s retirement, and an additional five points due to my absence during roll call.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Ibuki Mio
CLASS:	First Year, Class C
STUDENT ID:	S01T004714
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	July 27th



EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	C
INTELLIGENCE:	C
DECISION MAKING:	B–
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	B
COOPERATIVENESS:	E

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

She's lacking in cooperativeness and speaks very little. Although our evaluation of her was rather low during the interview because of her indifferent personality, she is an excellent student academically and physically, and we expect much from her. We hope she can make friends and greatly improve her communication skills.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

It seems she has built relationships, though with a limited number of students.

Chapter 7:
The Curtain Rises

August 7th. It was finally time for our short stint on the uninhabited island to come to an end. Our minor saving grace was that we hadn't spent our time rigorously fighting to survive. At least we'd had a moderate amount of fun? There still wasn't any sign of Mashima-sensei or the others, even when the test ended around noon.

"We're now tallying up the test results. Please wait a moment. Feel free to use the rest area if you would like, or have a drink."

After that announcement, the students gathered together and headed toward the rest area. Underneath the provisional tents, they'd prepared tables and chairs for our use, so we could get comfortable. There were no signs that Kouenji, Horikita, or any of the retired students were waiting on the cruise ship. Sudou, always together with Ike and Yamauchi, looked up at the ship.

"Ayanokouji. You work pretty well with Horikita, don't you? How close are you, really?"

Rather than sounding angry or upset, Sudou sounded like he genuinely wanted to know.

"There's nothing between us. We're just friends. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Even that makes me jealous, though. I still ain't her friend." Sudou sounded a little frustrated.

"But didn't Horikita acknowledge you a little bit this time?"

He hadn't caused any trouble. Rather, he'd acted for the sake of the class by trying to save Horikita and taking the initiative to fish.

"I sure hope so. She still hasn't called me by my first name, after all."

"Good work, both of you. Thank you for everything you did this week. You really saved us." Hirata appeared with words of gratitude. He handed me one of two paper cups he had. The cup cooled my palm. He handed the other to Sudou.

“I should be thanking you. You covered for me, the class loner. Also, you covered for me being late for roll call, and the fact that Horikita retired.”

“I couldn’t blame you when I heard the reason. Besides, Horikita-san gave us some really important information.”

“Do you believe what she said?”

“She isn’t the type to speak irresponsibly. That’s why you get along with her, right?”

This guy would protect an ally even if it meant risking his pure reputation.

“I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t any risk, but I had to help Horikita-san.”

Hirata softly added, “That’s a friend.” It seemed like there was a faint trace of the smile I saw yesterday. Sudou tilted in his head in confusion, as if unable to understand what we were talking about.

“Wait, what did you say? What are you talking about?”

“I think you’ll understand pretty soon. Anyway, Class C is really strange… They’re on another level.”

Because most of the Class C students had retired on the second day of the test, there wasn’t anyone here. I saw no sign of Ibuki anywhere on the sandy beach, as if she’d retired as well. I saw a rather bizarre sight: Ryuuen alone, the only remaining student from Class C.

“Why is he…? So Ryuuen-kun didn’t retire?”

While Hirata and I tried figure out the situation, Ryuuen turned toward us, as if he noticed our stares. He slowly drew nearer, as if thinking of something. The tension started to rise.

“Oh, hey there, sycophants. What happened to Suzune?” said Ryuuen as he drew closer, a paper cup in hand, completely ignoring Hirata’s presence.

After Sudou heard the name “Suzune” cross Ryuuen’s lips, the veins in his head bulged, and he shot Ryuuen a glare.

“I know you’ve been chasing Suzune’s ass. We were together before, you know.” Ryuuen, having drained the contents of his paper cup, lightly crushed it

and threw it at my feet. “Throw that away for me.”

Sudou trampled on and kicked the paper cup as hard as he could. “What a stupid thing to say. Huh? Pick up your own trash, jerk.”

“But picking up garbage seems like the perfect task for garbage.”

Ryuuen didn’t show any signs that he cared, in contrast to Sudou, who looked ready to blow his stack.

“Calm down, Sudou-kun. Here, I’ll throw it away.”

While Hirata hurriedly picked up the cup, Sudou clicked his tongue and kicked at the sand. Ryuuen looked away, as if we were boring. His torso had gotten dirty, and his trousers and jersey were covered in filth. It was an unimaginable state for him, since he had groaned about how much he loathed hard work.

“I thought you retired, Ryuuen-kun.”

“Who are you? More importantly, where’s Suzune? I’ve dreamed of squeezing her bottom.”

That was the second time he’d said “Suzune.” Coupled with his coarse language, it was too much. Sudou approached Ryuuen, grabbing him by the collar.

“What are you doing?”

Ryuuen showed no signs of agitation. He met Sudou’s intense glare with ease.

“The next time you say something stupid, I’ll kill you,” Sudou growled.

“Huh? What’s with you? Getting all excited by yourself, huh?”

Fists were about to fly, so Hirata jumped in and pulled Sudou away from Ryuuen.

“Horikita-san retired yesterday. She’s not here.”

“Retired? Suzune? She doesn’t seem like that kind of girl.”

“That’s¾”

Just then, we heard the click of a megaphone being turned on. Mashima-sensei appeared on the beach. The first-year students hurriedly tried to form a

line, but Mashima-sensei waved his hands at them to stop.

“It’s fine. We don’t mind if you want to keep relaxing. The test has already concluded. Now we’ve entered the summer vacation part of the trip, so it’s all right if you loosen up.”

Even though he’d said that, tensions were naturally running high for the students. They all stopped their chatter in an instant.

“Over this past week, we, your teachers, have closely watched your efforts in this special test. There were some students who took on the challenge honestly, head-on. There were some who devised schemes to tackle the test. Many things have happened, but overall, the test results were splendid. Good work.”

The students appeared relieved to receive such straightforward praise from Mashima-sensei. It seemed like everyone was finally starting to believe the one-week test was really over.

“Well then, to get straight to the point. I would like to announce the results of the special test.”

There probably wasn’t a single person, not even our own homeroom teacher, who had seen these test results.

“We will not accept any questions regarding the results, no exceptions. We would like you to accept the results you have been given, analyze them, and use them to help you for the next test. It is what it is. Don’t wet yourselves over these results. You must accept reality, you know?”

“That’s what we should be saying to you Class C people. You used up all of your points, right? Don’t make us laugh.” Sudou poked fun at Class C’s reckless behavior.

“We have 125 points remaining. I think we’ll be quite fine,” Hirata said.

He said so proudly, probably irritated by Ryuuen’s provocation. Ryuuen responded by making a gesture that looked like he was vomiting.

“Ha. I’m jealous of the nerve of you small fry. How you can be satisfied with that amount of points…”

“It doesn’t really matter whatever you say; Class C is still going to stay at zero

points.”

“Heh heh heh. Don’t be hasty. It’s certainly true we used up 300 points. However, have you forgotten the additional rules of this test?”

“So you’re going to expose a class leader?”

“That’s right. I wrote it on the paper, didn’t I? The name of Class D’s leader.”

Hirata and I tried to not show any emotion, but Sudou looked shocked.

“Also, those guys in A and B wrote the same thing, too. Do you know what this means?” Ryuuen said.

“Hold on a minute. What are you talking about, huh?! I-If you’re telling the truth, then…”

Then Class D would be hit with penalties, and we would lose 100 points. Mashima-sensei’s voice sounded through the megaphone.

“Now, we will announce the rankings. The lowest class is¾Class C, with zero points.”

“Bwah ha ha ha! Hey, check it out! You guys have zero points after all!”

When Sudou heard the results, he clutched his stomach in mocking laughter.

“Zero?”

Ryuuen didn’t seem to understand the situation. Mashima-sensei continued the announcements matter-of-factly.

“In third place is Class A, with 120 points. Coming in second place is Class B, with 140 points.”

A commotion broke out. No one had expected the rankings or the point totals.

“And then, Class D…”

For an instant, Mashima-sensei’s movements stiffened. However, he soon resumed speaking.

“…has come in first with 225 points. This concludes the announcement.”

All of the students in Class D, save Hirata, were probably more confused than

anyone else. Even Hirata, who was the only one in the know, was still almost unable to believe it. He wore an exuberant smile.

“What’s the meaning of this, Katsuragi?!”

Voices saying such things echoed from one end of the rest area to the other. Class A students circled around Katsuragi.

“Something is strange… What does this mean?” he muttered.

“Yahoo! We did it! In your face!”

As Sudou shouted for joy, all of the Class D students gathered together.

“Hey, hey, hey, what’s going on?! Hey, hey!!”

Ike, filled with both excitement and confusion, asked Hirata for an explanation.

“I’ll explain everything. Well, Ryuuen-kun, if you’ll excuse us.”

With those final words, Hirata walked toward the boat alongside Ike and Sudou. Sudou raised his middle finger while sticking out his tongue. Ryuuen could do nothing but watch in silence.

The exam was over, and the first-year students scattered. The ship was going to depart in two hours, and although we were free to play in the sea, we were also free to go onto the ship. I walked aboard.

“Hello, ladies and gentlemen. How was your week on the deserted island?” Kouenji, on the ship’s deck with a drink in hand, greeted Class D.

“You jerk, Kouenji! We lost thirty points because of you. You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

“Calm down, little boy Ike. I was in poor health, and was resting. I had no other choice.”

His skin looked smooth and glossy, so it was easy to tell that he had spent the week tanning. Also, his evidently perfect health made him sound not the least bit credible. While the guys joined forces to yell at Kouenji as one, Horikita appeared. She was still pale, not in good health yet. The students noticed her presence, and naturally gathered around her.

“S-Suzune. Are you feeling better now?”

Sudou tripped over his words a bit, but he approached Horikita and called her by her first name, just as he’d practiced.

“I’m not too bad. I can’t say that I’m back to full health. More than anything else, retiring was a big mistake on my part.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Horikita had accepted being called by her first name rather naturally. That was unexpected.

“By the way, Sudou-kun. Don’t just go around calling me by my first name without permission. Understand?”

“Y-y-yeah.”

Or not. Sudou couldn’t offer resistance. All he could do was nod.

“But…what happened? Why was Class D ranked first?”

Our leader’s identity had been exposed, so I’d made Horikita retire. Calculating, I supposed that would have gotten us incredibly close to zero points.

“Th-that’s right. What happened, Hirata?! I don’t get it at all!” Karuizawa asked.

Before Hirata could answer, something needed to be resolved.

“Well, Karuizawa-san, I think you should talk to Horikita-san first, don’t you agree?”

Karuizawa drew closer to Horikita.

“Horikita-san, do you have a minute?” he asked.

“Yes. There’s something that we’re supposed to talk about. Right?”

Horikita, seeing Karuizawa nod, closed her eyes. She was thinking of the underwear theft, and how she’d accused Karuizawa of spending points selfishly while her own identity as the leader had been discovered and she’d retired. She had no choice but to eat some humble pie now.

“I’m sorry.”

Karuizawa said it somewhat bluntly, but with sincerity.

“Ibuki-san stole my underwear. Ayanokouji-kun told us everything.”

“Huh?”

Horikita had prepared herself for abuse, so she was puzzled when she received an apology.

“Horikita-san, when you noticed that Ibuki-san was the culprit, she tried to run because you questioned her, right? That’s why you ended up collapsing and getting sick…”

Horikita suddenly turned toward me, shocked by Karuizawa’s words. I felt kind of awkward for some reason, and averted my eyes.

“I heard about it from Hirata-kun first. He said that you found out the leaders of Class A and C. That’s why we had so many points. So, I’m…sorry for everything I said.”

Karuizawa immediately returned to the other girls.

“Wait a minute. I… You said *I* found out the leaders’ identities? But I retired¾”

“There’s no need for you to be humble, Horikita-san. We won because your answers were absolutely correct.”

Doubts seemed to swirl in Horikita’s head. It seemed like the mysterious test results made sense to everyone except her.

“Wait. Ayanokouji-kun, what did you¾”

Horikita called to me in the midst of all the joy and confusion. However, being the key player in our victory, she was now surrounded by a great number of classmates.

“Horikita-san, you were so incredibly awesome! You’re seriously a genius, you know that?!”

“When I heard that you’d retired I wondered what was going to happen, but everything turned out okay!”

“W-wait a second!”

She was bombarded with questions from boys and girls alike. I clasped my hands and prayed for her safety while I made my retreat. Whew, I was sure glad how things ended up. Our class took first place and Horikita gained in popularity. Considering her natural poise, she'd probably get through it just fine. I wanted to avoid getting caught up in the rejoicing, so I went to my room to rest. As I walked away, I was confronted by a goddess of death yet again.

"May I have a word with you?"

"I don't really feel sociable. Is it okay if I refuse, Chabashira-sensei?"

"If you really don't want to, I can just start talking here. You don't mind if we stand outside, do you?"

"It's hot, so please keep it brief."

I had walked to the other side of the ship, so Chabashira-sensei took the lead. We found a place where there weren't any people around and it was completely quiet before we started talking.

"Is it safe to say that for the time being, you're satisfied?" I asked.

"Yes. First, I'd like to say that you did wonderfully. I'm honestly impressed."

"Well, tell me something. Is it really true? Did *he* demand I be expelled from school?"

Chabashira-sensei leaned against the railing and looked toward the sky.

"Do you have any basis for saying that the story is true?"

"I know quite a lot about you. Might not that be the reason, more than anything else? Other teachers don't know about your true abilities. But I have no doubts."

I certainly had *my* doubts. It was true that I stood out because of the entrance examination, but it shouldn't have been something all the teachers had inside knowledge of. But still, the sequence of events was rather odd. Chabashira-sensei had said that man had contacted the school directly. As expected, this person was hiding something.

"I'm sure that you've heard of this rather famous myth, the wings of Icarus."

“Why do you bring that up?” I asked.

“Icarus flew out of the tower where he was imprisoned in order to gain his freedom. However, that wasn’t achieved through one person’s abilities alone. It was because his father, Daedalus, had constructed wings and instructed him to fly. He didn’t fly because of his own intentions. Don’t you think that sounds exactly like your current predicament?”

“I can’t understand.”

“That man—no, your father—said this: ‘Sooner or later, Kiyotaka will gladly chase the means of his expulsion from school.’ You’re welcoming your end, much like how Icarus fell into the sea and died after his wings were burned, because he’d flown too close to the sun.”

The wings of Icarus, huh?

“So, what do you plan to do?” she asked.

“You should know, Sensei. Icarus won’t heed Daedalus’ warnings.”

Even though his wings burned, Icarus flew as high as he could in search of his freedom.

7.1

After I returned to the ship, I went back to my room right away. An exhausted Hirata was there, asleep on his side. I changed my clothes quietly so I wouldn't wake him and headed into the hall. When I turned my phone back on, the ringer started buzzing repeatedly. My call history had filled up. They were all from Horikita. Scary. For the time being, I just answered emails and relaxed in the lounge while I waited.

She probably wouldn't be convinced unless I explained things. Soon, a quite angry Horikita met up with me, radiating a silent pressure.

"What do these test results mean? What in the world happened?"

"You look like you don't have any idea at all."

"I just can't imagine it. I don't understand it at all. I have a mountain of questions."

Horikita ordered a drink from an attendant. I started talking.

"I'll tell you everything. However, my one condition is that you stay quiet on this matter. I won't compromise on this."

I'd assumed it would come to this, considering Horikita hadn't retired of her own will. This story was for Horikita's ears only.

"What would you like to ask?"

"What were you doing during the test? Tell me," she said.

That was a much better question than I'd expected. She wanted to hear everything at once.

"When the special test was announced, I didn't focus on anything except for the additional rules. I roughly understood how to manage the 300 points, but you couldn't manipulate them as an individual."

"But the additional rules were really difficult to understand. If you did things normally, you wouldn't have been able to identify the leaders. Right?"

"Yeah. First of all, I volunteered to join the search for the base camp. Able to

move freely, I planned to search out spot locations ahead of everyone else."

"You make it sound simple, but no one should have known the spot locations."

"That's not true. You didn't understand because you were ill and holed up inside the ship, but the school already gave us hints about the locations when we were sailing around the island."

Katsuragi had also noticed this when the ship circled the island at an unusually fast speed. Horikita fell silent. The ship had been traveling nearly three times faster than a usual cruise ship. Besides, if it were just for sightseeing, it wasn't normal to use a strange expression like "significant scenery."

Kouenji had noticed this hint, too. Well, it was probably a waste of time thinking about Kouenji, anyway.

"Then, I reached the cave. I thought it was the most important base."

"The cave was the most important base? Don't you think that the river and the well would have been more convenient, though?"

"The spot itself wasn't what was important. Its location was."

There were no spots close to the river or the well. However, there were two spots near the cave: the hut and the tower. It was the perfect place to exercise control. Horikita looked like she understood once I explained.

"But what advantage is there in going into the cave if you don't have a keycard?"

"Well, I'd intended to explore various things, but in the end I discovered the leader's identity."

"Well, I suppose that Katsuragi-kun *was* careless."

No, that wasn't it.

"There was that guy, Yahiko, remember? The one following Katsuragi around? *He* was the leader. I saw Katsuragi and Yahiko at the cave, but I didn't see the moment they occupied it. After the two of them walked away, I checked if the cave was occupied or not."

I explained the situation. When I saw them, Katsuragi had been standing near the entrance with the card in his hand. Yahiko came out of the cave, and they left together.

“Wouldn’t you have mistaken Katsuragi-kun as the leader?” she asked.

“Do you think that the leader would have shown off the card so carelessly in front of people?”

Horikita should have known how unbelievably stupid that was, precisely because she’d been appointed as the leader.

“But why? Why bother deliberately holding onto the card, then?”

“Because he didn’t have any other choice. As far as I can tell, Katsuragi is a calm and collected man, excessively cautious. There’s no way he didn’t understand the high risk of occupying a spot immediately after finding it. In other words, the person who occupied it was enticed by short-sighted greed.”

“That’s…why there was another person.”

“Yes.” When Katsuragi found the cave, he didn’t intend to occupy it. Nevertheless, he was holding the space down, probably because Yahiko had been careless. Even though he thought no one would be watching them, he’d probably wanted insurance. By holding onto the card and displaying it, even in the unlikely event that a witness was present, he could mislead them into thinking that he was the leader.

“So, aside from their base, Class A held down at least two spots, but we didn’t confirm how many they were occupying by the end of the test. If I correctly guessed the identity of their leader, though, I could invalidate all of their points.”

After I’d narrowed it down to Yahiko, putting effort into anything else would’ve been a waste of time.

“I’m still not convinced. If he figured out the spot’s location at such an early stage, and if he were acting alongside a lot of other people, shouldn’t he have avoided trouble? Even if he just had someone standing watch by the cave, it should have been sufficient claim of ownership. Why would they occupy it?”

“That was probably Class A’s disadvantage.”

Their overall points on the test were high, and they didn’t receive a negative assessment due to behavior in class like Class D. However, their class was divided internally. In other words, there was a reason why Katsuragi couldn’t rely on other people.

“Their class appears perfect at first glance, but it actually has a huge schism in it.”

That was why my methods had revealed Class A so easily. Well, that was simple luck. It was like getting a good score by exploiting a mistake. Class A wasn’t vigilantly watching for a surprise attack from overhead, so there was nothing to be done.

“That’s why I excluded Class A at that stage, and turned my attention toward Class C. Katsuragi was easy to understand, but with Ryuuen, there were many unknown variables. To tell you the truth, he was gathering more information than I was. He’d found out the identities of all of the leaders.”

“W-wait, he found out the identities of all of the leaders… So not only Class D, but also the leaders for Classes B and A? But that’s strange. We were far from being penalized; we ended up getting first place by a wide margin. How do you intend to explain that?”

“This is a little difficult to explain, but the reason I made you retire is the answer.”

“Wait, the answer is you made me retire? What in the world did you do?”

“Oh, that reminds me. I didn’t return it to the school yet.”

I took a single card out of my pocket and handed it over to Horikita.

“This is a keycard. Why do you…?!”

Horikita was astonished when she saw the letters engraved on the card.

“Wait, why does…?”

The name read “Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.”

“The test had to be fair. The rules were fundamentally created to be fair.”

That was quite natural, something you would have seen if you'd carefully confirmed the additional rules. Only one person could be chosen as leader. The leader could not be changed. Only the leader held the rights of exclusive possession.

"What do you think would happen if the leader retired because of poor health?"

"That's… The leader would be absent. So the rights of exclusive possession would disappear…"

"Wrong. In the manual, it says, 'It is impossible to change the leader without suitable justification.' Don't you think that retirement is suitable enough justification?"

It seemed like the additional rules had been made to be broken if someone were absent due to poor health or injury. I could predict setting up a new leader. I was able to figure this out by looking at the other rules. For example, we couldn't change the base camp without suitable justification after we'd first decided where it would be, but there were suitable reasons.

We'd occupied the riverside area, but if we were careless and it was taken by another class, then that would have counted as "suitable justification." You couldn't stay in the base itself, so if there wasn't a system where you could search for a new base camp, everything would collapse.

"So then, you made me…?"

Horikita Suzune had retired, and I was appointed in her place. Of course, that meant that I was the leader they were supposed to guess at the end of the test. There can only be one.

"That's why even though Class C knew you were the leader, we avoided penalties."

"But wait. Ibuki-san stole my card, but what if I'd protected it really thoroughly?"

Horikita recalled the day of the accident.

"Did you drop the card on purpose back then? Well, I suppose that Yamauchi-

kun's actions might have provided Ibuki-san the opportunity to hatch a plan to steal the keycard…"

I'd been holding onto the muddy Horikita, so in that sense I had no choice but to give up the keycard.

"Unless I knew what Ibuki-san was aiming for right at the start, I couldn't have done anything…"

Right. Ibuki had been picked up by Class D purely by chance. I'd been almost convinced until I heard about the guy named Kaneda in Class B. He'd been sent as a spy by Ryuuen. I wasn't so good-natured as to believe that two people just happened to be saved by two separate classes completely by chance.

"Besides, Ibuki has a habit of looking people in the eye when she's lying."

You could say that the bigger the lie, the more obvious the habit.

"Wait, when she lied she would look the person in the eye? Isn't it usually the opposite?"

"Generally speaking, you avoid eye contact if you have a guilty conscience. However, it was the opposite for her. I think that she made eye contact to make the person think that the lie was the truth. She probably didn't even notice it herself."

Even when we were talking about the underwear theft, she looked me straight in the eye.

"Her goal was probably to find the keycard, but she might have intended to disrupt Class D at the same time."

What had happened to Karuizawa, and the underwear in Ike's bag, might have otherwise been seen as mere coincidence.

"But I have to wonder why Ibuki-san specifically stole my keycard. All she needed was to check my name."

"That was likely Ibuki's intention from the start. However, she ran into unexpected trouble."

That was the catalyst that led to verifying the leader of Class C.

“Ibuki had a digital camera in her bag to take a picture of the keycard.”

“To take a picture…with the camera? Why would she go so far?”

“If she had a picture, then the leader’s identity would have been clear for anyone to see, right? If she had convincing evidence, she would have profited.”

“I don’t quite understand… Did Ryuuen-kun not trust Ibuki-san?”

“That wasn’t it. If the discussion only stayed within Class C, then there shouldn’t have been any need for her to take a picture with the camera or steal the card.”

In other words, that meant there had been people involved who didn’t trust Ibuki’s words alone; they’d wanted reliable evidence.

“From here on out, I don’t have any evidence of what I’m saying. Think of it as my intuition, which I derived from the test results. At the end of the test, Class A had 270 points.”

In other words, they hadn’t used a single point during the test.

“Classes A and C were connected, working together behind the scenes. Class C sacrificed their own points and bought whatever Class A needed. Also, by taking all of C’s tools, Class A was able to spend the week without using any points.”

Ibuki had obtained evidence and given it to someone in A Class.

“By the way, I became aware of Class C’s leader after half of the students retired. It was certain that the leader would have remained on the island, right?”

“Even so, we weren’t supposed to know who was left.”

“No, I was almost one hundred percent sure that Ryuuen was still on the island.”

I figured it out when I saw Ibuki hiding a wireless transceiver in the ground. Ibuki had used it to stay in contact with Ryuuen. Retired students shouldn’t have been able to use a transceiver. In other words, someone was left on the island for her to communicate with.

He’d casually set the transceiver on top of a table while enjoying his vacation.

No one else was controlling it, just him. His mistake was that he didn't trust anyone.

"My god… I don't even have the words," Horikita answered, facing the truth.

If I were to summarize this test, I'd say that Class A's first mistake carried through to the end. They didn't function well due to an internal rift. Class B went through the test with a thoroughly defense-oriented strategy, which did neither harm nor good. Their only mistake was that, because there were so many good-natured people in Class B, they'd permitted Kaneda to stay, and they'd believed him.

I don't know how Kaneda got the evidence, but he'd obtained something, and probably told Ryuuen. If you looked at the fact that Class A didn't get any points, you might think it was because they hadn't obtained any physical evidence. Then there was Class C. We were able to avoid damage because I'd been appointed as the leader. In addition to sending people off as spies to find out the identities of the other leaders, Class C had profited from some kind of negotiations with Class A. Ryuuen might be our number one enemy.

"I don't like this. You completely used me, like a pawn."

"Yeah. I can't deny that. I wouldn't be surprised if you never want to speak to me ever again."

I was aware of what I'd done.

"Well, I'll be heading back to my room now. I'm really tired," I said.

"Wait. We're not done talking."

"What? I just want to relax in my room, if possible."

"After you explain everything. There are still some things we need to talk about, right?"

"Well…like what?"

"The reason why you participated in this special test. Was it to fight alone? I don't care that you used me this time. I want to know why you put in the effort when you dislike trouble."

"I wonder."

Perhaps the explanation I had given so far had been less important to Horikita.

“I don’t have any room for doubt. I understand your talents now. If you help me, aiming for Class A seems a realistic enough goal. But what are your principles? Why did you do this?”

Of course, I didn’t want to talk to Horikita about my personal problems. I’d only participated because of a commitment I made to Chabashira-sensei.

“Because I was touched that you tried to fight all alone when you were ill.”

“You wouldn’t normally say that kind of thing. It’s easy to spot the lie.”

“Well, what I mean is I don’t feel like explaining it.”

I stood up and stretched out my hand.

“I don’t mind helping you get up to Class A. However, I have one condition. Do not investigate me. If you promise not to touch on this subject ever again, I will help you.”

Horikita took my hand without hesitation.

“If you don’t want to talk, there’s nothing I can really do about that. If you’ll help, I have no reason to refuse you. I’m not interested in digging things up that are better left buried. After all, you dislike trouble.”

Horikita’s handshake was firm. *I work for me. You do things for yourself.* The battle to raise our class up from the very bottom was about to begin.

Postscript

Hello, this is Syougo Kinugasa. I've started to become health-conscious. There's been a sake boom recently, so I've been drinking one cup a day, and making sure to relax.

Anyway, in the third volume we begin to understand the goals and policies of each individual class, centered on the special test. The protagonist's way of thinking and his classmates' ways of thinking gradually become clear.

Even in modern society, problems arise from the differences in opinion between men and women. As long as the human race continues to evolve, I don't think there will ever be a perfect solution for the inequalities based on gender.

Well then, do you remember? In Volume 2, my goal was to have Shunaku-shi treat me to sashimi. Of course, I remembered. Maguuroo! It was incredibly delicious. Thank you very much. Please, let's continue to be good partners. As for next time, let's go out for sea cucumber.

Attention, everyone! We have some news!

Yes, *Classroom of the Elite* will be turned into a manga! When I received the news from the publisher, I was extremely ecstatic, really happy. Ichino Yuyu-sama will draw the manga. I sincerely look forward to working with you. I'm very much looking forward to when the series will begin serialization in January!

Phew. Now then, how about we get to the postscript? No, there's one more thing to report. Actually, in the previous postscript, there was one other thing I wrote about besides the sashimi story. I think no one else cares about this at all, but it's a story that makes me hang my head in shame when I remember.

I'll come out and say it. This is to my past self:

Did you seriously mean to say something like "I've already finished the manuscript early"?

You moron! Idiot! You fool! You wound up eating your own words! Yes! You completely messed it up! Way out of bounds! Yes, I ended up causing a lot of

trouble for my editor. Even now, as I'm writing this postscript, I can see the tear stains of my dear editor, who works so diligently. The tears just won't stop coming.

You really are an idiot, Kinugasa-kun! Reflect on your faults!

Phew. The guilty Kinugasa has reflected. You can rest assured of that. Therefore, the Kinugasa who has reflected on his actions dares to say, "I will definitely finish more quickly next time!" Then, he will write it.

And I'll add that I'll be sorry if I'm late again!

Well everyone, I will report on the results again next time, in the next volume. Hopefully it'll be good news!

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Born in November. Blood type: AB. Primarily responsible for scenario and PC game planning. Most important works are *Guards of Daybreak* and *Reminiscence*. He has become health-conscious after the results of a through medical check-up. After reviewing his dietary habits, some have said that his complexion has improved in recent months.

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