X Strategy



People are nothing but tools to me

Introduction: X-Strategy is the strategy employed by Classroom of the Elite protagonist Kiyotaka Ayanokouji against the first major antagonist of the series Kakeru Ryuuen. It encompasses four volumes and serves as a scheme centered around misdirection and manipulation.

Disclaimer: An appeal to possibility fallacy is the fallacy that because something is possible means it's probable or likely. In the context of analyses, debaters often use this fallacy to downplay characters. For example, suppose Bob plans to rob a bank by slipping a note to the teller and revealing a gun. It would be an appeal to possibility to criticize his plan for not accounting for the possibility of him being struck by a meteor or lightning. Both events are possible, but they're so improbable that it's unreasonable to criticize the lack of preparation there as a flaw in the plan. It's not an appeal to possibility if you criticize Bob for not accounting for the possibility of a silent alarm since silent alarms are fairly common and worth considering in a high stakes robbery. I explain this because I seek to avoid that in this analysis, but a lot of criticisms later on will be fairly basic strategic maneuvers that even average people like me could think of. For these supposed geniuses to not consider that or that their opponent might consider that they might consider that is thus a flaw.

Disclaimer 2: Like *SAW, Classroom of the Elite* makes clever use of foreshadowing. Kiyotaka frequently makes innocuous observations that pay off much later down the line. A good example of this is when a group of people note that Hirata and Karuizawa don't seem that close in Vol 3, which pays off in Vol 4. I take this into account by filling in any possible gaps or explicating on

unspoken strategic aspects of plans if the hints are there. BUT I won't fill in any gaps if there are no hints. For example, a point I make later on is that, from Kiyotaka's POV, his plan was essentially to have Horikita lose to an average girl in a fight. Since there's no indication that Kiyotaka accounted for Ibuki's martial arts skill or even noticed it, I don't just make the claim, "Ayanokouji must've known Ibuki would win because he presumably noticed her skill via his great BIQ (despite no hint of that in the text)."

Strategic Aim: To maintain Kiyotaka's anonymity, to build Horikita up as a major player within his class, to increase his influence over Class D, and to deal with Ryuuen.

This strategy has many benefits. Building up Horikita is important since she is, like him, pragmatic and intelligent, and his closest friend. By increasing her influence over the class as a leader, Kiyotaka can essentially puppeteer his class from the shadows through her. Ditto for increasing his influence through other means expanded on later.

Outline:

Island Exam (Vol 3)

This is where Kiyotaka begins his strategy in response to the events of Vol 2, where Ryuuen made an indirect attempt to expel Sudo. Halfway through their summer vacation, the class's luxury cruise ship circles around a deserted island. The school instructs them to change into jerseys, confiscates their phones, and has them stand in formation. Kiyotaka notices how Horikita looks disheveled and seems cold. This, they announce, will be the first special test of ANHS:

- Each class gets 2 tents, 2 flashlights, a box of matches, unlimited sunscreen, and the girls would get tampons and such.
- 300 points for each class + a manual that explains how to get points, good spots on the island, etc.
- Each class with get however many points they have left added onto their class total the next semester
- Per each student who leaves due to illness, 30 points will be deducted from their class. (Class A starts off with 270)
- Wristwatches will be distributed amongst all students that tracks their pulse, the time, their position, etc
- No pissing/shitting outside of a toilet

- Spots on the island grant rights of exclusive possession that may be invoked for up to 8 hours after discovery. A special key card is needed to claim that spot. Only a leader can use the key card. Leaders can't be changed without justification. One bonus point per claim.

- Any student who commits burglary, causes damage to, or is violent toward another class will immediately disqualify their class.

- At the end of the week, you guess the leaders of the other classes: you take 50 pts per correct guess from them, and you lose 50 pts per incorrect guess. The classes who have their leader discovered loses all bonus points from spots.

Kiyotaka's class eventually settles in a spot by the river, and Kushida elects Horikita as leader. Also, while scouting with Sakura, they find a primitive path that leads to a cave. A man from Class A exits the cave holding a key card. Katsuragi orders another guy around and clearly announces that he is the leader in the same sentence that he advises the guy to be mindful of what he says and does. When Horikita later asks him to do a favor, Kiyotaka notes that a smart but aloof girl like her would struggle in this situation, having to rely on and work with others. Later, while foraging for fire wood with Sakura, Yamauchi informs him that he plans to date her, and they stumble upon a bruised girl while making their way back. Kiyotaka notices dirt under her nails and a disturbance in the soil beneath where she was sitting, but they agree to take the Class C girl back to camp. The pragmatic reason is that her absence would also cost Class C points.

The next morning, he snoops through Ibuki's (the Class C girl) bags and finds a camera with no signs of use or battery. Ryuuen's goons show up and invite Class D to party with Ryuuen, and Kiyotaka persuades Horikita to go to scout their camp. Class C used up all their points, negating the costs of any potential correct guess, and Ryuuen implies Ibuki got beat up for disagreeing with the hedonism alongside another boy. The two eventually end up at Class A's base, where Katsuragi tells them to piss off. The next day, which is the third, Kiyotaka decides to investigate the forest with Sakura. The two have an intimate moment where Sakura says she wishes she could take a picture to preserve the memory, triggering a eureka moment in Kiyotaka.

Day 4. Kiyotaka discovers a fishing hut beneath a small cliff with free equipment. He next scouts a tower to see if there's a spot there, and two Class A thugs accost him. Upon interrogation, he responds simply that he can't say anything. They offer him points to sell out his leader, and he responds asking if someone trustworthy like Katsuragi could oversee the deal, the mention of whom prompted one thug to state that he's being silly. Katsuragi isn't in a position to make such plays since Sakayanagi is Class A's representative. And this makes him wonder if perhaps Sakayanagi is in fact the leader. He goes to scout Class C next where he meets Ichinose, and there it's a ghost town. She's distraught as now they can't deduce Class C's leader (seriously?). Ichinose tells him that Sakayanagi and Katsuragi don't like each other, and Ayanokouji states he's simply acting on Horikita's orders.

Day 5. There's trouble as the girls discover Kei's underwear is missing. It's in Ike's bag, but that doesn't make sense if he did it he would've been nervous the whole way through the process of checking his bag, but he only became so half-way through. It also would be too dumb of a move to hide it in your own bag. There's a big drama as the girls decide to pack their things and camp at a distance. Ayanokouji speaks to Ibuki, just by looking into her eyes, understands her, and he concludes she is the culprit. (Kiyotaka later reveals that she looks people in the eye when lying but otherwise doesn't make eye contact.) Horikita enlists him to find the culprit, he predicts that Ibuki will act soon after tensions have cleared since she hasn't finished her goal yet, and he reveals to Horikita that he knows she's sick. The evidence is that her hair was disheveled, indicating she'd been sleeping since her bangs were disheveled, implying she'd been lying on her side, and she obviously seemed cold.

They go searching for food later and Horikita shows him the key card, different from the card he saw with Sakura. Right after. He makes a deal with Yamauchi to give him Sakura's email address in exchange for him smearing mud on Horikita. The line for the shower when they return is long and Kei is there, who Horikita is hostile to after the underwear drama. At his behest, Horikita goes to clean up in the cold river, and Ayanokouji invites Ibuki along. Horikita confides with Ayanokouji that the key card is gone afterwards, and Ibuki is the prime suspect. She returns to base camp 10 minutes later, just when a fire breaks out. Ibuki disappears and gets in a scrap with a heavily weakened Horikita, and the latter notes they could have a case against Ibuki since her fingerprints are on it. Ibuki digs up her radio but gets the odd sensation that it's been tampered with. She reports her location, responds to a flashlight morse code signal, and meets Ryuuen. She had to do this because she needed "definitive proof" and her camera was broken. She replaces the key card when their meeting is finished. Ayanokouji returns, comforts Horikita, who collapses back into unconsciousness, he delivers his edgy monologue, and then retires Horikita. He later explains everything to her after she unintentionally took all the credit for Class D's victory.

Ryuuen's plan:

The aim is fairly simple: info gathering on the other classes.

>Bruise Ibuki (and the other guy), and then send them as spies
>Strike an alliance with Class A
>Bank on Class B and D taking them in out of pity plus the point incentive of roll call absence
>Use all 300 points initially given before sending the class back to the ship. Ryuuen further uses reverse psychology to make it seem like he doesn't care whether the spies return or not, offering to take them back in
>Ryuuen would stay behind on the island
>The spies would use cameras to record the key card interaction and then rendezvous with him, and Ibuki would drive division in Class D by pitting the girls against the boys.

We can see that it's decent in these aspects. It's believable that Ryuuen's class would have defectors since he had the reputation of being a tyrant, so he played into that even more by bruising the "defectors." He further displays a nonchalant attitude about whether they return or not, deflecting suspicion away from them. Ryuuen orders them to bury their radios outside of the camps they end up in so they can communicate with him secretly. If it worked, it would have nabbed them 100 class points and impressed Class A, while putting down both CLass B and D, and it would also have maintained his hold over Class C by giving them a way to both have fun and win on the island.

But the plan also has numerous holes. The spies just enter the classes with the cameras in their bags for anyone to see. Despite Ryuuen's bruising of Ibuki, people (of average intellect) would still naturally be suspicious of her given the nature of the game and Ryuuen's reputation for underhanded tactics. A simple baggage check is something he should have anticipated and planned around, perhaps by having her bury the camera outside the camp as well. Ryuuen carelessly lets the radio be spotted when the Class D duo come to see them. There's no benefit to this and it doesn't fit in with the facade that Class D didn't give a shit about the exam and was just partying, and it further telegraphs him as their leader. Even if Ryuuen successfully guessed the other classes' leaders, he made it extremely obvious that he is the leader. So his entire plan is negated if the other classes write his name down, causing a net gain/loss of 0 for any mutual exchange involving Class C. Ryuuen could have easily planned around this by just having some NPC in his class under his control be the leader who renews the spot, anticipating that he's the obvious first guess since he's the "tyrant" of Class C. This is the strategy I actually thought he was employing to make himself a red herring, but no, he just banked on no one guessing the obvious answer. When all is said an done, he later explains to Horikita his plan and the various deductions he made.

Ayanokouji's Counter-Plan

The aim is primarily to switch the key card so that the information Ryuuen acquires and passes along will be incorrect

>Drop the key card during the discussion with Horikita where she reveals it to him, catching Ibuki's attention
>Convince Yamauchi to put mud on Horikita so that she has to go bathe, allowing Ibuki to make her move
>Sabotage Ibuki's camera, forcing her to physically grab the card
>Set a fire that makes Ibuki panic and flee, as people would naturally suspect her, being the outsider when so many bad things were happening. (Prediction)
>Horikita chases after her, gets in a fight, and collapses, allowing Ibuki to pass along the information (Prediction)
>Retire the exhausted Horikita, either through persuasion or just dumping her off to the staff
>Class C's plan fails. Make the correct guesses of the other classes' leaders. Let Horikita take all the credit.

Pros - This plan is much more intricate in its multifaceted benefits and precautions. It plays into his long term strategy of misdirecting attention away from himself and building up Horikita as a powerful figure within the class. It proves to Horikita his superiority. By using her as a pawn, though he could have likely convinced her to play along on her own, he demonstrates his superiority to her and inclines her to respect his capabilities, and since he did this seemingly in service of Class D Suzune also respects him as an ally. Setting fire to the manual is an impressive, on-the-spot frame job against Ibuki. The underwear incident had already caused a lot of tension in the class, and while that could be interpreted as perverted internal trouble, the manual burning seems like a malicious external act of sabotage. The outsider Ibuki would naturally be the culprit, and Ibuki realizes this and flees. Ayanokouji had also made sure to weaken Horikita as much as possible by manipulating her into bathing in the cold water, worsening her condition and causing her to lose the fight to Ibuki and collapse from exhaustion. It's likely he improvised much of this plan on the fly when the group went foraging, as he did mentally note that peeling Horikita's name off the keycard would be impossible, implying he might've considered that beforehand, before dropping the keycard. Since Ibuki had been there for a while by the time Kiyotaka formulated a plan, he knew she likely knew the leader by then. Thus He had to retire Horikita, but that can't be done without "suitable justification" per the given manual, and he surmised that sickness would be a suitable justification. It's mentioned early on in passing that one student in Class A would stay on the ship due to sickness, so it's likely he used this information to make the connection.

Cons - But it has flaws just like any plan. First, it relies on Horikita not being able to use the shower. There's a long line there when they return. Kiyotaka never hints that he accounted for this somehow in his narration. There's no mention of him seeing people clamoring to use the shower before he heads off to forage, so he just gambled that Horikita would both be unable to use the shower and impatient enough to knowingly bathe in the cold. He doesn't know Ibuki is a capable martial artist. From his POV, Kiyotaka is betting that a random girl will be able to beat up Horikita when she is sick. This might not seem too bad, but Horikita does put up a fight against her, throwing multiple blows and landing one that's described as "agonizing" to Ibuki. It's only after Horikita got slammed to the ground, tired herself out throwing multiple attacks, and was forced to block/evade multiple hits from Ibuki that she collapsed from exhaustion. An ordinary girl, even against a weakened Horikita, would most likely have gone down fast. And this is something Kiyotaka should have known. He's seen her manhandle Yamauchi and complimented her striking power in Vol 2 when she, while holding back, hits him. He got lucky Ibuki was trained. Most obviously, the fire tactic is both clever and contrived. I've already explained why it's clever, but this is why it's stupid. No one in Class D actually makes the logical inference that Ibuki was the likely culprit. (It's true Kiyotaka actually was the perp, but from their POV this would be it.) Even Suzune, who doesn't have the excuse of being a screw up or an idiot, just goes "One thing after another" after she returns from bathing, just dropping whatever suspicions she had for Ibuki despite knowing both that the keycard was missing and now that there's a fire. She only gets seriously suspicious when she notices that Ibuki is gone; i.e. somehow Ibuki is able to make the inference but no one else in Class D is able to do so. If anyone else did or if Horikita put two and two together while Ibuki was still there, they could've either confronted her the camp or multiple people would've followed her out of the camp to confront her, confounding his plan which requires the keycard to be stolen and shown to Ryuuen.

Reasoning - His deductions are as follows. He deduced Katsuragi wasn't the leader for Class A because he was too careless (pretty obvious) in that instance, but he was otherwise cautious, and so it had to be the guy next to him. Occupying a spot immediately after finding it is risky, and Katsuragi pretended to be the leader in case anyone had caught sight of Yahiko's making claim to the spot He figured out Ibuki was the thief (and thus a traitor) when he noticed that she didn't make eye contact normally, but did when he expressed trust in her when she said she wasn't the thief, and this is in comparison to normal people who do ordinarily make eye contact but look away when lying, so perhaps her eye habits are inverted. Most impressively, the digital camera in her bag led him to suspect that there was an alliance at play, because if Ibuki was merely giving info to Class C her word would likely be good, but other classes wouldn't be so trusting. Class A's final points (270) confirms the fact since that's only the 30 point deduction from Arisu's absence. It's likely Class C lent them resources. This is actually fairly impressive.

Unsoundness - Besides the alliance deduction, his reasoning here is very sound and he is carried by his conclusions being fairly obvious. His reasoning that only short sighted greed would prompt someone to claim a spot is flawed. Hypothetically, if you immediately find a spot, claim it, renew it every 8 hours on the dot, then you'd get 3 points from it per day. Delaying just reduces the points gained in the 7 day period from that spot. So a shrewd, intelligent person is just as likely to immediately claim a spot to maximize points. And more obviously, someone might just want to claim a spot before a person from another class stumbles onto the site to claim it, and then you are forced to either reveal the leader to hog the spot or give up the free points. But since there were only two possible leaders there, no matter what he said he had a decent chance of guessing right. For all it matters, he could've just as easily said "Katsuragi is taller than the other guy, and taller people are more likely to be leaders," and it would've been just as likely to be right. His deduction about Ibuki is also flawed, because people, even the aloof and introverted types, also tend to make strong eye contact during emotional moments or significant conversation points. Within the conversation he made the deduction, he stated that he trusted her. Her making eye contact could just as easily have been from shock at his gesture of good will, attraction, or appreciation.

VIP Exam (Vol 4)

It's been 3 days since the island exam, and Kiyo is lonely. He's under pressure from Chabashira. Hirata interrupts his daydreaming to invite him out, even canceling his outing with his girlfriend, Karuizawa, to do so. Kiyo briefly wonders if he's gay, but he suspects an ulterior motive. He is correct: Hirata now thinks highly of Horikita and wants to coordinate with her. He could act as a bridge to deliver Hirata's thoughts to her and pretend they're his. Kiyo notes how Hirata seems to have, in doing this, lost his nerve and showed unusual uncertainty. Karuizawa and her friends arrive shortly after, push Kiyo away, and chat with Hirata.

A message from the school interrupts a conversation between Kiyo and Kushida, urging students to arrive at a certain room at a certain time. He notices the times for girls and boys are

different. He meets Karuizawa, the Professor, and Yukimura at the meeting. The test is this: all first year students will be divided into groups with designations based on the Zodiac calendar. It's a test of thinking. Why exactly only four of them were called there when it would be more convenient to explain everything at once greatly puzzles Kiyo and the gang until the teacher explains that groups aren't made up of members from just one class. The teacher hands them a slip of paper with their group (Rabbit) 15 total members.

The rules are as follows:

There is a VIP in each group. At 8AM on the test day, every student will receive a text stating that their respective group's VIP has been chosen. The test begins the next day and ends on the fourth day. Each group should convene twice on test days to discuss for one hour. Answers will only be accepted between 9:30 and 10:00 PM on the final night. During that time, each group member must submit an answer as to who they think their group's VIP is, but only the first submission will be accepted. VIPs can't submit answers. Submissions should be only for a student's own group.

There are 4 outcomes, as explained:

O1: If the answer is correct, then everyone in the group gets 500,000 private points, with the VIP getting an extra 500,000
O2: If there is no answer submitted, or if someone within the group who is not in the same class as the VIP answers wrong, then the VIP gets 500,000 private points.

O3 and O4 trigger for any answer given prior to the 9:30 to 10:00 time frame.

O3: If a group member not in the VIP's class submits a correct answer early, then their class gets 50 class points and they personally get 500,000 private points. (The answer is null if the VIP's classmate answers early.)
O4: If a group member submits a wrong answer early, their class loses class points, the VIP gets 500,000 points, and the test ends (Answer is null if the VIP's classmate submits wrongly.)

The incentive for O2 is to simply prevent other classes from benefitting. The most beneficial outcome is mutual cooperation, but the built-in traitor system also fatly rewards betrayal. So it's a prisoner's dilemma. When all is done he begins creating his strategy. Later, as he meets some students from other classes he memorizes their names and faces. Hirata is in the same group as Horikita and Katsuragi. Horikita is now respected as a "puppet master."

At a meeting with Suzune, they notice that her group (Dragon) is stacked with talent from all classes, which is odd since Ichinose isn't there. They both get emails confirming they're not the VIP, and Kiyo picks up on choice wording in the email - "After thorough consideration." He surmises the VIP was chosen based on something that set them apart. Kiyo silences Suzune just as Ryuuen shows up. He wants to know how she pulled off the island scheme. He says the plan that beat him was too high level for Horikita to have come up with. He figured out they

swapped leaders and that the second leader is probably the mastermind. Kiyo remains calm as Ryuuen observes him. Horikita attempts to draw attention away from Kiyo by condescending him and saying she wouldn't swap places with him. Ryuuen reveals he knows Kiyo is smart but hasn't achieved anything of note academically. He doesn't consider anyone else besides the mastermind and Sakayanagi threats.

After Ryuuen leaves, Kiyo believes that the meeting was not chance. Ryuuen had probably had Suzune spied on. A mistake, Kiyo admits.

At the first meeting, Ichinose quickly takes charge as leader. Class A proves stubborn, and Kiyo senses someone else behind their most prominent student Machida. He recommends a strategy to "come out on top" which is to not discuss anything at all, which prompts another member to suspect the VIP is in Class A. But this strategy is contested on the potential that VIPs were disproportionately from one class, though this is shot down on the argument that the school values fairness based off previous tests. Theoretically, Class A's VIPs being equally distributed and playing silent would get a hefty amount of points, and so would any other class employing the strat.

But Ichinose points out that continuing A's strategy would maintain the status quo of them at the top. She turns the tide against them, but A's students commit to the strategy. Then Karuizawa gets in a spat with Manabe for apparently having shoved Rika earlier in the year, and Kiyo notices she acts oddly weak in the encounter. Sakura calls him to meet at a secluded spot shortly after, he stumbles upon her speaking to herself behind a pillar, and she gets spooked when she notices him. She diverts to being scared about being in a group with no one she's close with. He gives her his email and she's overjoyed, which he attributes to her growing as a person through the tests.

At the second meeting, Kiyo's suspicions against Karuizawa grow as she remains aloof. An earlier scene where she was very casual around Ibuki (underwear thief), the earlier encounter with Manabe - all of it seems odd to Kiyo. She was usually a domineering figure, but now she was very reserved. But she is a valuable figure nonetheless for her influence with the other Class D girls, and to close the gap with A he needs her.

After B leaves, Kiyo speaks to Manabe and lies that he thinks he saw Karuizawa fight another girl from another class, keeping his words vague to sell the lie. He wishes to see how Karuizawa will react. Later that night, Hirata reveals he knows two D classmates have been chosen as VIPs. At Kiyo's suggestion, he reveals the name by typing it on his phone - Dragon (Kushida) and Horse (Minami). Kushida being the VIP in such a stacked group has him worried. Koenji purposefully sends a wrong answer early to end his group's test, costing his class points and escalating things. This greatly irks Kiyo to his limits. Stepping outside to get some air and think, he encounters Kushida, who flusters him greatly with a hug. He stumbles upon the teachers moments after and eavesdrops on their conversation. Dragon Group traditionally was intentionally stacked with class reps, and Ichinose was only excluded at her teacher's discretion. She wanted Ichinose there to spy on Kiyo after his leader swap stunt on the island test.

The next day, he speaks to Horikita for info on Karuizawa. He can't approach her directly since he's a loser. He explains how Karuizawa has a secret self that he must uncover, perhaps to make her an ally. Enter Ryuuen. He states he's already figured out the mechanics behind the selection process. He suggests simply discovering the VIP's class, analyzing the group, and then collecting phones to prevent lying - a strategy otherwise against the rules but one he can pull off as an "absolute tyrant." He leaves his phone behind out in the open set to record, forcing the two to talk like spies. Horikita orders Kiyo to find his VIP, directing suspicion away from Kiyo. (This is a really bad trap.)

When he returns to his room, Yukimura confirms he and Sotomura aren't the VIPs, and likely Karuizawa as well. At the next meeting, she sits with Machida defensively. Ichinose has them play cards and discreetly observes the group members' behaviors to learn how to approach them. Kiyo considers his own style of play and what one might pick up from that. Afterwards, Ichinose and Kiyo head to see Horikita, who is still in discussion with Ryuuen and Kanzaki. Ryuuen has figured out that Ichinose was put in with the losers for a reason. Ryuuen proposes an alliance to defeat A, proposing to pool their knowledge of their respective class's VIPs. When Suzune rejects, Ryuuen offers the same to Ichinose to crush A and D, but she declines. As Ryuuen leaves the room, he makes an odd remark to Kiyo.

Afterwards, Ichinose proposes a strategy of rules out who isn't the VIP, firstly stating she isn't. After some deliberation, he gives up who he knows isn't the VIP. Mentally, he cryptically says he'll have to apologize to her someday. Hamaguchi shows up and says he's not the VIP. The next meeting, Manabe ingratiates herself with Machida. Karuizawa gets jealous and calls him a two-timer, which is odd given her relationship with Hirata. He analyzes the situation to apply it externally. Karuizawa had gained a lot of power within the microcosm of the group setting by attaching herself to the respected Machida, so he probably did the same thing with Hirata. Afterwards, the Class C girls follow Karuizawa and bully her. Yukimura breaks up the fight and gets told off by Karuizawa shortly after. Kiyo senses she's not afraid of the violence so much as something deeper.

On the second night, he meets with his teacher and learns that points can be used to change school rules. As he leaves, he says he'll soon need a favor from her. The next morning, he reveals to Hirata that he knows about Karuizawa's situation, and that Horikita has ordered him to report all info he can to her. Since Hirata wants to bridge the gap between Horikita and the class, he acquiesces to revealing Karuizawa's situation. Karuizawa begs Hirata to avenge her, reminding him of his pledge to protect her, but he wants to be peaceful. Hirata confesses that their relationship is entirely transactional. Kiyo reveals he had a vague suspicion of this before the whole fight since they still talked formally to each other in public. She had been a "parasite." But it wasn't just to increase her social standing, otherwise she would've done so immediately with Machida in the analogous group situation. It's because she's afraid, he asks. And Hirata is perturbed, remarking how Kiyo seems to have two different personalities. He attempts to cover this up by saying he's just following Horikita's orders and thought process. Hirata reveals Karuizawa had been bullied in her youth.

Hirata reveals why he's heroic. He had a childhood friend who he drifted apart from. The guy got bullied, Hirata did nothing, and the kid became comatose after a suicide attempt. Kiyo agrees that Horikita and him would keep the story a secret in return for Hirata's cooperation. Kiyo hands a slip of paper that has some instructions on it, and Hirata reveals the last VIP in Class D.

As part of his plan, Hirata calls Karuizawa to meet him at a certain isolated location, one with no cell signal and minimal entrances so he could monitor the scene effectively, and sends Manabe's contact info. Kiyo created another account on his phone for the messaging app to anonymously contact Manabe with that. He tells her he hates the same person she does, telling her he's a classmate from Class D who wants revenge on her. He tells her he knows that she still wants revenge for Rika. He eventually convinces her and tells her he'll arrange a meeting between them. He states that he had a back up plan where he would've blackmailed her with footage of the earlier fight if he really needed to, but that would've been a risky last resort. He based this scheme off the Milgram experiment, the takeaway being people were capable of hurting others incredibly depending on the circumstances. They beat her, targeting spots that are hidden to not leave visible bruises.

After they finish beating her up, he goes to manipulate her. The secluded location also has the effect of creating an intimate situation. He chides her and reveals that he knows about her past. He tells her Hirata isn't a good enough "host" for a parasite like her. He blackmails her with his knowledge of her fake relationship, her beating, etc. He pretends to want to rape her, she acquiesces, showing how broken she was and reveals more about her past. He pushes further, believing she had a deeper reason for her fearfulness and discovers a self harm scar on her. He promises to protect her and be much better than Hirata. He shows her a photo of Manabe bullying her from a day prior he can use as blackmail. When he later sends this image to Manabe, he tells her it was sent to him by someone else.

Before the final meeting begins, Kiyo feasts his eyes on Ichinose's sleeping figure. He makes an attempt to get her phone for information, realizes he's being stupid, and retreats. After a conversation with Ichinose, he monologues that he's had the VIPs' phones switched so that any spy who checks would get thrown off. Hamaguchi explains his plan that they should all show their emails, beginning with his own. Machida objects on the notion that someone could betray the group right afterwards. The others follow suit. Kiyo shows his phone to confirm he's not the VIP, which he actually switched prior. Class C's students follow. Yukimura reveals the VIP email after demanding everyone give up their phones to prevent betrayal, but Kiyo had also swapped phones with him. There's a 30 minute window of time between the meeting's end and the test's end. Ichinose calls Kiyo, ringing Yukimura's phone, revealing the swap. Kiyo had even undergone the effort of copying Yukimura's emails to sell the swap. She had set the whole thing up, having considered the VIP's possible strategy, but knowing that SIM cards were locked to the phones. Only by swapping that could one bypass a call check. Everyone thinks Kiyo is the VIP, and he tells Ichinose that Horikita set up the plan.

So we have 2 plans that converge here:

VIP Defense:

A defensive maneuver to protect his class.

> Find the VIP
> Swap phones with them.
> Transfer his number + emails into the VIP's phone via a technician, swapping SIMs.
> So VIP's phone now is essentially identical to Kiyo's. Swap phones with Yukimura.
> Play along with the (obvious) strategy of revealing phones to narrow down who isn't the VIP, revealing Yukimura.
> Employ a similar tactic with Kushida/Horikita

If someone sees through Yukimura by calling his or Kiyo's phone, Kiyo would be the second red herring VIP, concealing Karuizawa. And since people are generally inclined to believe whatever follows the exposure of one lie, then he could be sure the second lie (where he's "exposed") wouldn't fall through. He had also predicted that Ichinose might be able to see through the first layer and wanted that, hence him giving her his contact info, but he underestimated her as she saw through the whole thing entirely. This is a genuinely good plan, and its only weaknesses are that Kiyotaka underestimated Ichinose and some meta complaints. He doesn't actually take any initiative to find the VIP. He gets lucky that Karuizawa, who was already a key figure he wanted under his control, was the VIP, and Hirata tells him of this after Kiyotaka discovers the fake relationship.

Though it doesn't really contribute to the X-Strategy against Ryuuen.

Karuizawa

A cruel tactic Kiyotaka employed to both gain Karuizawa as an ally and her loyalty.

>Lie to Manabe that he saw Karuizawa fight another student
>Get Manabe's contact info from Hirata
>Anonymously contact Manabe, pretending to be a Class D student pissed off at Karuizawa.
>Arrange a meeting between the two at a secluded location, instructing Manabe to not leave any bruises
>Have Hirata call Karuizawa to meet at that secluded location
>Let Manabe beat the hell out of Karuizawa
>Step in and manipulate her when they're done

Contingency plan:
>If Manabe isn't persuaded, directly meet her and blackmail her

Good - First, he demonstrates good thinking in terms of social awareness. He sees how Karuizawa is unloyal and quickly latches on to the most powerful male in their little group to escape Manabe's antagonism, raising her power, applies that to how he noticed Karuizawa

became popular after dating Hirata, and, using other clues such as how formal they were with each other, concludes that their relationship is fake.

This is a reasonable goal. Karuizawa is established to be the “popular girl” of Class D alongside Kushida. Exerting control over her increases Kiyotaka’s influence, and it also bridges the gap between Karuizawa and Horikita. At the end of the book, we see Horikita sitting with several more people now, giving Ryuuen more suspects since Horikita is the key to the mastermind and anyone in close contact with her could be X. We can see there’s a decent amount of coverage as well. He picked a spot on the ship where there was no cell service, Karuizawa’s screams wouldn’t escape the room, and the bullies would thus feel at liberty to take their wrath out on her. It also, as he states, provides an intimate atmosphere for when he manipulates her. Lastly, it also is later revealed to deliberately give Ryuuen a trail of bread crumbs to follow to X.

As for why he employed such a cruel tactic, it was necessary to get past Karuizawa’s alpha girl personality. He makes her vulnerable, exposing her real character, allowing him to expose himself as well. Having blackmail on Manabe earns her loyalty as Hirata had proved impotent in protecting her from bullies, so he also greatly increases his standing with her.

Bad - The biggest flaw with this plan is how Kiyotaka gets Karuizawa into this situation. He has Hirata call her there. While he had earned her loyalty, he did nothing to prevent Karuizawa from curiously asking Hirata why he never showed up. If she did, Manabe’s vicious bullying would be exposed, and Hirata would be able to connect the dots on why Kiyotaka arranged the meeting there. True, Kiyotaka narrates that he has no hard proof, but Class D’s aren’t the most scrutinous and logical (as demonstrated in the Ibuki fire debacle). If Hirata spoke against Kiyotaka, he’d likely face severe social consequences with the reputation of deception and cruelty. At the very least, he wouldn’t have Hirata as an ally. On a more nitpicky note, Kiyotaka states he was inspired by the Milgram experiment - an experiment where prisoners pretended to be shocked when the test groups administered a shock at the behest of an authority figure - but the two situations are similar only in the most tangential sense. The Milgram experiment showed that humans have a tendency to trust authority figures to the point they might even commit actions that would compromise their morals. Kiyotaka’s set up just relied on the fact that people are capable of violence in the right conditions, which is obvious. He didn’t actually subvert Manabe’s morals. The closest thing would be Riku, though she only participates in the beating at Manabe’s behest.

Sports Festival (Vol 5)

Classes are on again. The school is now putting the students through training in preparation for the sports festival. Students of all grade levels will divide into the Red or White team. Students will compete in events such as three-legged races, tug-o-war, and so on, with top scorers having the potential to buy exam points on the next exam. Low scorers will have points

deducted. Classes of all levels will be divided into Red and White Team. Ichinose and Ryuuen, being grouped together as leaders of B and C, seem to have a spat.

Horikita wonders what the trick is to this exam, but Kiyotaka points out that the school never called this test a special exam like the previous ones. Just as written exams are to test academic ability, the sports festival is probably a straightforward test for physical ability. He also notes that the dispute between Ryuuen and Ichinose was probably a farce. While abrasive, it wouldn't be like him, to his disadvantage, to disregard her so quickly. He mentally explains that he's been studying his tactics and thinking since the attack on Sudo. When she's gone, he examines a file he received.

Hirata suggests either identifying talented people and assigning them to games based off that or allowing self nomination. Horikita suggests the first approach but across all events, not just for the recommended section. This would exclude the less talented people from a shot of reaping the benefits of victory. To appease them, she suggests that top scorers distribute points to help the dumber students. Karuizawa dissents and wants people to freely decide for themselves. Horikita wins the vote.

Karuizawa meets him after class, and it's revealed her dissent was at Kiyotaka's behest. He had instructed her to disagree with Horikita's plan no matter what before asking Kushida for her opinion. He coldly refuses to tell her his thoughts and tells her to play along. He does predict that one student will betray the class. He already has a plan in mind.

The boys measure their grip strengths and, despite Kiyotaka's efforts, he accidentally proves strong enough to participate in the tug of war. When he's in practice the next period, Horikita discusses how Ryuuen has probably set his plans in place since he's not engaging in recon. Kiyotaka notes how Ryuuen is making it obvious he has a secret plan by not even bothering to do recon. She wonders what else besides physicality is needed to win, but Kiyotaka remains cryptic. The two separate to practice for the three-legged competition.

Cut to two weeks before the festival. Horikita is a problem since she's faster than all of her potential partners and refuses to accommodate them. He demonstrates to her the error of her ways by inviting her to practice with him, then mogging her physically. The next is Kushida. He wants to resolve their enmity via a confrontation. After class, he invites Horikita to hang out, then calls Kushida over for a spying mission in the morning, tagging Horikita along. Also, he explains that he figured out that Ryuuen had a spy based off the VIP exam. He explains that he shouldn't have been able to know the VIP in Horikita's group. Therefore, Kushida probably worked with him. They all meet the next morning to go spy on the other team, and Kushida drops the facade for a moment to reveal that she is the cause of their little rivalry. Horikita asks her if she told Ryuuen she was the VIP. She gives no answer.

One week before the festival. Horikita asks to swap places with Sudo. She wants to be an anchor like her brother. Another week later, the competitions begin. As expected, Sudo does well. Kiyotaka wishes to stand out while also remaining inconspicuous and finishes fifth in

his race. Koenji refuses to participate, enraging Sudo into attacking him, but Koenji easily stops his blow. After the relay races are finished, Red Team is slightly ahead. During the hurdle race, Kanzaki from Class B points out he held back, and Kiyotaka states that Ichinose and Class B understand his thought process. He places third, retaining his unremarkable character. Horikita places third in her competition. Sudo and him face Ryuuen in Capture the Flag. Kiyotaka remains unremarkable while Sudo does his best to carry the team. Class C sneaks in a few physical attacks on Sudo in the second match, with Ryuuen in particular stomping down on him, and dominate the last half. Next, Red Teams' girls win their game to cancel out the CTF loss. In the tug of war, Kiyotaka is able to use his full strength discreetly, but Red Team loses the second round against White Team. Ryuuen throws the third round.

In the next game involving the girls, Class C focuses solely on Horikita. She falls and hurts her leg. Kiyotaka takes the role of one of the jockeys supporting Hirata. Sudo, meanwhile, goes to directly fight Ryuuen. Ryuuen cheats in the game of snatching the opponents headband by slathering his with some sort of lubricant. Afterwards, Kiyotaka reveals that Ryuuen had gotten ahold of their composition somehow and sent fodder after D's stronger students and targeted stronger students like Horikita. Such a strategy reveals much about Ryuuen, he explains. Ryuuen wanted them to know. He wasn't being subtle. Sudo spergs out after all of Ryuuen's provocations, hits Hirata, and storms off.

Kiyotaka urges the sulking Horikita to bring Sudo back. When she refuses, Kiyotaka chides her. If she can't control her classmates or herself, she's a burden. She's useless; she needs "rebirth." Later, he meets with Hirata and some friends, but he opts not to disclose the traitor to avoid causing chaos. He had originally wanted the traitor to be caught by Horikita, but she failed. He tells them he's "taken stock of the traitor's moral fiber" and that they want to reform without being cornered, all per Horikita's plan.

Horikita POV: She goes to the infirmary to get her leg checked. Kushida tells her the girl who tripped her has been injured. The girl, Kinoshita, accuses Horikita of attacking her. Ryuuen wants a million points for Kinoshita to not file a complaint.

Hirata approaches Kiyotaka to substitute Horikita with Ike. Kiyotaka speaks to Ryuuen during the scavenger hunt game, but Ryuuen wanders off after finding him boring. Kiyotaka fails since his first draw is to find 10 friends (the few he has are out of commission), second is someone he loves (none), and third is a table clock.

Horikita POV: She finds Sudo and makes the effort to connect with him. After being verbally destroyed by Kiyotaka, physically by Ryuuen, and her brother's cold attitude, she is humble. She empathizes with his desire for appreciation and his anger at having to carry the others, the same feelings she felt during the first exam.

Kiyotaka and Kushida take Sudo and Horikita's place in the three-legged race. He confronts Kushida for being the traitor. He saw her take a picture of the composition on the blackboard. They discuss how even if she was the traitor, someone who knew could've changed it

at the last minute, but then he suggests checking with the teacher to see if anyone checked it after it was submitted. Kushida did do that, so that causes her to drop her facade. She reveals she betrayed that she was the VIP in exchange for Ryuuen's help expelling Horikita. But now she also wants Kiyotaka gone.

Horikita POV: Sudo returns after 30 minutes. She confesses that she feels insecure and wants to impress her brother. She realizes that if she has allies, she is better for it. She admits she's worthless.

The two return just as the relay race is about to begin. Horikita gives up the anchor position to a substitute. Miyake also withdraws after twisting his leg in the 200m race. Kiyotaka steps in for him. This was unexpected, as Hirata/Kiyotaka had planned for Hirata to withdraw, but this worked out. He goats Horikita's brother into racing him, a first year vs a third year, and he barely loses. He notes that he probably got the whole school's attention.

Arisu arranges for Kiyotaka to meet her after class. Horikita meets Ryuuen with Kushida. He explains his plan was to have Kinoshita run into Horikita and take a fall, though her getting injured was an accident. He then injured her afterwards before sending her to the medical ward. Horikita reveals she recorded the whole thing, Ryuuen says he was just humoring her, but then Ryuuen reveals he anticipated she would do that and recorded the conversation, too. Just as she is about to kneel, Ryuuen receives a video of Ryuuen plotting to target Horikita. Ryuuen figures out that there's a traitor in Class C, and the mastermind behind them predicted Kushida's betrayal and Suzune's debasement at the hands of Ryuuen. Ryuuen isn't too displeased. He got what he wanted - a good show. Kiyotaka, concurrently, meets Arisu and she apparently saw him nearly 9 years ago. "White Room" gets a rise out of him. She promises to destroy him, which he partially wishes for.

Ryuuen's Plan

A fairly simple plan. Ryuuen optimized his composition relative to Class D's and targeted the stronger players, Horikita and Sudo in particular

>Have the traitor (Kushida) report the composition, taking a photo after its submission to negate the effects of any last minute swaps
>Optimize composition
>Provoke Sudo during the games (sneak in physical assaults, verbal jabs, etc.)
>Target Horikita
>Have Kinoshita run into Horikita
>Genuinely injure her afterwards and send her to the nurse
>Extort Horikita for points

He knew Sudo would have some resentment towards him for the trial and that he was a hothead, so getting him worked up would be easy. It might nerf his performance, turn his own team

against him as he, being their leader, raged, or, as nearly happened, he might even take himself out of the field by lashing out with violence. As for Horikita, he had already promised to take her down before the festival ever began. It was both personal and tactical as she was both one of their strongest players and their leader. Taking her out wouldn't just be a huge blow to their performance, but also a great blow to their morale. He went after both Class D's brains and brawns, a move that would doubtless have hurt them past the festival as Horikita proved to be "worthless" and Sudo an asshole.

Kiyotaka's Plan

Kiyotaka's counter plan, if it could be called that, mainly serves to manage his class's dynamics, particularly Horikita

>Let the traitor (Kushida) relay info
>Let Horikita deal with the traitor
>Participate in the games, maintaining a mostly low profile
>Once Horikita has been beaten down by Ryuuen, verbally dismantle her further to humble her
>Perform exceptionally well in one of the games against Manabe.
>Save Horikita from extortion via the file

The main purpose of this is to improve Horikita as a person, hence the "rebirth" line. He knew she'd already taken some serious blows to her pride from the island exam, where her brains proved useless and she began to learn the value of others, and the VIP exam, where she'd been outmaneuvered by Ryuuen and Kiyotaka. Letting Ryuuen walk over her would humble her further, and personally (being one of her only friends) chastising her would be the final blow to her. A smaller instance of this earlier, when he overwhelms her during the three-legged race, is a smaller version of this. He likely also predicted Ryuuen targeted Sudo. It's a fairly logical assumption from his POV, given that Ryuuen had made targeted Sudo before and was now targeting the stronger players of Class D in the games, so he likely knew Sudo would sperg out, and that Horikita would be the "only one" who could reach him (both because of their similar personalities and Sudo's crush on her). This would serve as a bonding moment to raise her back up.

What good does this serve? While Horikita isn't as smart as him, she is still smart enough to act in his place to an extent. But she can't meaningfully do much if she's constantly looking down on others as too inferior to engage with. Therefore, he destroyed her self worth before giving her a friend of sorts who mirrored her own personality to build it back up, inducing her to be a bit more introspective and self aware.

As for Ryuuen, Kiyotaka could just let him roam freely since he always had the file acquired from a Class C spy as a back up plan in case he went too far. As Ryuuen explains in Vol 6, by recording Ryuuen's scheme and letting it play out, Kiyotaka effectively created blackmail against him. The most prominent thing he does, racing a third year student as a first year and almost winning, serves to contradict the "mastermind's" behavior thus far. It throws Ryuuen off from suspecting Kiyotaka since the mastermind seemed to stick to the shadows and puppeteer

others, not show in front of the whole school. Ryuuen even states that Horikita, Ayanokouji, and maybe Hirata were pawns for someone else, showing he didn't suspect Kiyotaka.

The only real failure was in expecting Horikita to deal with Kushida. He had Karuizawa ask for Kushida's opinion, perhaps expecting an unsatisfying answer from her that would later trigger Horikita's intuition, but he has to later just tell her outright, and she still isn't able to do anything.

You'll notice that I left out some specific info. He states, the next period after receiving the file, that he has a plan to Karuizawa one month before games begin and his class even begins strategizing, so I don't think he initially wanted to race against Manabe specifically, but he later came up with the idea some time during the weeks of practice after he had time to observe the others. And while Ryuuen goes on about how he predicted "everything," he didn't really. He got Ryuuen's whole plan one month before the festival ever began, which explicitly opens with him gathering everyone to take out Horikita. Kushida's betrayal he knew about beforehand. The most likely thing he predicted is that Sudo would be targeted and have to be placated by someone.

One problem is Kiyotaka's reasoning. His reasoning for figuring out that Kushida was the traitor is based on Ryuuen simply not having been able to know that Kushida was the VIP… but the author shoots himself in the foot by opening the story by explaining just how the selection process worked. The new friend group compare notes on the Zodiac Exam. Horikita explains the pattern. The groups' zodiac names correspond to certain numbers on the Zodiac calendar. Order a group's members in alphabetical order, then the Zodiac number corresponds to that student. Karuizawa was fourth in group rabbit, with rabbit corresponding to #4. They discuss who the VIPs within their own class were and, by that knowledge, figure out the rule of the process to make inferences about other classes' VIPs. There's no reason Ryuuen couldn't have simply done this as well by having the VIPs within his glass reveal themselves and then figuring out the pattern.

Paper Shuffle (Vol 6)

Around October. The light novel opens with the students gathered for a small ceremony. Kiyotaka notices that Horikita isn't so fearful of her brother anymore, showing her growth. Class D, too, he notices, has noticeably wisened up. Even Sudo is more studious and thoughtful now. As he heads out of class, Satou, who he's never interacted with before, asks him to follow her someplace secluded. Sakura watches with interest. Satou confesses a crush on him after his performance during the relay race. They exchange contact info. On the way back, he has a brief exchange with Katsuragi, who warns him about Ryuuen.

That night, Karuizawa calls him over the phone to confront him about Satou's confession. She wants to know for sure so that info about her doesn't pass to Satou. He confirms

Manabe hasn't done anything since the ship incident. He says to himself that he'll have to confront Ryuuen soon. He makes sure she erases the calls and emails they exchange.

A few days later, Class D awaits the mid-term results. No one fails and Sudo has greatly improved. Chabashira remarks that no Class D has ever gone this far without any expulsions. She announces a test next week over eight fundamental subjects. This will decide who will partner with who. On that next test, scoring below a sixty total on one section (for both partners combined) will cause expulsion. Total partners scores for the entire test have to be at least 700 points, or an average of 43.75 per section per partner, Kiyotaka calculates. Even missing due to health issues will incur a point penalty, and cheating is grounds for automatic expulsion. The Paper Shuffle aspect of this is that classes are to create questions for the exam which will be used as questions for another class. The class with the higher average will take points from the losing class. There's a month until the exam.

Kiyotaka deliberates on the race. The relay race had put eyes on him, and Ryuuen + Ichinose certainly wanted to know who was behind Horikita. He can't distance himself from her as that would be suspicious, but staying around her is also suspicious. He decides to increase Horikita's power before fading away. Horikita arranges a meeting. Ayanokouji sees Karuizawa snuggling up with Hirata, and this causes her to stop. Horikita confides with him later about her past with Kushida. They had gone to the same junior high and Kushida was popular, but her class mysteriously fell apart soon before graduation. Rumors said that the class's blackboards were filled with all sorts of slander. Kiyotaka speculates she brought her class down with lies. They resolve to talk it over with her, and Horikita is disgusted when Kiyotaka suggests expelling her as a last resort.

Meeting with the group, Horikita explains that the pairing method is likely based on balancing dumber and smarter students based on only a couple pairs being expelled in previous years. They decide to target Class C despite the risk of losing the lottery, which might put them against A.

Meanwhile in Class C, Ryuuen gives a speech. He states that someone in Class D knows how to think like him. He now wants to target Class D to smoke the person out. He explains that person, X, has a spy in Class C. He has everyone take their phones out to check them. Some students refuse on the grounds of privacy, making them prime suspects. After a moment, Ryuuen clears them of suspicion.

After twenty minutes, he finishes checking everyone's phones. Ibuki states that the file didn't have anything about Ryuuen forcing Horikita to kneel nor about the exact time, so X must've predicted it. Ryuuen says it was just a coincidence. (In reality, Horikita had met Kiyotaka before leaving to kneel before Ryuuen, so he likely just figured it out and followed them.) He explains that the file gave X immense power, that they could've easily saved Horikita beforehand or pressured him afterwards to hand back the points if she did give them up, but X didn't. X is allowing Ryuuen to torment Horikita. The phone inspection tactic was just for show. Any spy would've known to delete emails, texts, etc, so the spy would likely be someone who thought by turning in their phone they could prove their innocence (not the "prime suspects").

He demands the traitor come forward again. He confronts Manabe, who he'd been eyeing from the start because of her guilty expression. Manabe reveals her ordeal with Karuizawa, that the girl was bullied long ago. She reveals X blackmailed them, promising to expose them with the footage. Ayanokouji and Yukimura, she says, were there when they were first bullying here. That makes them prime suspects for being X, but Ryuuen feels that if Kiyotaka = X, then he wouldn't have let Horikita get hurt.

After homeroom, Horikita takes the podium with Hirata. She apologizes for her past behavior. She explains the pairing system that the school is likely using. But since the class's grades aren't distributed so smoothly, she opts to use a bracket system to force optimal pairs where the highest quadrant score as much as they can, the lowest zero, the upper middle no more than a B, and the lower middle one point.

The day of the short quiz. Chabashira reveals that it's A vs B and C vs D. Afterwards, the pairing strat proved successful. Horikita arranges for the class to study in groups. She has Kiyotaka wrangle Yukimura, Miyake, and Hasebe, with the latter two presenting some minor problem due to how they scored. While studying with them, he gets the feeling he's being watched and turns around to see multiple Class C students, only recalling Ishizaki among them. He excuses himself to escape his stalkers and senses another one, Sakura, who he sits with. He invites her to study. He explains that he wants her to grow.

Horikita invites him to her study groups on the days he's free. Kushida still hasn't come around to Horikita, and the latter worries that once they submit the questions Kushida can leak them. Just as he's about to sleep, he gets an email from Ryuuen. "What are you?"

Satou tries to flirt with him the next day at the library, but Kiyotaka is a buzz kill. He doesn't like the attention it brings from the other members of Horikita's study group. Afterwards, Horikita and Kiyotaka stay behind to talk to Ichinose. Horikita grills her about her character, assessing her loyalty to Class B and her friends outside. Ichinose becomes strangely evasive/humble when Horikita praises her good character. Afterwards, Kiyotaka suggests making peace with Kushida through an intermediary, but Horikita declines, wanting to personally deal with her. They meet her, but Kushida asks Kiyotaka to leave.

At his dorm, Kiyotaka receives a call from Horikita, a hidden call while she's conversing with Kushida to let him spy on them. They discuss Kushida's past. She wishes to expel Horikita merely for knowing about it, and Horikita suggests a bet: If she scores higher on the next exam, they'll cooperate; if she scores lower, Horikita will leave. Kushida can pick the subject in particular. She has Manabu Horikita oversee the bet to make it official. After agreeing to it, Kushida reveals she knew Kiyotaka was listening; she'd been trying to call Horikita during their conversation, but the phone didn't ring. So Kushida knows Kiyotaka knows about her past, and she has Horikita summon him. She adds a condition. If Kushida wins, Kiyotaka will also drop out. Kiyotaka obliges, knowing that if Horikita wins Kushida would just focus on him instead, protecting Horikita, but he demands to know about her past.

She explains her desire to be #1, how she wanted to excel at being nice and kind. But the stress of knowing so many people was too much, and she would vent about it on her blog, making fun of the people she was kind to. But then someone discovered it and tied it back to her, causing everyone to instantly disavow her. Her class fell into chaos as people turned against each other. Still, she hasn't acquired the same level of info in ANHS. Afterwards, Horikita wonders if Kushida's desire to expel her aligns with Ryuuen's. Kiyotaka doubts it. He wants Horikita humiliated, which can't happen if she's gone.

Some time later, Ayanokouji is in his study group with Yukimura and the others. Ryuuen shows up. He asks whether Kiyotaka and Yukimura got his "gift" (the "What are you?" email). Hiyori attempts to read them but sees nothing useful. She has four targets/suspects: Kiyotaka, Yukimura, Hirata, and Kouenji. Hiyori stays behind as the Class C students leave. She buys Hasebe a cup of coffee with the exact amount of sugar that he dropped, explaining that she's very perceptive. She questions them about the mastermind, but they attribute any clever moves on D's part to Horikita.

Later, they get ice cream. Kiyotaka gets the nickname "Kiyopon," and Sakura joins the group after stalking them for multiple study sessions. Karuizawa later that night wishes him a happy birthday after she receives her new errand. She also confirmed that Hiyori had been asking people about how much sugar Hasebe puts in her coffee, showing that she wasn't perceptive but merely lied to apply pressure.

The next day, Kiyotaka goes to the movies with his study group and they encounter Karuizawa's friend group, as planned. Satou latches onto him, making Sakura jealous. She had watched him the day they went somewhere secluded for her confession, though he doesn't remember exactly. Karuizawa gets in a spat with Kushida, pretending to get pissed at her relaxed attitude towards the upcoming exam. She throws her drink at Kushida. She apologizes and Sudo offers to have her blazer cleaned. Horikita asks if she has a spare. The school provided them two, and Kushida's other one has Kiyotaka's fingerprints.

Later as he walks back to his dorm with Katsuragi, the place is in an uproar. Everyone's received the same mail in their mailboxes - a short message from Ryuuen: "First-year Class B student Ichinose Honami may be collecting points illegally. – Ryuuen Kakeru" When Ryuuen shows up, he doesn't deny being behind it and chides Ichinose. She resists and wants to plead her case directly with the school. Luckily, she is cleared very quickly the next day.

December arrives. Horikita and Ryuuen both turn in the final questions. Horikita instructs Chabashira to not take any submissions after the one she turns in. Unfortunately, the entire class has to agree to this. If someone does want to see the questions, Horikita would be present. But it feels too smooth, his intuition tells him. Kiyotaka gives Chabashira a look, and Horikita catches on, reminding the teacher she can't directly lie. Horikita asks if she accepted any questions previously. Chabashira admits she did, and the other student also instructed her not to accept any later submissions. She admits Kushida had submitted the first batch of questions. They look at the questions and Kiyotaka figures out the plan: Kushida had the questions made to be just as hard as Horikita would've made them via Kaneda. Class C would

succeed by knowing the answers ahead of time. Horikita would take the blame. Kushida also received Class D's answer key. After Ryuuen leaves, Horikita reveals she anticipated this and had Chabashira pretend to take any early submissions and also promise to only accept a submission from her. Ayanokouji is impressed and states he couldn't have come up with it himself. Her goal was to fool Ryuuen.

The day of the first half of the exam. Karuizawa and Satou have a jealous, passive aggressive little interaction over Ayanokouji. Hirata notices Karuizawa's growing affection for him before calmly revealing that he knows Kiyotaka is the mastermind Ryuuen is after. Hirata just wants him to know that he has his back. When the test begins, Kiyopon aims for a 60 point baseline, but he keeps his focus on Kushida, who is shocked for 3 minutes and struggles to regain her composure upon seeing the test. Afterwards, Kushida calmly admits defeat and says she'll honor her bet to the letter, only precluding any attack on Horikita and not Kiyopon.

Ryuuen later messages him and asks what's he's planning. He also sent a message of Karuizawa. Kiyo explains that he knew when Ryuuen and Hiyori accosted his group earlier that he discovered Manabe as the spy and traced it back to the bullying incident, along with the witnesses of that. He knows Ryuuen will go after the person in the photo. He decides to forego any half measures to take the fight directly to him. "War" it is.

Later, it's revealed that Ryuuen betrayed Kushida by switching out the answers he gave her. Since Horikita countered her, Ryuuen considered her worthless and ditched their deal. He had figured out Suzune's plan some point prior to the day they submitted their tests. He grabs her blazer and reveals a cheat sheet with the questions and answers for the math test of the first exam Ryuuen had supposedly given to her. Ryuuen deduces it happened at the outing with Karuizawa. He gives a statement that only two people there were lying to her, and one of them could perfectly read the behavior tics, thought processes, and habits of others. This is important since Kushida figures Hirata was the one who asked if she had a spare due to his kind nature. (This is a mistake Horikita asked her.) Ryuuen also explains how the fake letter was X's plan, one he knew Ryuuen would play along with given his temperament.

This volume has multiple plans which require in-depth analysis.

Kushida Counter-Action

This is Ayanokouji's contingency plan to ensure Horikita and him remain in the school.

>Order Karuizawa and her group to go to the mall on the same day as Ayanokouji's group, combining there
>There, have Karuizawa rant at Kushida and spill a drink on her
>Find out how many blazers Kushida has via someone asking if she has a spare
>Predict that Sudo will offer to clean it for her

>Message Ryuuen for a “transaction” and warn him that Suzune had seen through his scheme and taken preemptive measures against Kushida. The message demands that he either changes his test’s answers or gives X his answer sheet

>With the test’s answers, create a cheat sheet and plant it on Kushida’s blazers some time afterwards

>If Kushida flies through the exam, call her out for cheating

The Good - First, this is a fairly elaborate plan for a simple goal - Ayanokouji just needed to know if she had a spare blazer, otherwise he could have planted it on her jacket during any gym period, as Ryuuen states. This shows his meticulous thinking. Ayanokouji, per Ryuuen, had accurately predicted the dialogue of the incident. He knew someone would ask if she had a spare blazer. He needed to know this because of the two, one was out of commission due to the fingerprints she forced on it, which she kept unwashed to maintain leverage over Kiyopon; she mentions this to him in the last volume. But students could buy extras for whatever reason at a price, so it’s possible, he knew, that she bought another to avoid having to constantly wear one. And he knew Sudo would offer help. How did he know this? Sudo is a member of the sports club and frequently plays basketball. Kiyotaka knew it would be most convenient for him to clean the blazer since he frequents the laundromat and it aligns well with his schedule, so he’d naturally be inclined to offer help. The plan also heavily preys on Ryuuen’s psychology. He makes some objectively stupid moves here (which I will go much more into later on), but Ayanokouji by now knows that he’s a brash, thrill-seeking sort of person who will do so for fun. Lastly, the cheat sheet acts as a contingency plan that ensures Kushida loses and Horikita/Kiyopon remain in ANHS.

As Ryuuen explains, it also forces a dilemma upon him:

He can ignore X by giving Kushida the right answers and letting her expel Horikita, but Ryuuen’s psychology precludes this. He has a fixation on making Horikita submit and X’s warning seemed to save his class, invoking his gratitude.
He could leave the test questions as they were and let Kushida be exposed. This is ideal for X, which Ryuuen doesn’t want.
He could sabotage Kushida by switching the questions. This is what he did.

The Bad - There’s a lot of contrived elements to this plan. The paper is in a pocket in the interior of her blazer. If anyone called her out for cheating, it’d be extremely difficult to call her out without seeming suspicious themself. The novel handwaves it away by vaguely alluding to her reputation being destroyed for whatever reason even if she did pull through, but she could easily claim she was framed. Moreover, fingerprints are treated as a serious threat within this universe, so much so that Kushida’s months old blazer with Kiyotaka’s prints on it are treated as an actual threat in-universe despite the unreliability of fingerprints on textiles in real life and Horikita says she could use Ibuki’s fingerprints on the keycard to prove she’d stolen it. She could’ve had the cheat sheet examined to prove her innocence, expelling Ayanokouji. Furthermore, there’s a camera in the class, so any accusation of cheating would easily be disproven.

Rumors

This is an offensive measure pitting Classes B and C against each other and gains Ryuuen's interest

>Write letters signed from Ryuuen alleging that Ichinose had been hoarding/stealing points
>Stuff them in every first year's mailbox in the dorms

The Good: This was inspired by Kushida's past, which he learned earlier in the novel. As he explained, for someone like her, the usage of information/lying is a very powerful tool, one that can break trust between people. Class B and C had worked together last in the last exam. By making it seem like Ryuuen was spreading rumors or ratting out Ichinose, he drives a wedge between any possible alliances between them in the future. Again, this strategy preys on Ryuuen's psyche. He knows Ryuuen is wise enough to know it's from X, brash enough to be interested rather than offended, and cocky enough to take credit for it instead of denying that he did it. He also uses his knowledge of human psychology here, noting that while Ichinose will pull through, it'll naturally tarnish her hitherto spotless reputation, setting up future schemes he may have for her. And last, this increases Ryuuen's interest in X.

The Bad: This strategy easily falls through if Ryuuen denies it and demands an investigation. Recall that ANHS takes itself very seriously, so all he has to do is demand for an investigation, stating that it's too obvious for him to sign his name on letters like that, and he could have the cameras checked. Ayanokouji would be exposed. Also, as previously mentioned, fingerprints would give him away. Note: As far as the cameras go, Ryuuen states in Vol 7 that there are "hundreds" throughout the school. Ichinose in Vol 2 also notes that there are cameras "everywhere" in the school, with the boys she's attempting to coerce into a confession concurring. It's particularly the special building, she notes, that has a dearth of cameras. So the lobby where the tactic occurred does have cameras, and Ayanokouji's whole strategy fails if either of them press the school for an investigation.

Showdown

The novel opens with a monologue from Ryuuen explaining how he's never felt fear. He realized that when he, as a child, crushed a snake to death that was scaring his whole class.

It is now halfway through December. Ayanokouji now has a steady friend group, the Ayanokouji group from Vol 6. Meanwhile, Ryuuen has had Komiya spy on the group, but Kiyotaka also noticed another person spying on them, who the others hadn't noticed. Two of

them had even showed up to Akito's archery club to see if he was X and slipped up due to the pressure. Kiyotaka internally monologues that he knows what Ryuuen will do; it's only a matter of time. He himself is a prime suspect, most likely. Also, Class D has nearly overtaken Class C, with only 8 points separating them. If they do, Ryuuen's status as leader will take a serious hit. Ryuuen's hunt for X is still obscure, so Kiyotaka leads them on that Horikita is his main target. Kiyotaka stays behind to "use the bathroom" as the group heads to the mall, but he uses the time to confront the second spy, Kamuro of Class A, with Komiya following the group. Based off her hawkish attitude towards Sakayanagi, he can tell she's not on good terms with the disabled girl. She must have dirt on Kamuro, which he tricks her into revealing is the case. Kamuro accuses him of being X, though he doesn't care since it's inconsequential.

The next day, Ryuuen isn't only targeting suspects; he's begun pressuring Sudo again, though Sudo promises to mind his temper. Pleased, Horikita feels he's ready for "the next step." As Ayanokouji explains, she's begun acting independently of him more and more, and this is just another one of her machinations. She informs him that Ryuuen may have his sights set on Class B in his hunt for X. Later, he runs into Hiyori at the library while running an errand for Suzune. The two discuss books and she invites him to lunch, which he thinks may be at Ryuuen's behest, but he decides to play that to his advantage by flaunting how boring he is.

After classes end, he goes to visit his group again. Horikita chides him for unconsciously grinning since he's grown to like his friends. The group discuss who Ryuuen suspects. It could be Keisei, who is smart; it could be Kouenji, who's an ace student; it could be Hirata. Regardless, they say Ryuuen has his eyes on about ten people, and anyone close to Suzune being top priority.

The next day, Ayanokouji turns down a date due to Chabashira. Her surveillance of him throughout that day had set him on edge. Unusually on edge herself, she leads him to a meeting with the principal. Enter Ayanopapa.



It's been 1.5 years since they last spoke. Ayanopapa derides his social skills, stating he has no ability to make friends. He wants his son to drop out. Ayanokouji was supposed to remain on stand-by within the WR, but he had disobeyed. We get some backstory, as apparently a butler named Matsuo had given Kiyotaka the idea to enroll. He chose ANHS because Matsuo told him it was the only place Ayanodad couldn't snatch him back to the WR. Despite his cold outward expression towards the butler, he monologues inwardly that Matsuo's affection for his son was unforgettable. But Ayanodad, being an asshole, had his son expelled from high school and subsequently blacklisted. To protect his son, Matsuo begged Kiyotaka's father to leave his son be and then burned himself alive. Despite his inward unhappiness, he shows no reaction at all. Ayanokouji states that, as a first year high school student at just sixteen years of age, his knowledge far exceeded what an ordinary person could learn in a lifetime due to the WR's methods.

Still, Kiyotaka knows his dad's being here is ultimately a bluff for that very reason of the government-funded ANHS. Not only that, he, who is usually so careful, is without his bodyguards, likely due to the authorities not allowing them inside; Ayanodad's not the type to try and persuade people, as demonstrated in his tale about his efforts against Matsuo's son; and aggressive action against ANHS could compromise Ayanodad's goal of a career comeback. Kiyotaka also gives some insight into his motives. He was curious about the world, he wanted to see if common folks could match up to geniuses, if all people were equal – much in contrast to his father's ideals.

Arisu's father comes in and speaks with Ayanopapa. He drops the critical piece of info that the latter has no ultimate power to make his son drop out, We also learn that Kiyotaka ostensibly should never have made it past the admissions process. He was recommended to the school in secret. So long as Kiyotaka wishes, he may remain within the school. After his father leaves, Kiyotaka asks about Arisu, confirming that she is the man's daughter. That explains how she knew him…

When that's done, he confronts Chabashira. He now knows she never really had any power over him. She had lied several volumes before that a man had contacted her from the outside, someone powerful, to expel him. He tells her that the chairman (Arisu's dad) had revealed that he told Chabashira about Kiyotaka soon after his admission, though this was a lie to gain info from her reaction, which he did. She truly never had spoken with his father.

He then explains his reasoning, which he thought up the moment Sakayanagi revealed he saw through Kiyotaka's mediocre score on his entrance exam. Sakayanagi revealed he had acted independently to admit Kiyotaka. He put Kiyotaka in a poor class to draw less attention to him, and Chabashira is especially good for this as she shows no outward desire to rise to Class A unlike the other teachers. A comment from one of her colleagues about Chabashira wanting to be "dominated by a younger man" he also interprets in new light as a coded way of saying she wishes for the inferiors (D) to overcome the superiors (A) as young would supplant the old. That, plus Chabashira's actual attempt at blackmailing puts it all together: She has no power over him, and she only made a play against him after learning about him from Sakayanagi, news from whom gave her hope of rising to Class A. While she puts up some resistance, he explains that even then it's not in her best interest to expel him. Class D had proved remarkably successful so far in contrast to previous years, and an expulsion would only demoralize everyone. No longer with an incentive to reach Class A, he stops giving a shit about Ryuuen's hunt and Karuizawa's place in it all

Upon further consideration, he concludes that conflict is inevitable. He has to deal with Ryuuen. He calls Karuizawa and ends their working relationship, though he'll come to her aid if need be. He hints that he's confident in this decision since she'd proven so reliable thus far. He instructs her to delete all traces of their communication and does the same after hanging up. The intention is to make her lonely and anxious, putting her in a state where she's sure to crumble if Ryuuen comes after her since she no longer has the host for her parasitic nature.

He goes back to his apartment and introspects. He wants to lie low, but, again, Ryuuen has to be dealt with since he'll just keep coming. If Ryuuen finds out, he might spread that information, and Kiyotaka doesn't want that. And Karuizawa would always be an error in his planning that ties back to him. Horikita's older brother stops by and talks about Nagumo, who has gained a lot of ground with classmates both in the same year as him and out. He wants to act as a bridge between Kiyotaka and the council.

The day before winter vacation, Ryuuen barges into Class D. Chabashira doesn't give a shit since he's not being explicitly violent. They tail Kouenji out of the class, which Kiyopon finds weird since he's an unlikely prime suspect. Horikita and some other students confront him, and

it's revealed going after Kouenji was a red herring to smoke out the power players of Class D who would naturally chase after him, narrowing the list of suspects to Ayanokouji, Yukimura, and Miyake. Sudo and Suzune are also there. The only major thing causing Ryuuen to be suspicious of Kouenji is his performance in the Zodiac exam. He had apparently figured out his group's VIP before throwing. Ultimately, Kouenji's arrogant, boisterous attitude proves too different from X's profile. Arisu arrives and reveals the nature of the earlier alliance between Class A and C, a particular clause of which guarantees monthly payment from A to C. Before parting ways, Ryuuen tells him he's narrowed his list of suspects down to the weird freak behind her (Kiyotaka).

Ryuuen POV: He explains his process thus far. He'd had D's students spied on, excluding weaklings and focusing on power players like Sudo and Hirata, to pressure X. He'd all but told X that he would target Karuizawa but delayed any action, wanting to instill X with terror and trepidation. He thinks X is asking her daily to check on her status. The thrill of it all is his primary goal, like love. Today is the day he makes his move.

He's invited Karuizawa to the rooftop, threatening to expose her past if she doesn't show. He also messaged X about this and warned that he would use any means necessary to discover him through her. He explains that if she does anything to get him in trouble he'll expose her, therefore X must directly show up. He had only recently learned about her connection to X after the Paper Shuffle test. Ibuki balks at his plan to bully Karuizawa into giving up X, especially since there's a camera on the roof. Ryuuen's way around this is by spraying the camera with paint. Since the cameras don't report in real time, the school couldn't stop it either way. He has Albert downstairs as a lookout.

At 2 PM, Karuizawa arrives.The message Ryuuen had sent to Karuizawa had read, "Manabe and her friends told me everything about your past. Come to the rooftop after class, alone. If you talk to anyone, word of your past will spread through the entire school." Ryuuen, aware that Karuizawa or X could similarly blackmail them now as Manabe had been blackmailed, monologues that it would be mutual destruction. Karuizawa would go down too. But she remains strong despite the verbal abuse and attempts at persuasion. He's impressed by her wit. He feels X probably chose her for her social clout. X has no problems using people and no problems abandoning them. Incensed, Ryuuen has her waterboarded.

He further explains his process of planning. He'd subtly investigated the school's layout, the security camera locations, and where the buckets for this torture would be found. Even the assault on Sudo had helped this. She still doesn't break, however, and Ryuuen reveals that X had set up the whole bullying stunt back in Vol 4. Still, she's loyal. She had a lot of fun working with Ayanokouji, having felt like a supporting actress to the hero. Plus, she is eternally grateful for him "saving" her.

Kiyotaka POV: At noon, 2 hours before Karuizawa's torture, he leaves class. He received a text from her at the emergency email he gave her about the meeting. He hangs out with his friends in the interim before ditching them at 2. He calls Chabashira. He can't resolve it entirely on his own and she's crucial to concealing his involvement.

Heading upstairs, he knows what Ryuuen's doing with Ishizaki rushing around with the waterbucket; he's trying to reawaken Karuizawa's past trauma. Horikita Manabu arrives and Ayanokouji heads up to make his grand entrance, instructing the older brother to follow after him in a few minutes and to be seen by those who come down. He's a witness.

Before the big fight, Ryuuen gives a little more insight into his thought process. After the Manabe/Karuizawa incident came to light in Vol 6, he'd considered Ayanokouji and Hirata prime suspects. To convince them, Kiyotaka explains how he outplayed them in the past exams. For some reason, Ayanokouji is apparently cornered so far as not being able to report this to the school. They wouldn't treat it the same as they would at other times (?) The Class C students are still confused, however. They know his identity, having apparently won, but the move was so unexpected. They expected him either to abandon Karuizawa or to outplay them again somehow from the shadows, but stepping out in the open to confront them was out of left field. They're essentially at a stalemate since both sides have ample blackmail material against each other. Violence ensues, per his plans, and Ayanokouji beats them all up. He also explicates that this was all his plan. Ryuuen was a person who'd resorted to violence several times, so he knew he'd resort to violence if presented with a stalemate. If he really prioritized hiding his identity, he wouldn't have raced Manabu. He says he knew Manabe would be caught and Karuizawa would be discovered through them. He lets Ryuuen get some hits in to "teach him pain" before inflicting a vicious beating on him to draw out any fear within the Class C tyrant.

He goes to comfort Karuizawa and explains that he timed his arrival 40 minutes late to implant within her the idea that she could have faith within him until the last moment, increasing her dependency and trust in him. He goes to wake up the others and explains that Ryuuen can't report anything. Given the footage of him spraying the camera, it's fairly obvious that he set a trap. And Manabu and Chabashira served as witnesses. Manabu would bring down not just Ryuuen, but also his cronies as well, safeguarding Kiyotaka against any future pursuits from Ryuuen. Humiliated, Ryuuen opts to drop out of the class to protect the others, but Kiyotaka goads him to stay. He explains that Ryuuen overplayed his hand by going after the strongest opponent; he should've cut his teeth against weaker foes like Ichinose and Arisu. Ultimately, with Kiyotaka having blackmail against his cronies, Ryuuen decides to stay. This brings X-Strategy to a close.

The plan (apparently) was this:
>Allow Ryuuen to discover the Karuizawa connection via the usage of Manabe as a spy, allowing her to be caught
>Let Karuizawa be captured and interrogated viciously, knowing they'd employ violence against her (Prediction)
>Gather Chabashira and Manabu as witnesses
>Now that there's a Mexican standoff situation with Kiyopon + Karuizawa having blackmail on Ryuuen, Ryuuen having blackmail on Karuizawa, and Ryuuen having blackmail on Kiyotaka, the agitated Ryuuen will resort to violence. Beat the shit out of him to make him afraid.
>Use him against the other classes

Holistic Analysis

We can see that he has a few schemes running throughout his battle against Ryuuen at once since he's also having to counteract Chabashira's blackmail for most of the run. This is evident in his plays to boost Class D's ability overall. We see this in his usage of Horikita, strengthening her as a leader and building her connections with Hirata, winning the exams for them, letting Sudo get bullied during the Sports Festival to facilitate character development, and even more minor gestures like letting Ike be useful during Vol 3 by building a fire or raising Sakura's confidence by being her friend. These acts contribute towards strengthening Class D and prove his worth. When Chabashira confronts him, he points something out to this effect and now she's cornered into a situation where her coercion is nullified. If she exposes him or works against him in any way, that only spells doom for Class D without Ayanokouji's guiding hand. He could, he suggests, even actively sabotage them if she overplays her hand.

Now that brings us to Ryuuen, and we'll have to diverge since I don't trust Ayanokouji's words. I'll first give an analysis of events based on his own words (the popular interpretation) and the one I feel is more sound, taking into account his status as an unreliable narrator.

Ayanokouji's Description

Based on this interpretation, Ayanokouji's ultimate goal from the very beginning, at least so far back as Vol 5, was to dominate Ryuuen mentally and physically, coercing him into going after other classes. He deliberately led him on, predicting Ryuuen's actions and then setting up a stalemate situation as described above. Karuizawa's predicament, which he facilitated, would serve as a good excuse to beat the shit out of him.

In light of this, it may be interpreted that Ayanokouji deliberately didn't cover his tracks well in his strategy to recruit Karuizawa, knowing she would lead back to him. His actions could be interpreted as creating a false profile to lead Ryuuen on into believing the latter had genuinely ensnared him. His plans - the VIP switch in Vol 3, Karuizawa's recruitment in Vol 4, the spy footage in Vol 5 - make Ryuuen think this guy sticks to the shadows at all costs. This sells the illusion that his ultimatum with Karuizawa was a genuine trap. Kiyotaka racing Manabu at the sports festival served to get attention on him as a possible suspect.

Kiyotaka knew, based off her previous reliability, that she would hold against his peaceful attempts at persuasion and that this would only stoke Ryuuen into violent measures, which would force the stalemate. He had also read Ryuuen perfectly, both knowing the latter would resort to such a stupid plan and also that he would resort to violence quickly based on his several assaults on Sudo and even his own usage of violence against Ibuki during the Vol 3 exam. His strategy can be outlined as this:

1. Pass the exams
2. Elevate Class D to counter Chabashira

3. Recruit key figures like Horikita and Karuizawa, strengthening the former
4. Allow Karuizawa to be discovered through the spy
5. Allow her to be violated
6. Beat up Ryuuen in "self defense" with witnesses

Was it actually all planned out? No. Alt. Interpretation

This interpretation takes into account his status as an unreliable narrator and I personally believe it makes more sense when you look at his actions throughout the war from a strategic standpoint. It wasn't actually all planned out. Ayanokouji had genuinely fucked up in not covering his tracks well with his usage of Manabe and Karuizawa, but the plan to mentally break Ryuuen and Karuizawa had formed in his mind soon after the text from Ryuuen at the end of Vol 6 showing Karuizawa. This jives much better with his internal monologues prior to the showdown. For example, when he gets the text, he says, "Enough. I was fed up with his obsessive persistence. I closed my phone and steeled myself. Half-measures wouldn't do here," implying things weren't actually going as planned (since he had no exact plan) and that his mind had shifted to employing a definitive solution against Ryuuen's hunt, hence the foregoing of "half-measures." Up to that point, he didn't actually have any solution in mind for dealing with Ryuuen beyond the half-measures of just continually evading or outwitting him. Furthermore, while anything he tells someone is inherently questionable, his brief dialogue with Ibuki in Vol 7.5 does seem to confirm this interpretation as he states that he only fought Ryuuen after considering several options, alluding to his decision to forego half measures in Vol 6. This plan therefore served to break his spirit, as he says during the fight.

From here, it's largely the same as the other interpretation. The only difference is the shift in strategic goals. He now wants to break Ryuuen and use him against other classes while also end Ryuuen's hunt for him. Ayanokouji allows her to be caught, tortured, and then forces a stalemate which enrages Ryuuen, allowing Ayanokouji to beat him viciously. The actual explanation Ayanokouji gives to Ryuuen is just fluff he made up. Given his goal is to break Ryuuen's spirit, of course he not only physically beat the tar out of him, but he also exaggerated just how much was per keikaku to seem intellectually superior as well. He used his own deductions of Ryuuen's actions (such as him discovering Manabe as a spy or tracing X through Karuizawa), which he predicted or reasoned out but didn't really have a solid counter to, to bluff that he had puppeteered Ryuuen. When we consider his private introspection in his apartment where he says - "The only remaining problem was Ryuuen Kakeru. If he did figure out I was the class mastermind, he might create an uproar by circulating that information. It would have been ideal for my identity to remain completely concealed, though that seemed impossible now. Even if I cut all ties to Karuizawa Kei, we were still bound by an invisible thread" - this implies he adapted to a hole in his plan, being Karuizawa, rather than it all being planned from the start. In this light, his performance at the Sports Festival can be seen as a weak attempt to throw suspicion off of him by attempting to throw Ryuuen off by being out in the open, unlike the profile he'd formed of X.

This is a decent change in goals. Ryuuen, of course, had proven to be a powerful, challenging figure to deal with. He'd genuinely gotten Ayanokouji on the ropes there, so he

needed to bluff superiority and send him after other classes like an attack dog. Ryuuen's hold over Class C makes him both a risky and valuable possible "ally" against the other classes, and, considering Arisu's threat against him, it would be useful to have another card up his sleeve.

7. Pass the exams
8. Elevate Class D to counter Chabashira
9. Recruit key figures like Horikita and Karuizawa, strengthening the former

Ryuuen closes in on him -> Adaptation

10. Allow Karuizawa to be discovered through the spy
11. Allow her to be violated
12. Beat up Ryuuen in "self defense" with witnesses, dominating him physically and mentally
13. Send him after the other classes

But how are we to interpret Ayanokouji's external and internal dialogue that implies/states it was all according to keikaku? (1) The external dialogue is a clever lie and reframing of events that happened thus far, making Ryuuen believe he was just "dancing in his palm." In that situation and considering his goal, he's only incentivized to lie. (2) The internal monologue in that scene is unreliable narration. We know (2) based off its conflicting with previous internal monologues and his tendency to lie and exaggerate. For example, Ayanokouji frequently exaggerates how much of a threat Horikita is to him, expressing fear for her. He even lies to the reader about having a normal upbringing in Vol 2. If Ayanokouji lies and deceives in his narration in one facade, it's difficult to not consider that he would lie in another.

With that said, we can consider the categories:

1. Strategic Adaptability - Ayanokouji turns each test towards his advantage to evade Ryuuen. He adapts to Ryuuen catching up to him.
2. Strategic Alignment - Uplifting Class D both works out in his favor against Chabashira and Ryuuen, particularly in his usage of Horikita
3. Strategic Execution - Ayanokouji displays excellent martial arts skill and physicality in defeating four capable opponents. He maintains his cool against surveillance and bluffs convincingly during the showdown.
4. Strategic Resilience - Ayanokouji maintains his and Horikita's place in ANHS despite Kushida's bet
5. Strategic Shielding - The Paper Shuffle contingency. Setting up Hirata and Karuizawa as Horikita's friends, increasing the pool of suspects. Manabu and Chabashira as witnesses. Deleting all conversations between him and Karuizawa.

Feat Framework

External Situation - One of his challenges is maintaining the facade of normalcy. While it doesn't hold perfectly, Kiyotaka manages to fly under the radar and achieve his goals from the shadows despite increasing scrutiny and novel situations.

By far Kiyotaka's biggest advantage isn't his brain, it's the stupidity of others throughout the novels. I've hinted at it before, but let's run down all the instances he's carried by luck or stupidity. In Vol 3, Ayanokouji's plan relies on framing Ibuki by burning the manual. Ibuki knew she'd naturally be the prime suspect in that situation as it does seem like someone is trying to sabotage the class - people would naturally go for the outsider, so she fled… Except no one else in Class D makes this connection besides Horikita! And it's after a while she does, so Horikita goes alone (Kiyotaka likely knew she would based off her pride) to confront Ibuki. But it's not like Kiyotaka controlled for anyone else following Horikita or noticing Ibuki flee from her spot, where she was standing right beside the fire next to Hirata. You can make excuses for students like Sudo and Yamauchi, but even the supposedly "clever" ones like Karuizawa and Suzune don't catch on as quickly as they should or at all to make the logical leap that Kiyotaka induced in Ibuki. Vol 4, Karuizawa, as mentioned, never once questions the contrived nature of her ending up in the lower decks of the ship. As I explained earlier, she realistically would've questioned where he ran off to, opened up to him about the incident with Manabe (or Hirata would've caught on), and Kiyotaka would've been exposed as a manipulator to Hirata at the very least.

There's also something to be said about Karuizawa. She, alongside several other characters, are two-dimensional and sometimes comically easy to manipulate. Karuizawa displays absurd loyalty to Kiyotaka because she… had fun and felt protected, even though she just discovered the situation that begot his protection in the first place was orchestrated by him? Yamauchi just agrees to harass Horikita with mud because of a promise with no backing that Kiyotaka will give him Sakura's email address.

As far as stupidity goes, there is also an elephant in the room…

Opponent Quality – I've not been subtle about this. I think Ryuuen is, at best, written inconsistently, or a downright idiot at worst. He's smart enough to figure out the group system in the Zodiac Exam and subtly map out the school's cameras, but his strategies are mediocre at best. The best and funniest example of this is when Ryuuen leaves a phone on record after antagonizing Kiyotaka and Horikita in Vol 4. The story treats this as a serious trap, even specifying that he left it out in the open, funnily enough, when it has no right to be. They realistically have no reason to not just throw it away, ignore it, or tell Ryuuen to eat shit. His ingenious strategy is to have NPCs spy on possible suspects to apply pressure and make X sweat. When X contacts him in Vol 6, he doesn't press him at all when X claims Horikita saw through his strategy with Kushida. Even then, he has no reason to betray Kushida besides his own stupid fixation on making Horikita submit. If he just ignored X and gave Kushida the correct answers, Horikita goes down and Class D + X take a big hit.

Also, let's talk about his big plan. He thinks X wants to preserve his identity and so he might come up to… reveal himself to stop Karuizawa from revealing his identity? This makes no sense

as a plan. There's no benefit to texting X about what he'll do to Karuizawa on that day. In fact, considering the first interpretation, let's assume Ryuuen doesn't know he's being played by Ayanokouji and thinks he's got him trapped. He still has to consider numerous other plays X could make against him to get out of there. He could've sent a teacher there (almost actually what Kiyotaka does), he could've sent someone in his place (Albert takes little convincing to get past) to get Karuizawa out, and, of course, anything he does at that point with Karuizawa can be used against him. Even if X does show up, the most obvious and logical conclusion is that X would instantly have blackmail material against him, negating any threat of exposure. Even without that, he'd given X the time and location of Karuizawa's torture. Ryuuen didn't check for any sort of listening device or recording that Kiyotaka could've set up there. X could have easily turned his own plan against him if he just prepped the rooftop. Remember, from Ryuuen's POV, X's only goal in this situation is to prevent Karuizawa from betraying information. It's a stupid plan, so let's consider some superior ones that an average, not "clever," person like me could come up with:

1. Once you've discovered Manabe as a spy and Karuizawa's connection, simply have her spied on and tailed, record her schedule, and conceal any particular suspicion towards her by having others spied on as well (something similar to what he actually does). Have someone break into her room while she's out and plant a bug or listening device and listen for a conversation with X. Given the "income" from Class A, he could've easily acquired the resources to do this. Discover X through this.
2. During the Kouenji interrogation scene, have a lackey outside of the area message or call X. Given that Ryuuen was perceptive enough to notice Karuizawa's pupils dilating during the torture scene, he'd certainly notice Ayanokouji's phone dinging or vibrating.
3. During the rumor stunt, simply deny the allegations and demand an investigation. Camera footage would show Ayanokouji rummaging through people's mailboxes.

Obviously we can think of easy counters. Kiyotaka leaves his phone behind, he instructs Karuizawa to check her room, etc, but that's exactly the point. Ryuuen never even considers these simple, average-human level albeit effective strategies, and Ayanokouji never even alludes to any countermeasures for these obvious tactics besides the possibility that someone might check Karuizawa's phone. If we're being objective without adding contingencies where none are mentioned in the story, Ayanokouji would've lost his anonymity against anyone even slightly cunning if they played their cards right at these points. It only speaks to his great emotional intelligence and theory of mind that he knew Ryuuen, capricious and inconsistently intelligent as he is, would be clever enough to make certain inferences but retarded enough to make the plans he did.

Of course, he's given some leeway since he's chaotic and motivated by fun, but that still makes for a poor opponent.

Internal Situation - On some level, it's implied Kiyotaka holds back out of self-hatred. This is apparent in his conversation with Arisu.

Bonus: Crystallized Intel (Vol 0 - Y1V12)

This is just an add-on I wanted to put together after the fact. I'll collect the fields he shows knowledge in, and given his Vol 0 statements, it's safe to assume he's extremely proficient in whatever field he shows obscure knowledge in.

Classical Literature - Vol 2. He compliments Horikita for her choice in reading a certain book. He also, in hyperbole, states he's read millions of books.
Classical Music, Piano, and Violin - Vol 6. Ayanokouji identifies one of Beethoven's pieces playing in the library. He states he knows the piano and violin in Vol 0.
Psychology - Vol 4. Karuizawa's trap was inspired by the Milgram experiment. He also demonstrates knowledge in Vol 2 by giving a little spiel about Edward Hall's conceptualization of personal space.
Anatomy and Physiology - Vol 5. Kiyotaka names the muscles and mechanisms involved during the grip strength test.
French - gives an expression in 7.5
Nutrition - Vol 0. A young Kiyotaka understands food purely in terms of nutritional value, not likes nor dislikes.
Economics - Stated in Vol 0.
Judo - Stated in Vol 0.
Hiragana, Kanji, Katakana, and English - learned by age 3.
Mathematics
Ecology - One of the instructors recruited for WR was an expert in this field
Political Science - stated in Vol 0
Chess - Shown in the opening of Vol 11, which gives Arisu's POV of her first seeing him

Context: Arisu has obtained information about Ichinose from President Nagumo. Nagumo himself allows this to break Ichinose's spirit and have her as a pawn. Using that, she begins a vicious smear campaign by circulating rumors that Ichinose is a criminal. Ayankouji has also been tailed by Hashimoto, a Class A student who was tipped off by Nagumo that there may be something unusual about Ayanokouji. Arisu's plan is ultimately to draw Ayanokouji out and provoke some sort of response. On the 11th of February, she even had one of her henchwomen visited Ayanokouji and reveal Ichinose's past, concealing this as if it were betrayal since the Class A student in question was someone she had blackmail on, which would make it seem like a genuine betrayal to Ayanokouji.

Explanation

Ayanokouji's primary goal is to save Ichinose. Since Ichinose is unwilling to take action that would force the school's hand and shut down the rumors harming her, he figures the best way forward is to involve other students who wouldn't be so reserved. To do this, he, on the 11th, calls Kushida to his dorm at night. He strikes a bargain with her: Kiyotaka will, moving forward, give half his points to her in exchange for secrets about all the first years', secrets which he carefully chooses so as to not trace solely back to her and not so trivial as to be uncontroversial. This move, he explains, simultaneously disincentivizes her from expelling him, since he's now a steady source of points and thus an asset to her, defending himself from Kushida, a looming threat in the background, while also pushing his main plan for the story forward.

But before all this occurred on the same day, Ayanokouji was accosted by a girl from Class A. She claimed that she was going behind Arisu's back to talk to him, and to back this up she revealed her shady backstory. She was a frequent shoplifter, Arisu caught her early on in the school year stealing beer, and she'd been under blackmail ever since. To prove this, she even leaves the dorm and returns with a can of beer. She reveals Ichinose's past and then leaves. Ayanokouji is already suspicious, as it makes no sense for her to approach him, ostensibly a random student from her POV if she's honest. He inspects the beer, notices its sell date, and goes to the store and sees a very blatant discrepancy between the can she gave him and cans at the store, which are far more recent. Therefore, he reasons that Arisu had put the girl up to this. The can she gave him was the same as the can she first shoplifter and gave to Arisu when she was caught, and she either got it back at some point or quickly retrieved it from Arisu when she briefly left Kiyotaka's dorm. He then knows that Arisu, who had already told him that she would go after Ichinose, knew Ichinose's secret, as who else could this random Class A girl have found it from? And that secret was passed to her by Nagumo, who is on the council with Ichinose as her superior.

Next, he has to get rid of Hashimoto. On the 14th, he had predicted that Kei Karuizawa would give him a Valentines Day gift. He had already subtly encouraged her to break up with Hirata, and she in fact did so at the start of Vol 9. Knowing Hashimoto will be tailing him, Kiyotaka briefly visited Ichinose's floor in the dorm building to pique his interest. It works, as Hashimoto sticks around for some extra time until six, when Kiyotaka leaves and meets Kei. He briefly inquires about a mysterious number that had called him (not really related to this

strategy), and she gifts him chocolates when their meet is over. Finally seeing something interesting, Hashimoto decides to stir things up by revealing himself and flirting with Karuizawa, though Kiyotaka had prepared for that and reveals that he was just on his way to the library, which he proves by showing the books in his backpack. The cover story Karuizawa improvises is that he's not really her crush, but rather that he was just passing on the gift to her real crush. Regardless, Hashimoto is thrown off his trail. Afterwards, he met with his reading buddy from Class D, Hiyori, and planted the idea in her mind that Class A wanted to do more than just spread rumors.

His next move was to meet VP Kiriyama (a confidant of Manabu) and explain his strategy to save Ichinose. He wants Kiriyama to post the rumors for him to every class's online board except Class A. He explains that this has the double effect of both making it impossible to trace the rumors back to him. He also tells Kiriyama that, if someone really traces it back to him and presses him, that he could give credit to Manabu for the strategy, as the feud between Manabu and Nagumo is well known. In particular, he targeted the volatile Ibuki and Ishizaki, knowing they'd start a fight that would catch the school's attention. During that fight, he also showed up, knowing Hashimoto there would bring up the rumor about his crush on Kei (which he had Kiriyama put forth), and let his classmates point out that those rumors had some weight to them, lending credence to his respective "secret" being only a mundane love story.

Finally, he moves towards repeatedly visiting Ichinose, who is skipping classes, during lunch when no one else is around the dorms. He knows that, since she is so compassionate, she'll feel bad about his display of empathy, and she eventually does break down. He says he knows her secret, and she confesses it all to him. Why? Because he knew Arisu would confront her about it and he knew that getting her to be honest the first time would make the second time easier, so Ichinose was able to earnestly confess her secret in front of the class at Arisu's coercion without mentally breaking down, resisting her demands to step down as class leader.

We have 2 plans:

To misdirect Hashimoto:

1. Prepare certain countermeasures (the meeting with Hiyori as a pretense, the visit to Ichinose's floor to keep his interest)
2. Meet Karuizawa in his view
3. Show up at the fight and let his classmates bring up his closeness with Kei

To save Ichinose

1. Strike a bargain with Kushida
2. Use Kiriyama to circulate the information
3. Guilt trip Ichinose into spilling the beans
4. Allow her to stand up to Arisu

Strategically, this had several effects. (1) Ichinose is saved, countering Nagumo. (2) His relationship with Ichinose is improved. (3) Class A's relations were destroyed. While they were focusing on B, Kiyotaka made it seem like they were attacking everyone; and since they started the whole affair with the first rumors, he knew they'd be unable to deny the claims convincingly, especially since they were the sole class whose board was left untouched. (4) He gets rid of the tail. (5) If anyone does bother to investigate the online rumors, it traces back to the student council, hurting Nagumo. (6) Kushida has less reason to go after him. (7) One of the rumors being about him brings him a lot of embarrassment, which makes it less likely for someone to suspect that he started them.