

4.5

ようこそ 美力至上の教室へ
Welcome to the Classroom of the Second-year
TOMOSESHENSHUNSAKU

2年生編

木立 韶梧
KINUGASA SYOUGO
トモセシユンザク
TOMOSESHENSHUNSAKU





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ようこそ実力至上主義の教室へ 2年生編
Welcome to the Classroom of the Second-year
衣笠彰梧 × トモセシュンサク



"P-pushin' me like that..you're awful Haruka-chan!"

"It's because you wouldn't hurry up and get out here."

Saying that, Haruka showed herself
immediately after Airi's arrival.

"O-oh, come on..."

How could I put it? The two of them were
wearing incredibly bold swimsuits.



KARUIZAWA KEI

YAMAMURA MIKI

Second-year from Sakayanagi's class. A girl with high academic ability, but a thin presence.



TOKITŌ HIROYA

Second-year from Ryūuen's class. He is antagonistic towards Ryūuen's methods.



HIMENO YUKI

Second-year from Ichinose's class. In a class of close friends, she is a step withdrawn

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Classroom of the Elite - Second Year, Volume 4.5

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EPUB Version 1.0.2 (11/5/21) | Compilation & markup editing by *Christmas Cavalier*

Prologue: Raising the Curtain on a Fun Summer Vacation

After finally seeing their phones returned after two weeks, many students' faces relaxed into smiles.

The mobile phone has become an indispensable tool for people living in the modern world. The popularity of smartphones among those aged between 10 and 20 exceeded 99% by 2020. When considering such a world, there was no doubt about this fact.

Since I'd only started using a mobile phone in high school, it still wasn't a high priority for me as a necessity, but it was probably only a matter of time until it became so.

The luxury cruise ship sailed gracefully across the vast ocean, providing the students a pleasant summer vacation for a while.

Looking back, I couldn't really say that I enjoyed my summer vacation last year.

A group I could call friends, a lover. Even if it was just a passing acquaintance, the number of students I could call by their name.

All of it was incomparable to last year, showing a great leap forward.

This time spent on such a cruise ship would be a page in the lives of us students that we would never forget. You could enjoy the pool, a delicious meal, or talk with the person you love on a deck overlooking the ocean.

However, this didn't mean that you could do whatever you wanted. You could only have fun within the confines of the rules.

For example, students weren't allowed to leave their rooms after 10pm unless there were special circumstances. The rules seem to have gotten much stricter than the ones we had on board last year. These 'special circumstances' included sudden illness during the night, in which case you'd have to go to the infirmary, which was open 24 hours a day. It was unlikely

that any students would break the rules that have been established, but the penalties were quite severe, so there shouldn't be any problems.

In addition to that, there were certain levels of the ship that were prohibited to students, so you couldn't just walk around wherever you wanted. Even within the permitted levels, there were areas that were off limits.

Now, with moderation and morals in mind, let's enjoy this cruise.

Chapter 1: With Ike and Komiya

It was the morning of August 4th, the day after the completion of the uninhabited island special exam. For the next seven days, from today until the end of August 10th, the students would spend their vacation on a luxury cruise ship. We were promised that there wouldn't be any special exams like the zodiac exam held last year.

The ship had a swimming pool, a fitness gym, a movie theater, a concert hall, a bathhouse with a view, a shopping area with restaurants such as the café terrace, and various other entertainment facilities.

In other words, we'd earned the right to enjoy all of this.

So where was I on this long-awaited first day...?

I was relaxing in the four-person cabin assigned to each student with my mobile phone in my hand. There was no need to rush off to play just because you had a few days off.

In fact, it wasn't a bad idea to give up all entertainment for a while to get some rest and relaxation. In contrast to the hard bed from our dormitories, the bed of a first-class brand gently embraces the body. That feeling was further amplified after spending the last two weeks living in a tent on the harsh uninhabited island.

I'll leave it at that as far as the situation for the first day goes.

The class points for August were determined and announced based on the results of the uninhabited island exam. Normally, they were announced on the first day of the month, but this time the beginning of the month coincided with the middle of the uninhabited island exam. Because of this, the point totals were announced late so that they could account for the results of the special exam.

For students enrolled in this school, the beginning of the month started with the confirmation of class points. The same was true for our individual rankings, but class points were directly related to our private points, which in

turn were directly related to our monthly allowance. If you didn't have any money at your disposal, your holiday on this luxury cruise ship would be wasted.

Second-Year Class Points for August:

- Class A led by Sakayanagi: 1206 points
- Class B led by Ichinose: 578 points
- Class C led by Horikita: 571 points
- Class D led by Ryūen: 551 points

As a result, our class ended up rising to Class C by a narrow margin. There was a chance we could've even risen to Class B, but we were just one step short.

However, there was nothing to be pessimistic about. In fact, the results were rather good, with Kōenji managing to get us 300 class points with his solo win.

I was once again reminded of the destructive power of this overwhelming points bonus. Kōenji had always been perceived as a nuisance by many in the class, but those people would have no choice but to change their view now.

However, I was skeptical of whether this change in view would last forever. In exchange for the huge amount of class points he had earned, he was given a card that meant he would be 'exempted from all cooperation' until graduation. If this fact were made public, the number of people who felt honestly happy about the situation would likely decrease. Nevertheless, I think this was a good thing.

If we hadn't gotten Kōenji's 300 points, we would've had to keep fighting for a long time while being uncertain of whether we could really keep up with the upper classes. Having all three classes side by side like this would be a great help mentally.

Now we were just a step away from being able to rise up and become the sole Class B. From there, we would have to try and close the gap through direct confrontation with Sakayanagi's class.

This upward path also applied to Ryūen's class, which had dropped to Class D.

He was unable to finish in the top three in the uninhabited island exam, so didn't win any points for his class. The points gap had shortened as a result of this, but there was nothing to complain about regarding their ability. The addition of Katsuragi would raise the overall academic performance of the class and provide them with a sense of stability.

In addition, Ryūen made some kind of deal with Sakayanagi. It was hard to say if it was a contract to do with private points or class points, or even something completely different, but it may well have an impact in future battles.

Although there were some concerns, their momentum wasn't slowing, but increasing, making them probably the scariest class right now. They dropped to Class D in name only; in fact, I am sure they don't care one bit.

In contrast, Ichinose's class, which had risen back up to Class B, was not in bad shape if you only looked at the results.

With Sakayanagi leading, Ichinose was able to gain class points through cooperation. However, they couldn't rest on their laurels, as the gap between Class B and Class D was only 27 points. We'd entered a situation where the rankings could be switched come September 1st through minor behavioural issues alone. Depending on the results of the uninhabited island exam, they could've fallen to Class D. The anxiety Ichinose was feeling must be quite strong. The moment of truth will come soon, Ichinose.

I sent her a message, though only in my heart.

I didn't think that there would be more exams like the uninhabited island exam where all classes in all years participate from here on, so the next special exam should be a battle among our year. If they fall behind Class C and Class D, the future will look bleak for Ichinose's class. In other words, the next battle may decide their future...

The situation of the three classes side by side could be briefly summarized as such.

In the end, it was Class A led by Sakayanagi on top. It wouldn't be easy to close that gap. Their sense of stability was outstanding, and as such, they were able to slip into third place in the uninhabited island exam and accumulate class points.

They have many excellent students, and Sakayanagi's ability to control them was perfect. Furthermore, the strategies Sakayanagi was capable of using weren't limited to just the traditional or unorthodox, she was able to use both with great dexterity. Class A was truly unshakable, and she was certainly worthy of being their leader.

There was barely a chance, but if 'Horikita's Class' gained momentum, it wouldn't be impossible to catch up. Yes, it wasn't like there was no room to manoeuvre.

Of course, in order to do that, the dominant Class A needed to be broken down in some way. The shortest route would be to get rid of Sakayanagi, but it would be extremely difficult to do so when considering her protection point. Even if she didn't have a protection point, it would be no simple task. Rather than destroying the head, the smart thing to do would be to crush the pieces that are the limbs.

We would need to eliminate more than just 1 or 2 people, but if Kamuro, Hashimoto, and Kitō were absent or otherwise made dysfunctional, there was only so much Sakayanagi would be able to do. There were unknowns about Kitō, but the other two seemed to be people with a lot of problems that could be exploited.

Well, I'll leave it at that for now.

With the official start of the summer vacation, all classes had temporarily stopped fighting and were in a state of truce.

From here on for a while, it was my turn to have as much fun as I could as a normal student. Until the other day, my pockets were empty, but when the class points were announced and the private points for August were given out, my wallet was suddenly full. Our class had 571 class points, or in other words, 57,100 yen worth of private points were given to each person. I didn't receive any bonuses since I wasn't able to get into the top rankings for additional rewards, but it was more than enough. Private points were essential

for spending a fulfilling time on this luxury cruise ship, as the system required a minimum number of private points to enjoy a movie or meal of your choice. Last year, all the facilities on board were free of charge, so the rules have been tightened up regarding money as well. Of course, it didn't cost anything to spend the week holed up in your guest cabin, but then it would be no different to living in your dormitory on a day off.

Ping! There was a pleasant little sound and then an email arrived.

I received a message on my recently returned phone that the detailed results of the uninhabited island exam would be released at the resting area by the fitness gym on the ship for two days starting today. Since only the top and bottom few groups had been announced, many students would be interested. As for me, it would be best to check it out so that I could keep an eye on the future.

However, it would be more convenient to send the list to everyone's phones, but they didn't do that. Did they not want students to take the results home and analyse them for a long time? It could be considered a measure to avoid leaving unnecessary evidence due to Tsukishiro's involvement this time.

There was a part of me that wanted to go check it out right away, but it was likely that students would be coming in droves, so it would probably be better to give it some time.

Forgetting about the test results for the moment, I decided to take care of something else. Using my phone, I sent a simple message to Ichinose with a request to meet briefly in the evening in three days' time. Of course, it was easy for her to imagine that it was in response to the spur of the moment confession I received on the uninhabited island.

I thought about seeing her and giving my reply right away, but the gruelling uninhabited island exam had only just ended. It was okay to let her spend some time regaining her strength and having some fun with her friends. Since the message hadn't been read yet, I turned off my phone for now.

I decided to see what my roommates, Miyamoto Soshi, Hondō Ryōtarō, and Miyake Akito, would do.

"Hey Ryōtarō, the exam results are out. Wanna go take a look?"

“Hmm...pass... I can’t walk, I’m a wreck. Right now I just want to lie in my bed...”

Not only was he tired, but it was understandable that this bed would take away his energy to move. The temptation of the bed was too much for all of us, including me. Hondō, who was particularly exhausted, turned weakly to his left and showed his back.

“You’ve been like that since yesterday.”

“I felt like dying when I moved and I really wanted to eat, but I couldn’t get it down my throat.”

With his back to me, he covered his head with the duvet and curled up. For now, it seemed he just wanted to lie down and sleep. The trip on this luxury liner would last for a week, so it was a wise decision to not panic and wait to recover his strength.

“What about you guys, Miyake and Ayanokōji? Aren’t you a little curious about your rankings?”

Akito turned his gaze towards Miyamoto as he fiddled with his phone. “I’m good. I have a good idea of what rank we placed. Honestly, I think it’s enough that we didn’t get expelled. I just want to relax for today, like Hondō.”

It wasn’t hard to imagine that Akito, who was working with both Haruka and Airi, would’ve had a lot of trouble as the only guy in his group. It must have taken more of a toll on his spirit than his physical strength.

“You were in the same group as Sakura and Hasebe right?” Miyamoto asked Akito whilst sitting on his bed.

“What’s this all of a sudden?”

“I was in a group with three guys, so it was a hell of a sweaty time, but you must’ve been in heaven surrounded by girls, right?”

“What kind of heaven is that? If you ask me, it was hell ’cause there were so many things to take care of. A bunch of guys would definitely be easier.”

Because both were part of different groups, each was claiming the other had it better.

To be honest, I was glad I didn't join either group. For this exam, unless you were really good friends, it was better to go alone.

Anyway, when the two of them refused, Miyamoto's gaze turned towards me as well. Unlike Hondō and Akito, I was able to regain most of the strength I had lost on the island by sleeping well in my bed. I wasn't quite in perfect condition, but I'd have no trouble moving around the ship.

However, instead of rushing, I could go take a look later. Besides, even if Akito didn't go, it was possible that other members of the Ayanokōji group might go to check it out.

"I'm going to take it easy today. I don't like crowds and I'm sure everyone is curious about their rankings."

Bang bang bang!

When I tried to say no like the first two did, there were several knocks on the door of the guest cabin. The momentum of the knocks was unbelievably strong, as if something unusual had occurred. Akito jumped up and rushed to open the door, revealing Ishizaki. There was a tense atmosphere as if something was wrong...

"Ayanokōji, let's go check out the test results together!"

Everyone was taken aback by his smile and what he had said. Akito turned around and looked at me, having lost his voice.

"No, I'm..."

"What, you're not busy are ya? Come on, let's go!"

He barged into the room and grabbed me by the arm while I was sitting on the bed.

"When did you guys become such good friends?"

The person who was most surprised by the situation was Akito, with whom I spent the most time. Ishizaki, who was from a rival class, was also a bit of a problem child, so it wasn't surprising that Akito was concerned. In fact, the other two had also been taken aback by Ishizaki's appearance and were still stiff.

"Well, it just kind of happened..."

I had nothing more to say, but I didn't think Akito would find my explanation satisfactory. Despite the strong pressure of Ishizaki's smile, I decided to pull back and turn him down.

"I'm a little tired today."

"Whatcha mean you're tired? If it's you it'll be fine. Come on, let's go!"

With no regard for my feelings, he didn't seem to want to give up on dragging me out of the room.

"...Okay, I get it. Let me get changed for now."

"Right, I'll be waitin' for you in the hallway then!"

Perhaps because he was satisfied with my answer that I would join him, Ishizaki walked out of the room.

"Looks like you've caught the eye of a nasty one. Let me know if there's any trouble."

"Thank you, Akito. Well, Ishizaki's not a bad guy, so I'll be okay."

"Not a bad guy, huh? I ain't got a good impression of him. It's possible Ryūen's pulling his strings from behind. You'd best be on your guard."

We'd repeatedly had clashes with the delinquents led by Ryūen, so it was natural for those who didn't know the inner workings of the class to think that way. Ishizaki wasn't good at hiding things or playing games, but if he was being controlled without knowing it, then he could be troublesome to deal with. Saying that, now that weren't in the middle of a special exam, I could assume that wasn't the case.

After changing out of my uniform, I raised my hand lightly to Akito and left the room. Ishizaki seemed to be the only one waiting in the hallway, and I couldn't see any other students.

"Right, let's go~!"

"There's no need to be in such a hurry, is there?"

"Eh? Why not?"

"Even if we don't rush, the results will be up for two days, so we can see them later, right?"

“I want to see it quickly. I’m the kinda guy who, when a new movie comes out, can’t wait and goes to see it straight away.”

Even if he explained to me that he was that type of person, there was no way I could understand. It was a little hard to imagine Ishizaki going to the movie theatre in high spirits on the day of its release.

“I went to see ‘World Domination 16’ the day it came out.”

I’d never heard that title before, but it sounded like it would have guns and fists flying all over the place. And 16 films made it quite the long series. However, that title didn’t appeal to me at all.

“I’m curious where Ryūen-san’s group ended up placin’.”

At any rate, Ishizaki didn’t seem like the kind of guy to not have many friends in his own class. He shouldn’t have needed to invite me, a student from another class.

“Are you sure you don’t want to invite Ryūen and the others who are worried about their ranking?”

I’ll ask him indirectly to find out his true intentions.

“That guy will say somethin’ if he needs to. If he hasn’t said anythin’ yet, then it ain’t needed.”

“That’s easy to understand.”

“Right. A lot of the other guys are too tired after being on an uninhabited island and passed on my offer.”

Like Akito and the others, most people just wanted to rest right now.

“You’re in good spirits. Aren’t you tired?”

“Me? I recovered after I slept.”

“I see”

It was a surprisingly simple answer, but it was easy to understand. He might not have particularly good motor skills, but he seemed to be more resilient than most. However, the fact that he chose me after the process of elimination didn’t really make sense.

“You’re easy to talk to, Ayanokōji.”

“...Is that so?”

That was a little surprising, since I wasn’t very good at socializing.

“You’re way easier to talk to than that weirdo Kaneda.”

I didn’t know much about Kaneda, but the comparison resulted in some complex feelings.

On the way, we passed by a store.

“Oh, they’re sellin’ national flags!”

Ishizaki’s eyes sparkled with excitement as he picked up national flags from all over the world in the store. As I watched him with a confused expression, wondering what was going on, Ishizaki rubbed the bottom of his nose with his index finger and answered.

“Ah, you know, when we went to Albert’s room before, he had a collection of flags. I dunno, maybe I’ve been inspired by him, but I’ve been collectin’ them too.”

So, one person’s hobby influenced another person, and that spread? They’d apparently found a common hobby in collecting flags, which seemed to be a rarity nowadays.

“I don’t know much about Albert, but he’s a good guy, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, that’s right. When we first came to school we had a bunch of problems, but now he’s my best friend.”

It was true that I often saw Ishizaki and Albert together.

“So, as far as friendships go, it’s smooth sailing, I guess.”

I was honestly impressed and said so, but Ishizaki’s face hardened slightly as he walked beside me.

“It’s not really like that. It’s not like I’m the most popular kid in class.”

“Is it because you’re working under Ryūen?”

“I don’t think that’s necessarily the reason, it happened right after I came to this school after all. But after our run-in with you on the rooftop, I was supposed to have defeated Ryūen-san and taken back the class. I’d been hangin’ out with a lot of people I’d never really gotten to know before.”

He spoke so much that he seemed to be at a loss for words. It was true that Ishizaki's position may be complicated. There were more than a few students who were hoping Ryūen would be defeated and were grateful to Ishizaki. However, if he were to fall straight back into line under Ryūen, he would inevitably face opposition.

“So, I’m also part of the cause.”

“Ah sorry, I phrased it weirdly. It’s not your fault, Ayanokōji. That was a fight we started in the first place. It’s true that some of my friends left me, but now I’m friends with you instead, so don’t worry ‘bout it.”

Ishizaki turned his head my way and laughed powerfully. But there was something fragile about that laugh, almost dangerous.

“Don’t go trying to solve the class problems all by yourself.”

“I know. Class problems are solved with classmates together. Ryūen-san returned with that determination.”

Ishizaki believed so and would do everything he could to follow.

1.1

“Whoa, there are loads of people.”

Sure enough, the rest area near the fitness gym where the test results were disclosed was crowded with students. A large sign beside the monitor read, ‘Photography is strictly prohibited’ and there were two adults, probably associated with Tsukishiro, watching the students.

The rankings and scores were displayed as a list on the monitor, which seemed to be scrolling automatically. Right now we could see the group members and scores for the groups ranked 50th through to 60th.

“...Huh?”

Suddenly, I felt an incredible sense of discomfort flowing through my body. What was it? I couldn’t immediately figure out what it was, but I felt an indescribable sick kind of feeling.

“I wanted to get a closer look at the results, but I don’t think I can concentrate with all this.”

Ishizaki, who wasn’t feeling the same discomfort as me, looked at the monitor and muttered in displeasure.

“There’s no helping it. I’m sure a lot of people wanted to know the detailed results of the exam.”

Ishizaki clicked his tongue in frustration and had no choice but to squint at the results from the spot. Although he had a bold personality, he wouldn’t push the upperclassmen to get to the front.

The trouble was, even though it was an auto-scrolling monitor, you could touch it with your hand to hold it in place or scroll to look at any order. Currently a third-year student was operating it, so it was unlikely we would see the top results that Ishizaki wanted to see anytime soon.

“What shall we do?”

Even if we waited for a long time, it would be a while before our turn would come.

“I’m curious, but let’s not overdo it. We can look at it later after all.”

That was what I said a few minutes ago but...If he understood, then it was fine.

“By the way, do you notice anything?”

“Hm? Notice what?”

Ishizaki, who was about to turn around, didn’t seem to have noticed anything.

This bizarre atmosphere. The number of gazes directed at me.

This couldn’t be dismissed as just my imagination. It wasn’t that Ishizaki next to me was too slow and unaware of it. It wasn’t Ishizaki, or any other students; the gaze was focused entirely on me.

They were watching my every move, with no apparent intention to hide. All of the students looking at me had one thing in common; they were all third-years. I didn’t know all the details yet, but I was certain that Nagumo

was involved in this. I guess this was one of his plans that he had decided set in motion after putting it off in anticipation for the exam.

“What’s up?”

Apparently, I was so lost in thought that Ishizaki was worried about me.

“No, it’s nothing. It looks like a lot of other students are coming to check it out, so let’s head back.”

“Oh, yeah you’re right.”

I’d imagined he’d try something sooner or later, but this was a bit troublesome. It would’ve been much easier to deal with if Nagumo had decided to confront me directly. He got me with something I hated to deal with right from the start.

“Hey, you haven’t eaten yet, right? Let’s eat together.”

“What? Ah, yeah I haven’t eaten yet, but...”

I started to walk away, and there was no sign of the third-year students following after us. In the end, all they did was watch me, but it didn’t feel great to be stared at relentlessly.

“What’s the matter with you? You don’t want to eat with me? You’re a rude guy.”

“It’s not that. I was just thinking about something unrelated.”

I couldn’t involve Ishizaki in this, but if they didn’t come after us, we’d be fine.

“It’s rude to think about other things like that.”

He had a point. Let’s forget about the third-years for now.

“Are you fine with it? Eating with me?”

“Who cares? We’re just eatin’ a meal together.”

I couldn’t deny that I was feeling some pressure, but it didn’t feel bad at all. I just couldn’t get over the fact that Ishizaki was treating me like a friend.

“I don’t know if I’ve said this before, but I’m not invitin’ you out like this just to get you to join our class. It’s ’cause I like you as a friend, okay?”

Without hesitation, Ishizaki uttered a line that, in a way, set my teeth on edge. But then, as if realizing something, he turned around.

“...Am I botherin’ you?”

“That’s not the case.”

“Right!?”

For a moment, Ishizaki seemed to wonder if he’d been acting selfishly, but then he immediately laughed with a cheerful face. Well, I already knew that he had this kind of personality. I didn’t feel bad at all, so I decided to just go along with Ishizaki.

As the two of us left the area and started to move, we heard footsteps running towards us from behind.

“Ayanokōji-senpai!”

The owner of the footsteps was Nanase, who I had worked with for the first half of the uninhabited island exam.

“You came to see the results of the exam too, senpai?”

“Yeah. Saying that, I couldn’t go over them slowly, so I gave up.”

“Is that so? Right now the third years are operating the monitor, so we underclassmen will have to wait a while before we can view it freely.”

Apparently Nanase also wanted to know more about the results, but decided against it. Ishizaki was watching our conversation with curiosity. Thinking about it, Ishizaki probably hadn’t had any direct interaction with Nanase.

“Oi, oi Ayanokōji. When did you get to know this cute girl?”

“A lot happened.”

It was tedious to explain from scratch, so I gave him that summary.

“Oi, don’t tell me you’re...datin’ an underclassman, are ya?”

“That’s a big leap. It’s just a normal senior and junior relationship.”

It was unusual for me to be brought into this sort of thing. I’d thought that Ishizaki wasn’t particularly interested in relationships with the opposite sex, but not so much, apparently.

“Did you want something from me?”

“No, after I saw you, senpai, I just wanted to come talk to you.”

She spoke without hesitation as she looked at me with bright eyes, despite the contents of her reply being somewhat embarrassing.

“Sorry for bothering you. Excuse me!”

One minute she was running up to me, and the next, she was running away. The ship’s interior was the same as the school corridors in that she shouldn’t be running here, but I guess she was just about safe.

“She was a cutie. And her...you know...was pretty...you know.”

I’m sorry, but I guess I’ll just skip over the ‘you know’ part.

“You’re really not dating her, right?”

“No, we’re not dating.”

It would be annoying to have people misunderstand and spread the story. That was why, once again, I firmly pushed Ishizaki so that he wouldn’t talk.

1.2

When I returned from my meal with Ishizaki, I found Ike standing in front of the door. He had a restless look on his face as he worked his phone. After raising his head and checking his surroundings, our eyes met.

“Oh, Ayanokōji! I’m glad you’re here, I’ve been waiting for you.”

Ike was waiting for me? Another unexpected occurrence.

“Actually, I’m thinking of going to visit Komiya right now, and I was wondering if you’d join me.”

“Me too?”

Ike approached me, asking me to lend an ear, so I did.

“How to put it?...I feel a little awkward going to see him by myself.”

“Why?”

“You say why... Well, you know, I...I’m going out with Shinohara. When we were heading back to the ship after the exam, there was a moment when we were alone, and...”

It seemed he confessed his feelings and Shinohara gave him the okay. I thought their relationship might develop, but this exceeded my expectations.

“Is that so? Well, congratulations.”

After I bluntly offered congratulations, he averted his gaze in embarrassment.

“Ah, thanks. But...from Komiya’s point of view, I think I might have done something unfair.”

“I don’t think so though.”

“No, I mean, rather than unfair...It’s like I was stealing a march on Komiya.”

Certainly, Komiya had to retire from the island exam early due to injury, so you *could* express what Ike did as stealing a march, but that was also true for everyone involved. It seemed like Komiya was planning to confess to Shinohara during the uninhabited island exam.

“I was actually gonna wait until Komiya recovered, you know? But then I was so relieved that the island exam was over, Shinohara was right by my side...and then...it just hit me that I didn’t want to give her to Komiya...”

It seemed like he couldn’t help confessing his feelings to her. Of course, there was also the risk of being rejected. If that had happened, it would’ve been even more awkward if Komiya and Shinohara had gotten together.

“That’s why I thought I have to report it to Komiya properly. If that guy’s still planning to confess to Shinohara, it’ll get complicated, right?”

“If you don’t get ahead of this, you could be in trouble if Shinohara decides to go with Komiya.”

“Uh...! W-why would you...!?”

My exaggerated reply left Ike flustered. So half of the reason was to report the truth to him, and the other half was to stop him from confessing.

“You’re prepared to take at least one hit, right?”

“Ehh!? I’m going to get hit!?”

“Wouldn’t you do at least that much if the person you love was snatched from your side?”

“...Gulp.”

Ike looked terrified; it seemed imagining what was coming left him a bit scared. Komiya wasn’t necessarily a big guy, but he wasn’t playing basketball just for show. On the other hand, Ike was on the smaller side for a guy, so there was a more than sufficient size difference.

“Well, he’s got an injured leg right now, so he shouldn’t be able to get a good footing. It shouldn’t hurt that much”

“T-that’s not really the point, but...I-I’m prepared.”

Since he seemed to be somewhat determined, I didn’t have any reason to object. I’d been wondering about Komiya’s condition, so this was a good opportunity.

“I hear that Komiya’s still sleeping in the infirmary.”

“I’m sure it would be hard for him if he was in his own room.”

It wouldn’t be surprising if he spent most of his holidays in the infirmary.

Ike and I arrived in front of our destination. Ike took a deep breath to calm himself down before entering. There was no point in rushing him, so I was just waiting quietly when we heard a loud laugh from inside.

“W-what’s that? Let’s go in and have a look.”

After hearing unexpected laughter from inside, Ike opened the door and entered the infirmary before he could finish preparing himself. There we found Ryūen and several classmates around Komiya, who was sitting upright. There was a group of four people; Albert, Kaneda, Kondo and Yamawaki.

Because people from outside his class appeared, Ryūen stood up, not giving us a second glance.

“Excuse us, Komiya.”

He left the infirmary with his friends; apparently he was done talking. I stole a quick glance in Ryūen’s direction, but he didn’t look my way.

“Ryūen’s just as scary as ever… Anyway, what did he want?”

On the other hand, Ike couldn’t even look directly at Ryūen, and was muttering to himself dejectedly. Komiya, who overheard what he said, nodded in understanding before answering,

“Well, he certainly has that power. Despite appearances, he just came to visit me.”

On a small table near the head of the bed, there were snacks and juice that he seemed to have been gifted.

“J-just visiting…Somehow, he doesn’t come across as the kind of guy to do that.” Ike replied with his honest feelings and Komiya agreed with him.

“If it was this time last year, well, that would’ve been unthinkable.” Komiya smiled with nostalgia as he recalled the past year. “But somethin’ about Ryūen-san’s changed a little bit. He’s become a bit more mellow…or maybe not…” Komiya added, with a somewhat confused, yet happy face.

As soon as they entered school, Ryūen took control of the class and treated everyone as tools to be used without mercy. It wasn’t surprising that most of his classmates felt a strong sense of rejection in their hearts.

“If it’s that guy from now, I feel like I can honestly follow him, you know?”

“You can willingly follow Ryūen?…I don’t get it…”

Ike’s body trembled slightly, as if he couldn’t understand what he was hearing.

“Anyway, Ike, Ayanokōji, don’t just stand there, sit down.”

Komiya gently welcomed us students from another class and urged us to sit down without hesitation. The two of us took advantage of his kind offer and sat in a couple empty chairs.

“You seem healthy.”

Looking at his leg that was secured in a fixed position, I checked Komiya’s condition.

“As you can see, I’m fine except for my leg. But I get frustrated when I think about everyone having fun on the other side of the door. I hope it heals

quickly..."

"When will you be able to walk?"

"I'm in the process of asking for permission to walk on crutches."

They were rivals in love, but surprisingly, they were able to talk to each other without any problems. It looked like my presence here was completely unnecessary.

"I'm just... a little worried."

"Worried? About what?" Ike, who was straddling the backside of the chair, put his arm on the backrest and asked Komiya.

"It's just...Ryūen-san's trying to figure out who pushed me during the exam. He asked me a bunch of questions to see if I remembered anything, but just like I told Ayanokōji, I don't even remember being attacked at all..."

It seemed there has been no difference in his memories since that time. Right now, Ryūen's class was gaining momentum day by day. It was time to focus entirely on the second year battle and reach Class A. Of course, that goes for our class as well, so we shouldn't delve too deep into this one.

If Amasawa or another White Room student, or someone else related to Tsukishiro was involved, there was no guarantee that even Ryūen would be safe.

"It would be good if Ryūen-san doesn't overdo it."

"It seems he wants to beat the culprit half to death."

The two of them were unable to envision Ryūen getting beaten. Rather, it was natural to be worried about the culprit instead.

"So? You didn't just come to visit me, right?" Komiya asked Ike softly, as if he had sensed something.

At that moment, Ike stiffened up in surprise.

"Ahh, no...That..."

He was unable to speak. Had he not prepared himself enough yet? Perhaps seeing this, Komiya waited for him to speak without prompting, wearing a serious expression.

The atmosphere changed in the blink of an eye. There was no trace of the relaxed situation we had just experienced.

“...I...How to put it?...so...”

Ike's talkative demeanour faded and he became unable to string the words together.

“Ike. I don't know what you're gonna say, but if it's important, then look me in the eye and say it.”

He must've guessed what he was about to say. Even so, Komiya pretended not to know, and urged Ike to tell it to him straight. I didn't think Ike had noticed that Komiya had already guessed what he wanted to say, but he must've felt something from him as a fellow man. He felt that this wasn't something to be reported in a lazy manner. He slapped himself on both cheeks, forcing himself to wake up out of his daze.

“I confessed to Shinohara!”

Ike, who had steeled his resolve, spoke in a simple but loud voice.

All that came after was silence. I could see Ike gulping down a large mouthful of saliva beside me.

“And? What was Satsuki's reply?”

“I got the okay. We're going out now.”

“I see...”

After hearing his curt response, Ike continued to stare at Komiya's face without averting his gaze. Like we had spoken about earlier, because Ike had jumped the gun, he couldn't blame him if he had complaints. He seemed to think he would jump out with a surprise shot.

“Did you think I was gonna hit you?”

“Eh?”

“It's written all over your face; that you might get punched.”

“T-that's... Well, maybe a little.”

“Well, then you've resolved yourself, right? I can't move right now, so you come over to me.”

As he asked him to come over, Komiya's face hid any hints of his intentions. But, from his intensity, it seemed Ike had made up his mind. Even though he was terrified, he went to stand right next to Komiya. Immediately after, Komiya's right arm reached out and grabbed Ike's shoulder.

"Tss!" Pushing his aching body to the limit, Komiya looked into Ike's eyes. "If you make Satsuki cry, I'll show you no mercy." Komiya said, as he lightly pressed his left fist against Ike's chest.

"K-Komiya...?"

Komiya's serious expression turned into a smile. "What's up with you, don't act so glum. Satsuki chose you, that's all there is to it, right?"

"But...If you hadn't been injured, it might've been the other way around..."

"It sucks, but I don't think that's true. Satsuki's had her eye on you for a while, that's why she accepted your confession. It's not a case of first-come-first-served. But..."

"But?"

"If you hadn't faced Satsuki properly and kept runnin' away, I might've had a chance."

It was as Komiya said. I didn't think it mattered so much whether he confessed first or after. There was an accident that resulted in a serious injury, and Ike just happened to be in the vicinity. That then created an opportunity which gave him a huge boost, allowing him to face Shinohara. Without a doubt, that was the single most important factor that resulted in the two of them being together now.

If Komiya hadn't been injured, if Ike hadn't been nearby at that time. If either of them had suffered a different fate, the one next to Shinohara right now may well have been Komiya.

"In that sense, this injury was really unlucky."

Even though his feelings of love were left unfulfilled, Komiya seemed to be in a good mood.

"Thank you, Komiya."

“Make sure you study properly, will you? Satsuki...No, Shinohara was worried about that too.”

“...That’s right. I can’t afford to get expelled.”

This love affair might just become a pivotal turning point for Ike. Like Sudō, he now had an opportunity to struggle for both himself and the one he loves.

Anyway, Ike’s report and the ensuing discussion with Komiya had concluded.

“Sorry Ike, but can I talk to Ayanokōji alone for a bit? There’s something I’d like to confirm about my injury.”

“Alright, see you later Komiya. You too, Ayanokōji.”

Ike said goodbye to us and left the room. When we were alone, Komiya cut me off.

“I’m sorry. Ike brought you here asking for your help right?”

“No, I was concerned about your condition too. Rather, I caused you trouble.”

“That’s not true. I mean...I don’t really understand what’s going on.”

“Hmm?”

“Even though we’re in different classes and fighting against each other, we’ve started talking normally. It’s like that kind of hostility has faded away. Last year, it was so bleak.”

Since we were in different classes, we were supposed to fight and kick each other down. Other than for a strategy, there wasn’t much merit in getting along with each other.

“The uninhabited island exam was a competition between school years, plus we’ll be at the same school together for a long time. Maybe that’s the reason?”

“Yeah, maybe.”

“So? You wanted to talk about your injury?”

It was obvious that this conversation was just a preliminary chat before we got to the main topic.

“It’s as I was saying earlier, it’s about Ryūen-san.”

“You said he was searching for the culprit.”

“I’m against it. To be honest, I’d rather chalk this one up as an accident caused by my own mistake.”

“But Shinohara actually saw the person that attacked you.”

“I know that. But I have this bad feeling that this won’t end well.”

Maybe it was because he was the one attacked that he could feel the danger.

“Even if it’s just for a little while, would you mind keeping an eye out on this matter for me, Ayanokōji?”

“I don’t really think there’s anything I can do about it though...”

“I don’t expect you to do anything directly. If you feel uneasy, let me know.”

Komiya made his request with a strong look in his eyes. We formally exchanged contact information so that we could get in touch at any time.

“Okay, for now, you should just focus on healing your injury as soon as possible, Komiya.”

Resting was the only shortcut to a full recovery after all.

“Thank you. I’d like to thank you properly next time, if you don’t mind. I wanted to talk to the other guys that helped me too.”

“I’m sure they’ll be glad to hear it. Ike might even bring Shinohara along.”

“No way. If I had to watch those two flirting, I think I might just cry.”

Komiya smiled bitterly. It seemed he was more heartbroken than he looked. I think it was a mistake to include that teasing comment.

Anyway, I wasn’t saying the injury was a good thing, but I felt like the distance between Komiya and I had shortened a little.

“See you later, Ayanokōji.”

“Yeah.”

After saying goodbye and leaving the infirmary, I was struck by a strange feeling.

My classmates Sudō and Ike, and from another class, Ishizaki and Komiya. The number of people around me that I could call my friends was gradually increasing. I wasn't even particularly trying to make friends, but that was what ended up happening.

“The way to make friends isn't something you can find in a textbook.”

Like an idiot, I thought that seriously.

Chapter 2: The Beginning of the Short-Lived Vacation

For many students, each day of the uninhabited island exam seemed to drag on for a long time. In contrast, a day spent on a luxury cruise ship was just like a flash of light; gone in an instant. Why was it that the flow was so different for the same period of time?

The main reason was probably because we didn't spend most of the day thinking about time. During daily school life and special exams, students were often thinking about time. On the other hand, when you were on holiday, you weren't thinking about it, so the difference was noticeable.

Today was the second day of such a festive holiday.

The exhaustion many students had been feeling had finally worn off, so they were starting to enjoy their holiday in earnest. As a result, the number of students passing each other in the ship's corridors had increased dramatically. Even I, who'd spent most of my time quietly on my own, received an email from a rather unexpected person inviting me to meet up.

It was from third-year Class B student, Vice President Kiriyama. He had invited me to the pool, perhaps to have an elegant chat while riding a float or play water volleyball to deepen our friendship.

I'll throw out the possibility of any of those ridiculous predictions.

Although he called me over to the pool, it should be a far from playful time.

Of course, I could refuse his invitation. Or I could choose to ignore it. But I was going to end up hearing it at some point anyway. Depending on the situation, it wasn't impossible that I could be called out in more unpleasant place and time than right now.

I sent a curt yes in reply, promising to be there at the specified time. I decided that it would be less damaging for me to be called out now, when I was by myself. Besides, there was a good chance that I could solve the

mystery of the persistent stares I'd been receiving from the third-year students since yesterday.

“Kiriyama, huh...”

Right now, I was at the resting area by the fitness gym. The monitor where the results of the special exam were posted was in front of me. I was the only one here; probably because most of the students had already checked their exam results. The number of teachers keeping an eye on the test results had also been reduced to just one.

I memorized the results of the test, and slid the results back to the top groups again, focusing on Kiriyama's group. The top three had already been announced in front of the entire student body, with Kōenji Rokusuke's solo group in first place, Nagumo's group in second place and Sakayanagi's group in third place. In fourth place was Kiriyama's group with 255 points, leaving a difference of only 6 points. In other words, Sakayanagi stole the last spot on the podium from his group. The difference between third and fourth place was more than just the difference in their ranking.

“Naturally, for a third-year student, these results would be seen as a disappointment.”

Nagumo missed the top spot and Kiriyama didn't even make it into the top three. In addition, all the expulsions were from the third-year, which was a highly unusual situation.

Since I still had about 20 minutes until the appointed time, I decided to head over to the pool first. It was also to confirm that the stares being directed at me wasn't just me being self-conscious, but a plan that had been put in motion.

The answer was immediately apparent without the need for close examination.

No more than a dozen seconds after showing myself at the pool, I noticed I was being subjected to stares from a large number of third-year students spread all over the place. Students engrossed in conversation, students who were swimming in the pool; all the third-year students began to observe me closely upon noticing my presence.

The stares I felt yesterday weren't just a coincidence.

"I came to find proof of my suspicions, but this is too fast."

It was such a strange feeling that I wanted to complain to the contrary. I was supposed to be a background character in the shadows, but here I was standing out more than anyone. Even though I tried not to think about it, internally, I was naturally looking for the reason.

There was probably an 80 or 90% chance that they were acting under the instructions of Nagumo, but exactly what the contents of his orders were was completely unknown at this point in time. Although many students were sending obvious stares my way, I continued to pretend not to notice anything.

It was easy to play the role of a fool; however, I could easily imagine that Nagumo assumed I was aware of the stares. It wouldn't be surprising if he was enjoying seeing me as the target of this attention.

At any rate, the best thing to do for now was pretend I didn't know what they are all looking at.

I looked around the pool, wondering who else was here besides the third-year students, and saw Ichinose with some of her classmates. It just so happened that Ichinose was the first one to notice my presence, and our eyes met.

Her shoulders jerked once and she quickly hid behind her classmates, looking for an escape. Seeing the sudden strange movement, her classmates were asking what was wrong with her. It was just after Ichinose confessed to me on the uninhabited island, so it was no wonder that just looking at each other, even from this distance, might make things awkward.

It'd be one thing if it was just Ichinose, but her classmates were also there, so I decided to keep my distance for now. Even if I left it alone, I had already made an appointment to see her the evening after tomorrow. I saw a few classmates here and there, but unfortunately I couldn't find anybody that I was particularly close with.

"Looks like you might be in trouble, Ayanokōji."

When I turned diagonally in front of me in the direction of the voice that had called out, I found Kiryūin resting on a beach chair on the deck.

“What are you referring to?”

“The third-year students. It’s not like you haven’t noticed, right?”

“I don’t really understand.”

I tried to play it off, but Kiryūin didn’t even snicker, and just kept going nonchalantly.



“Even though I’m not involved, I’m still a third-year student. The information has already reached my ears.”

“By any chance are you referring to the stares that are currently being focused on me?”

“So you do know what I’m talking about.”

“It’s not a big problem. I’m being watched, that’s all.”

“That’s all, huh.”

Even though I mentioned that I didn’t care, Kiryūin didn’t seem to think that was the case.

“It looks like quite the frightening strategy to me. I’m sure it’s especially troublesome for someone with your personality.”

While she was just teasing, Kiryūin’s point was not wrong.

“As expected of the Student Council President. He’s played a bizarre, yet effective card against this flawless person in front of me.”

“Flawless? I think you’re overestimating me.”

“Don’t be modest. We’re comrades that have been through the line of fire together, so I know that your abilities are limitless, right?”

The gaze lurking beneath the sunglasses pierced me sharply. Even if I were to deny it, there were many students around, so I would have to be careful so as not to be overheard. Of course, Kiryūin would’ve taken the surrounding environment into consideration.

“I understand, I’ll admit it for now.”

“Fufu, that’s fine. Now back to the topic at hand, did something happen with Nagumo during the final stages of the exam? At the very least, no orders were issued to the third-years until the end of the uninhabited island exam.”

“There may have been something that would cause him to resent me...It’s frustrating that I can’t say that it’s not the case.”

Kiryūin, who’d been lying back comfortably, sat up slightly.

“In terms of individual strength, Nagumo Miyabi’s ability is top class among the school. Academic Ability A, Physical Ability A, Adaptability A+

and Social Contribution A+. He cannot be faulted.”

“I know. As far as the OAA is concerned, his overall ability is overwhelming at the top of the school.”

There were a few students, like Sudō and Kiryūin, who held an A+ rating in one ability. However, Nagumo was the only student with all A's or higher, and the number of students with two A+ grades was extremely limited.

“With his high academic and physical abilities, his charisma and ability to organize the school year, as well as the achievement of climbing to the top as the president of the student council, Nagumo has never faced a worthy opponent in his year group. The only person in the school who he recognised as his equal, Horikita Manabu, has graduated, and is thus no longer here.”

Kiryūin sighed and picked up the glass on the table next to her.

“To Nagumo, you should've been nothing more than a toy. However, something happened during the uninhabited island exam that has caused him to take you seriously.”

“It would be best to leave someone like me alone.”

“If that's the case, then you've made a seriously bad choice somewhere along the line.” Kiryūin spoke harshly, showing no mercy. “There are probably only a handful of people that can defeat you one-on-one. I'm pretty confident in my ability, but if there's one type I'm not good with, it would be someone like you, Ayanokōji. But Nagumo's case is completely different. I can tell that he's the type of person you're no good at dealing with. Am I right?”

“I can't deny that possibility anymore. I misjudged his true character.”

They were only looking at me, but I didn't realise how stressful and disgusting it would make me feel. There were always eyes watching in the White Room, but this was completely different.

In other words, I was forced to live in an environment I had never experienced before in my life. Moreover, the only way to escape was to hide indoors, which wasn't a practical solution at all.

“That's about right. Nagumo tends to prefer flashy moves and one-on-ones, but when it comes to ensuring his victory, he'll use any strategy to win.

Even if it means mobilizing the entire third year. He'll prioritise winning, no matter what it takes.”

His gathering of the crowd was just the beginning.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t help you with this one,” she said, covering her eyes with the sunglasses that had been resting on her forehead.

“I never once said that I wanted to rely on you.”

As if trying to get ahead of me, Kiryūin refused to cooperate.

“For three years I’ve been free to do as I please, but...I do have one small regret regarding my school life. If there were a retention system at this school, I might’ve considered it.”

Retention, in other words repeating a grade without advancing. To put it bluntly, she wanted to stay.

“So you were here, Ayanokōji.”

As I was talking to Kiryūin, Vice President Kiriya showed up. It seemed Kiriya, who was wearing a serious expression, had arrived much earlier than promised. After taking a glance at the lounging Kiryūin beside me, he turned to look back in my direction.

“We’ve still got a few minutes until the scheduled time, but you don’t mind if we get started, do you? This isn’t the best place for it, let’s move.”

“‘This isn’t for you to hear’, is what you’re trying to say, right Kiriya?”

Even though she said couldn’t help me, it seemed she was interested in what he wanted to talk about. She lifted the sunglasses she had just put on back to her forehead.

“It’s just that we would attract too much attention here. If we can, I’d like to speak in a quiet place.”

Because the poolside was so popular, a large number of students were hanging around here. Well, for some reason, only the seat next to Kiryūin was empty, but I didn’t think I needed to look too deeply into that.

“That’s funny, saying that you don’t want to attract too much attention. That’s a contradiction, Kiriya.”

“What?”

“If you wanted to talk in a quiet place, to choose the pool where so many people are gathered is nonsense. Am I wrong?”

“So you would’ve preferred if I told you from the start that I don’t want to be around you, so I want to move?” Kiriyama spat out after Kiryūin interrupted him.

The expression on his face was completely dead, devoid of any emotion. The fact that Kiryūin had been a pain for him to deal with so far was obvious.

“I see, you’re saying I make you feel uncomfortable.”

Whenever a conversation starts, it revolves around Kiryūin. Kiriyama didn’t want to deal with that, so he made a move to escape, but on the contrary, it provided the opportunity for Kiryūin to bulldoze in.

“Anyway, how about you let me listen in on what you were going to talk about?”

“I refuse. It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Nothing to do with me? I don’t see how you can just assume it’s of no concern to me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Ayanokōji and I are in a romantic relationship. If that’s the case, how can it have nothing to do with me?”

Eh?

Before his reaction leaked out, Kiriyama looked between me and Kiryūin alternately with a stunned expression on his face.

“Fufu, it’s a joke Kiriyama. You’re a real boring guy, but if I consider just your reactions, you can be amusing at times.”

When Kiriyama saw Kiryūin laughing merrily, he seemed to explode with anger. He started walking without saying another word.

‘Leave that woman and come with me quickly’ seemed to be what he was getting at.

“I can’t ignore this, so I’ll take my leave, Kiryūin-senpai.”

“Give my regards to Kiriyama.”

I’d rather not. Even if she wasn’t there in person, he probably wouldn’t want to hear Kiryūin’s name being uttered.

Following Kiriyama, who walked ahead of me, we arrived on the deck one floor above which overlooked the pool. Many students were napping or sunbathing, but it was a comparatively quieter place. Even so, because of the kind of students that were here, it could conversely make our conversation stand out even more.

However, there was not a single third-year student present. Kiriyama must’ve paid them off. That meant that first and second-years shouldn’t care about the conversation between me and Kiriyama. Another saving grace was that there was nobody waiting for us, allowing me to have a one-on-one conversation with Kiriyama.

“So, why did you want to bring me all the way out here?”

“I won’t beat around the bush. What did you do to Nagumo on the last day of the uninhabited island exam, Ayanokōji?”

“What do you mean?”

“Quit messing around. It’s obvious you had something to do with the results of the exam.”

On the last day of the exam, when Nagumo and I met, I overheard from the transceiver that they were enacting a strategy to suppress Kōenji. It wouldn’t be strange if Kiriyama had already grasped what happened.

“I have no problem answering, but before that, could you answer my question first?”

“Your question?”

Yes. There was one thing I wanted to check out when he called me out like this.

As Kiriyama looked at me suspiciously, I continued. “It’s a question I’ve had since I first met you, Vice President Kiriyama. Initially, it looked like you were working to take down Nagumo. At what point did you stop fighting...? Did you give up?”

If Kiriyama was still hoping for Nagumo's downfall, it should've been a welcome development.

"Give up? I don't know what you mean. My personal fight is still going on."

"Is that so? It doesn't look like that to me."

After denying it, Kiriyama seemed to immediately understand what I was getting at.

"You seem to think that I'm on Nagumo's side, but that's incorrect. Now that Nagumo's plan has changed, the others and I have started to see the adverse effects. I believe I told you before the uninhabited island exam, don't get in my way."

That one remark was a rather ordinary denial from Kiriyama. However, human beings were prone to little gaffes like that.

"That's a broad interpretation. I was simply talking about whether or not you've given up the fight, but Kiriyama-senpai, you seem to be very conscious of whether you come across as being on the Student Council President's side."

"...Aren't those the same thing?"

"Admitting defeat and changing sides are not even close to being the same thing. They are completely different. If it's that much, even you should understand, right?"

Proud people who categorize themselves as superior think they will never make a mistake. That's why, if they pre-emptively say to themselves 'I'm so great, there's no way I could be wrong, right?', it makes it even more difficult to admit they made a mistake.

"What are you trying to say?"

Neither admitting nor denying it, Kiriyama tried to continue the conversation. Right now, out of the choices available to him, the easiest option was to ignore it.

"I simply wanted to ask you where you stand. You've given up fighting, but the fact you oppose Nagumo hasn't changed? Or are you under

Nagumo's thumb? After all, this was a case that Horikita Manabu entrusted to me."

Hearing Manabu's name for the first time in a while, Kiriya's face hardened.

"...That was the case, wasn't it...?" Maybe he was remembering the first time he and I met. "Thinking back, this relationship between you, me, Nagumo and Horikita-senpai...in short, the student council, you never had any interest in it whatsoever. In that sense, it wasn't right to involve you in all this."

He placed his left hand on the railing and gripped it tightly.

"It's true that I wanted to take down Nagumo. If we couldn't beat him, it would be impossible for our class to rise back up to Class A. However, that spirit gradually faded away by the time we reached the middle of our second year."

The current third-years had allowed Class A to run unchallenged far more than us second-years. At the moment, the difference between third-year Class A and third-year Class B was more than 900 class points. Even at the midpoint of last year, they should've been over 700 points ahead. They allowed Nagumo to run off with the lead early on and it had now reached a point where they couldn't catch up.

"We third-years shifted to an individual competition early on. Class points and school rules were of secondary importance, and we started playing according to the original rules proposed by Nagumo."

This was a big reason behind his running away with the competition. Once that happened, it would've been too high of a hurdle for Kiriya to face alone.

"I struggled to break out of it, but as soon as I became a third-year, I was swept up in that wave."

Regret? Resignation? Kiriya showed an indescribable profile.

"What happened after you were swallowed up by that wave?"

"Hmph...It seems you won't be satisfied unless you hear it clearly from my own mouth."

“It’s very important to me after all.”

“Nagumo handed me a ticket to graduate from Class A, so I decided to follow the rules that he made up...That’s what you wanted to hear, right?”

In other words, the position he was in meant that not only was he no longer hostile towards him, but he’d become one of Nagumo’s allies. That was how important it was for ordinary students to graduate from Class A. It was proof of just how much value and appeal 20 million points has.

“Whether or not you take advantage of this school’s greatest privilege will have an enormous effect on the rest of your life. Regardless of how my classmates may end up feeling about me, graduating from Class A is most important. These three years of high school are a blink of an eye compared to the decades of your life that come after.”

It was only natural that Kiriyama was feeling indignant and wanted to know all of the details, even calling me out here to explain.

“It was our mission to make sure that Nagumo took first place. But your involvement disrupted the chain of command, leaving Kōenji to take first place while Nagumo fell to second. The result was a significant loss in both class and private points. Do you have any idea how much?”

It was confirmed on the OAA that Nagumo had a Trial card as well as a 7 Bonus cards in his large group. The amount of money lost by not taking first place amounted to 7 million points alone. Furthermore, if all of the third-year’s 28 Free Ride cards had been designated to Nagumo’s group, they would have received an additional reward of nearly 15 million private points. However, they received less than half that due to Nagumo’s group falling to second place. Of course, it was a massive amount of money. If you included the bonus for the class points from the trial card, the loss was even greater.

“With graduation imminent, it’s a huge loss for us third-year students to miss out on first place. We need to gather private points without wasting a single one.”

Considering that Kiriyama’s group had also used ‘Bonus’ cards with the intention of getting second place, the third year had lost even more private points than I had just calculated.

“The fact that your group couldn’t win any additional points from placing in the top three is not irrelevant, Kiriyama-senpai.”

When I pointed that out to him, his shoulders twitched slightly.

“...Yeah. I was dispatched as backup for Nagumo’s group on short notice and the slight delay in response had repercussions on all sides in the end. We didn’t just lose to Kōenji, another group of second-years took third place from us too.”

If everything went to plan, the third-year would’ve gained a massive amount of private points. Although this was just a rough estimate, it was exactly the kind of money that could save a few of Nagumo’s allies.

“It costs 20 million points for a ticket to Class A, so we’re always looking for the best way to procure points. After this, you could say we’re one ticket down.”

For the uninhabited island exam, the rewards at the top end were very attractive, but when it came to private points, the Bonus and Free Ride cards could have a great effect.

“Until now, Nagumo has been producing results and has therefore earned the trust of the entire year. But by coming here and clinging to you, he’s suffered a wound; losing both trust and money. Even so, if he switched his focus off of you, the problem would be minimal...But after the special exam...Nagumo took an unbelievable step.”

“The unexpected expulsion of third-years, yes?”

“That’s right. The original plan was for the top groups to pick up the groups that had deliberately been placed at the bottom and save them from dropping out at the end of the test.”

However, because this wasn’t done, the third-year students in the lower groups were expelled en masse.

“Unable to do anything, those fifteen people were expelled. They didn’t even have time to cry out.”

“It’s terrifying isn’t it? From the point of view of a third-year student that is.”

“Of course it is. A single whim and these last three years would amount to nothing. If it’s because of their own actions, they would just give up, but if it’s because of Nagumo’s unreasonable behaviour, it’s a different story.”

If all of this were really true, it should be a wake-up call for the students that had been following him blindly. Rather, it was unusual that the third-year students hadn’t shown any signs of disobeying Nagumo even after this incident.

“You think it’s strange? That Nagumo isn’t being accused of anything?”

“It’s a huge blunder after all. It seems the students that don’t have tickets in Class B and below are still keeping quiet.”

“Even if they want to defy him, they can’t. Nagumo and the students with a ticket to third-year Class A are protected by an impenetrable fortress.”

An impenetrable fortress. So a system has been set up so that the other classes cannot go against him. In that case...This mystery can be solved by asking a single question.

“Vice President Kiriyma, you have the ticket to Class A in your possession right now, right?”

Normally, this question would be answered with a simple ‘yes’. Even so, Kiriyma replied in a blink of an eye without changing his expression.

“If I had the ticket in my possession right now, I wouldn’t have any problems.”

“I see. If Nagumo was holding onto that ticket, it would certainly be a different story.”

I mean, it wasn’t surprising, but Nagumo had a cunning strategy. If Nagumo controlled all the private points, then nobody could go against him. Put simply, he made a verbal promise to spend 20 million points to rescue them and bring them up to Class A. No, it may be a bit naïve to call it a promise.

If you continue to be loyal to me, I will provide you with a ticket.

It was safe to assume that he was avoiding explicit statements by using vague expressions. If they were to go against him in this situation, Nagumo

would violate that promise without a second thought.

“It’s also forbidden to accumulate your own private points. Individuals are free to hold up to 500,000 points. Anything beyond that is syphoned off to Nagumo.”

“Sounds tough.”

Unlike hiding cash under your mattress, private points were an electronic currency that couldn’t be hidden. They would probably have rules in place to supervise each other.

Even if they were able to kick Nagumo out of the school by some means, he would then be expelled with his tens or even hundreds of millions of private points, and they would be left with nothing. This also meant that even if they wanted to rebel, they could never succeed.

“Now you know why the third-years put Nagumo on a pedestal and protect him, right?”

“I understand.”

You could say it was the perfect dictatorship. It was impossible for anyone within their year to oppose Nagumo.

“That guy has been playing around with the entire third year. The students without tickets are made to compete against each other, and then he’ll make a show of giving the winning guy a ticket and make him pledge his allegiance.”

He was just playing around of course, but from the point of view of students in Class C and D who had no chance of winning in the conventional way, Nagumo must be seen as nothing but a God. If you can be useful, you can graduate from Class A. Since that was what he says, his support was not surprising. However, they wouldn’t know for sure until they actually moved classes just before graduation.

“With what little school life we have left, we want to fight and compete, even if it’s for just one more ticket. That’s why your existence is just a hindrance, Ayanokōji.”

Because he was focusing his attention on me, Nagumo was losing out on precious private points. The resulting loss would mean that students who could’ve been saved, would no longer be saveable.

So this was the situation that the third-years were in now.

“But do you really think I chose to be in this situation?”

“I know.”

“So, what do you want from me?”

“Let’s go back to where we started. Tell me about what happened on the uninhabited island, and then we’ll find a solution.”

“I thought Nagumo didn’t want that? He didn’t tell even you, the Vice President, what happened, right?”

“...That may be true, but letting it go won’t solve anything.”

So he wanted to stop Nagumo’s reckless actions, even if it meant risking losing his ticket. No, he was concerned that if he didn’t stop it, something might come up that affects his own ticket.

“If you’re not going to talk to me, I want you to go meet Nagumo right now and talk to him instead. I’ll even set up the meeting if you need me to. Nobody will benefit from you and Nagumo getting into a fight in the future, right?”

“You’re absolutely right.”

“I’ll make sure to advise Nagumo to stop the current operation he’s carrying out. I want you to trust me.”

The operation he’s carrying out. There was no need to ask him what that could be referring to.

“You mean the stares everyone is sending my way, yes?”

Kiriyama looked down towards the pool and nodded.

“What is its purpose, and how long will it last? There was no explanation for any of it. There’s a growing sense of distrust among the third-year students at this bizarre behaviour.”

Despite their lack of trust, they had no choice but to obey Nagumo, who held all the cards.

“The Nagumo administration is rock solid, but... If we continue with this nonsense, the worst could happen.”

Kiriyama and the others who had been given tickets would surely continue to follow him faithfully, but the same couldn't be said for the many students who didn't have one. Kiriyama couldn't let something like an uprising happen. If they knew they wouldn't get a ticket from him, it wouldn't be surprising if they were planning to expel Nagumo. For Kiriyama and the others, that would be the worst case scenario.

"I don't think the story would just end there if I said I'd agree to meet with him though."

"Then what would you have me do? You won't tell me the details, but you won't see Nagumo either. As it is, this is only going to get worse."

"Could you give me some time? I will definitely have an answer for you soon."

It was likely that Kiriyama would receive further information not from me, but from Nagumo.

"...That's fine. But you have to make a decision before Nagumo makes his next move."

Kiriyama, who had been looking around the pool area, quickly noticed someone's entrance. Of course, it was the person who had been the focus of our conversation, Nagumo.

"I'm going. If he knew we were meeting, things would become even more troublesome."

I think that would be wise. Kiriyama must have taken a considerable risk by making contact today. It was worth coming here just to understand the situation of the third-year students.

2.1

As Nagumo and his allies started arriving at the pool, I quickly withdrew.

Even if I didn't initiate contact, I knew that he would send a messenger from his side if he wanted to talk to me directly. The fact that that hadn't happened could be interpreted as him having no intention of talking to me.

In any case, it wasn't pleasant to be the centre of attention.

After I escaped, just as I had finished getting dressed in the changing room—

“Ayanokōji-senpai!”

I encountered Nanase, who saw me walking along the corridor and ran up to me with a cheerful look on her face.

Since there were so few places you could go on the ship, you would repeatedly pass by students you recognise, and so seeing each other two days in a row wasn't that unusual.

That being said, because the way she appeared was completely identical, I was reminded of the encounter we had yesterday.

“Could I have a moment of your time, please?”

She was checking my surroundings to make sure that I wasn't with anyone else. I was with Ishizaki yesterday, so she might not have been able to talk about it back then.

Somewhat disconcerted by her intense pressure, or rather, her close proximity, I nodded.

“Actually, I'm not sure if I should report this, but um, there's something that's been bothering me.”

“Something bothering you?”

Nanase nodded and her cheerful expression was replaced by a more serious one. She then spoke in a whisper, paying close attention to our surroundings.

“There's something I kept quiet about, senpai. If I tell you, you might get angry...”

I might get angry? What on earth could it be?

“The thing is...”

Whispering even more quietly, Nanase was about to speak up about what she was keeping quiet, but...

“Oh? Ayanokōji-kun?”

A voice she didn't recognise called out, and Nanase hurriedly distanced herself from me.

It was Ichinose's classmate, Kobashi Yume. In the past, we wouldn't have even greeted each other if we passed each other at school. However, we spent some time together during the uninhabited island exam, albeit briefly, and it seemed to have brought a change in our relationship.

"Oh, was I a bother...? Maybe I should have waited..." she said apologetically, perhaps noticing Nanase hiding behind my body.

"No, it's okay. I was just asking Ayanokōji-senpai about something I didn't understand."

"Are you sure it's okay?"

Nanase nodded vigorously twice, as if to say it wasn't as serious as I was thinking.

"I'll call on you again when you have more time."

The only thing I knew for sure was that it wasn't something for other students to hear.

Nanase bowed deeply not only to me, but also to Kobashi, and ran off.

"Ah, sorry, I didn't realise you were in the middle of a conversation. That girl's a first-year right? Did I upset her?"

"I don't think you need to worry about that. More importantly, you wanted something from me?"

"Actually, the girls in my class are going to have a party tonight to celebrate the end of the exam. We were wondering if you'd like to join us, Ayanokōji-kun. We also wanted to thank you for helping Chihiro-chan."

So it was an invitation. However, the key phrase "girls in the class" stuck with me.

"What kind of people are going to be there?"

I was worried so I went to check, but Kobashi just tilted her head with a "hmm".

“Right now, I guess we’re still fine-tuning who is coming and whatnot. There are no weirdos so you don’t need to worry so much.”

It wasn’t that I was afraid of a strange person participating, but she didn’t seem to understand.

“It’s only students from your class, right Kobashi? Would it be okay for an outsider like me to join?

“Really? It’s nothing like that. Hey, hey, so how about it?”

It was an invitation to a fluffy, abstract celebration party. To be honest, I wasn’t really interested in going as there weren’t very many people in Ichinose’s class that I was close with. It was doubtful I’d be able to have a good conversation with Ichinose, especially right now. I felt a little regretful, but I decided to decline.

“Nah, I’ll pa—”

Seeing that I was about to refuse, Kobashi clasped her hands together and cut me off.

“Please! This was like, a fateful meeting, right?”

It was hard to say no when she put it like that, but I couldn’t give in so easily. I could see that if I just went with the flow here, it wouldn’t be good for me later.

“You mean it’s my fault...right?”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, I guess it’s no use. I’ll properly report what happened here to everyone in the class. I invited Ayanokōji-kun to the party, but I was turned down because my invitation wasn’t good enough.”

“Wait. Why would it end up like that?”

“So you’re going to come?”

“...That’s...”

“Oh you do hate it, don’t you? Ahh, if only I could have asked you out a little better... I’m sorry everyone.”

“It would be a problem if you get so depressed...”

“You only need to show your face...! Please, even just that! And Honami-chan is coming too!”

She clasped her hands together once again, this time with more force than before. After she had come this far, it was as if there was no way out of this situation.

“Fine, I get it. I really just need to show my face, right?”

“Yes, thank you! Ah, but don’t tell Honami-chan you’re coming to the party later, okay?”

She showed a smile so bright that it was hard to believe that she had been sad and depressed just moments ago. It was often said that women were born actresses. But don’t tell Ichinose? That part stuck out to me a little.

“Why keep it a secret? I’d like to ask permission from everyone to see if it’s okay for me to join.”

If even one student didn’t want me to participate, I’d prefer it if they told me without reservation. If that were to happen, I could say no again unequivocally, this time in the name of the greater good.

“You know...that’s just...well...Don’t you think it would be better as a surprise, Ayanokōji-kun?”

I couldn’t help but think it would be a surprise of the unpleasant sort. I didn’t really want to get into it, but it seemed that her classmates had a lot on their minds regarding me and Ichinose.

“Well then, we’ll be waiting for you in room 5034 at 8pm, okay?”

“Room 5034...You’re doing it in someone’s room?”

I thought we would be using a rest area or a deck somewhere. Moreover, I could tell from the room number that this was a room where girls, not boys, were staying.

“Is that a problem?”

“It’s not that it’s a problem...I just feel like I’ll have a harder time getting there.”

“That’s not the case. Right?”

Somehow, Kobashi's 'right?' left me overwhelmed and on the defensive. One after the other, my possible escape routes were being taken away.

"I'll be waiting for you then! You definitely have to come!"

Perhaps satisfied with my promise, Kobashi walked away a little too fast.

"Ah, I give up."

It wasn't really the right time to talk to Ichinose face to face. Well, I guess if it was going to be in a crowd it would be fine. If it was a party to celebrate the end of the exam, there should be more than a few boys in attendance.

2.2

After all that, I didn't feel like playing around and spent my time feeling gloomy in my room. I finished my 6pm dinner, and in no time at all, it was just before 8pm.

"I guess I should go..."

If I could choose again right now whether to go or not, I would choose 'I'm not going' right away. It wasn't a particularly welcome invitation, but if I really didn't want to go, I should've refused without hesitation. This was all because I gave such a half-hearted response, so I guess I had no choice but to live with my mistake. I was determined, but...when I arrived in front of room 5034, I just stood there.

A minute had already passed since I first arrived. I was going to knock, but I could hear the occasional sounds of girls talking and laughing from inside the room. The presence of any boys...couldn't be felt at all right now.

I could only have a bad feeling about this. I wasn't sure why, but I felt like I was starting to sweat. What I was sure of, was that I was more nervous now than when I had to face Tsukishiro during the uninhabited island exam.

"No, wouldn't it be wiser to just turn around right now?"

The whisper of a devil leaked out of my throat. Wouldn't I take less damage if I just said I forgot and apologized later? That could work, but I'd like to avoid being branded as a person who breaks his promises.

What on earth should I do...?

I was in a bind and felt like I couldn't move when the spell was suddenly broken by an unexpected interruption.

"Oh, you came!"

It was Kobashi who appeared from down the hall. I didn't know if it was just bad timing or what...

In Kobashi's hand was a large plastic bag filled with snacks and small bottles of juice. Once I was spotted, running away was no longer an option.

"I think everyone's already here, so don't hesitate and come in."

"Y-yeah... I was just about to."

Escape was no longer allowed. The door that I had felt was too heavy to open was opened easily, without hesitation by Kobashi. Was it really okay to open it so trivially? I wanted to prepare myself a little more...

As I was thinking that, the only barrier that separated me from the guest cabin was removed. Rather than sight, the first of my senses to be stimulated was smell. There was a sweet aroma in the air, like flowers or honey. And right after that, a girl's, or more accurately, several girls' eyeballs caught sight of me.

"Ta-da! I brought Ayanokōji-kun!"

It was a four person room, so it wasn't exactly spacious, with girls spread out sitting all over the place. What is this world in front of me? 1, 2, 3...with Kobashi included, there were 10 of them in total. In other words, half of the girls in Ichinose's class were here.

Moreover, there wasn't the slightest hint of any boys, which almost made me feel like I had been betrayed.

"Hey, saying you brought him is a bit rude, Yume-chan~!"

"Really? Oh, I bought what you asked for~"

She placed the plastic bag on a small table near the bed of this small room.

What was up with this fluffy, light-hearted gathering? It was definitely a little different to Kei and her group of girls. Most of the members participating were girls that I had never spoken to before, but I remembered their names and faces from the OAA app.

I was so taken aback by the sight that I couldn't move, and I felt Kobashi tap my back lightly. "Then, I wonder where we should put Ayanokōji-kun~? Ah, how about next to Honami-chan?"

While it was true that Ichinose was the person I was closest to out of everyone here, Kobashi didn't even think before assigning my place. I didn't think there was any choice to be made in the first place due to how small the room is...but it seemed like she never intended to give me the right to decide anyway.

Another curious thing was that despite the fact that there were 10 people in the room, there was enough space for a boy to sit next to Ichinose right from the beginning.

In other words, it wasn't a coincidence that there was a space there, but most likely a predetermined move. I thought back to when Kobashi invited me in the afternoon and compared it...I wasn't sure that doing something like this was going to help in the current situation.

In any case, standing here like this with 10 people staring at me would only make me uncomfortable, so I hurriedly made my way through the girls, apologizing for the disruption, and arrived at Ichinose's side.

"...May I sit here?"

"O-of course you can."

After hearing her brief reply, I sat down next to Ichinose, but everyone's attention was still on me. Or perhaps it would be better to say that everyone besides Ichinose, Kobashi and a student named Himeno, were watching me carefully, as if evaluating me. No, I needed to stay calm and keep a low profile. Then, when the timing was right, I should be able to slip out quietly.

Kobashi poured some tea into a clear cup and handed it to me. As soon as everyone had their drinks, Amikura, who seemed to be the one hosting this get-together, spoke up.

“So, without further ado... We’re having a party to celebrate the end of the uninhabited island exam and also to thank Ayanokōji-kun for helping Chihiro-chan when she was lost. Cheers!”

Hearing these words, everyone raised their cups.

“Well, first of all, thank you Ayanokōji-kun. I really appreciate your help from that time.”

It was Shiranami, who was sitting to Ichinose’s left, that spoke up to thank me. I really hadn’t done anything to deserve these repeated thanks... For now, I just nodded my head slightly, as I couldn’t further the conversation.

“Um, Ayanokōji-kun...”

Personally, I’d like to say that the party was in full swing, but unfortunately only about ten minutes had passed when Shiranami suddenly faced my direction with a serious expression.

“What is it...?”

She clenched her hand around her can of orange juice, as if to motivate herself to say something.

“I’m grateful to you for your help...but I just can’t accept it yet.”

“...Huh?”

Without elaborating, Shiranami left it at that and squeezed the orange juice down her throat.

“Phuaa! I can’t say any more!”

No, no, what are you talking about...?

I was left behind, and the people around Shiranami showered her with words of encouragement and praise, saying she had done well and worked hard. Shiranami was acting shy and embarrassed, as if this wasn’t all that bad, but seriously, what are you talking about...?

However, when you’re an outsider, you can’t ask a question like that in return.

Shiranami talked to me at the beginning of the celebration, but after that, the girls started talking about their own problems. I just sat there watching

their conversation unfold, meek as a lamb. Of course, if you were to ask me if I was comfortable, the answer would be a resounding no.

At any rate...It was amazing how the girls' conversation progressed, with new topics coming up one after the other. The topic of conversation, regardless of genre, was as busy as an airplane flying around Japan. However, no matter the topic, there was one thing in common.

That was because most of these girls centred their lives around Ichinose, having great trust and a blind faith in her. I wouldn't necessarily say that was a bad thing.

Ichinose Honami was unquestionably the most trustworthy student among the second-years. This was true regardless of whether you were a friend or foe.

The criterion for what constitutes trustworthiness depends on the individual, but I'd like to think that trust was something that was built up on a daily basis. No one would trust a person who had never spoken before if they suddenly said 'trust me'.

However, there was a difference between being trusting and having blind faith. Because even if Ichinose is a trustworthy person, there are times when she'll make the wrong decision. If you continued to trust a person that kept making wrong decisions, you wouldn't see any results. There was always a need for people who could point out when something was wrong in order to correct it.

"Can I have a moment?"

As their excitement peaked, one of the girls, who had so far only shown the occasional gesture, raised her hand.

"What's the matter, Yuki-chan?"

"The usual headache. Sorry, but I'm feeling tired, so can I go back to my room? I feel really heavy."

Normally, I wouldn't have paid any attention to such an ordinary, throwaway statement, but I was surprised by the tone of her voice. This was because Ichinose's class was filled with fundamentally polite, decent students.

Himeno revealed that she wasn't feeling well and wished to go back to her room.

“Of course, should I go with you?”

Ichinose and the other girls, hearing about their friend's condition, hurriedly called out to Himeno.

“Ah, it's fine, it's fine. I'm not a child...”

Himeno stood up, looking fed up with their overprotective behaviour. So there was a student like this in Ichinose's class, huh? As I recall, all of the people in Himeno Yuki's group during the uninhabited island exam were from the same class.

Anyway, the atmosphere preventing me from leaving seemed to have changed slightly. If I let this opportunity pass, I had no idea when I would be able to leave this place. I had to be bold and follow Himeno's lead.

“Well then, I guess I'd better get going.”

“Eh, you're leaving already? You could've stayed way longer.”

“No, I was only planning to show my face briefly, and I have plans to meet up with someone later.”

If I told them I had plans, Ichinose and the others wouldn't try to hold me back.

“Well, then I'll see you later, Ayanokōji-kun.”

With Ichinose and the other girls sitting pretty, I got up and left the room.

2.3

“Phew...I was about to break into a strange sweat.”

No, it was safe to say I was already sweating.

Less than 30 seconds after Himeno left the room, I also slipped out of the demonic room 5034. It may be heaven for some people, but for me, I'm sorry, but it was a painful place to be. I couldn't say I was very good at interpersonal relationships after all. If I had committed to that kind of thing

from the start, it might've been a different story, but I decided to play the role of an inconspicuous high school student. Suddenly changing that was no simple task.

However, since I hadn't had much contact with Ichinose's class before now, I think I was able to close the distance to a certain extent. With Ichinose at the centre, I was able to get a vague idea of the students surrounding her. What do they have and what are they missing? At this point, I knew the strengths and weaknesses of Ichinose's class.

The presence of students who could speak up was essential, no matter who was in charge in future. The only person I could think of who could do that right now was Kanzaki from the boys in the class. However, in a class that revolved around Ichinose, the girls seemed to have just as much influence as the boys.

Kanzaki was the type of person who could speak up against Ichinose, but whether he could appeal to the whole class and control the girls was an entirely different matter.

“Hmm?”

Himeno complained about having a headache and said she was going back to her room, but she walked in a completely different direction from the guest cabins. I only caught a glimpse of her as she turned the corner, but I was sure I didn't mistake her for someone else, as she had a very distinctive hair colour.

Himeno, the one who seemed to be a bit out of place during the girls' party earlier. She was acting a little suspicious, so I decided to follow her.

It was already late at night when we arrived at our destination, the stern of the ship, so there was no sign of life. I watched her profile from a distance and recalled Himeno Yuki's OAA scores.

Second-Year Class B Himeno Yuki:

Academic Ability: B- (63)

Physical Ability: C (51)

Adaptability: C+ (58)

Social Contribution: C+ (58)

Overall Ability: C+ (57)

Except for a high level of academic ability, they were neither good nor bad, and as far as I could tell, she didn't possess any outstanding abilities. However, that was just from what the school had decided. It was possible for students to have hidden strengths and weaknesses that couldn't be seen from the school's perspective. I'd like to keep digging a little more. The fastest route would be to speak with her directly.

“What are you doing?”

“Huh...? What?”

She averted her eyes with a slightly displeased look on her face. It was unnatural for her to be here since she left the room claiming she had a headache.

“Is your headache gone?”

She muttered a few words which were mostly drowned out by the wind, but I thought I made out the word ‘annoying’. There certainly were a few boys and girls who used abusive language, but in Himeno’s case, rather than to be offensive, it seemed she spoke like that so that others would keep their distance.



However, perhaps concerned about how others would view her, she cleared her throat once and turned her gaze in my direction.

“I thought that the breeze might help it ease up a little, so I was just stopping by.”

“Do you get headaches often? You said something along those lines earlier.”

I planned to ask her for more details, but she kept quiet, as if she didn’t want to continue this conversation any further. She hadn’t said a single word during the party, except for when she was leaving. In addition to that, the other girls basically never approached Himeno.

It wasn’t like she was being bullied as Ichinose would never tolerate such a thing. Also, if their relationship was so bad, they wouldn’t want to show it to someone from another class like me. In that case...

They must’ve half forced Himeno to come to the party. If I thought about it as them desperately trying to get a classmate to have fun, even if just a little, I could see the connection.

“It’s because I get migraines.”

She gave a short reply, in a cluttered manner.

“If it’s a migraine, cooling it down is the correct response.”

Migraines are caused by the dilation of cerebral blood vessels due to changes in hormones, fatigue and lack of sleep. Blood vessels dilate less when cooled, so exposure to a cold breeze wasn’t a bad idea.

However, that was only if it really was a migraine.

She was about to start speaking, but I cut her off.

“Isn’t your headache just an excuse to get out of an unpleasant situation?”

“Huh? Are you saying I’m a liar?”

Himeno had been relatively calm up to this point, but when I suggested she might be lying, her face changed. She was a rare type of person for Ichinose’s class, where there were so many mild-mannered students.

My intuition wasn’t wrong after all.

“I can see you’re pissed off, did I hit the nail on the head?”

“You’re wrong. Oh, what’s this? Ah, my head is starting to hurt again... I’m going back to my room.”

“I’m sorry if I upset you. It’s just, could you listen to me for a moment?”

Holding her forehead, Himeno looked back in displeasure. “My headache is getting worse though?”

“I’m sorry.”

“‘I’m sorry’ you say...you think it’s a given that I’ll listen to you?”

“You don’t seem to like this.”

“I don’t.”

The conversation flowed like a game of catch, and I could see it. This one seemed to be her true self.

“Ah well, guess I have no choice.” Do you understand now? I shrugged my shoulders in exasperation. “I guess I have to go back to the party now and let them know that Himeno might be faking her condition.”

“H-huh? Don’t go treating me like this is a fake illness. You liar.”

“Liar? I’m just saying you ‘might’ be faking your condition. At least that’s the impression I got, so I’ve got the right to throw an accusation. You can just prove whether or not it’s true or false in front of everyone later.”

“There’s no way to prove a headache, is there?”

“Maybe.”

“What the hell’s up with this? Everyone kept on praising you but you’ve got a nasty personality.”

“At the very least, I don’t believe they ever praised me for having a good personality, did they?”

I didn’t really want to say it myself, but all they did was thank me for helping Shiranami.

“Is that right...?”

“In any case, you’re a strange one, Himeno. How to put it? It’s kind of unlike a member of Ichinose’s class.”

“Strange? If you ask me, the people in my class are too good-natured. Our class tends to get together in large groups to do everything. Well, I don’t mind that in and of itself, but the problem is that these meetings take too long, and nobody ever wants to leave.”

If I had to repeatedly go to meetings I didn’t like, I’d get fed up with it. However, Ichinose’s classmates enjoy these gatherings. That was why nobody wanted to leave, which of course resulted in the meetings taking too long.

“If you don’t like it, you don’t have to participate, right?”

“Do you really think I can do that? Even if I think it’s irritating, it’s important to stay in line.”

“Well, I guess so.”

Their class as a whole was a cohesive unit, and there was an especially strong sense of unity among the girls. Even if you were secretly unhappy, it would take a lot of courage to throw a stone and cause a ripple.

Himeno. Perhaps my encountering her would be the one factor that would change the path her class was headed on. Normally, I wouldn’t get deeply involved with Himeno, a person of the opposite sex, unless there was a special situation.

However, it wouldn’t be such a bad idea to take a step forward here. Of course, if it ended up troubling Himeno, then so be it.

“If you want to relieve stress, isn’t screaming the best thing to do?”

“Screaming...? Even if I wanted to, I’d get in trouble if I screamed here.”

“Not many students come to the back of the ship, and when you consider the sound of the engine and the wind, even if you screamed, it wouldn’t be heard. It would immediately be drowned out and disappear.”

“But...” She looked puzzled, as if she had never screamed with all her effort before. “Well, why don’t you go ahead and scream first?”

“...Me?”

I couldn't help but feel flustered by her unexpected response.

"I don't really know much about you, but you seem rather quiet... You don't seem like the type to scream out. If you show me how it's done, I'll try it myself."

I was in trouble. I don't remember ever feeling a strong sense of stress in my life, so if you were to ask if I had ever screamed out loud like I was suggesting, I'd say no.

"If you can't do it, hurry up and leave."

If I were to back out now, this would probably be the last time I'd speak with Himeno.

"I understand—"

Having made up my mind, I screamed out into the ocean while Himeno watched.

"Ah—— Okay, now it's your turn, Himeno."

"...Are you kidding me?"

"Not at all?"

"Your voice didn't have a shred of volume. Seriously, you're messing with me."

"Then show me how it's done."

"I won't give you an example or any other shit after *that*."

I spoke at Himeno's back as she tried to leave in disgust. "I thought you said that if I did it, you would do it too, Himeno?"

"No, no, I don't care if you think you've done it, you're just annoying."

"Whatever the volume, I did respond to your request. But if your voice is just as low as mine, you have no right to make fun of me."

To make sure she didn't just scream in the same low voice, I preemptively shut her down.

"Ah, shut up...I know, I know. I just have to do it once, right? Then you'll leave me alone?"

After taking a breath, Himeno put both her hands up in front of her mouth as if she had no choice.

“WA————!!!”

The sound of the ship’s engine and the wind drowned out the rest of the world, so no one aside from me could hear it. However, a voice, twice as loud as I had imagined, echoed inside my ears. I felt like the ship was rocking... but it was only a feeling, it shouldn’t actually be shaking.

Her usual speech and demeanour were that of a downer, her tone was low and her voice was subdued. However, in actuality, she had a tremendously powerful voice.

“Hah... That felt refreshing.”

Himeno nodded in satisfaction, seemingly unconcerned by my surprised reaction.

“Right? I also felt better after screaming.”

“No, no, you didn’t scream at all.”

She poked and prodded me while sending me a cold glare, like she was looking down on me.

“Well...I think I could’ve done better if I was under more stress.”

“Yeah? It really didn’t look that way to me though.”

“You were much better than I thought you’d be. You must’ve been under a lot of stress.”

“Ha? I’ll kill you, you know?”

She gave me a very sharp look. Even when she was angry, she would always use her mouth before her hands and feet.

“I went a little too far.”

I honestly apologized for my behaviour, but she didn’t seem to be offended. Maybe this Himeno had a fearless side to her too.

“I’m going back to my room.”

“Ah yeah, I’m sorry I held you up with all this.”

“If you know that you were in the wrong, that’s better yet.”

After saying this, Himeno returned to the ship.

“I think I’ll head back to my room too.”

The party was supposed to be a celebration, but I felt unusually tired. It seemed I was going to have a deep sleep today.

Chapter 3: Everyone's Days Off

Living on a cruise ship like this came with the problem of deciding where and what to eat for lunch every day.

Breakfast and dinner were provided by the school in the form of a buffet and were free of charge. We were free to decide whether to use it or not, but not only was there no charge, it was also delicious and thus very popular with the students. It was so popular that admission was divided into three intervals between 7am and 9am to avoid congestion. The service was limited to 60 minutes or less, and you could make a reservation for your preferred time slot from your phone.

I usually ate breakfast at 8am, but due to a late reservation, the 8-9am time slot was already fully booked for August 6th, so I had to eat a little earlier at 7am. Because of that, I was feeling strangely hungry despite it only being noon. Perhaps it was because my calorie intake was minimal during the uninhabited island exam, but my body was craving energy.

The café terrace was a popular place to dine, but the food prices were especially expensive. If you wanted to buy a lunch set that came with a drink, you'd need to spend at least 2000 points. If you wanted to eat while having fun with your friends, that might be fine, but I was alone today. In this situation, it was natural to want to save as much money as possible.

That was why I was grateful for the existence of the store. It was a place where one could easily purchase rice balls, sandwiches and other snacks, just like a convenience store.

I promptly went to the store and bought a rice ball and a small bottle of tea for 250 points, and, carrying the plastic bag in my hand, went to find a place to eat.

Any adequate rest area would do, but most of them were already occupied, and I was firmly against the idea of sharing a small space with someone else. When I think of places where I wouldn't mind it even if there

were a certain number of strangers in the vicinity, most of them would be outside.

After much searching, I found myself on the deck nearest the bow on the sixth floor, overlooking the ocean. Naturally, it didn't cost anything to use this area, so it was the perfect place to eat snacks bought from the store.

I thought I'd have a quick snack whilst taking in the magnificent view of the ocean, but I seemed to have chosen a bad time. There were a lot of students who had come here to enjoy the view, so it didn't look like I'd be able to relax.

It was a spacious deck, but there were a lot of people using it, so it would be difficult to find a good spot. I looked around for a vacant space to sit and found one empty bench and Nanase's back sitting alone on the bench next to it. A sandwich, probably bought from the store, as well as a small carton of milk lay beside her. It was funny; it was the opposite of yesterday, where she was the one that found me.

In addition to Nanase, I also saw my classmates Ijūin and Okitani, Sakayanagi from Class A, and Nakaizumi and Suzuki from Ryūen's class. It seemed that many second-year students wanted to have lunch whilst looking out to the ocean, just like Nanase.

Ultimately, people tend to think in the same way.

I didn't move from the spot and looked towards the ocean. Certainly, a meal eaten with this kind of view in front of you must be delicious.

But...just as the number of students from the second-year was very high, this was also the case for the third-years.

Although it was still only a few, the third-years that noticed my arrival immediately began keeping an eye on me. However, if I instantly walked away, it would prove that I didn't like the stares and would be seen as running away. Doing so would risk encouraging the third-years as they would judge the strategy effective.

Now that I think about it, Nanase seemed like she had something she wanted to talk to me about yesterday. I remembered that we were interrupted

by Kobashi at the time, so I decided to call out to her. It would give me a good excuse to stop by this place if I were to talk to her.

“Nanase.”

When I called her name, she turned around in surprise.

“Ah, senfai.”

It seemed she had just taken a bite out of her sandwich, and, taking great care not to let the contents spill out, she looked at me.

I felt a little bad when I saw her hurriedly start gulping down her food. I was just using her as a means to counter the third-years, but I seem to have made her panic unnecessarily.

“Oh, sorry. Should I come back later?” I said, but Nanase’s personality would never let that happen.

“Howd om, pwease waihd a bihd” She couldn’t spit it out after putting it in her mouth, so she started to chew. “Gulp...Um, I’m sorry, but actually...I was eating lunch.”



She spoke like she was confessing a secret, but I could tell she was eating lunch just by looking at her. If anything, I knew it from the moment I saw her back.

“Um, is there something I can help you with?”

Nanase was still looking somewhat flustered, which left me feeling a little strange. Her gaze was restless and she looked as if she couldn’t concentrate on her conversation with me.

“Ah no, you seemed like you wanted to talk to me yesterday. I was just wondering what it was about. Back then, I was approached by Kobashi and you kind of drifted away.”

“Ah...”

Her thoughts were a little slow and the words didn’t come out right away. After pondering for a moment, Nanase shook her head from side to side.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve already solved the problem myself, so could you just forget about it?”

“I see. If that’s the case then it’s fine.”

If Nanase had a problem, I was going to offer advice since she had helped me in many ways, but if she’d already solved it, then I didn’t need to worry about it. Rather, the main reason was that I got a sense that this was something that just didn’t matter right now.

“I’m sorry for calling out to you so suddenly. Then I’m going to head back. There are more people than I thought there’d be, so I can’t relax.”

“Is that so? Then I’ll see you later, senpai.”

I left as soon as I had finished my business.

When I turned to look back at the deck one last time, Nanase was facing forwards and had resumed eating her lunch.

3.1

In the end, I made my way to the stern on the fifth floor, where there were fewer people, to have lunch. This was where I spoke with Himeno last night,

and I'd already confirmed that it was a place that people rarely went to.

For the next few minutes, forgetting my original goal in coming here, I just stared at the rough waves created by the ship's movement.

At that moment, an unexpected person approached.

“Are you going to eat lunch all on your own in a place like this?”

“Sakayanagi huh? You just here by coincidence?”

She should've been on the same floor as Nanase until just a moment ago.

“It was a coincidence. Or so I would like to say, but I've been chasing after you, Ayanokōji-kun.”

She chased after me? But Sakayanagi's legs were so bad that she shouldn't have been able to keep up with my walking speed. That being said, there was no indication that she had someone follow me ahead of time.

“It's a simple deduction. You showed up on the deck by the bow earlier to have lunch, but gave up when you saw how crowded it was, right? With the snacks in your hands and the fact that you were looking for a view of the ocean, it wasn't too difficult to predict where you would go to eat next.”

So she was saying that she completely read my behaviour patterns and therefore arrived here.

“So even you want to eat with a nice view, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Unlike the one by the bow, I can't exactly say the view here is first class, but it's not every day you get to see the ocean like this.”

There was no guarantee that there'd be another uninhabited island exam this time next year. There were other events planned for our second year, including a school trip, but I didn't know the details yet. This may well be the last time I'd ever be able to see the ocean.

“I'm sure you will experience many more sights that you have never seen before, just like this ocean. In that sense, I think you made the correct decision in choosing to come to this school, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Yes, that's right, I think so too. However, I did actually see the ocean once before entering this school.”

Sakayanagi unexpectedly looked a little surprised. No, it wasn't unreasonable that she was surprised. In truth, I didn't leave the facility even once until I was 14 years old, when I should've been a third-year middle school student. If she had a rough outline of what the White Room was like, it should be common knowledge.

I'd only seen that view once. When I was transferred out of the facility, I had a chance to go outside for a little while. I've never been in direct contact with seawater, but I *have* walked along a path with a view of the ocean.

However, the first time I saw the ocean, I didn't think anything of it. I was just walking around in the outside world, completely emotionless.

“Have you heard of ‘Beneath the Wheel’?”

“It's a novel by Hermann Hesse, right?”

Of all the novels he wrote, it was the one that was most well known in Japan.

“The protagonist of that story, Hans, was a genius blessed with incredible talent. He goes to an elite school and is expected to have a bright future in higher education. However, after living only in the academic world, he begins to have doubts, and then, in trying to live up to expectations, he fell short and declined.”

The protagonist Hans Giebenrath's end was tragic, and he ended up falling into a river and dying.

“What does that matter?”

“I don't think he was a genius. Because a true genius would never fail. Not to mention, to choose death at the end of it all would be the height of stupidity.”

Sakayanagi seemed to have interpreted the death as a suicide, rather than an accident.

“I once said ‘People learn of warmth when they touch each other, and that's a very precious thing. The warmth of another human is by no means a bad thing’. Do you remember?”

“You did say something like that.”

It was at the end of the third semester of our first year, just after the special exam.

“Hesse, the one who wrote Beneath the Wheel, was troubled and frustrated, just like Hans, the protagonist. However, he said that it was his family’s presence that allowed him to look forward and not take his own life.”

The author, Hesse, and the book’s protagonist, Hans, seemed to share very similar backgrounds. It could be seen that the story was a projection of his own struggles.

As Sakayanagi gazed out to the sea, a strong gust of wind blew for a moment.

“Ah...”

Her hat floated up in the blink of an eye. Seeing that, I immediately thrust out my hand and caught it.

“Oof...that was close.”

If my reaction in reaching out had been even slightly delayed, the hat would have flown off into the ocean.

“Thank you very much.”

“It’s dangerous to wear it on the deck, you know.”

“Fufu, that’s true isn’t it. However, this is my trademark.”

Sakayanagi held her hat in her hands and hugged it close to her chest as if it were something precious to her.

“Just now, I suddenly remembered something a little nostalgic.”

“Something nostalgic?”

“No, it’s not a big deal. It’s just that I also have a few memories of the sea.”

Even though it looks the same to everyone, each of us have different memories of the sea.

“By the way, you never told me why you chased after me.”

“Would it bother you if I chased after you without a reason?”

I was wondering how she would respond, but she said something I hadn't thought of.

“You don’t have a reason?”

“I just wanted to talk to you, Ayanokōji-kun. I could have tried to talk to you back there, but you wouldn’t want others to see you talking to me, right?”

I was grateful for her consideration. However, I wasn’t a very good talker, so I didn’t have anything in particular to say to Sakayanagi.

“Do you mind if I just chat idly about one thing?”

“Sure. Can I eat while I listen?”

“Please do, don’t mind me. Just listen to what I have to say and that will be enough.”

I took the rice ball out of the bag and peeled off the wrapping by hand.

“Yesterday, Ichinose came to see me.”

“Ichinose did?”

“Yes.”

Recalling the events of yesterday, Sakayanagi spoke up as she looked back.

3.2

“Um...Sakayanagi-san. Could you give me a moment of your time?”

After lunch, I was resting in the café on the ship’s deck when Ichinose-san approached and called out to me. I was just having tea by myself, so I had no reason to refuse.

“What can I do for you?”

I knew what she was going to say before she started speaking, but I dared to tilt my head curiously all the same.

“It’s about the special exam...I just felt like I had to apologise. On the last day, I did something really selfish...so, I’m really very sorry!”

Probably having prepared herself to some extent after knowing that I was not someone you could make excuses to, Ichinose-san bowed her head as hard as she could.

No, I don't think she would have given a poor excuse, no matter who it was.

It would be no surprise if her actions had angered me, as Class A's leader, and caused the dissolution of our partnership. I was sure she felt that that was the least she had done.

"Please raise your head, Ichinose-san. I'm not angry about anything."

"...Eh?"

"Rather, I recognise that you contributed more than enough to our group. You scored highly in all of the tasks you took part in and organized groups of allies who were all over the place. Despite the harsh conditions on the uninhabited island, you played a central role brilliantly. And as a result, did we not finish in an admirable 3rd place?"

"B-but..."

"Certainly, it's true that you acted a bit selfishly on the last day of the exam, Ichinose-san. However, that cost the group a few points at most. If I compared it to your contribution, it's not something deserving of reproach. Now if we had fallen into a close 4th place, then you might have taken some of the blame, but that did not happen, right?"

"But that's only when looking back on it with hindsight..."

"Sometimes it's good to look at the results with hindsight, isn't it? Things don't always work out the way they're supposed to. In fact, if you fought as hard as you could and came in a close 4th, you would have suffered a great deal of psychological damage."

It was possible that the fact that I didn't try to blame her at all had caused Ichinose-san to be doubly sorry. The remorse would not go away.

"You have a look on your face that says you feel you need to take responsibility somehow."

"Uh, it's not like that...or maybe it is."

“If that is the case, I can punish you for it if you like?”

Ichinose-san was pressured by the fearless look on my face, but gave a small nod.

“Yes. I think that would make me feel better.”

“Fufu, you’re a strange person aren’t you? Well then…yes, please sit here.”

I urged Ichinose-san to come in front of me and sat her down. She became as meek as a lamb, and I had the staff prepare a menu.

“Go ahead; please order whatever you would like.”

“Um…the punishment?”

“You have to keep me company right now and spend 30 minutes with me for afternoon tea.”

“Eh, t-that’s my punishment?”

“That’s right. I’m going to take up your precious 30 minutes, Ichinose-san. This is nothing but a punishment.”

“I wonder if that’s true…but if you say so, Sakayanagi-san, I’ll agree to it.”

Ichinose-san didn’t quite get it, but she followed my instructions and ordered a drink.

“You really are very honest, aren’t you Ichinose-san? You were humiliated by me once, but you don’t show the slightest trace of it, even being willing to accompany me like this.”

“I don’t feel you humiliated me. In the first place…it’s because it’s true that I made that mistake in the past.”

“At the very least, it’s natural that you’d want to hide your guilty past, the past you don’t want people to know about. Even if you say it’s the truth, Ichinose-san.”

Up until now, I’d seen many excellent people, both children and adults, up close and personal. Of course, there were many that knew they were the best

and recognized their own talent. On the other hand, I'd probably seen dozens of times as many incompetent people who were completely useless.

And then, regardless of whether they were excellent or incompetent, I'd never know anyone who could be called purely good. It was the same for my own mother, father, and also Ayanokōji-kun.

“You’re a hard person to describe. That’s why you seem so scary to me at times.”

“I’m...scary?”

I am sure she has never been told anything like that before in her entire life. However, I am certain that there are more than just one or two people who have been afraid of the person named Ichinose Honami-san.

“Every person in this world has a more or less evil part to them. But I don’t sense that from you in the slightest. You’re like a mass of goodness.”

“You’re overestimating me. Just like in middle school, I’ve done bad things in my life...”

Her shameful past, which she could never boast of, remained an inescapable reality that could never be erased.

“The goodness I’m speaking of right now has nothing to do with those kinds of things. In the first place, even if you were involved in some wrongdoing that one time, your motive was the precious love for your family.”

In the eyes of the law, it was undoubtedly bad, but it could also be seen as an act of good depending on how you look at it.

“Your goodness is both your strength and your weakness. Please be careful not to let others take advantage of it.”

“Are you referring to Ryūen-kun?”

“It’s not just him. I too, as well as Horikita-san, will take advantage of your goodness to win.”

After taking a deep breath, I continued in order to tell her the most important thing.

“And that goes for Ayanokōji-kun too.”

All of this applied to the leaders of each class, including the one she just mentioned, Ryūen-kun. The sudden mention of Ayanokōji-kun's name made Ichinose visibly agitated.

"On the last day of the uninhabited island exam, it was probably thanks to you that Ayanokōji-kun was saved."

"W-wait a minute? Um, what do you mean by that?"

"This is just a guess on my part. To be honest, there were a lot of parts that I was not involved in, so you may take it as a soliloquy and ignore it."

I could easily imagine Ichinose-san would shed some light on some of the more unclear parts if I pursued her here, but I avoided it. It would be so boring to hear it that way after all.

"Looking at you, I can already somewhat guess that your feelings for Ayanokōji-kun are different from those you have for other students."

"E-e-ehh!? N-no, um, I mean...that's...!"

"That's good isn't it? It's a human instinct to have special feelings for a particular member of the opposite sex. But...if you get too attached, it may come back to bite you. If the other person is Ayanokōji-kun, then even more so."

"I don't really understand the meaning of what you're saying, Sakayanagi-san."

What I told her today was a warning. I would not say anything more here.

"Let's end the conversation here. It's time for afternoon tea."

When Ichinose-san took a sip of the tea that had been brought to her, she probably couldn't taste it very well. I'm sure she couldn't forget what I said, and it was currently stuck in her head.

It was a little bit of my meanness, my mercy and also my strategy.

3.3

Sakayanagi finished narrating her interaction with Ichinose.

I'd just finished eating and drank what remained of my 200ml bottle of tea.

"To win the heart of Ichinose-san, one of the most popular girls in the school, you are a sinful person."

It may seem like a frivolous statement, but it couldn't be taken as being even one millimetre in a positive direction.

"That's harsh, Sakayanagi."

"Fufufu, it's in my nature after all."

As if to get ahead, she was trying to protect Ichinose whilst also making preparations so that she could use her.

"If I do something to hurt Ichinose here, she'll put her trust in you."

"If I can gain her trust, I'll have a much easier time getting around in the future."

Sakayanagi had a side to her that was my ally, but naturally, she also had a side that was my enemy at the same time. They were two sides of the same coin, and she was making good use of it.

"But why are you telling me all this?"

"What I just told you was about Ichinose-san, but that's not important right now. In this school, the number of people who know about you is gradually increasing, Ayanokōji-kun. And they hold a very strong interest in you."

It was true that if my relationship with Ichinose hadn't been so close during the uninhabited island exam, she wouldn't have come running to me, causing trouble for her friends.

"And to go along with that, you've been getting a lot of strange looks from the third-year students, right?"

I see. I'm sure she chased after me because she wanted to chat, but this was the main topic she was after. It meant Sakayanagi was able to realise I was being watched by the third-year students from just that short period of time. As expected from her.

So the earlier conversation was just a preparatory step to bring up this topic.

“Are you in trouble with the third-years?”

“Well, trouble would be one way to put it. I seem to have made an enemy of a nasty opponent.

“A nasty opponent...the Student Council President?”

Nagumo was the only one who came to mind when considering a potential strong opponent among the upperclassmen.

“I had a dispute with the Student Council President on the final day of the uninhabited island exam. It seems he missed out on first place because of it, so now they’re looking at me like I’m the enemy.”

“So he was tripped up by trying to stage a dramatic late victory.”

“You were aware of that much?”

“I think the majority of people in the uninhabited island exam hold the opinion that Kōenji-kun was an unmatched lone warrior. But I knew from early on that the Student Council President was deliberately holding back on scoring points. If they made the difference too big, it would be blatantly obvious that the entire third year was trying to make a particular group win. I saw the stream of cards in his possession, and therefore also saw his strategy.”

Although I thought I was already fully aware of Sakayanagi’s ability, she still exceeded my expectations. It was proof that she had a perfect grasp of everything that went on during the uninhabited island exam.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No, I’m fine. Nagumo can’t make any fancy moves lightly either. Besides, you were already a great help during the uninhabited island exam, Sakayanagi. I can’t rely on you even more than I already have.”

“You really don’t have to mind it. I was glad that you relied on me, and I also took full advantage of your proposition.”

“Took full advantage? Meaning?”

Sakayanagi giggled and stared out to the ocean with narrowed eyes.

“As we neared the end of the uninhabited island exam, we knew it would be difficult to take first or second place. The pace at which Kōenji-kun and the Student Council President were gaining points exceeded the maximum score that our group would be able to obtain.”

Well, those two groups were fighting on a whole other level.

“I was aiming for third place, but one of my rivals in the final stages was Ryūen-kun’s group. He was only in a small group of two with Katsuragi-kun, but he showed exceptional tenacity. So I asked him for his help and decided to let him and Hōsen-kun clash.”

“I see. So that’s what you meant.”

“Whatever form it took, if Ryūen-kun were to stray from the main focus of the exam, his scoring would slow down. As it turned out, he was forced to retire, which was the best possible outcome for us.”

So she was able to help me while crushing her rival, Ryūen, at the same time.

However, there were still some parts that I didn’t understand, even after hearing all this. Ryūen had been working hard for two weeks to get on the podium, but he readily cooperated with Sakayanagi. It wasn’t hard to imagine that he wouldn’t come out unscathed if he were to confront Hōsen.

The only thing that was clear was that some kind of promise was made. If he had to give up the possibility of third place, it would have to be more than just a small transaction.

“Considerable compensation...For example, he didn’t make you pay a massive sum of private points did he?”

If Sakayanagi made good use of the ‘Bonus’ cards belonging to her classmates, she should’ve brought in a good bit of income. It wouldn’t be a surprise if she’d made an offer to Ryūen, who was trying to collect a huge amount of private points.

“I haven’t paid a single point, and I don’t plan to in the future either.”

“So you’re saying it’s not money.”

In this school, the exchange of private points was the standard method used for transactions.

“It sounds like a riddle, but I can’t tell even you the details right now, Ayanokōji-kun. This is an agreement made between him and myself. Until he tells me to fulfil my end of the deal in the near future, that is.”

“That wish will end up strangling him soon enough,” added Sakayanagi.

With that in mind, it was no wonder she didn’t pay him back with money such as private points.

“Anyway, please be careful, Ayanokōji-kun. You’ve solved one problem, but the White Room students are still around, and now you’ve also got to deal with the third-years.”

“It’s a long list of problems, but I’ll be careful.”

I heard a ringtone come from Sakayanagi’s person. Sakayanagi gave me a light warning and answered the incoming call.

“—Is that so? I’ll be right there.”

Without speaking for even five seconds, Sakayanagi ended the phone call and let go of the railing.

“I have an appointment with someone after this, so I’ll take my leave now.”

“Okay. I’ll see you later.”

“It was a pleasure speaking with you. Then, see you.”

After watching Sakayanagi slowly depart, I decided to look out to the ocean for a little while longer.

3.4

On that same day, Amasawa was wandering around the ship alone with no particular destination in mind.

Sometimes her classmates would talk to her, but she’d just show them a friendly smile and leave it at that. She’d not once done anything like go out in

a group and hang out.

“I want to go see Ayanokōji-senpai~”

Stepping out onto the deck, Amasawa muttered in a voice that was lightly drowned out by the sound of the wind. For Amasawa, who had no interest in other students, the only time she felt delight was when she was meeting Ayanokōji, the one person that could move her. However, because of his current position, he was deliberately refraining from contacting her right now.

“Ahh~, I’m sooo bored I feel like I’m gonna die...”

“Good day, Amasawa Ichika-san.”

The one who approached Amasawa, who was alone on the deck looking out to the ocean, was second-year Class A student, Sakayanagi Arisu. Not especially surprised, Amasawa only turned her gaze towards her.

“And who might you be?” Amasawa tilted her head curiously as if she’d never seen her before.

“I am Sakayanagi Arisu from second-year Class A. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Sakayanagi...senpai? Do you have business with me?”

“Fufu, no need for any monkey business. I hear you are a White Room student, right Amasawa-san? Of course you know who I am as well, don’t you?”

White Room student. When those words were heard, there was no choice but to understand.

“Fuu, I see. So it was the chairman’s daughter that Ayanokōji-senpai relied on. You seem to know a little bit about the White Room, so I suppose you could say it was inevitable. And so?”

Not surprised, Amasawa asked Sakayangi what she was after.

“It’s only natural that I’d want to see how good the White Room student he was so worried about is.”

“It’s okay that you’re so motivated to do this, but does that mean you have permission from Ayanokōji-senpai?”

“Permission? I have no need for such a thing. My being here is my own personal decision.”

“You’ve got an awful lot of self-confidence, haven’t you, Arisu-senpai?”

“I’m proud to say that I have at least that much ability.”

“So cool!”

Amasawa, while praising and applauding, seemed somewhat preoccupied.



“But I’m sorry. I’m feeling a little sentimental right now. Could we do this some other time?”

“I don’t mind. Today was only supposed to be a mere face-to-face meeting after all.”

Satisfied with just saying a quick hello, Sakayanagi bowed softly and turned to leave.

“Oh, and by the way, Arisu-senpai, could the surveillance you’ve had me under come to an end here?”

Sakayanagi found Amasawa after using several students from Class A to keep track of her location and waited until she was alone.

“I had instructed them not to let themselves be seen, but it seems you noticed.”

“Ahahaha, that was supposed to be hiding? That’s cute.”

“I apologize if my actions made you feel uncomfortable. But as you can see, I’m crippled, so it wouldn’t be easy for me to locate and go to see you otherwise. Please forgive me.”

“Ah, I have one question~ I’m the kind of girl who can hit a cripple without hesitation, is that okay?”

“Violence is one of the stronger cards available in the deck, but it is not always the strongest.”

Saying this, Sakayanagi lightly tapped her cane against the deck two and then three times. As if it were a signal, her classmate Kamuro appeared in the distance.

“She’s the upperclassman that’s been following me around, right? Is it possible that she can compete with me?”

“That is not the case. I just mean that uncivilized conduct can be easily detected.”

“So you want to have a battle of wits with me? You make me laugh.”

“You’re very short-sighted, aren’t you? Please don’t go drawing your own conclusions. After all, even if you are a White Room student, other than

Ayanokōji-kun, you are all failures. I don't have excessively high expectations."

At this point, Amasawa's gaze sharpened for the first time and she looked at Sakayanagi.

"I'll give you a win or a loss in any setting, is what I mean."

"Oh, really? Even if we were using violence like you were just talking about?"

For the first time, Amasawa became interested in Sakayanagi and licked her thumb.

"Yes, of course. You can use any means you like."

"I'll make sure to remember you, senpai."

"If it's etched into your hippocampus, I would be glad to hear it. Then, have a good day."

Sakayanagi slowly walked away, and Amasawa took a deep breath on the now empty deck.

"Even without Ayanokōji-senpai, I might be able to enjoy myself a little. Play around a bit with Kushida-senpai or enjoy watching Arisu-senpai's crying face...? Under normal circumstances, I'd be in an excited mood..."

She softly placed her hand on her aching abdomen and thought about what was to come.

"...I'll wait and see for now, I guess."

It would take some more time before she was back in perfect condition. Besides, Amasawa couldn't make a move until she saw how *that side* fared.

Sakayanagi, on the other hand, left with Kamuro and returned to the corridor.

"That first-year looks dangerous."

"Oh, you could tell?"

"It's just a feeling. I guess after being around you for so long, I've developed some kind of strange sense. Honestly, I don't want to get involved any further."

“Please cherish that feeling. That said, it would be better to continue surveilling her to some extent.”

She was warned not to monitor her, but Sakayanagi had no intention of listening to her. Amasawa wouldn’t be able to ignore her if she knew that she was still marking her relentlessly. If that happened, it wouldn’t be a surprise if she tried to provoke her.

“She noticed that I was following her, didn’t she? Will you use Hashimoto?”

“If it’s him, even if he were seen, he might be able to get through it, but...”

If they weren’t careful and came into contact with the White Room students, it was possible it could become disadvantageous later on.

“For the time being, thank you for your hard work Masumi-san.”

With her role already over, Kamuro left the scene immediately. After that, Sakayanagi took out her mobile phone and made a single call.

“Could you continue for me please?” She asked the person on the other side to continue monitoring Amasawa, and then added one last thing. “As I thought, it seems that you are the only one I can rely on from the class, Yamamura-san.”

Chapter 4: The Growth in Each of Us

This summer vacation aboard a luxury cruise ship continued to be a valuable experience, and had already reached its halfway point.

The wallets of the students enjoying their remaining time to the fullest must be loosening up like never before. It may sound crazy to the students who were systematically working their way up, but there was nothing wrong with spending money on a short break. It would help refresh any accumulated fatigue, and at the same time, you would achieve a sense of euphoria and happiness. But that might sound like an excuse, since I was also using my meagre amount of private points.

I changed into my swimsuit and opened the door to see a large, empty pool. This luxury cruise ship had a large swimming pool facility that was open to everyone free of charge, but it was also equipped with another pool. You could call it a private pool, a pool that we could rent out and enjoy all to ourselves. It wasn't cheap at 20,000 points per 60 minute interval, but the time you could spend alone with your closest friends was more than worth the money. Moreover, the number of people who could use it was up to 40 people at a time, so if an entire class rented it out, you could use it for only 500 points per head.

Because of this, the private pool was surprisingly popular with students and was almost always fully booked from 8am to 8pm when it was open. While it was difficult to swim freely in a large swimming pool packed with people, the private pool was spacious enough to do whatever you wanted and enjoy it with no trouble.

“Wow, it’s huge...”

Akito spoke with a hint of excitement after showing up at the poolside a little later than me. It was the same size as the pool that was open to the public for free, but it looked so big that I wondered if the scale could somehow change by reserving it.

“Where’s Keisei?”

“He said he’d go to the bathroom first. The girls aren’t ready yet, are they?”

There was no need to confirm that they wouldn’t be able to change as quickly as us boys. For some reason, Akito picked up a menu that was sitting next to a beach chair.

“Oh...It’s more expensive than the other one.”

For the private pool, drinks were far more expensive than for the free pool; in fact, they were almost double the price. It shouldn’t be that surprising when considering the number of orders that would be placed for this many people, but it was harsh. It meant that we would be relentlessly exploited here as well. The fact that bringing your own food and drink was prohibited was also well thought out.

Just then, the door to the changing room was opened slightly. We both looked back at the same time, but there was no sign of anyone coming out. Instead, the sound of voices reached my ears.

“Come on Airi, what are you doing? Hurry up and go.”

“B-b-b-b-but, but! It’s embarrassing Haruka-chan!”

“What’s so embarrassing about it? You’ve been posting all kinds of embarrassing pictures onto the internet so you should be fine, right?”

“W-well it’s not like they were looking at me directly!”

“For me, that’s even more embarrassing. Come on, come on.”

“Aah! Wait, wait!”

Such an indescribable conversation was going on between Haruka and Airi.

“How to say it? There’s a certain invisible quality, right?” Akito said something completely unexpected. “What?”

“I was just thinking, you think about stuff like that too, huh Akito.”

“You know...It’s natural for guys right? I mean, it’s not like I talk about it lightly on a daily basis like Ike and the others. You’re the same, aren’t you?”

He faced me with a somewhat dumbfounded look in his eyes, and at the same time, there was an air that didn't allow for any denial. I wasn't trying to read the atmosphere, but I could tell that Akito was trying to be brave in his own way. It wasn't a good idea to ignore him, so I decided to admit to it honestly.

"Well, I guess that's true."

Hearing my answer, Akito laughed a little as if he were relieved.

"If a girl hears, I know she'll just say I'm an idiot or something though."

Akito usually wore a calm poker face, but judging by how much he was talking, it was obvious that he was getting nervous. However, those two still seemed to be arguing and wouldn't come out easily.

"I'm so embarrassed!"

"You know what?! I feel the same way!"

"H-h...Haruka-chan, that's a very daring outfit isn't it?"

"That's because you promised to wear *this* in front of everyone!"

"Hyah!"

We were in something of a life or death situation, waiting for them to appear.

"Daring, she says."

"Sounds like it."

A sense of anticipation, accompanied by a feeling of embarrassment. Where should I look and what should I say when the girls come out?

"Impossible, it's impossible! I-I'm going to borrow something to cover myself with."

"No, you can't! Come on, don't run away!"

"Ugh, I'm still embarrassed in this kind of swimsuit after all, Haruka-chan!"

"You know that it's the same for me too, right? I had no choice but to go along with you!"

“I never asked you to do that!”

We were waiting for them to come out, but it looked like the struggle would continue a little while longer.

“Hey, Ayanokōji. What do you think of Airi?”

Akito had been looking towards the girls until now, but I realised he was now looking at me. I was sure he wasn’t just speaking randomly.

“As in?”

I immediately understood what he was talking about, but I dared to feign ignorance.

“Mixed-gender groups can be a little complicated, right? It’s not unusual for someone to end up liking someone else.”

The question wasn’t difficult to answer, but...

“How about you?”

When I asked back, Akito showed a somewhat troubled expression.

“Well, I guess so.” After a few moments of silence, Akito spoke. “I’d be lying if I said I felt nothing like that whatsoever.”

He answered in a way that acknowledged, not denied, the existence of such a possibility.

“But if it might destroy this group, I’m not gonna push it.”

He meant to leave those feelings smouldering in his heart. I couldn’t tell for sure if it was Haruka or Airi at this point, but... I wonder what the right answer would be here. Unlike math, it wasn’t always possible to get a definitive answer after trying to figure it out.

“Kiyotaka, you...”

“Kyaah!”

Just as Akito was about to say something, the half-opened door swung open and Airi came flying out in front of me. I made eye contact with Akito again after looking at where the shouting came from.

“P-pushing me like that...you’re awful Haruka-chan!”

“It’s because you wouldn’t hurry up and get out here.”

Saying that, Haruka showed herself immediately after Airi’s arrival.

“O-oh, come on...”

Akito looked shocked, but needless to say, I felt the same way. How could I put it? The two of them were wearing incredibly bold swimsuits. If this wasn’t a private pool, they would have attracted a lot of attention from both men and women.

Haruka immediately looked up and saw us. I somehow felt like it was a crime to stare at them, so, at the same time as Akito, I turned to look in the appropriate direction. However, as if something immediately caught his curiosity, Akito spoke up, keeping his gaze elsewhere.

“Airi gives off a very different impression, doesn’t she?”

I’d rather he didn’t bring me into this, but I guess Akito must also be in a tight situation.

“I guess. She gives off a much more innocent feeling.”

“That’s it...that.”

While we were describing our impressions of Airi, Haruka looked blatantly disappointed.

“Conventional. Mundane.”

“Don’t say that. No, I’m too surprised to get the words out.”

I really hoped that Haruka would catch the part where my vocabulary was rapidly declining.

“...I’m gonna go for a little swim.”

Perhaps the two of them were too stimulating for him, as, after saying that, Akito turned his back on them and jumped into the pool without doing any preparation. With a splash, he swam through the empty pool alone. I knew what it was like to be hit with the feeling of wanting to run away. Because the private pool was an environment that we would rarely be able to experience, when faced with the destructive power of the two people in front of us, escape was no longer possible.

To get rid of all kinds of worries, swimming away like that was the correct decision. Having said that, if two guys were to suddenly put their all into swimming, the atmosphere would obviously turn strange. I guess I'd just have to be the shield here and continue this confrontation.

What should I do...? Taking a look at the two of them, I could see that Airi was blushing uncomfortably. Seeing Airi like this, Haruka happily walked around to her back and grabbed her shoulders.

“Hyaa!”

“Hey, hey, Kiyopon, how’s the reborn Airi?”

Saying that, she pushed Airi forward. The distance between us was so close that if we weren’t careful, we’d end up touching each other skin-to-skin. Rather than that, it was like she actually was touching me. I retreated just enough for it to be unnoticeable and maintained a close distance.

“Whoa...”

Both of them were wearing swimsuits that exposed a lot of skin, so touching them easily was problematic behaviour. Unable to bear the situation, Airi opened her mouth to escape.

“I-I think I’ll go swim in the pool too!”

“Wait, Airi...”

Haruka reached out her hand to try and catch her, but she failed to grab her arm in time. She then went to jump into the pool...or so I thought, but the way she held the stainless steel railing and gently entered the water was very Airi-esque.

“Damn it. Even though I’m so embarrassed too...”

That certainly would be the case. Aside from the emphasis on the breasts, the area of the swimsuit’s lower half was clearly small. Even though they were tied together tightly with string, I was anxious that something might happen to them.

“Just so you know, it was Airi who chose this ridiculous swimsuit, okay?”

“I wasn’t going to get into it, but how did that happen?”

Originally, Haruka wasn't the kind of student who liked to show her skin in public. However, the amount of emphasis she was putting on her breasts and lower body wasn't normal.

"How did it happen? How *did* it happen, hmm...?" For a moment, she showed a troubled face, but then she began to explain, choosing her words carefully. "I'm not sure how to say it? It's a form of going along with Airi?"

"What does that mean?"

There were so many choices, I couldn't even begin to understand.

"It means that she's desperately trying to change. And that's the same for me. I can't believe I'm saying this, but...there's a part of me that stands out a little more than others, right?" She said it in a muddled way, but it was without a doubt referring to that which I couldn't look at. "I know I shouldn't care, but the way people look at me makes me uncomfortable."

I could understand her distress, but from a male psychological perspective, ignoring it was extremely difficult. It was inevitable that our eyes would find themselves being drawn to them.

"I chose a slightly daring bathing suit for her to encourage her, and she replied that she would wear it if I wore one too."

That was a good reply. I could easily imagine Haruka refusing to wear a flashy swimsuit. If Haruka refused to wear it, she could say back to her that she wouldn't either.

"I can't let her stumble during the first step of the Airi remodelling project. It's called willpower." Now that she'd accepted the conditions that Airi herself set, Airi couldn't escape either. "Besides, even if Airi and I can't wear something like this in the open pool over there, if it's here..."

It seemed that because it was with three boys that they were close with, they managed to make it happen. Even so, it was easy even for a guy to imagine that there was quite a bit of shame involved.

"...You wanna see?" Haruka asked, looking embarrassed, or rather, hiding her disgust.

"Well, even if I've been told not to look, I have to admit there are some difficulties."

In the first place, they were in my line of sight when I was talking to her so there was no way around it. The only way to avoid seeing them was by looking directly above or below, or by turning my back.

“I see. I think I know the difference between a man and a woman, but I don’t know anything about psychology.”

The difference in curiosity about breasts, hips and lower abdomen wasn’t something that men and women could understand. No, there was no way to know because each individual person had their own preferences; it wasn’t just separated by men and women.

“Huh? By the way, where’s Yukimuu?”

“Looks like he’s going to be a little while longer.”

I don’t know if the stomach-ache was lingering, but he didn’t seem to be coming out at all.

“Hmm?”

Perhaps not that interested in checking, Haruka’s mind seemed to be elsewhere. The conversation stopped for a moment, and a brief silence fell.

“...Ah, no, I can’t stop thinking about it.”

“I’m sorry. I’m trying to be careful not to look.”

If you couldn’t help but look at the other person’s face while talking to them, they would inevitably come into view.

“That’s not what I mean. You really haven’t done anything wrong, Kiyopon. I know I’m too self-conscious to begin with. I know that you’re not looking because you like it.”

Eh, no...it’s not like I don’t like what I see. I’ll keep that part to myself.

“When something stands out it attracts attention. It’s the same with anything, right? It’s just, when I think it’s me, I can’t help but feel bad.”

In Haruka’s case, it wasn’t just the boys’ gaze. Even if it was a same-sex gathering, she wouldn’t welcome attention being drawn to her breasts.

“I’m sorry, I think it’s going to take me a little more time to calm down,” she continued.

“It doesn’t really matter. If you think it’s impossible, you can just go back and get changed.”

“I can’t do that. As long as Airi is giving it her best, I don’t want to break.”

She called it the Airi remodelling project, didn’t she? I could tell she was thinking about it.

“Let’s change the subject. It may be a little late, but it seems you were just about safe in the uninhabited island exam.”

I hadn’t been able to get together with the Ayanokōji group for the past few days, so Haruka mentioned the topic to me rather late. It was a completely unrelated topic, which was probably a good thing right now.

“Well, we were just the same, so it’s not something to laugh about.”

“To be honest, it was pretty tough. I fought as hard as I could and that was the result. My bad.”

“It’s not bad at all. I mean, I’m a little relieved.”

Exhaling slightly, Haruka watched Airi, who was clumsily trying to swim.

“Relieved? After those terrible results?”

“I mean, there were rumours that you were a jerk because of that math problem, Kiyopon. Won’t this help everything calm down a little? You didn’t like the weird pressure you were under, right?”

Apparently, she was thinking about my future.

“As I thought, you’re more like a saint than the other boys, Kiyopon.”

“What did you see that made you think that?”

I was doubtful because I thought she was overestimating me. I had just as much sexual desire and interest in the opposite sex as anyone else.

“Things like your facial expressions, your gaze...I feel like it’s less of an issue with you than other boys.”

I didn’t know what to say about that. I was afraid I’d get a lot of flack for showing anything like that here. I was also grateful that another guy was playing the role of a panicked person. It must have a synergistic effect.

“Oh...”

As soon as Keisei, who had finished changing late, showed up, he let out a surprised voice. It was clear to the eye that this wasn’t his reaction to seeing the rented private pool. He must’ve seen the daring figure of Haruka beside me.

“Whassup.”

Perhaps to maintain a sense of normalcy, Haruka greeted Keisei with a silly face and voice.

“S-sup...”

He fixed his glasses, which had almost fallen off, and looked over towards her. I guess this meant that Keisei, who usually spent most of his time studying, was a fine boy. The fact that all the guys uniformly reacted and tried to escape in the same way showed the nature of this group. If it were a type like Ryūen or Kōenji, the reaction would probably be very different.

“Well then...I think I’ll go swim a bit too.”

He jumped into the pool to escape, joining Akito, who was swimming vigorously. Airi, who couldn’t swim well and thus let her feet touch the bottom of the pool, waved at Haruka.

“Come over too, Haruka-chan~ It feels good~!”

“Okay, okay, I’ll go. Give me a second.”

Saying that she couldn’t help it, she started to do her exercises next to me.

“I get the feeling you’ve become closer since fighting through the uninhabited island exam together.”

“Well, that’s true, isn’t it? We’ve shared a lot of things from top to bottom.”

“Waah! That’s a bit embarrassing so don’t say it!”

Airi, who was waiting at the edge of the pool watching us, hurriedly made a splashing sound. Top? Bottom? They were common keywords, but also very meaningful.

“I don’t know, Airi is essentially helpless, but I can’t leave her alone. Kind of like a best friend or little sister?”

A statement that was unthinkable when we first met. And that wasn’t something limited to just Haruka. It was the same for Keisei, and, even if there were no major changes, it was also the same for Akito.

4.1

After that, I took turns playing in the pool with my group of friends, enjoying myself to the fullest.

After playing two-on-two water volleyball, we were now in the middle of first to five, one-on-one matches. First up was a battle between Keisiei and Airi, which Keisei won 5-2. Then Akito and I fought, and Akito won by 5 points to 3. Airi, who lacked physical strength, was sat down by the side of the pool to rest, probably tired after just one match. Seeing this, I called out to her.

“You looked like you were having a great time.”

“Ah, Kiyotaka-kun. Yeah, it’s really fun. Though I wasn’t much of an opponent at all...”

For some reason she tried to stand up, so I stopped her and sat down beside her instead.

“To be honest I’m still surprised. That you had the courage to do something like this, Airi.”

“That’s...yeah. I thought I’d take the plunge...Though I’m still terribly embarrassed about it.”

“Why did you decide to be brave?”

She couldn’t have decided to do something like this on a whim.

“During the uninhabited island exam, we were always with our group for 24 hours every day, right? So Haruka-chan and I spoke about all sorts of things. About when we were little, about middle school. And then after coming to this school, about how we started getting along.”

If you were together for long periods of time, small talk just wasn't going to cut it. With that being the case, it was no wonder that they delved into the deeper stuff. Probably because of the intense time they spent together, the two of them must've come to understand each other like they'd been best friends from way back.

“I thought maybe I can change now...It might be the only time...”

“Change? You’re not just talking about looks, right?”

“Yeah. I can’t say it clearly yet, but... I’ve started to think that I should change, that I have to change. It’s not good enough for me to be bad at both studying and sports.”

Even though her cheeks were flushed and she felt embarrassed, Airi expressed her determination.

“So the start is your appearance.”

“Haruka-chan scolded me, saying that it’s not good to be deliberately inconspicuous.”

Airi didn’t like to stand out because of her personality. That was why she lived her life keeping her hairstyle modest and wearing unnecessary fake glasses. As for posture, she often rounded her back and kept her head low. She couldn’t improve her studies or sports abilities overnight, but she could fix her appearance.

As Airi gazed at the pool, she saw that in the new match, the ball had been smashed into the water and Akito had scored a point against Haruka. This gave Akito a lead of 3 points to 1.

“It’s too late...I guess.”

After telling me everything, Airi looked up at me anxiously.

“No, it’s not too late.” I wanted to praise her honestly for making that decision. “I’m rooting for you.”

“T-thank you, Kiyotaka-kun. I’ll try my best.”

“Ah, yeah, yeah, I forgot to tell you earlier but Airi’s image change is still a secret, okay? We’ll be unveiling it to everyone when the second semester starts.”

It would probably be better to do it in a classroom with all the students present. At any rate, if it was going to make her nervous, the fewer times, the better.

“So what did you think, Yukimuu? When you saw Airi.”

Haruka, who was serving, stopped what she was doing and spoke to Keisei, who was watching the match.

“D-don’t ask me.”

“We won’t know unless we ask, will we? Let us hear your unreserved opinion.”

After being told that, Keisei looked directly at Airi and observed every inch of her body. Naturally embarrassed, Airi tried to run away.

“You can’t run away, Airi.”

Haruka did her best to hold Airi down as she growled and flapped her legs. And after completing his observation, Keisei’s evaluation was...

“...It’s...not bad, is it? I mean, no, it’s totally attractive...”

Keisei, who didn’t usually show much interest in girls, replied, his body tense.

“Oh, if Yukimuu reacts like that, then I’m sure it’s perfect!”

Haruka, as pleased as if it were her, jumped high into the air at that moment. She then slammed her serve towards Akito, who had been watching Airi after having his attention caught.

“Whoa!”

“One point! With that it’s two points to three!”

“That’s not fair, Haruka.”

“It’s your fault for gawking at girls, Miyacchi. Don’t let your guard down, carelessness is one’s greatest enemy.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. But...how can a girl change so much just by taking off her glasses and changing her hairstyle a little?”

“It means the original material was already top-notch. Didn’t you know that much?”

“Even if you say that...”

Akito and Keisei looked at each other and nodded at the same time.

“Oh dear. Well, it’s because you guys are like this that I’m comfortable hanging out with you.”

Akito shook off his worries and concentrated on his own serve. With the game resumed, Airi let out a sigh of relief.

“When it comes to studying, how do I improve? Or rather, how do I get smarter I wonder...”

Although Airi and the others prepare when tests come around, they don’t study from the ground up like Horikita and Sudō do. That part was essential when it came to raising your academic level.

Keisei overheard something related to studying, so began to explain in front of us.

“The first step is to find out what you can and can’t do, isn’t it? Beginning with the 1st year of elementary school, we all start running side by side. But gradually our strengths and weaknesses when studying start to emerge. Do you know why?”

“Um...”

“Individuals have different abilities regarding learning and absorbing content, as well as different levels of concentration. There are those who can’t stand it for even one minute, and there are those that can get through an hour of class by resourcefully controlling their concentration. That alone will start to make a difference in your ability to learn, but how much you study outside of class is also a big factor.”

“That’s...yeah. It’s true that the kids who went to cram school were smart.”

Although it was obvious, Airi nodded her head as if she were convinced.

“Rah!”

The ball bounced off Haruka’s attempt to catch it and he won the 5th point. The result was a 5 points to 2 win in favour of Akito.

“Alright. With that I guess it’s my win.”

“Bummer. But I was a little curious about what those two were talking about and couldn’t concentrate, so that’s why I lost.”

So with that analysis and excuse, Haruka came up to the pool side.

“Why don’t you teach her how to study, Kiyopon?”

Hearing the flow of the conversation, Haruka came up with an idea.

“Sorry, but I’m not very good at teaching. Besides, there’s a teaching specialist nearby, right?”

To shift the gaze away from me, I turned to Keisei as if to urge him on.

“Well...if Airi says it’s okay, then I don’t mind.”

“No, but Yukimuu, you know, I was thinking you could take care of me and Akito from now on. Wouldn’t it be hard to teach all of us if we added Airi, who’s at a different level?”

“Uh, that means I’m an idiot, right?...Ugh.”

“Ah, that’s not it! That’s not what I meant!”

“No, you know, that’s the only way to take what you just said, Haruka.”

Unable to defend her, Akito muttered under his breath.

“I’m just, you know...Ah jeez, I’m very sorry, I was out of line!”

She bowed deeply to Airi, and at the same time, the two lumps became bigger...And don’t look...If I do, my concentration will be uprooted and taken away.

After that, there was a lot of laughter and the atmosphere became more relaxed.

“Then it’s time for the Airi and Keisei revenge match.”

“Ehh? I won’t win no matter how many times I try~!”

“You don’t need to worry, I’ll join you as a helper.”

“W-wait, Akito. I’m at an overwhelming disadvantage then!”

Even while complaining, Keisei went into the pool without hesitation. He was very serious about it.

“I-I’ll try my best.”

Airi, who had gained a reliable companion in Akito, clenched her fists slightly.

Haruka and I decided to watch the novel two-on-one battle from the poolside.

“Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Hmm?”

Shortly after the match started, Haruka spoke to me with her gaze fixed on the competition.

“I hope it’s not my imagination, but aren’t you a little cold towards Airi, Kiyopon?”

“I don’t mean to be.”

“But you could’ve taught her one-on-one. You can do that much, can’t you?”

If I had to choose between being able and not being able, then I would say I could do it without any problems.

“That’s kinda unfair, don’t you think? For Airi.”

“I’m just trying to be fair to everybody.”

“Really?”

“I’ve never really favoured anyone except for pretence.”

“...Does that mean you’d be as fair to your best friend as your girlfriend?”

“That’s right.”

“Isn’t that a little strange? It’s like the distance between us is too far. I’ll take this opportunity to say, right from the start you’ve been watching us while keeping your distance, right Kiyopon?”

Apparently, that idea had gotten through to Haruka.

“I’ve never seen you smile or anything.”

Saying that, she reached out with her right arm and pinched my left cheek. She played with it, pulling it with some intensity.

“I wish we could at least make you smile, Kiyopon.”

“It’s not like I’m not smiling on purpose though.”

She removed her fingertips from the cheek she had been pinching and crossed her arms in displeasure.

“There are more reasons that I can’t tell you directly. The distance between Airi and I was too close from the beginning.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I think it’s not me, but the environment surrounding her that is making her grow.”

“The environment surrounding her?”

“There’s you, there’s Akito, and there’s Keisei. Growing surrounded by her best friends is the most important factor for Airi. In fact, Airi is about to undergo a major change thanks to you, Haruka.”

“I think the one most important to Airi is you though, Kiyopon.”

“If she were the type who thrives on romantic entanglements, that might’ve been a good idea.”

“You told me that you were aware of Airi’s feelings once before Kiyopon, but, how can I put this? What you’re saying is a little harsh, don’t you think?”

She looked at me with complicated eyes, as if she didn’t know how to express herself.

“Since our first year, Airi has been thinking about me in no small way. That makes me happy. It’s just...”

She looked at me with anxiously, as if she were a girl waiting for a reply to her confession. Airi’s love. It was an undeniable fact that she was her best friend and was praying for her to succeed.

“What Airi needs right now are friends that she can trust.”

“But, but you know what? It might be good if there were also a romantic element. She might be able to work harder.”

“Indeed, there could be some synergy.”

But the trouble was, love wasn’t something that you could have for more than one person at a time.

Basically, if the seat was occupied by one person, if you wanted to bring in a second person, you'd have to take action to cut off the first. Of course, it wasn't impossible to do it with two or three people at the same time if you were good at it, but I'd say it wasn't suitable in the closed environment of this school and the demerits should you get exposed were far greater. I stood up from the poolside.

"In the near future, Airi will undergo a bit of a psychological shock. At that time, Haruka, I need you more than anyone to be there by her side to encourage and cheer her up."

"What's that? What do you mean?"

"Sorry, but I can't answer that right now."

Airi is the least valuable person in the class. Academic ability, physical ability and other factors. Looking at her comprehensively, that was the only way to judge it. This was not only true for the OAA, but it was also my own personal opinion.

However, depending on Airi's willingness to change from here on out, she will surely grow, albeit slowly. Maybe in six months, maybe in a year, at that time, she might be able to climb out from the bottom of the class.

4.2

Our time in the pool came to an end in a flash and we started to get changed.

The system didn't allow for extensions because there was a fixed amount of time for employees to clean the area before the next reservation. The three of us quickly showered, changed our clothes and left the private pool. The girls couldn't be seen, probably because it took a fair bit of effort for them to get changed, unlike for us boys.

"Looks like the girls aren't done yet."

Since we hadn't discussed what to do afterwards, we decided to wait for them to come out.

"Ayanokōji-senpai!"

“Hmm?”

I suddenly felt a pair of eyes watching me, and it was revealed to be Nanase. I set a new record today, having met Nanase every day aboard this ship.

“Nanase helped me find a partner for the special partner exam. She also helped me several times during the uninhabited island exam.”

“Really? So you’re a pretty amazing girl then, huh?”

Akito nodded with admiration and raised his hand lightly to greet Nanase. Keisei followed suit.

Could it be that Nanase was the next reservation for the private pool? That’s what I’d thought, but...

“I just happened to be passing by.”

As if to deny it, Nanase said it was just a coincidence.

“I see.”

“I don’t want to bother you, so with that, I’ll take my leave.”

In this area, the only place where students could play was the private pool. In fact, Nanase walked away, but I still couldn’t figure out why she showed up here in the first place. No... At this point, it would be too optimistic to dismiss this as a mere coincidence. Nanase seemed to have some grasp of my actions and was checking on me every step of the way. However, I didn’t feel any kind of malice in it. If that was the case, then what was her objective?

Nakaizumi and Suzuki passed by in front of the three of us. Seeing this, the other two didn’t seem to have noticed anything unusual.

“What’s wrong, Ayanokōji? Did those two do something wrong?”

“No...I was just wondering where they were going.”

“Ah, you’ve got a point. There’s not really anything up ahead, is there? Maybe they’re lost?”

There were no special facilities beyond this point. It wasn’t impossible that they were lost, though. To begin with, people didn’t visit this level for any purpose other than the private pool. Just like Nanase, they were walking

around in places I wouldn't consider normal. Speaking of which, I saw Nanase, Nakaizumi and Suzuki on the deck near the bow yesterday.

"But Airi's in trouble. She seems to have a lot of formidable enemies."

"What's that?"

When Akito muttered from behind me, Keisei butted in.

"No, it's nothing."

Shortly after Nanase left, the two girls finished getting dressed and came out.

"That was fun, wasn't it Haruka-chan?"

"I guess so. Playing in the pool isn't so bad if it's with close friends."

The two girls seemed to be completely satisfied and were smiling the whole time, even after they'd finished changing. I was sure Haruka was still anxious about what I said earlier, but she wasn't showing it.

"Ah..."

When we had all gathered and were about to leave the private pool, the person who seemed to be the next reservation showed up.

"Oh, next is Ike huh?

"Y-yeah. That's right. This was the only time I could make a reservation."

"You're not alone, right? You with Sudō and the others?"

Akito looked behind Ike curiously, but couldn't see anyone.

"Ah~ no, um..."

Ike choked on his words and became restless, but he caught something out of the corner of his eye.

"Sorry to keep you waiting!"

"What a rare combination, Shinohara and Ike hanging out together. Where are the others?"

Neither Akito nor Keisei thought anything was out of the ordinary and asked the question indifferently. Of course, Haruka and Airi, though they were surprised, seemed to sense it immediately and pushed the boys' backs.

“Come on, come on, we don’t need to worry about that, we’ll be on our way.”

“Huh? What’s this all of a sudden?”

“S-Satsuki, let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

He took Shinohara’s hand as if running away, and the two of them went to the reception desk of the private pool. I guess they didn’t have time to loaf around in this place because the time was fixed.

“Satsuki?”

He called her by her first name and they walked hand in hand as they disappeared into their respective changing rooms. Seeing that, Akito finally noticed something strange about the two of them.

“They...eh, since when?”

“What is it? What are you talking about?”

Keisei still didn’t understand, but he was immediately given a straightforward explanation by Haruka.

“It means they started dating”

“What are you talking about? Ike and Shinohara are like oil and water, why would those two date each other?”

He denied with a serious expression that people who didn’t like each other would ever date each other.

“You’re smart, Yukimuu, but...you’re an idiot.”

“They might’ve disliked each other at first, but I think they’ve probably been closing the distance, little by little. I get the feeling they’ve become more conscious of each other lately.”

Airi nodded her head in understanding, perhaps because girls were better at this kind of romance stuff.

“Yeah, I guess. But I’m surprised. I can’t believe that they actually started going out.”

“S-so that’s how it is. Ike and Shinohara are? ...No, as I thought, I can’t understand it.”

Keisei, having grasped the situation, looked shocked and searched for the backs of the two people who were no longer visible.

4.3

“Nope~ scary~”

Not long after we’d finished hanging out and returned to our guest cabin, Miyamoto came back whilst mumbling to himself.

“Did something happen?”

“It’s nothing like that. That Tokitō guy had a hold of Katsuragi’s collar by the nearby restroom. Ah, of course it’s that Tokitō who’s always so quick to start fighting. Well, it was quite a mess.”

“You didn’t try to stop them? Hiroya can be pretty scary when he gets mad, you know?”

Miyamoto looked a little annoyed at Akito, who’d made it sound like he’d abandoned Katsuragi.

“I’m not gonna stop them. It’s none of my business and I’d get in trouble if I got involved.”

Katsuragi and Tokitō Hiroya. Both were students from Ryūen’s class.

“Katsuragi has only just moved from Class A. Considering that they were enemies until not too long ago, it’s no wonder that trouble is brewing. Right, Kiyotaka?”

“That may be so.”

“I’m a little worried, why don’t we go check on them?”

“Leave it be, Miyake. An enemy class has a dispute, so relatively speaking, it’s a win-win for us, isn’t it? It’s not surprising that they don’t get along since Katsuragi was originally a Class A student.”

“But...aren’t we all second-years?”

“If we carelessly get involved, we might end up as collateral damage. And what will we do if we get noticed by Ryūen?”

Akito seemed to have complaints regarding Miyamoto’s arguments, but he listened to him all the same. It wasn’t inconceivable that the situation could take a turn for the worse if Akito joined them.

Listening to the conversation between the two of them, I stood up silently.

“Just leave it alone.”

“No, I think remaining calm is the right thing to do regarding the Katsuragi situation. I’m just going to the store because I’m thirsty.”

With that, I left the guest cabin. I was pretty sure he said their dispute was at the nearby restroom. If it was a minor dispute, the best thing to do would be to leave it alone, just as Miyamoto said, but…

When I heard the name ‘Tokitō’, the first person that came to mind was Ichinose’s classmate Tokitō Katsumi, who was in the same group as me during last year’s mixed training camp. The one who was making trouble right now was someone else, Tokitō Hiroya. I remember being surprised when I heard that their both having the same relatively rare surname, Tokitō, wasn’t just a coincidence, but because they were distant relatives. We haven’t built up any deep friendship since then, but I have shared food, clothing and shelter with Tokitō Katsumi.

It seemed that they weren’t acquainted, but if it was okay for an outsider like me to step in, I’d like to reach out to him at least. That was what I planned on doing, but…

Even after getting close to the restroom, there was still no sign of Katsuragi and the others. There was a bit of a disagreement, but I guess it was already resolved.

“Ayanokōji-kun.”

As I was about to take a look around the area, Hiyori called out to me.

“Have you seen Katsuragi?”

“As I thought, other people saw them too. I also heard that Katsuragi-kun and Tokitō-kun were having a dispute, so I came here. That’s why I asked

them to change location just now.”

I see. If it was around the restroom, they’d stand out even if they didn’t want to. As I followed Hiyori’s lead, I could faintly make out a voice from an unpopular area.

I was instructed to peer in from the shadows, and silently listened for the source of the voice. Just as Miyamoto reported, it was Katsuragi and Tokitō. However, besides them, it seemed that a girl, Okabe, was also participating.

“Katsuragi, are you really followin’ Ryūen?”

“You’re still going on with this? This is the third time you’ve asked me that question, albeit with slightly different wording.”

“That’s because you won’t answer.”

“There’s no way to answer. I keep asking you to clarify what you mean by ‘following’.”

While Katsuragi was calmly handling the situation, Tokitō was letting his emotions get the better of him.

“I’m talkin’ about you being his dog and doin’ whatever he tells you to do.”

“I don’t remember becoming a dog, and I have no intention of being ordered around.”

“Sorry, but I don’t think so. If that’s the case, why did you team up with him for the uninhabited island exam?”

“That’s a difficult question to understand. Obviously it was for the class to win. What else is there to say,” answered Katsuragi, as if it were a matter of course.

“Even though you couldn’t even get third place?”

“It certainly didn’t go as planned. But, the results were not bad.”

“What the hell is that? It’s all the same for fourth place and below. Also, the Trial card up being meaningless.”

“It means that Ryūen has more on his mind than you think.”

“I don’t wanna hear that from a stranger like you. Go on then, what’s he thinkin’ about?”

“This isn’t the right stage to talk about it. I’m sorry, but I can’t tell you anything.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? There’s nothin’ at all, is there? Anyway, I don’t like Ryūen.”

The push and pull exchange went on and on. One thing was for sure; Tokitō really hated Ryūen from the bottom of his heart.

“It’s true that if you were to ask me if he’s a likable person, I couldn’t honestly answer with a yes.”

Katsuragi nodded his head in agreement, not arguing that point. However, it seemed that Tokitō didn’t care for this attitude either.

“And yet, you teamed up with Ryūen on the uninhabited island and were acting all buddy buddy while eatin’ together today.”

“We’re going around in circles. There seems to be a misunderstanding...”

When Katsuragi was about to deny it, Tokitō intervened with a biting attitude.

“After all that hostility, you were won over so easily. I thought you’d have more backbone than that.”

“I’ve had more than one or two run-ins with Ryūen, regardless of being a friend or foe. But now I’m fulfilling my role as a member of the class, and as Ryūen’s classmate. If this class is moving around Ryūen, then it makes sense to follow suit.”

“I can’t believe these words are comin’ from the guy who was goin’ at it with Sakayanagi.”

“The process is different. When we started as 1st years, we hadn’t decided who was going to be the leader yet. And since Sakayanagi, who had put herself forward as a candidate, and I had opposing views, I put myself forward as leader and we had a confrontation. The current class has already set its course with Ryūen as its leader. In the first place, do you really think I’ll be recognized as the leader after having just changed classes?”

“That’s...”

“Besides, Sakayanagi and Ryūen are different types. The class also has a very different feel.”

Katsuragi replied with a good argument as if admonishing him, but Tokitō didn’t seem to be convinced at all.

“That’s why I told you, Tokitō. Katsuragi-kun isn’t worth talking to.”

Okabe, who had been quietly watching up to this point, tapped Tokitō on the shoulder and told him there was no point in going any further.

“In the end, you, who had no place in Class A, were happy to be picked up by Ryūen, right Katsuragi-kun? In other words, you’re his dog.”

“I don’t think you people are going to understand me if I deny it here.”

I see, it was only a rough idea, but I was starting to see the root of all this trouble. After being tapped on the shoulder with a fingertip, I pulled my head back and faced Hiyori.

“It’s not just today that some of my classmates have been complaining.”

“I guess. The resentment they’ve been feeling until now must’ve been building up.”

Ryūen’s dictatorship obviously generates strong opposition. They must’ve been forcibly suppressing it until now, but it was finally started to boil over.

“What about Ryūen? In the past, he never would’ve shown mercy in response to rebels.”

“In the past, yes.”

“Is the absence of that ruthlessness the cause of what’s happening here?”

Hiyori gave a small nod.

“Everyone is changing. In the beginning, I didn’t have any strong feelings regarding the class either. I hardly ever asserted my opinion, as long as I could spend the next three years surrounded by books.”

Certainly, if you were to ask me if Hiyori’s presence was strong from the beginning, I would’ve said no. In fact, I didn’t even take notice of her existence.

“Tokitō-kun has always hated Ryūen-kun’s way of doing things. No, it’s not just Tokitō-kun. The one nearby, Okabe-san, is another one of them.”

“Are you saying that they want to embrace Katsuragi and rebel against Ryūen?”

“That may be so.”

Ability-wise, Katsuragi was more than capable of being a substitute leader. And because he’s student from a different class, he could cut through Ryūen without hesitation.

“But Tokitō Hiroya. Ryūen has made another troublesome enemy.”

Akito said something similar about Tokitō Hiroya, but he has a selfish personality and was rough with his words, and he was also known to be vindictive.

“Do you think so too, Ayanokōji-kun?”

As Hiyori feared, this situation was a scourge that wouldn’t benefit anyone.

“Indeed, our class is going strong right now. I think one of the main reasons for this is the growth of Ryūen-kun, who came back after being out of the war for a while.”

Compared to the beginning of the first year Ryūen, Ishizaki, and others have shown a lot of growth.

“But whether or not this steady progress will continue forever is another story. It might be something you could say for every class, but if Ryūen-kun were to be expelled from school in the near future, our class would fall apart immediately.”

“The way Ryūen fights is always fraught with danger after all.”

In the future, it was likely that there would be developments in which he would take on a lot of risk in order to win big. I was also very curious about the ‘agreement’ he brought up to Sakayanagi.

“Should that happen, it’s essential to have someone who can contain the damage.”

She meant a potential leader in case of unforeseen circumstances. Hiyori smiled at me.

“At that time, Ayanokōji-kun...would you join our class?”

Hiyori, despite her appearance, wasn’t optimistic and spoke of a strategy to help the class win.

“Again? What a daring thing to say.”

“I invited you the other day, but that was half-jokingly just to go along with Ishizaki-kun. This invitation is different.”

In other words, this time she’s serious.

“I don’t consider my class to be weak at all. But it’s also true that we lack someone who can guide us in case of an emergency. What do you think?”

A battle with Hiyori, Katsuragi and Kaneda backing me up as general counsel, huh?

“This development doesn’t necessarily mean that Ryūen is going to be expelled. Isn’t that right?”

“Of course, the best thing would be if that didn’t happen.”

But for Hiyori, I had a feeling that this was a bit of a spur of the moment invitation. Even if she’d been thinking about it in her gut, I questioned whether it was something she should’ve said right now.

“Did you hear something worrying?” I asked boldly, but Hiyori just smiled a little and didn’t answer.

While I was talking to Hiyori, Katsuragi and Tokitō continued to argue. Katsuragi’s rigidity was finally broken by the fact that Tokitō wouldn’t be pleased no matter how he responded.

“...This is a waste of time. I told you this because I thought if it was you, you’d understand, but I was wrong.”

“You seem to have understood.”

“I’m not askin’ you to keep quiet about this. If you wanna report it to Ryūen, do it.”

“I have no intention of reporting it.”

“You sure about this? I’m tellin’ you, I’m serious. You never know what’ll happen if you let it go.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Tokitō. There are lots of things wrong with the way Ryūen does things. I don’t think it’s wrong to have complaints like you do. But I’m not impressed by your overzealous behaviour.”

It was obvious that Tokitō had something in mind. And there was no doubt that his intention was to eliminate Ryūen.

“Shut up.”

After saying this, Tokitō left Katsuragi. We hid ourselves and watched Tokitō and Okabe leave so that we could stay unnoticed. I was going to leave quietly after that, but...Hiyori pulled my arm, revealing our presence in front of Katsuragi.

“Do you need something, Ayanokōji?”

It would be strange to run away now, so I went with the flow and walked up to Katsuragi.

“No, it just seems there’s a lot of difficulties in your class too, Katsuragi.”

“It’s the same in every class. Although I would’ve preferred not to be overheard.” Katsuragi looked once at Hiyori, who was standing next to me. “I’m not impressed, Shiina. You seem to trust Ayanokōji, but I can’t say it’s the right decision to bring your personal feelings into a class matter.”

As harsh as it may sound, what Katsuragi said was correct. Sending information to the enemy that you didn’t need to give could become a fatal wound later on.

“That may be so. But who among our classmates can you talk to about this? If Ryūen-kun, one of the parties involved, heard about it, he wouldn’t leave Tokitō-kun and the others alone, and neither would the other students. Some might even try to score some points by selling out their friends who betrayed him.”

“It’s not something that can be solved by letting Ayanokōji hear it.”

“Isn’t this a good opportunity to sort out your thoughts on what to do, Katsuragi-kun?”

“What?”

“Why don’t you let out what’s on your mind so that you can find your bearings?”

A schemer, huh? Hiyori was trying to use me to influence Katsuragi in a positive way. It wasn’t easy for Katsuragi, who had a tendency to think alone, to get along with others. Her actions must’ve gotten through to Katsuragi, as he agreed in spite of himself.

“You seem to be thinking about the class more than I thought, Shiina.”

“Of course. I intend to graduate with all my classmates in Class A after all.”

As if encouraged by her remark, Katsuragi put his thoughts into words.

“As the only second-year student who has experienced both classes so far, I feel there is a crucial difference between Sakayanagi’s class and Ryūen’s class. In both cases, the leaders often face complaints from their classmates, but even so, Sakayanagi’s class has a certain cohesiveness. On the other hand, in Ryūen’s class, there are still many students who are not convinced and dissatisfied.”

These were exactly the kind of students Tokitō and Okabe, who had just confronted Katsuragi, were.

“This dissatisfaction will continue to build up and persist as the class ascends...”

“You mean you’re afraid of the next time it starts to go downhill?

“Yes. Depending on the situation, a single mistake could half destroy the class. I don’t think that man hasn’t already have foreseen that, but...I don’t think he’s going to change the current system.”

“Isn’t that just what you’ve read into it, Katsuragi? I’m sure Ryūen knows that too.”

“But if he knows that, then he should step up to the plate and do something about Tokitō and the others.”

“Well, there will inevitably be backlash against Ryūen’s methods.”

Apparently, Katsuragi thought that Ryūen should solve this problem.

“Didn’t Ryūen pull you out of Class A in anticipation of that, Katsuragi?”

“...Me?”

“If something happened to Ryūen himself, you would be able to fill in for him, Katsuragi. I think that’s why he pulled you out.”

He was exactly what Hiyori was looking for, somebody who could potentially become the new leader.

“I find that hard to believe.”

Of course, as I told Katsuragi, it was just my own personal interpretation.

“In the case of Ryūen, a high-risk, high-return type student, it’s possible he could graduate from Class A, or he could also drop out of school in a flash during some exam. That’s why he needed some insurance.”

It was very possible that a single betrayal could lead to the downfall of Ryūen’s administration.

“If that’s the case...I don’t like it.”

I felt it was because he thought highly of Katsuragi, but he didn’t hide his dissatisfaction.

“Ryūen and I are enemies because of our different values. That hasn’t changed now that we’re classmates. But now that we’re allies, I think the minimum goal should be to graduate from Class A without missing anyone.”

Since he knew that this was the kind of person he was, Ryūen probably wouldn’t tell Katsuragi directly. When I look at his personal growth, I could see that Ryūen has made remarkable progress, but his classmates haven’t been able to keep up with his momentum.

“About earlier, you made the right decision to keep Ryūen from hearing about Tokitō.”

“It would be nice if we could just leave the rebels alone, but if we have to get rid of them later, it could become a bigger problem.”

I was sure it was a source of annoyance and a headache, but at the same time, it would be a rewarding experience for Katsuragi. At the very least, the situation was largely different to the time when he was in Class A, where he was tamed and defeated without a fight.

The expression on Katsuragi's face softened slightly, as if some new idea had come to mind.

“What do you think, Katsuragi-kun?”

“...I understand.” After clearing his throat once, Katsuragi turned his attention to me once again. “After having you listen to what I had to say, I have some perspective on what I need to do. I’m grateful.”

“No, I’m just saying what’s on my mind is all.”

“If it was all bullshit it wouldn’t be worth talking about, but what you said was right on the money. Shiina asked you because she was sure you’d give the right answer.”

Hiyori smiled happily. I’d been taken advantage of, but it would be nice if this could bring the slightest sign of life into Ryūen’s class.

“And by the way, Ayanokōji. I’m sure some other students were thinking the same thing, but I was a little surprised.”

“Surprised?”

“The results of this special exam were very close.”

Starting with Matsushita, many students had become skeptical of my abilities. In that sense, Tsukishiro’s presence turned out to be a good thing.

“Was that your true ability? Or did something unplanned happen?”

“Hmm, I wonder.”

I tried to play it off, but Katsuragi wouldn’t look the other way.

“Shiina, I’m sorry, but I want to speak with Ayanokōji alone for a moment.”

“I understand. I’ll go back to my room. Then I’ll see you later, Ayanokōji-kun.”

I exchanged a quick goodbye with Hiyori and the two of us remained in place.

“During the uninhabited island exam, Ryūen told me everything he knew about you.”

“Ryūen told you frankly?”

“He was a little evasive at first, but I told him that if he wanted me to be part of the class, he was going to have to tell me.”

That was some kind of honeyed phrase.

If that was the case, then my standing as X, who was working from the shadows in Horikita’s class, was revealed. That meant that Katsuragi knew everything, even the incident on the rooftop.

Just like Sakayanagi said, I can’t prevent the number of people who know about me from gradually increasing.

“Until now, you’ve handled everything well.”

“As long as I could have a quiet school life, I figured it wouldn’t make much difference to me whether I was in Class A or Class D.”

“Is that why you’re hiding your abilities? I’m not going to tell anyone, but it probably won’t take much time for word to get out.”

It seemed that way. It was safe to say that there was no way to stop the information from spreading.

“I’ll just continue being myself and do what I have to do at this school.”

“I don’t know when it’ll happen, but I’m looking forward to the day I get to fight you for real.”

With that, Katsuragi nodded once and left the area.

4.4

It was late afternoon, and I was on my way to the café terrace with one of my friends.

“It’s been a while since we’ve met up just the two of us like this, hasn’t it, Satō-san?”

“Yeah. Probably not since that time.”

Since that time. She was talking about the time I told her I was going out with Kiyotaka.

Since then, Satō-san and I have become good friends... No, we were much closer than before, to the point where I could now call her my best friend.

However, our group was usually made up of four or five people. Taking turns, I was always hanging out with a group around that number.

That was why it wasn't often that I had the opportunity to be alone with Satō-san. It was the same on the cruise ship during this summer vacation. In fact, I had even less private time because I was always hanging out with seven or eight other people. We even went to the pool, which I was somewhat resistant towards... Well, I was able to cover my skin with a rash guard, so there weren't any problems. Anyway, there was a reason why I forcibly created some time to spend alone with Satō-san today.

First things first...find an empty seat. Satō-san and I looked around, trying to find a seat before ordering. Unlike the school, the café terrace was spacious so there was no need to worry about finding a space.

However, because of the subject of today's conversation, I didn't want people around me if I could help it. If you want to keep some distance from other students, the best place would be a spot with poor sunlight.

What should I do...?

"I'm okay with the back of the room if you want."

"Eh? Is that okay?"

"I mean, you have something important to talk about, right?"

Satō-san, who had already figured it out, replied so and gave me a cute smile.

"Thank you."

I thanked her and we decided to take the unpopular seats with no view of the outside. After turning over the 'in use' tag, we headed over to place our orders.

"Let me pay for your drink. I'm the one who called you out here after all, Satō-san."

I pushed through Satō-san, who seemed to be hesitant, and ordered two cups of coffee before taking my seat.

“So...what did you want to talk about?”

As soon as we sat down, Satō-san began to speak. I also wasn’t intending to drag this out at all, but...

“Hmm...wait a moment.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Don’t you think there’s something strange about this atmosphere?”

I felt something was wrong regarding the atmosphere in this place so I went to check with her, but she just tilted her head curiously.

“Strange? I don’t think there’s anything though...”

“Yeah, I guess so. I’m sorry for saying something weird.”

At first, I also didn’t know why I felt this way. But maybe it was something I’d learnt from spending so much time with him...Kiyotaka. That guy never overlooked even the slightest detail. No matter if it was someone’s facial expressions, emotions or the atmosphere of a place like this. Whatever it might be, he would see through it and detect any anomalies. Perhaps I’d also become able to discern things like that...?

I didn’t know what was really going on, but that was what I decided to think for the time being. But what could it be? Why did I feel such a bad vibe? I tried to keep my composure and began quietly observing my surroundings.

“If only we could keep living on this cruise ship forever...”

As I said that, I put the cup to my mouth, and looked around casually.

“Ahaha, I feel the same. But if we keep going like this every day, we’ll run out of money.”

“That’s true. With the pool, movies, and good food, I’m sure I’ll run out of money soon.

I noticed that the strange atmosphere had disappeared. Or rather, it had faded away. Was I simply mistaken? Or maybe I was too preoccupied with

probing, and it became too late to notice that things were starting to change.

A group of three third-year girls sat at the table next to us, chatting and laughing.

“You know, you know~… Kisarazu-kun from Class B, yeah~?”

“No way, are you serious? I didn’t know that~”

They were chatting amicably, laughing out loud and having a great time.

Ahh, jeez… I should’ve spoken sooner. Even though the ocean side was more popular, it wasn’t surprising that some people might choose this place to avoid the crowds or keep out of the sun. I didn’t think our conversation would be very interesting to them, but they were still close enough to overhear us. We could just move and run away, but I didn’t want to leave a bad impression.

It would be one thing if they were first-years, but these were third-year upperclassmen. I couldn’t ignore the possibility that they could become upset if I were to move just because I didn’t want them to sit next to us. I knew very well that bullying could start from trivial things like that.

“Actually, I was thinking I should tell you first, Satō-san.”

Let’s not worry about the irrelevant third-year students and focus on Satō-san here. It would be rude to worry about unnecessary things.

“I think it’s about time I told everyone. About Kiyotaka that is.”

“… Yeah.”

As I thought, Satō-san had almost expected the contents of what I was going to say. She might’ve also considered the possibility that I was perhaps going to tell her we broke up… No, I don’t think so. If that had been the case, I wouldn’t have been able to keep a level head. I couldn’t imagine myself being able to laugh about it and say, ‘we broke up~’ without a care in the world.

“That’s why… I thought I should tell you, Satō-san.”

“Everyone’ll be really surprised when they find out, won’t they? That the two of you are dating.”

I simulated it over and over in my head. There was no doubt that no matter when I reveal it, it was going to cause a bit of a stir. I don't intend to speak ill of myself, but I don't have a very cute personality.

I was always so pompous and trying to push everyone else down. Before I met Kiyotaka, I acted much bossier than I was now because I didn't want to get bullied. I'd even sent amorous glances to boys I wasn't interested in.

"So when do you plan to tell everyone?"

When Satō-san asked me about the timing, I replied immediately.

"Since it's summer vacation now, I was thinking I'll wait until the second semester starts."

"What did Ayanokōji-kun say when you told him?"

"He said he'd adjust to whatever timing I liked."

Satō-san sucked on the straw and sipped her drink.

"I see. You guys are all lovey-dovey?"

"Eh?! Ehhh?"

"It's fine to tell me isn't it?"

"Y-yeah. Well, I mean, it'd be weird if we weren't lovey-dovey given that we're a couple."

"Have you kissed and stuff?"

"Ehhhhh?!"

"It's been a while since you started dating, right? So how's the progress?"
She clenched her right hand and held it out to my mouth, mimicking a microphone.

"...J-just once, by surprise."

Hearing my honest reply, Satō-san smiled widely.

"That's nice, I like the idea of a surprise kiss."

"R-really? I wasn't able to prepare or anything...Even though it was my first time..."

Hearing such a murmur, Satō-san's eyes widened slightly and she let out a little, "huh".

"Did you never do anything with Hirata-kun, Karuizawa-san? You were together for quite a while, weren't you?"

"Eh?"

"And if it's you, Karuizawa-san, it wouldn't be surprising if you had a boyfriend during middle school."

As I listened to Satō-san's comments, I felt the blood drain from my veins. Karuizawa Kei was a very popular girl of high status who was constantly moving from one boy to another. Reporting that such a person had only just had her first kiss certainly was a problem.

"Well...you see, it's because I'm a modest girl." I replied, trying my best to look composed. "Don't you think that it has to be a special person, not just any boyfriend, to allow that kind of thing?"

Suddenly feeling thirsty, I poured a third of the cup of coffee down my throat in one gulp.

"But Hirata-kun was a super cool boyfriend, wasn't he?"

"Well, yeah. But maybe it just wasn't stimulating enough for me."

This is fine; you can do it, me.

Now that I'd slipped up, I had no choice but to go along with the flow and deceive her.

"Hirata-kun's a passive guy, so he didn't make a move even if I wanted him to. It was a bit unsatisfying for me~"

Sorry, Hirata-kun! I apologized in my heart whilst I sacrificed him for my own sake.

"Is that so? Well, it's true that you might want your boyfriend to take the lead in some areas."

"Right, right?"

"But Ayanokōji-kun looks like a more passive guy, but he's actually quite aggressive, huh?"

Satō-san seemed a little regretful after saying that.

“Satō-san...I...”

“Ah, sorry Karuizawa-san. That’s not what I meant...!”

Today’s meeting was just supposed to be for me tell her that I was going to reveal our relationship. And yet, this was nothing more than a disagreeable jerk bragging about herself.

When I first came to this school, I thought that was fine. I was a gaudy woman who went around talking about all kinds of things regarding Hirata-kun.

But now, I think that kind of thing is no good. I consider her a precious friend, so I should’ve avoided saying something so thoughtless...I could say it was a defence mechanism to protect myself, but that sounded like an excuse and was just my selfish ego talking.

“It’s fine, it’s fine. I mean, it’s normal to fall in love with the same boy if you think they are nice, or rather, it’s something that’s been happening to me for a long time. Well...in my case, I was always on the losing side though.”

Satō-san pouted her lips as she let out her complaint. But after that, she immediately returned to her lively self.

“Just to be sure, if you dump Ayanokōji-kun...It’s fine right?”

When she says ‘it’s fine’ she means *that* right?

She continued without letting me clear my mind. “You know, now that Hirata-kun’s free, he can go get a new girlfriend, right? So it’s the same for Ayanokōji-kun, yeah?”

“That’s...well I guess that’s true, but...”

That definitely can’t happen! I mean we’re not breaking up! I was screaming in my heart, but I couldn’t show it on the surface so it was difficult.

“You know, I think you could aim for better guys, Karuizawa-san.”

“Better guys? Like who?”

“Answering who straight after being asked is a little difficult, but...like Tsukasaki-kun, or Nagumo-senpai.”

“Ehh~?”

For me, both of them were out of the question. It was true that if we were only talking about visuals, Tsukasaki-kun was top class, and the Student Council President might be too. And if we were talking about status and stuff, they were unmistakable at the top.

But...yeah, I didn't think they could rival Kiyotaka. That guy...he could be disagreeable at times, but...he's strong, handsome and mysterious. And most of all...He understands me.

“Okay! I said something unnecessary, thank you for the meal!”

“E-eh?”

“I mean it's written all over your face, Karuizawa-san. That for you, Ayanokōji-kun is number one.”

Jeez... My poker face can't get past Satō-san, who knew the details of my love life.

“Thank you, for telling me about it first. It made me happy.”

“I wonder... If that's the case then that's good.”

After that, our conversation turned to other people's love stories. Reflecting on the uninhabited island and things that were completely unrelated. It was the first time in a long time that the two of us were able to spend an enjoyable time together.

4.5

That same day, a little after 2:10pm. It was a time of day when most students had finished their lunch and were having fun.

I was quietly looking out to the ocean while waiting for the person I had called out. Taking out my phone, I clicked on my own name, Horikita Suzune, and opened the OAA app. I was expecting to see some changes after the results of the uninhabited island exam, but it seemed my scores were

exactly the same. It was possible that it wasn't reflected because there were a limited number of situations where the teachers could observe each student.

There also weren't any changes when I checked the OAA scores of the person I was meeting later.

I quickly closed my phone and stared out to the ocean in silence.

It had been a few days since the extremely harsh and somewhat unrealistic uninhabited island exam. Although my body no longer felt tired, my sense of routine remained thin because I was on a luxury cruise ship.

“Geh, you’re still here?”

The voice came from some distance away. Before I could turn around, the words continued.

“Could you not use other people to call me out? They’ll misunderstand and think you and I are close.”

I approached Yamaga-san, who was from her class and shared a guest cabin with her.

“Unfortunately there was no other way to contact you. Or did you want me to approach you during a meal with many people present?”

“I’d definitely hate that. But I also hate gettin’ approached in a way like today just as much.”

“If that’s the case, could you tell me in advance what I should do if I want to talk to you?”

“The best thing would be if you didn’t think about talking to me at all.”

Ibuki-san arrived at the meeting place about ten minutes late with a disagreeable look on her face. Without a single word of apology, she’d been complaining ever since.

“You don’t seem to have been delayed by some special circumstance. By any chance, are you trying to be Miyamoto Musashi?”

“What? I don’t even know what that means.”

Trying to make me angry...that couldn’t be the case, right? Well, if that was her goal, she should’ve made me wait for two hours instead of ten

minutes.

“If it wasn’t just to harass me, I’d like to know why you’re late.”

“Huh? As I see it, *you’re* the one harassing *me* by calling me out.”

“Yes. You’re absolutely right.”

When I answered back in all seriousness, she sighed in exasperation.

“What do you mean by, if I ignore your call, you’ll consider me to have run away? You piss me off.”

“If I reached out to you normally, you would just ignore me, right?”

“Course I would. Who’d meet up with you because they want to?”

I was prepared for her to disregard me completely, but she came, albeit late. She disliked the idea of losing to me more than anything, so calling her out with a challenge was the correct decision.

“Ah jeez, I get it already.”

‘If you have something to say, say it quickly’, was what her hurried attitude seemed to show. I’d like to be sympathetic to her feelings, but the circumstances meant that wasn’t possible.

“Shall we talk while we walk? As for talking while standing around, it will take some time and this place is conspicuous.”

It was a suitable spot to meet up at, but not a good place to have a private conversation.

“Huh?...Fuckin’ hell.”

Even though she was irritated, she followed me relatively obediently. For her part, she was feeling frustrated because she finished with fewer points than me in the uninhabited island exam. I wouldn’t be surprised if she came at me looking for a chance at revenge.

We started to move and when we were able to blend in with the surrounding crowd, I started talking.

“It has to do with Amasawa-san, the one we fought during the uninhabited island exam.”

“...Ah, that shitty arrogant first-year.”

I couldn't see Ibuki-san's expression because she was walking slightly behind me.

"It's a little hard to talk, so could you walk a bit faster?"

"Oh, shut it. What pace I walk at is entirely up to me."

"When you're alone, yes." I stopped walking and looked back. "You want to get this over and done with, that's why I'm trying to keep this as brief as possible for you. But in order to do that, I'm going to need your cooperation."

"Yeah, yeah, I get it, I get it. I just need to walk faster, right?"

Saying that, she started walking past me with a speed like she was participating in a walking race.

How could I put it? She was like a child in a bad sense. Of course, since she wasn't childish in a good way, it couldn't be used to her advantage. I was watching Ibuki-san's back in disbelief while thinking that to myself when she turned and looked back at me with a scary face.

"Aren't you coming?!"

"Too fast a pace is also a problem. Could you walk moderately fast?"

"Ahh, for fuck's sake!" Ibuki-san ruffled her hair, and then came back. "I'll listen to what you have to say properly, but you have to agree to a revenge match! Do you understand?!"

"Right. We're expecting to have a sports festival during the second semester...Depending on the circumstances, I might be able to make it happen."

"You mean I can take my revenge, right?"

"I just said it, didn't I? I'll make it happen depending on the circumstances."

After taking a few moments to sort out the meaning of my words, she bit her lip in displeasure.

"In other words, you also might not agree to it depending on the circumstances, right?"

“Oh my, even someone with your brain can decipher things like that. Well done, you have my admiration.”

When I clapped my hands, it seemed she felt she was being mocked, as my hand was slapped away.

“You’re violent.”

“Shut up! If you don’t promise you’ll accept, we’re done here!”

“I don’t really mind, but then you’ll never get the revenge match you want so badly.”

“Hey...”

“I can’t promise anything here, but depending on your actions, the possibility remains open. That’s a very important thing, don’t you think? I don’t think I’ve lost to you. In other words, until you graduate...no, even after you graduate, you’re going to have regrets about not winning.”

“Aah...!”

“So? Are you going to listen to me or not? The choice is yours, Ibuki-san.”

“I get it, I get it already! I just have to listen, right?!”

“It would’ve been better to be obedient from the start. This conversation with me, who you hate so much, would finish quicker, so it would be easier for you.”

I decided to give her some advice for next time. Ibuki-san was hoping for a revenge match, but that really did depend on the future. Of course, if it would conflict with our class’ objective, I won’t become her opponent. Talking about that here would only bring about negative repercussions though, so I’ll keep quiet. The fact that I gave her room to potentially accept a revenge match may have helped lessen her sour mood somewhat.

Ibuki-san stopped in her tracks and started walking at my pace.

“And? What about that cocky first-year?”

“How did it make you feel when you traded hands with her?”

“How did I feel...?”

“Stronger than anyone you’ve ever fought until now, isn’t that how you felt?”

“Well...she wasn’t in perfect condition, so I might have to admit it.”

Whether it was myself or Ibuki-san, there was such a difference in skill that we wouldn’t be able to match Amasawa-san even if she was standing on her hands.

“Yeah, there’s no doubt that Amasawa’s strength ain’t normal for a first-year. Ah, I don’t wanna think about it ’cause it makes me feel sick, okay?”

“Don’t say that. You’re the only one I can and need to have this conversation with right now.”

Now that she’d confronted her face to face, Ibuki-san could also understand that. If I were to explain Amasawa-san’s strength to someone who didn’t know anything, they wouldn’t be able to comprehend it at all.

“I know it’s a strange turn of events, but you could also be in for some kind of damage. I thought I should apologize for that first.”

“Damage?” Ibuki-san raised an eyebrow, as if she didn’t understand what I meant.

“I’ve been thinking I should investigate Amasawa-san’s background for a bit.”

“You’re gonna stick your nose into her business? Wouldn’t it be better to just leave her alone? She seems to have a few screws loose and is a completely unpredictable type.”

For Ibuki-san to say something to that extent, she must have a powerful impression of Amasawa-san.

“Certainly, she’s a dangerous opponent. But I have a feeling that bad things will happen in the future if we leave her alone.”

“Doesn’t sound like she was interested in you though?”

“It’s not for me. It’s for Ayanokōji-kun.”

At the mention of that name, Ibuki-san’s gaze turned towards the ocean, as if she understood.

“Ayanokōji, right. I don’t really know much, but she sure seemed to know a lot about Ayanokōji.”

Yes, Amasawa-san knew about Ayanokōji-kun. It didn’t seem like she only knew him starting this year as a mere underclassman.

“He’s my classmate. If there’s anything I can do to help, of course I’ll do it.”

Even *my* teeth were on edge after saying that. If you’d asked me when I first entered this school, I would’ve had goosebumps and denied it with all I had.

“But if she figures out you’re looking into her, she’ll probably pick a fight with you. At that time, you wouldn’t stand a chance, would you?”

“Her strength is...how do I put it?...I feel like she’s in a completely different dimension to the world we live in.”

“I’d like to say don’t call it ‘we’, but *that* is definitely something else.”

“So there was no one else as good as her in your memory either then.”

“I’m the strongest of the second-years. It was the same when I was in middle school. There weren’t many girls who practised martial arts, and I was never gonna be beaten by someone who only had a passing interest in it. In other words, I’ve been at the top for as long as I can remember.”

“Yes, that’s right. I think your strength is second only to mine in the second-year, I won’t deny that.”

“You’re denying it so much. You don’t recognise my strength?”

“Nobody said that. I just don’t think I’m weaker than you.”

“No, no, I’m definitely stronger than you.”

“I wonder where you get so much confidence from. What’s your basis?”

“Intuition?”

“I wouldn’t count on that at all. You’re just being self-centred in your analysis aren’t you? We’ve not once fought each other at full strength. We don’t have all the information to make a clear decision on who is stronger, do we?”

“Then it’s fine to put me as number one provisionally, right? Why do I have to be second?”

“It’s the result of an objective evaluation.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

We reached one of our destinations, the café terrace.

“It’s going to take a while, so let me buy you a drink. What would you like?”

“I’m fine with anything, but...I’ll have an ice lemon tea.”

Ibuki-san and I finished ordering and I paid with my mobile phone. 1400 points for two drinks, that was pretty expensive.

We received two drinks from the barista who was ready to serve us.

“Here you go. It’s on me.”

“It feels strange that you’re buyin’ me a drink.”

“You should just accept gratitude when it comes.”

“Well, that’s fine I guess.”

Ibuki-san received the cup with her left hand and took a sip while staring off into the distance.

We then moved a little further away and stopped in a less crowded area.

“Because I fought her, I know we share the same sense of strength. On top of that, did you sense any weaknesses, or quirks in her fighting style?”

“She’s not someone you can analyse that easily.”

“...That’s true.”

It would be best if it didn’t turn into a rematch, but... I didn’t know what would happen if I pushed her too far.

“If you’re on your own, she’ll just turn the tables on you and finish it. I don’t think that outcome can be reversed.”

Ibuki-san wasn’t trying to put me down or anything, she was just stating facts. Even if I were to retrain myself from this point on, it would play out just as she indicated.

“You’re free to think about it all you want, but I think it would be best to just let it go.”

“Did you hear what I just said? For Ayanokōji-kun...”

“Yeah, that.” She interrupted my words, pointing the hand that held her cup towards me. “No matter what Amasawa does, if it’s him he can handle it on his own, no?”

“...What do you mean?”

Certainly, Ayanokōji-kun is an excellent person. It was because I’d been watching him for a year and had a chance to learn a bit about him that I knew this.

But there were still many mysteries, and not everything had been revealed regarding his academic and physical abilities. Even I, who was in the same class as him, didn’t know everything, so Ibuki-san, who was from another class, shouldn’t know more. From the outside, all that should be known was that he was good at math and his motor skills weren’t too bad.

“I felt like I was being assertive, but you must be buying into Ayanokōji-kun quite a bit.”

“I’m not buying into anythin’, anybody would think that considering his strength.”

Ibuki-san clearly said ‘*anybody would think that considering his strength*’.

“Did you by any chance hear about what happened with Hōsen-kun from somewhere?”

“Huh? Hōsen? Who’s that again? Ah, that gorilla looking guy?”

We weren’t on the same page and I was wrapped up in a queasy feeling.

“Where did you get the information that Ayanokōji-kun is strong?”

“You say where...”

As she was choosing her words, her face looked as if she was lost.

“Did he keep you in the dark about all that? Did he not? I’ve forgotten...”

She closed her eyes and crossed her arms, as if she was trying to remember something.

“Something happened without my knowledge, didn’t it?”

I’ll give a little push here.



"So you're the one who doesn't know anything?"

“Hmm... There’s nothing I don’t know, but it’s not like I know what you’re talking about either.”

Since we were both keeping each other in check, I decided to take the plunge and continue the conversation.

“I think we need to compare the information we have.”

“I don’t really want to though.”

“That won’t do. Now that you’ve mentioned it, tell me everything you know. What do you know about Ayanokōji-kun that I don’t?”

This was some kind of once in a lifetime chance to gather information. Anything, I didn’t care what it was, even if it was a little thing, if Ibuki-san knew about it...

“Well, that’s fine I guess. So, what don’t you know?”

It seemed Ibuki-san couldn’t decide on what to say so she asked me, sounding as if she considered this a hassle.

“I’m curious about what you were about to say earlier.”

“The thing I was going to talk about was the rooftop thing with Ryūen and Ayanokōji. You know, the time when he called out Karuizawa and tortured her with water.”

“What? Wait, what are you talking about...? I have absolutely no idea.”

Ryūen-kun? Rooftop? And Karuizawa-san? Water torture?

Question marks kept popping up in my head.

“Ah~, so it’s like that? That means he hasn’t told anyone in the class then, has he?”

Ibuki-san nodded her head as if she were satisfied that she had come to understand it first. Then, Ibuki-san started talking about something I didn’t know about Ayanokōji-kun.

As I listened to her, I stared out to the shining sea so as not to let my emotions get the better of me, whilst also trying to sort out my head at the same time. The fact that Ryūen-kun turned his attention to Karuizawa-san in

order to fish out Ayanokōji-kun, who had been hiding in our class. And how, in order to save her, Ayanokōji-kun went to the rooftop alone.

Once there, he showed his overwhelming strength and overpowered Ryūen-kun and the others. Even though I knew about him to a certain extent, I was still surprised many times over.

“...So the reason why Ryūen-kun stopped messing with our class was because something like that happened...I really had no idea.”

“Anyway, now you know, right? That guy’s strength ain’t normal.”

“Yes, that’s right. He’s a man with immeasurable ability... Having fought both, who do you think would win in a fight between the two of them?”

“Who knows? I haven’t seen either of them take a fight seriously. I’m not trying to say it’s because he’s a guy and she’s a girl, but isn’t Ayanokōji better overall? So there’s no need for you to get involved.”

Even if Amasawa-san tried to do anything to him, he might just have the strength to deal with her.

“But having physical strength doesn’t necessarily mean he’ll be safe. Especially in school, he might not be able to avoid expulsion. In fact, that strength could become his downfall.”

On the uninhabited island, Amasawa-san was able to do whatever she wanted, but that wasn’t the case while inside the school.

“Thank you Ibuki-san. Your information was more useful than I thought it would be.”

“You’re not gonna talk to Ayanokōji about all this?”

“Not yet anyway. This whole thing is about him to begin with, so I wouldn’t be surprised if he had already guessed what was going on.”

He should especially have some idea regarding Amasawa-san, given that they had been in contact several times even before the uninhabited island exam.

“And then there’s the question of the paper...”

“Paper?”

“Besides Amasawa-san, there was one other thing on my mind concerning the uninhabited island exam.”

I explained to her how someone put a piece of paper in my tent. Ibuki-san now seemed to understand why I was on the northeast side of the island on the last day of the exam.

“I see. Someone other than Amasawa sent you a note implying Ayanokōji was in danger.”

“So you know the word ‘implying’, huh?”

“Could you stop making out that I’m stupid?”

Ibuki-san’s academic ability score was low in the OAA, but she was surprisingly easy to talk to. I didn’t feel as uncomfortable as I would when talking to someone who was clearly not at the same level as me.

“That time, Amasawa-san looked at the paper she received from me and tore it into little pieces. That behaviour had been bothering me for a while, but I think it might be because she didn’t want to leave any handwriting evidence. Anyway, all I could remember clearly was that whoever wrote it had beautiful handwriting.”

“Beautiful handwriting?”

“Yes. I don’t think there are many people who can write with that level of penmanship.”

“I see. So there’s a possibility that the guy who can write that well is up to something. But won’t it be hard to find them if that’s all you have to go off? Plus the evidence was destroyed.”

“It’s not going to be easy. I can’t just go around from person to person asking to look at their handwriting. The other thing is, and this is still an unsubstantiated theory, there’s a possibility that the person who wrote those letters is physically capable. Whether it’s Ayanokōji-kun or Amasawa-san, if they have such exceptional strength, it’s also possible for this other person. Furthermore, it’s highly likely that they’re a first-year.”

“Given that it concerns Ayanokōji and Amasawa, then sure, they could be a strong one. But what’s the basis for them being a first-year?”

“Someone who was acquainted with Amasawa, who could be recognized by their handwriting. It’s unlikely to be a second or third-year.”

“I see.”

Ayanokōji-kun, Amasawa-san, and a third party. Right now, I didn’t have a complete picture of what linked each of them at all. But I couldn’t just leave it alone.

“I intend to move in a way that keeps you out of harm’s way, but I can’t guarantee what will happen if I’m brought down. If Amasawa-san shows any strange behaviour, don’t hesitate to get the school involved —”

A light click echoed across the deck. Ibuki-san pushed the cup of tea against the railing strongly and the contents of the cup, which had still been more than half full, overflowed and covered her hands.

“What’s wrong?”

“If you’re brought down? I told you, I’m the one who’s gonna take you down.”

“It’s not like I intend to be helplessly beaten. But we don’t know what the unseen enemies, including Amasawa-san, might do, so...”

“The other side has two, so we should have two as well.”

“Is that...”

“If you add me, the strongest out of the second-years, it’s a different story, right? If you absolutely insist, then I guess I’ve got no choice but to lend a hand.”

With that, she put the cup in her other hand and licked the lemon tea off the back of her hand.

“What’s going on? I can’t believe you’ve agreed to cooperate with me twice.”

“I don’t like how that first-year got the better of us, and I can’t stomach the idea of you losin’ to anyone but me. Besides...the truth is you came to me with the intention of relying on me for help, didn’t you?”

Ibuki-san looked me straight in the eye.

“No, not at all?”

“Huh? Why don’t you just be honest with me? Go on, say it, ‘I need your help Ibuki-san’.”

“I hadn’t thought that for even one second though?”

“...Alright then! Don’t come asking for my help a second time! Bye-bye!”

As the angry Ibuki-san was about to walk away, I grabbed her left wrist.

“What is it!”

“I’m going to have you work for free to pay for the drink I bought you earlier.”

“Huh? You said it was on you and now you want to take my money?”

“Nothing is more expensive than something that was given for free.”

“Then I’ll pay you back right now.”

Ibuki-san took out her mobile phone, but I continued.

“In that case, I’ll take three million points.” I raised my eyebrow and tilted my head, as if I couldn’t understand why Ibuki-san didn’t already know this.
“It was my treat. Don’t you think it adds that much value?”

“I don’t think that at all! It was 700 points wasn’t it?!”

“If you don’t have the ability to pay me, then I’ll write it off if you lend me a hand.”

“You know...I’m gonna say it again, but are you incapable of being honest?”

“If I need to be honest, then I will be.”

For some reason, I felt it was embarrassing to honestly ask Ibuki-san for help, so I ended up doing it this way. But I maintained my usual demeanour and continued with my high-handedness.

“You really have a nasty personality.”

“I think we are both equal in this regard, Ibuki-san.”

Our gazes crossed each other and Ibuki-san drank the rest of the cup even though she was disgusted.

“That’s one expensive lemon tea.”

I laughed a little because I felt such a complaint to be somewhat amusing.

4.6

It was dusk, and the sun was setting just beyond the horizon.

Ichinose was waiting for me at the place we agreed upon while staring out at the sea. When I saw her somewhat fragile profile, I felt a little hesitant to call her name.

“Ichinose.”

“Ayanokōji-kun. Hello.”

After exchanging a brief greeting, I stood in front of her. It wasn’t the kind of atmosphere where I could get straight to the point, so I decided to start with a bit of small talk.

“Are you still continuing with your strategy to act as a bank for your class’ private points?”

It had nothing to do with the topic at hand, but Ichinose didn’t look displeased at all.

“Yeah. We decided there was no harm in keeping it up. We’ll save up as much as we can and then, should we not need it, I can just return all the points that were deposited at the time back to everyone. It’s easy.”

She said it was easy, but it was a strategy that could only keep working because Ichinose was so trustworthy.

Like she just said, there was nothing wrong with keeping at it if they could. If their balances were automatically diminishing, some inconveniences may arise, but if you were guaranteed to get back what was filtered off, you could say it was a good move to have a large sum of money available just in case. The fact that it was the one and only advantage given to Ichinose was also a major factor.

“But the strategy of pooling points is just a provision for emergencies. That alone isn’t enough, right?”

“If it was something you just started, it would be a different story, but this time it’s a continuation.”

In other words, they haven’t prepared a new strategy, but were just maintaining the status quo.

“What do you think we’re lacking, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“What your class is lacking?”

“Yeah. I mean, we can’t really see that part properly ourselves...I was wondering how you see our class, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“During the uninhabited island exam, I was able to speak with some of your classmates. Also, after the celebration party, the first thing that struck me was that there are many good-natured students in your class.”

This was something that she should’ve already known without me saying it, but it was also an integral factor. Because they fundamentally didn’t like to fight, they couldn’t proactively go for class points.

“It might be important to be a little more assertive. I’m not saying you should use foul play or subterfuge, but I think it’s essential to be strong against rough play.”

“Rough play...huh. Yeah, you’re right. We have to be more firm or we won’t be able to fight.”

I didn’t have any concrete solutions in mind just yet. It was painfully obvious that she was trying her best to push forward towards her uncertain future.

“The uninhabited island exam the other day. About my reply...”

“Y-yeah...that’s right, that’s what we’re here to talk about, isn’t it?”

I gently pulled my face close to Ichinose’s ear and, while knowing that there was nobody else around, tried to speak in a voice that would be difficult to hear without focusing on it—That was when it happened.

“What are you and Honami talking about alone in a place like this?”

Ichinose, surprised by the owner of the voice, the Student Council President Nagumo, hurriedly moved away, but he definitely would've seen the scene where there was almost zero distance between us.

Was I followed? No, I wouldn't be stupid enough to be followed without knowing.

So Ichinose was marked right from the start?

No, it was probably due to the surveillance from the countless eyes that Nagumo had under his control. No matter how much you try to avoid being seen, it was impossible to perfectly escape the eyes of every third-year on this cruise ship. It wouldn't be surprising if several people had seen me on my way here.

However, there was no sign that Nagumo would make contact during these past few days. As if he had planned it, he made contact at a time when I wanted to avoid it the most.

“Good day, Student Council President Nagumo.”

The flow was cut off at once, and Ichinose rushed back into normal mode. It wasn't like she'd managed to completely sweep away her agitation and bewilderment. However, even if she had been perfectly mended, I didn't think it would've mattered to the current Nagumo.

“It seemed like you met on the last day of the uninhabited island exam, but are the two of you having another sneaky clandestine meeting?”

“U-umm...” Suddenly having recalled the incident on the uninhabited island, Ichinose was at a loss for words. For her, it was an incident where she accidentally confessed to me, and was not a simple thing to cover up.

I was about to interject, but Nagumo stopped me with his hand. I was now under strong pressure not to interrupt. “Well, it doesn't really matter what it is. It's just—if Honami, a fellow student council member, might be brought to tears, as the Student Council President, I can't just leave her alone, can I?”

As I thought, it was like that. I had already guessed this since the moment I fully understood that Kiriyama had joined Nagumo's side. As Nagumo approached us, he stood next to Ichinose.

“Brought to tears...is it?”

“It’s fine if this is just my mistake, but it’s about Karuizawa.”

Not daring to invite any misunderstandings, he spoke slowly and in small doses to make sure she understood deeply.

“Karuizawa-san?”

Of course, Ichinose couldn’t understand why Kei’s name would be mentioned at a time like this.

“It seems you’ve only told your closest friends, but I’ve heard that you’ve been going out with Karuizawa for quite some time. Isn’t that right, Ayanokōji?”

You’ve been going out with Karuizawa.

Even after hearing those words, Ichinose probably didn’t understand their meaning straight away.

“What, you didn’t know? You and Ayanokōji seemed to be good friends, Honami, so I thought he’d already told you.” After saying that, there was a slight pause and then he continued. “Don’t tell me you were thinking of two timing, were you?”

I didn’t return any of Nagumo’s one-sided attacks. There would be no point in saying that I was trying to tell her about my dating Kei at this very moment. Rather, it was obvious that it would just be an act of rubbing salt into the wound.

“Is that...true?”

“Hey Ayanokōji, since Honami is asking, why don’t you give her an answer? Or am I mistaken and you have nothing to do with Karuizawa? If that’s the case, deny it and I’ll give you my sincerest apologies, yeah?”

Kiriyama had seen me and Kei together. However, I didn’t give any definite indication that we were dating. In other words, there wasn’t a zero percent chance that he made an assumption regarding my relationship with Kei and was trying to play a trick.

But there was no option for me to say ‘that’s not true’ here.

If I were to say that here and then later say that we really were going out, the lie would be exposed. No, in the first place, it was better to assume that

Nagumo would've found proof of his claims before stepping in.

“Actually, I hadn’t told *anyone* about it, so where in the world did you get this information?”

“Ah...!”

I could see Ichinose’s obvious shock at my admission. Without a doubt, Nagumo must’ve realised that Ichinose had feelings for me.

“I guess you knew I wasn’t just jumping onto mere gossip and speculation, eh?”

He showed his teeth happily, but didn’t reveal what he knew or how he knew it. I vividly remembered Kiryūin’s words when she said Nagumo might be the type of person I would be no good at dealing with.

“I don’t intend to say anything about your love life. But, as I said before, Honami is a member of the student council and has a good chance of becoming the Student Council President in the future. I have to protect her.”

“I can understand why the relationship between Ichinose and I seemed unnatural from your point of view, Student Council President Nagumo. But don’t you think it was a bit premature for you to step in at this stage?”

“You’re right. It would be one thing if it was an instance of Honami dating you and being deceived, but from the looks of it, that doesn’t seem to be the case. It might’ve been a completely unrelated bit of gossip. But you know, when two people meet up in a deserted place like this just before dinner, it’s understandable that someone might think that way, right? I’m sure your girlfriend would be very sad to see you in this situation.”

“You’re right, it might cause needless misunderstandings.”

“As Student Council President...No, as a member of the student council, I just did what was natural.”

Nagumo gave Ichinose one last look and then approached me.

“You should introduce me to your girlfriend next time. I’d like to see her face at least once.”

Then, Nagumo tapped my shoulder and whispered in my ear. “You’re free to think what you like about my methods. But I haven’t even gotten started

yet, you know?"

"It hasn't even started yet?"

"You can mix a hundred truths with one lie and nobody would notice. You need to make a decision before it's too late. If you ever want to fight me, at that time, come and see me. If you get down on your knees, I'll be your opponent."

In other words, if I didn't agree to fight Nagumo, the relentless surveillance and harassment would continue indefinitely. He meant to drag me out onto the playing field even if he had to use force.

"See you later."

Leaving it at that, he vacated the area.

It hasn't even started yet, huh? An overwhelming surveillance and intelligence network that only Nagumo possesses. All of the third-year student body would become his formidable limbs, eyes and ears.

That was, for the students of this school who live on the premises, synonymous with the fact that their entire lives would be exposed. And then there was that phrase, 'a hundred truths with one lie'. He was only telling the truth right now, but it meant he was going to start mixing in some lies.

To the casual observer, it was a mere extension of harassment. I couldn't help but say that Nagumo's behaviour was childish. However, he had done more mental damage to me than anyone I had ever fought until now.

Nagumo didn't care that he was antagonizing his peers by sticking to me. Either he didn't think he'd lose their trust over something like this, or he had no intention of gaining their trust in the first place, as long as they were bound by his rules.

In any case, it was certain that Nagumo had an appropriate level of determination.

With Nagumo gone, all that was left in the area was a heavy silence. The lighthearted atmosphere that had been present when we first met up with each other had disappeared.

"Aahaha...Somehow, our conversation got a little sidetracked..."

“That’s right.”

“Uh, well, that...why was I called here again?”

“That’s...well the uninhabited island—”

“Ah...! That, you mean that thing? That’s...about that...you know...”

After shouting loudly, her voice gradually became quieter.

“Could you...forget about it?” Ichinose’s smile never faltered as she forced that out. “I’m sorry...for not knowing anything. I got carried away in my excitement and said something strange...”

“Like Nagumo said, I didn’t tell anyone. It was only natural that you didn’t know.”

“T-that’s right isn’t it? That may be so, but...as I thought, I was just being an idiot! I-I mean Ayanokōji-kun, you’re so kind...really, so great...there was no way you wouldn’t already have a girlfriend, right...?”

Despite Ichinose’s strong will to never lose her smile, her eyes were clearly moist, and they were beginning to fill with tears. Attempting to stay calm and pretending that everything was fine, she tried her best to keep the tears from overflowing.

What kind of emotions did people feel when they fell in love with a person who already had someone in their heart?

This was something you couldn’t really come to understand from television, books or through hearing about it. It was a little different from what I’d planned, but I was able to experience it right before my eyes.

“—Goodbye.”

Ichinose squeezed out a single word and then ran off. I didn’t say anything or try and reach out a hand to her retreating back. I just saw her off in silence.

“Nagumo, huh. I think I’ve made a much more troublesome enemy than I thought.”

It didn’t exactly go as planned, but the path I was on remained the same. Even though the unfavourable situations piling up against me were a

nuisance, I couldn't help but feel a sense of curiosity welling up from deep within my heart.



Chapter 5: A Treasure Hunt Game Filled With Women Troubles

There were only three days of vacation remaining on board the cruise ship.

The days were too intense and passed by extremely quickly.

Early in the morning, just as everyone was beginning to regret that their time on this cruise ship was coming to an end, the school sent out an email to all the students at once.

“Today at 10am, we will hold a treasure hunt game? What’s this?”

We all saw the unfamiliar word ‘game’ in the email and reread it carefully at the same time.

“Treasure Hunt Game”

- A bonus game free for anyone to participate
- Conditions for participation: Minimum of one person of any gender and 10,000 private points are required.
- Commencement date: Today, August 8th
- A more detailed explanation will be provided at the venue (must arrive at the 5th floor by 10am)
- You may choose not to participate after receiving the explanation.

“For a second I thought it was gonna be a special exam, but that couldn’t be, right? Doesn’t ‘free for anyone to participate’ sound interesting?”

We were all at liberty to take part and on top of that, the only risk to each individual was the 10,000 point participation fee.

The details were unknown at this time, but since it was called a treasure hunt, it was probably safe to assume that there would be a big payoff beyond

the participation fee. If you could find the treasure you could get private points; I was expecting the details to be that simple.

For someone who was always short of money like me, if there was a chance to earn a temporary bonus, it was a good idea to be proactive and participate. The fact that only 10,000 points were required to take part also seemed reasonable.

Miyamoto and Hondō naturally seemed to be participating and started talking about going together after they finished their meal. I was thinking of inviting Akito to join me too...

“Don’t worry about me, go have fun...”

Lying on the bed, Akito was breathing a little sluggishly. He had a fever, so he was going to sleep instead. Perhaps it was because he was too enthusiastic at the private pool yesterday.

“If it weren’t for the fact that we couldn’t bring our personal belongings, I would’ve lent you a game console.”

“There’s no way I’d feel like playing a game in this state...”

While somewhat exasperated, Akito nuzzled his face into the pillow.

We finished a meal with Akito still lying in bed, and after spending a leisurely time in the room until about 9:50am, the three of us decided to head for the venue, leaving Akito behind while feeling somewhat sorry for him.

5.1

There was a large crowd of students packed into the hall at the designated venue.

I was wondering how many people would participate, but it was roughly half the student body. I imagined there would be a few more, but students who weren’t interested in treasure hunting might’ve seen this as a chance to enjoy themselves to the fullest at a less crowded pool. Since the event was free for anyone to participate in, the students were at liberty to decide how they wanted to spend the day.

Not long after the deadline, the stage in front us started to get noisy. The details of the game were to be explained by Takatō-sensei, the homeroom teacher for third-year Class A.

Almost all of the teachers seemed to be present, but I couldn't see Acting Director Tsukishiro or Shiba, the homeroom teacher for first-year Class D. If Shiba had also been hired by *that man*, it wouldn't be surprising if he stepped aside after what happened on the island. In fact, Mashima-sensei and Chabashira had seen him, so his role had become known.

"Good morning everybody. As it's now 10am, we will close the application process for all students who are not already here at the present time."

The other teacher standing at the entrance slowly closed the door. Despite the fact that participation in the game was voluntary, rules were rules. Even if it was only one second over, they wouldn't allow any late comers to participate.

"Before I start explaining the details, I will describe how we came up with this treasure hunt game. This treasure hunt game was inspired by a suggestion from Nagumo-kun, the Student Council President, that we should have an interesting and fun recreational activity to deepen our friendships after each year group competed against each other while living on the harsh uninhabited island. Nagumo-kun, please say hello."

Nagumo stood in front of the participants after Takatō-sensei called out his name.

"With the full cooperation of the school, the bonus game is now open. The idea for this project came from the student council's daily commitment to enriching and improving school life. During the uninhabited island exam, all years often competed against each other, but in this treasure hunt, it's possible to make partners across year groups. We hope you take advantage of the merits and participate."

He concluded his brief speech with a statement that was typical of a serious Student Council President.

I was reminded of the Nagumo who showed up in front of us the day before.

As Ichinose was a member of the student council, she was sat beside members of the faculty and listened to his speech. From what I could see, nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary...

I remembered the tears that Ichinose had unexpectedly shed yesterday. The wound she suffered in her heart surely wasn't light. She was acting naturally now, but it should take a certain amount of time for her to heal. At that time, any love she might've had for me would disappear, or may even turn into hostility. I wondered what kind of changes she would undergo, and I was certain that this would be a major turning point for her in the future.

After Nagumo's speech, the microphone was handed back over to Takatō-sensei.

"Student council members will not be able to participate in this treasure hunt as they will be in charge of administration. They will be working on paperwork during their holiday, so please treat them kindly."

Horikita, Ichinose and some other student council members were gathered to Nagumo's side.

"Well then, let me give you an outline of the treasure hunt game. There are no complicated rules, so it's very simple."

Takatō-sensei raised his right hand, holding a square piece of paper between his thumb and forefinger. Its dimensions were roughly five centimetres square, with a QR code printed on it.

"A total of 100 stickers with these QR codes printed on them have been placed all over the ship. The participants will be tasked with finding these stickers during the treasure hunt game. The game works by scanning the data with a special app, which then rewards the user with private points. However, the number of times you can scan the data with your phone is limited to just once. The results will be reflected and you will be paid immediately upon accessing the site, so please be careful. Of course, if you try to scan a QR code that has already been used by another phone, it will be invalid and you will not receive the reward. Also, should anyone remove the sticker without permission or use a pen to make it unreadable, the culprit will be punished severely, even if it is a game, so please avoid this at all costs."

I see, it was a very simple game where luck was essential.

“The lowest number of private points you can earn is 5,000 points. There are 50, exactly half of the total, of these stickers available. And then, the second most common is 30 stickers with 10,000 points as a reward.”

Unfortunately, that meant that half of the 100 stickers would result in losing money. Even if you could find one of the 30% with 10,000 points as a reward, you would only break even, gaining nothing.

“The remaining 20 stickers consist of 10 for 50,000 points, 5 for 100,000 points, and 3 for 300,000 points, with the last two stickers giving 500,000 and 1,000,000 points. It’s safe to assume that the more difficult it is to find the hidden QR code, the more private points you will receive.”

There were about 200 participants, which meant that half the participants would receive nothing. However, if you could find the sticker with the most difficult to detect QR code, you would get a million points. This wasn’t an amount that would be easy to come by even from a special exam. If it was like that, it wasn’t a surprise that people felt it was worth taking the risk, even if half of us would lose money...

“In contrast to the over 200 students participating, there are only 100 QR codes. It is inevitable that there will be some students who won’t receive any rewards. However, we do have a way to avoid that risk. Participants of any year can pair up, and if one member of the pair uses their mobile phone to scan the QR code, the reward for that QR code, if it is 30,000 points, will be 30,000 points for both members of the pair.”

This meant that should everyone pair up and scan the 100 QR codes, then 200 people would receive rewards. This would greatly reduce the possibility of losing money without getting a single point. The only disadvantage was that if you found multiple QR codes, you might have trouble deciding which code to scan. This disadvantage would require some adjustment, but the advantages of pairing up seemed to be high.

“Also, the area where the QR codes are posted is within a predetermined range.”

Even if he said they were placed all over the ship, there were of course many places throughout the ship that were considered off-limits. Using a screen to assist, Takatō-sensei explained.

To summarize briefly, toilets and guest cabins naturally weren't covered with QR code stickers, and employee-only floors and rooms were also excluded. There also weren't any stickers hidden in the levels that students were forbidden to enter. It was emphasized that it was limited to only public places and areas where students were allowed to move.

"In addition...we will provide this."

As soon as he said that, all the teachers started handing out papers at once. Not long after, I received a folded piece of paper. The map of the ship had been slightly modified, and the areas with stickers had been filled in with colours. Also, there was some unfamiliar text and shapes listed on it.

"Basically, this game is mostly about luck. However, there is a small element of ability mixed in."

Perhaps he was referring to the text and shapes on the maps that were handed out.

"There are three riddles written here. If you can solve these riddles, you will be able to find a total of three hidden QR codes. You should assume that you won't be able to find these three unless you solve the riddles."

So, out of a total of 100 stickers, there were three specially prepared QR codes. I skimmed through the three riddles and then put the paper in my pocket.

"Registration will open for 30 minutes starting now. Please indicate whether you will participate or not from your mobile phone. If anyone is unable to turn on the power due to their battery running out, please contact the nearest teacher immediately."

One after another, students pulled out their phones and started to check in. A few students left the room, but it was safe to assume that almost everyone in the room would be participating. The treasure hunt game would end at 5pm, and we would have to scan the QR code by that time.

I, like many others, took out my phone and decided to participate.

However, with so many people here, the number of stares focused on me was the highest it'd been in days, and when it was on such a large scale, the fact that they were looking at me would be noticed by other year groups. I

wondered if they were working together, or if they had been instructed to do so beforehand, but as soon as the other years started to follow their gazes, the stares at me temporarily diminished and scattered.

It seemed like they didn't intend to make it known that they were watching me at this point in time, and were instead saving it for a more effective or damaging situation. As long as I didn't know what their ultimate goal was, I needed to conduct myself properly.

I spotted Kei, my girlfriend, among the participants, but we didn't even look at each other. This was because we refrained from making blatant eye contact as long as our relationship remained unannounced. Of course, even though we were told we could pair up, we wouldn't. It was unthinkable for Ayanokōji Kiyotaka and Karuizawa Kei to pair up in a place like this.

At this point, Horikita appeared in front of the students with a microphone.

"I am Horikita from the student council. I have a request for all students who will be participating. In order to prevent fraud, participants will be asked to pay 10,000 points when they leave the room, and at the same time, they will be asked to fill their names on the register by year group. Asking others to write it for you is not permitted. This is a measure to prevent unauthorized participation using a third party's phone, so please fill it in. After you receive your reward, please return here to report it by the time the test ends. If you disregard this, there is a possibility the reward may become invalid."

There was no way to connect the phone to the student for a simple mobile payment, which meant that it would be possible to use another phone to participate. Regardless of how much of a problem that was in and of itself, it was certainly a departure from the original intent of the game, which was to participate by following the rules. However, by forcing the user to fill out a list that included identification at the time of payment, the phone could be tied to the user. Even if I got paid with someone else's phone, they'd be able to spot the rule violation at the last check, and if I sent the owner of the phone, they wouldn't be recognized because their name wouldn't be on the list. It was also possible that people who didn't pay for the event might secretly download the app.

The student council and the teachers worked together to set up a special long desk at the entrance. There, we would pay the fee with our phones and write our name by year group before leaving the room. Those who finished installing the app would leave this place first.

In the midst of the chaos, I got in line and eventually found my way in front of Horikita at the reception desk.

“Put your name here. Once you are done, I will collect the 10,000 points.”

She spoke to me in a clerical manner, and I entered my name on the list. I then put my phone on the payment terminal and paid 10,000 points. With that I had officially joined the treasure hunt game.

“Next person.”

I didn’t have anything special to talk about with Horikita, so I just went with the flow and left the room.

5.2

Now then, the sudden treasure hunt game had begun and would last until the evening.

There were a few rules that we needed to follow, but they were basically only about violations. All that was left was to hope for good luck and participate...

The area around the starting point was crowded because it was within the range of where the QR codes were posted.

Like locusts devouring a crop, the search was progressing at an alarming rate. If I were to try and join now, there’d be no space for me to throw myself into. Similarly, some students saw the swarm of locusts and started to change the location for their search.

What’s more, there were many students using their phones to keep in touch. They were probably looking for a QR code while simultaneously recruiting a partner to pair up with. They could also just split into two groups since you could form a pair on the app without meeting in person.

“Hey, Mori-san, why don’t we take a look from up top?”

Kei walked out of the hall late accompanied by a classmate, Mori Nene, looking friendly. It seemed Kei grabbed a classmate early and made a pair.

I was on my own, of course, so I decided to go down to the lowest level for now. If I went upstairs like Kei did, we would be sharing the same space after all.

Even so...I didn’t receive any chat messages on my phone.

At a time like this, wouldn’t it be nice if someone would invite me to join them? No, don’t think about it too much. I felt like I would lose if I thought about it. In the first place, there weren’t many people with whom I’d exchanged contact information to either email or chat with.

Out of the members of the Ayanokōji group, Keisei was free, but he’d quickly announced that he wouldn’t be participating, as he wasn’t interested in this kind of game. Akito was in bad shape, and Haruka and Airi were like a pair from the start.

“Ah...”

As I started to move with that in mind, I suddenly bumped into Satō head-on. I raised my hind lightly in greeting before trying to leave, but...

“Ah, w-wait a moment!” She grabbed me by the arm and stopped me as if in a panic. “You know...Ayanokōji-kun, have you partnered up with anyone yet?”

“No, I’m alone.”

I didn’t add ‘for now’ because I didn’t plan to become part of a pair in the future. It was one thing to have made more friends, but it was another thing entirely to have people I could work with for events like this. I felt a little empty saying it myself, but I held it in.

“Then...then, um, you know? Would you...pair up with me?”

She made an unexpected suggestion, and I was at a loss as to how to respond.

Last year, Satō was the first person to ever confess to me. I couldn’t reciprocate her feelings so I turned her down, and then I started dating Kei

afterwards. As someone who expected to be hated; I never thought I'd be asked to partner up.

I had no reason to refuse, but to be honest; I also had no reason to accept.

I'd just seen that Kei had already partnered up with Mori for appearances sake, as she was keeping her relationship with me a secret. That being said, partnering with Satō was another matter.

“Are you worried about Kei-chan...?”

It was hard for me to say yes, but Satō seemed to immediately understand my attitude.

“I heard you were going to tell everyone about the fact the two of you are dating.”

“Is that so?”

It looked like Kei had gotten ahead of me and told her that we would be open about our relationship in the second semester. I knew from past conversations with Matsushita that Satō was aware of the relationship between me and Kei.

“We've been together for a while now. It's not something we can keep a secret forever.”

“Well, there are some couples who go out in secret, but I think only a very small number people would notice the combination of Ayanokōji-kun and Kei-chan.”

Satō told some of the girls she was close with that she suspected that Kei and I were involved. Of course, I didn't hear her say it directly, but judging from Matsushita's behaviour, there was no doubt about the fact that Satō told her. Of course, Satō didn't do anything wrong. She didn't know anything for certain, and was just letting them know what she'd guessed.

“Ahh, but you know? I suggested that we partner up because, how to put it...well, I thought I could rely on you if you were my partner. So there's no different meaning there...so...is that not okay?” She spoke firmly, stating that there wasn't any strange reasoning behind it.

“How many private points do you have on hand?”

“Well um, it’s a little embarrassing to tell you, but...about 180,000 points.”

I wasn’t in a financial position to speak for others, but considering the fact that it was right after the transfer of private points, it didn’t seem like a lot. Even though the risk was low, she must’ve had a certain amount of determination to spend her precious 10,000 private points to participate.

If that was the case, she’d want to pair up and find some of the more well hidden QR codes.

“Okay, I got it. If you’re okay with me, Satō, we can pair up. I can’t promise the results though.”

“Really?!...Yay!”

Satō’s disposition of honestly showing her delight when she was happy made me feel good as her partner.

We took out our phones and applied for and accepted our pair through the app. We were now officially paired up and would both be rewarded for any QR code that was scanned with either of our phones. All that was left was to grab a reward of at least 30,000 points.

“By the way, the teachers gave us some strange paper, right?” Satō took a crumpled piece of paper out of her pocket. “Ah?!”

When she saw the state of it, as if she had forgotten that she’d crumpled it up, she quickly put it away back into her pocket, looking embarrassed.

“Ah, it’s j-just that...I didn’t understand anything when I looked at it... ahaha. You have one too, right Ayanokōji-kun?”

It seemed she didn’t think she could solve the riddle, so she just rolled up the paper at random. I took out a piece of paper folded into quarters and spread it out front of Satō.

“This means we can find the three places where there are QR codes, right?”

“That’s right.”

“So if we can solve this, is there a chance we can get a million points?”

“No, I doubt that.” I was sorry to dash her hopes, but I decided to answer immediately.

“Ehh? Really?”

Only three of the hundred QR codes had answers provided from questions. Therefore, it was tempting to look for the QR codes given by solving the problems on the paper, but...

“The three hints are all of a similar level. With that being the case, I don’t think there is any difference in the reward for solving any of them. There are a reasonable number of codes that give 100,000 points...Or there’s also a possibility they could be worth 50,000 points.”

“Ehh? But if there are three, then what are the chances that they’re the three 300,000 point codes?”

“Certainly, having the three 300,000 point codes be the three specially prepared codes would be a nice fit, but the odds are slim.”

The hints were unlikely to include a large sum of private point rewards.

“Ehhh? Is that all we’d get for solving such a hard problem?”

“This treasure hunt is completely based on luck, and is placed as a bonus game. If the quick witted students who solved the problems get the extremely rare 1,000,000 points, 500,000 points, or as you said, 300,000 points rewards, it’s likely that many students wouldn’t be able to accept it. Wouldn’t you agree, Satō?”

If all of them were worth 300,000 points, then there would be no codes left in a game that was supposed to be about luck. In that case, as a game, it was tantamount to failure. This paper was only part of a bailout to be used at the very end and should be seen as a modest reward.

“I-I see. It’s true that if they were all expensive QR codes I might’ve been annoyed...”

She thought about how she would feel as someone who couldn’t solve it and was immediately convinced.

“It’s not a bad idea to use these hints to find a QR code, but we won’t know the result until we scan the code and get our private points. If we make

a poor move, there's a chance we'll miss out."

This treasure hunt game would last for hours, but the big prize would be decided within the first hour or two.

"So it's okay for us to just ignore this, right?"

"If I ever use this hint paper, I guess it will be if I can't find any good QR codes even at the end of the game. At that time, I'll know where to point."

Well, I was sure that by the time I rely on it, other students would've already collected the rewards.

"...By any chance, have you already solved the paper's hints, Ayanokōji-kun?"

"Pretty much."

"Wow..."

The hints weren't designed to be difficult. Because the game allowed first-years and third-years alike to participate, it was more like a riddle than a straightforward problem.

While we were talking, students participating in the treasure hunt were searching for QR codes around us at random. Even if the area where the QR codes were posted was limited to some extent, most of them would be found quickly if 200 people searched for them all at once. It was also possible that the high reward QR codes were hidden further away from the starting point.

"I think I'll search the lower levels for the time being."

"Got it, I'll leave it up to you to decide where we start looking, Ayanokōji-kun."

Satō and I walked side by side to the lowest level of the designated search area.

The two of us spent the next five minutes looking for a good QR code, but we only found two blatant stickers. Was it a bad location, or were they hidden in a more difficult to find place?

Without a clue, the number of students around me was starting to increase.

“Um, Ayanokōji-kun...”

“What’s up? Did you find something?”

“T-that’s not it... C-can I go to the restroom for a second? I’ve had too much to drink...I was actually gonna go earlier, but...” Satō asked, looking extremely embarrassed.

“I see, so that was when you found me?”

She nodded her head, blushing. “I’m sorry...even though we were supposed to be in a hurry...”

I had no intention of telling her not to go to the restroom, so gladly sent Satō off.

“I-I’ll be right back!”

“There’s no need to hurry.”

For the time being, I sent Satō off to the bathroom and resumed my search of the nearby area.

“Are you participating in the treasure hunt game as well, Ayanokōji-kun?”

As I was peaking under the sofa, someone called out to me from behind. I thought someone was looking to stop me in my tracks, but it was my classmate, Matsushita. Today was one of those days where I kept getting approached by classmates I didn’t usually associate with. At the same time, a third-year student, Tatara, who seemed to be talking to Matsushita, showed a suspicious looking expression.

“...Ayanokōji, huh”

“You know about Ayanokōji-kun?”

When Matsushita looked at Tatara’s face curiously, he turned his gaze away, looking embarrassed. Matsushita had no way of knowing, but it was certain that some sort of order regarding me had been given to the entire third-year by Nagumo.

“We’re in the middle of a treasure hunt right now, so talk later. We’re wasting time so let’s go.”

“If you’re going to say that, then it’s the same for you Tatara-senpai. Don’t worry about me and find someone else to pair up with.”

The presence of the third-year student Tatara that showed up here might be a good opportunity to explore Nagumo’s strategy.

“I see that you’re also participating in the treasure hunt, senpai.”

When I called out to him in order to jump in, he gave me blatantly disgusted look and turned his gaze away. When Matsushita heard the slight click of his tongue, she also sensed that Tatara’s demeanour had changed.

“What’s the matter? Tatara-senpai?”

When I called out to him once more, it was obvious that Tatara was trying to escape. I could tell from first impressions that he had some kind of fondness for Matsushita. The fact that he was more reluctant to make contact with me than he was eager to form a pair meant it was safe to assume that he was instructed not to engage in careless conversation.

“Another time, Matsushita.”

“Ah, sure.”

Laughing lightly without understanding what happened exactly, Matsushita waved goodbye to Tatara. He looked at Matsushita as if he had some regrets, but he then glared at me and walked away.

“Phew. I don’t really know what happened, but I’ve been saved. Ayanokōji-kun, did something happen with Tatara-senpai?”

Even though she didn’t know about Nagumo’s orders, she would’ve been suspicious after seeing his attitude.

“There was nothing. I’ve never even talked to him before.”

“Hmm?”

I wouldn’t say she was convinced, but she patted her chest in relief, as if a burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

“Hey, are you perhaps alone too, Ayanokōji-kun? If you’re alone, do you want to pair up?”

“Ahh, no——”

Just as Matsushita was about to invite me to join her in the treasure hunt, I heard footsteps running from behind me.

“Wait a second, Matsushita-san, I’m working with Ayanokōji-kun!”

When Satō returned from the restroom, she made a mad dash to close the distance between herself and Matsushita and grabbed her by the shoulders.

“Eh? Oh, really?”

Matsushita looked back, surprised by the sheer speed and pressure.

“I mean, I saw Tatara-senpai earlier, wasn’t he together with you, Matsushita-san?”

“Rather than saying we were together, it was more like I was just being followed...”

Apparently not only Matsushita, but also Satō knew about the third-year student named Tatara. He was a third-year Class A student whose grades were slightly above average, with scores ranging from a B to C on the OAA. He also had a long, unusual haircut for a boy.

I wondered what that kind of hairstyle was called...I didn’t really know much about those kinds of things.

“He was coming on too strong so I wanted to pull back a little. I was trying to turn him down in a roundabout way.”

“Ah~ I get it~”

I don’t understand.

For the time being, I decided to check the bottom of the sofa I had just been in the middle of investigating.

“I mean, Ayanokōji-kun, it’s probably not there, right? Even if there is one, I think it’s probably a cheap one.”

Indeed, underneath the sofa would be easily chosen as a typical hiding place for a QR code. In fact, on the floor of this sofa, if you crouched down at a slight angle, you could see a QR code peeking out at you. Of course, I didn’t want to scan this QR code.

“What’s important is the school’s pattern.”

“Pattern?”

“When they decided to implement this treasure hunting game, how the values of the QR codes were determined was important.”

“U-um...?”

Satō tilted her head, not really understanding. In contrast, Matsushita responded without especially thinking about it.

“Naturally, there will be valuable QR codes in hard to find locations, right?”

“Yeah. Then the next question is, who decides what’s ‘hard to find’?”

“The teachers!” Deciding that she would answer this time, Satō spoke before Matsushita could.

But as a supplement, Matsushita added, “It’s a lot of work to put up a hundred QR codes, right? I don’t doubt that the teachers are the ones putting them up, but it’s hard to imagine that it’s only one or two of them. Even if they split it up and put them up at midnight last night, several people were sent out...”

“Did they take their time deciding where to put the codes while the students were doing the uninhabited island exam, or did they just suddenly leave it to the teachers in charge? If we can find that out, it’ll be easier to guess where the stickers are put up.”

“Sorry, I don’t understand a word you’re saying...”

“The way the aisles are made and the decorations are placed is basically all the same, right?”

“Did you understand what all that meant, Matushita-san?”

“Pretty much.”

“That’s amazing, Ayanokōji-kun!”

“I think it’s an interesting point of view, but given that it’s just a treasure hunt game, it’s okay to be a little more easy-going, you know?”

“...I guess so.”

If you say that to me, there’s nothing I can say back any more.

I just thought I should try to reason a little so that we wouldn't have any regrets.

"But yeah, that's too bad. To think someone beat me to it."

"T-too bad?"

"I think I'm going to go look for a slightly more dependable partner. See you later."

Standing around talking like this was just a missed opportunity for everyone in this place.

5.3

Less than an hour had passed since the beginning of the treasure hunt. Many participants had dispersed, and although I no longer saw dozens of people gathered together, I still saw them passing by again and again, searching hard in the same places.

Psychologically, it was hard to scan the first QR code you found, because even if it was the QR code that was considered to be the most difficult to find, there was nothing to compare it to. There were probably a certain percentage of students, including us, who had already seen the 500,000 and 1 million point QR codes but held themselves back or ignored them.

"Good morning, Ayanokōji-senpai."

"Hmm? Oh, good morning, Nanase."

I felt I was being approached by a presence from behind, but it was only Nanase. Well, I guess today was another day where I'd broken the record for consecutive encounters since the holidays started.

"...Who?" asked Satō, who for some reason showed blatant vigilance and glared at Nanase.

Nanase, on the other hand, didn't take the gaze as unpleasant and bowed her head. "I am Nanase Tsubasa from first-year Class D."

"Hmm...It's hard to believe you're a first-year," Satō said as if spitting out at her after spotting a certain body part, but Nanase just tilted her head

curiously.

“Do you think so? I don’t think I’ve matured enough to be seen as that much older than I actually am.”

“H-huh? What are saying you’ve not *matured*? You’ve *matured* no matter how you look at it!”

“Is that...so? Hearing your compliments makes me happy. I’m going to devote myself every day to become even more mature.”

“It’s no use trying to get more *mature* than that. I mean, how exactly are you going to get more *mature*?” Satō asked somewhat forwardly, as if she too wanted to become more mature.

“It’s hard to explain exactly, but...yeah, I think mental growth is essential.”

“M-mental? So not like drinking milk or getting a massage every day?”

“Of course, I believe such actions that promote physical growth are also important to become a more mature person, but in my case, it was from the mind.”

“Hmm...That’s the first I’ve heard of it. It’s kinda convincing.”

It’s okay to admire her, Satō, but I’m pretty sure you and Nanase aren’t on the same page...

“Are you treasure hunting too, Nanase?”

“Eh? Ah no, I’m not. For some reason I was just in the mood to take things slow today.”

It seemed she wasn’t participating in the treasure hunt. But if that was the case, why did she show up in this place?

“I’m glad to see that you’re doing well today, Ayanokōji-senpai. Well then, it’s about time I take my leave.”

Shortly after Nanase left, I crossed paths with Nakaizumi.

“Nakaizumi, huh.”

“Hmm? Did Nakaizumi-kun do something?”

I'd been trying not to pay attention to it for the past few days, but as I thought, it wasn't a coincidence. It also wasn't a coincidence that I ran into Nanase every day.

First of all, Nanase had been trying to make contact with me to check on my condition. On the third day, I spotted Nanase having lunch on the deck, but even if I hadn't gone there, I was sure she would've come to me instead.

And then there was Nakaizumi following Nanase's every step. He might not be following Nanase all the time, but he was certainly up to something. And behind Nakaizumi, Ryūen's shadow was hiding in plain sight.

I wondered if he was investigating my relationship with Nanase, but Nakaizumi never once showed any sign of paying attention to me. If that was the case, then it was better to assume that they were marking purely Nanase.

I'll give a little guess as to why they'd mark Nanase. Ryūen was looking for the culprit who injured Komiya and the others. If it had anything to do with that, then Nanase was completely innocent. The testimonies of Sudō and Ike would make that clear. In that case, why were they spying on Nanase? She shared with me that she saw Amasawa that day, but if Nanase was withholding more information than that, it was a different story. Anyway, even if I continued to think about it, I wouldn't learn anything more, so I'll put it in the corner of my mind for now.

"Ah, I found one Ayanokōji-kun! It's in a place that's a little hard to find!" Satō shouted happily and pointed.

It was on the backside of the cover of an almost out of sight stand light. There was a sticker with a QR code printed on it attached in a way that made it difficult to find. Fortunately, there was no one else in sight but us right now.

"But we won't know how many points this gives until we scan it, right?"

"It's a tough call."

I had a feeling it wasn't one of the most common QR codes, but while it seemed difficult to find, it wasn't *that* difficult, so it was hard to judge.

"What should we do?"

"Yeah..."

Having said that, there was no doubt that it was a QR code that was too good to throw away. I took out my phone, switched it to the camera mode, and pointed it at the QR code.

“Eh? I-is that really okay? To scan it, I mean?”

“No, I’m not going to scan it.”

“Huh?”

I pressed the shutter button and took a picture of the zoomed in QR code.

“What are you doing?”

“I’ll take a picture of any QR code that looks like it could be worth a lot of private points like this and then leave it. If, hypothetically, we can’t find any other good QR codes in the future, we can use your phone to scan the QR code from my stored photos.”

“Eh? R-really? Will it respond even if it’s a picture?”

“As long as it’s a clear shot, it should work without any problems.”

It would be inefficient to come back here to look for a QR code that we’d already found in the past. There may be times when other rivals might beat us to the punch, but if we could find multiple codes and save them, then when the time came, we could scan them in order of how difficult they were to find. If even one of those hit, then we’d make a fortune.

Even with just one camera, it was possible to point the camera at a QR code and display the URL. However, it wasn’t functionally possible for our phones to copy the URL if we didn’t want to access it immediately. In other words, if you wanted to keep the URL, you would be required to input it manually for later. Moreover, in the unlikely event that you mistakenly touched the URL, it would load and the points would be transferred straight away.

“The school said that there were only advantages to forming a pair, but that wasn’t just about being able to share points. Using two phones allows for time saving techniques, and also prevents accidents.”

Although I said so, students who were in a hurry to get started might’ve overlooked this. However, I was sure that a lot of them would be using this

level of technique.

Now we just had to hope that nobody else would find this QR code. This place would be exposed immediately if we were seen looking at the stand light.

“Let’s move.”

“Yeah.”

After that, we put everything back as they were and started searching for QR codes again.

I was groping underneath one of the sofas when I noticed a snag.

“There’s one here too.”

“The pattern’s easy to understand, isn’t it? To think it’s under the sofa in the same way.”

“Satō. Could you keep an eye on the perimeter for a moment?”

“That’s fine but...what’s up?”

I sat down in front of the sofa and lowered my face as if looking into it.

“I thought we couldn’t count on these kinds of QR codes?”

“Sure, for the QR code *here*.”

Rather than underneath, I touched the base of the sofa with my hand.

Normally, even if someone looked around at the floor beneath the sofa, they wouldn’t look at the underside. Rather than say they wouldn’t look, it would be better to say that they couldn’t.

However, when touched with a hand, you could tell that it felt different. Normally, the underside of the sofa would be made of fabric and be flat. Despite that, there was a slight snag from a five centimetres square when I touched it. In other words, a sticker had been attached to it.

I put the phone in my hand under the sofa and took a picture. Using the light from the flash, the QR code that had been hidden in darkness was captured as a photograph.

“Wow, it’s really there! It’s a QR code...! You wouldn’t find this normally, right?”

If I'd participated in this treasure hunt game alone, it wouldn't have been easy to scan this QR code. With the flash turned on, I could save a picture of the QR code, but I wouldn't be able to scan it with my own phone.

Even if I were to turn the sofa over, it would be quite a large and conspicuous task. I would have to be prepared to scan the QR code immediately when considering the fact that other students would see me.

However, as I was in a pair, I could have Satō scan the code from the photo, so it would all work smoothly.

“You’re thinking about so much, huh. The school too.”

After finding a new potential code to scan, we decided to move on.

5.4

Even though the ship was vast, students couldn't just freely go wherever they liked. People would inevitably focus on places where they could hang out and relax, so unexpected encounters were common.

One man was going to the café terrace, while the other was heading back to his guest cabin. The two people who were going to completely unrelated places met in a hallway.

Both were walking in the middle of the hallway, and neither side showed any sign of giving way. The men noticed each other's presence at almost the same time and stopped with a metre separating them.

“Yo Ryūen, you did so much for me the other day.”

The first to speak up was first-year Class D student, Hōsen Kazuomi.

“You sure it’s okay not to be sleepin’? Might as well go rest in your bed for another week or so.” Ryūen Kakeru, who received those words, responded as if to accept them.

“Don’t worry ’bout it. If I half kill you...nah even if I fully kill you in this place, it won’t make me feel any better. The number of targets I gotta kill’s gone from one to two, so it’s gonna get busy.”

“You’ll look real lame if you lose to the same guy twice. Don’t force it.”

They repeatedly provoked each other, but never brought out their fists.

“Ha? Anyway fucker, I heard you been secretly buyin’ up the effects of ‘Free Ride’ cards from first-years. Sounds like ya bet it all on that third-year Nagumo so you must ’ave made a good bit of money, eh?”

“Kuku. Who pissed their pants? We had a contract to keep their mouths shut.”

Before the uninhabited island exam, Ryūen approached first-year students with the ‘Free Ride’ card and signed contracts with them. If the group they designated won a prize, they would give up all the points they gained to Ryūen.

If the group they designated only got into the top 50%, they would only get 30,000 points. In other words, if you were to pay more than that, some people would give up their rights. In the end, Ryūen guessed Nagumo and got a reward of 280,000 points for the number of students who signed up.

Most of Ryūen’s classmates were kept in the dark about this fact; only the ones who were used to execute the plan knew.

“If you lick my shoes, I’m okay with givin’ you a little somethin’ for your trouble you know? Gorilla.”

Laughing, he walked away without once taking his hands out his pockets. Hōsen could’ve stood his ground, but he took a step to the side and made way for him. Ishizaki was wary of Hōsen, but hurriedly followed after Ryūen. Hōsen also didn’t look back and walked proudly down the middle of the hallway.

“That guy’s just as scary as always, eh? But he was so scared that he had to clear the way.”

“He’s got balls, that guy.”

“But...”

“He’s sayin’ if I do it to him, then next time he’s gonna give it to me. It’s a show of his resolve.”

The moment they passed each other, Ryūen sensed the outpouring of killing intent and his desire for violence.

“It’s a pain in the ass, right?”

“Leave it. I know he’s a troublesome opponent, but we gotta find the culprit first.”

“Got it. I’m having Nishino hold it down.”

Ishizaki took out his phone to check, and then led the way for Ryūen.

Not long after that, they arrived at the target location. Before Ishizaki could utter a word, Ryūen approached a lone female student.

“Nanase Tsubasa, right?”

“Yes. What can I do for you?”

Nanase, who’d been stopped in her tracks, stared at Ryūen without any sign of panic. She didn’t understand why she’d caught the attention of an upperclassman from the second-year.

“Sorry, but I’m gonna need some of your time.”

Normally, Ryūen alone or with Ishizaki would’ve been sufficient, but he also had Nishino, the girl he was using to hold her back, accompany them. He knew that a situation with only boys surrounding a younger girl could be detrimental to them and would never be an advantage.

“I’ve got a question for you about the uninhabited island exam.”

“The exam, is it?”

Nanase still didn’t understand the situation, but the following words cleared everything up for her.

“Komiya was injured. I’m lookin’ for the one who did it.”

“Why me?”

“The first ones to arrive at the crime scene were Sudō, Ayanokōji, Ike, Hondō and also you. With Sudō, Ike, and Hondō, there’s no way we’d get any leads.”

“Then I think it would be better to ask Ayanokōji-senpai, who is also a second-year student, no?”

“Course, I’ll speak to him when the situation calls for it. But I’m gonna start with you. You were stickin’ to Ayanokōji during the uninhabited island

exam. Why?”

“I don’t think that has anything to do with the incident.”

“I won’t be able to judge if it has anythin’ to do with the incident or not ’til you tell me.”

Most people would readily confess when confronted by Ryūen’s overbearing demeanour.

“I’m sorry, but I have nothing to tell you.”

But instead of getting flustered, Nanase calmly refused.

As Nanase tried to leave with her head down, Ryūen kicked his leg out and slammed the wall with the sole of his foot.

“You don’t get to decide whether to talk or not, bitch.”

“You’re very violent aren’t you? I think you’re going to have a problem if anyone sees you in this situation.”

“Don’t worry. I got a few guys on watch to make sure that don’t happen.”

“I understand that Komiya-senpai is one of your classmates, Ryūen-senpai. However, I don’t think I can help you in any way. I don’t have any leads.”

“Really? You’ve been movin’ around an awful lot these last few days, haven’t you?”

“Whatever could you be talking about?” Nanase replied that she didn’t know what he was talking about without looking at him, but for Ryūen, that was an opportunity to take advantage of.

“In the middle of all these people playin’ around, you’ve been keepin’ an eye on Kurachi from first-year Class C all day, right?”

“Tch...” Here Nanase’s eyes widened for the first time and she showed signs of agitation.

“Once I heard from Komiya, I set up lookouts on you Sudō, Ike and Hondō just in case. The other three were playin’ around like idiots, but that’s normal behaviour on this ship. But you don’t play at all; you just stalk a certain first-year. I can’t call that normal.”

“It’s just a coincidence.”

“A coincidence, huh. A lot of people are playin’ around today, like treasure hunting. That Kurachi guy is participating but you’re not. And yet, until Nishino caught you, you were followin’ Kurachi the whole time. Is all that also just a coincidence?”

Once you’d joined the game, you had to go searching for QR codes, but if you weren’t participating, you could save yourself the trouble. Nanase was so focused on keeping an eye on Kurachi that she didn’t notice the presence that was keeping an eye on her.

“I’m so inexperienced, aren’t I? To think I didn’t even realise I was being followed day after day. I’m surprised.”

“You should be thankin’ me for reaching out to you first.”

“Very impressive, Ryūen-senpai. But the Komiya situation has nothing to do with Kurachi.”

“Is that so? Guess I’ll go talk to Kurachi directly then.”

“That would be a problem.”

“Then tell me what you know. Or are you not allowed to talk unless ‘someone’ gives you instructions?”

“That’s not the case. But what’s irrelevant is irrelevant.”

“Don’t make me repeat it. You’re not the judge of that, I am.”

Ryūen never stopped smiling, and that continued to be the case even now. However, the air he radiated changed.

Ishizaki, who’d been watching from the side, had felt Ryūen’s intimidation many times, but he still hadn’t gotten used to it. He felt like giving in even though he wasn’t the one being interrogated.

“That’s incorrect. You don’t have the authority to make that kind of judgement on your own, Ryūen-senpai.”

In spite of this, Nanase looked straight back into Ryūen’s eyes without showing any sign of fear.

“What you waitin’ for? Why don’t you just get on with it?”

Certainly, Nanase Tsubasa was bewildered and troubled. The seeds of her troubles were born during the middle of the uninhabited island exam. The story goes back to the day when she vented her uncontrollable anger on Ayanokōji; after Amasawa appeared in front of them with a deadly weapon in hand and Ayanokōji concluded that there'd been someone else before Amasawa.

At that time, Ayanokōji decided against doing any GPS searches, but Nanase secretly did one anyway in the tent she'd assembled. However, she slipped into Ayanokōji's tent without looking at the details. It was because she knew that if she wasn't careful and found something, he would be able to see through her surprise and agitation. As a result of her secret GPS search, she noticed that there were two people, excluding Amasawa, who were nearby. Kushida Kikyō, a second-year, and Kurachi Naohiro, a first-year. Normally, she would look into both of them, but the second-year, Kushida, was Ayanokōji's classmate, so she was putting it off.

Apart from that, Nanase had been in regular contact with Ayanokōji to check if anything was wrong and to protect him if necessary, but it seemed to go unnoticed.

“What a waste of time, let's go talk to him.”

Nanase looked down as if she had given up, but she quickly lifted her head. “It's a shame, but I don't know where on the ship he went to find the QR codes.”

Ryūen let out a small laugh and pulled out his phone. “Where's Kurachi at? Fourth floor...the guest cabin floor, huh? I'll be right there.”

Ryūen, who had anticipated all of this, ended the call quickly and returned the phone to his pocket.

“So after you pulled me away from him, you had someone watch Kurachi-kun?”

“Unlike you, I have a lot of people who can be my hands, feet, eyes and ears.”

“Kurachi-kun could really be irrelevant, you know?”

“I don't need you to tell me what to do. I'll just cross 'em off one by one.”

For both Nanase and Ryūen, the only lead they could follow right now was Kurachi.

“Hurry up and decide; you comin’ or not?”

If Nanase refused at this point, there was no need to imagine that Ryūen would approach Kurachi alone.

Nanase nodded once and decided to head towards Kurachi’s location with Ryūen.

Soon after, they spotted Kurachi looking for a QR code with Taguri, whom he seemed to be in a pair with.

“First, let me and Kurachi-kun speak alone please.”

“What?”

“I will get the information out of him.”

“What guarantee do I have that you’ll give me the information I asked for?”

“You will just have to trust me.”

“Sorry, but I don’t trust you.”

“You have no choice but to trust me, even if you don’t. I will definitely report everything.”

“Ah, whatever. But I’m not gonna show you any mercy if you screw up, even if you are a girl.”

“I am aware of that.”

Gesturing with his chin, Ryūen instructed Nishino and Ishizaki to pull Taguri away from Kurachi. Being approached by a second-year like Ishizaki, he had no choice but to obey quietly.

“Could I have a moment of your time, Kurachi-kun?”

“Huh? If I remember correctly, you’re Nanase from Class D...right?”

Kurachi, who was upset that Taguri had been summoned by some upperclassmen, couldn’t keep his composure.

“I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m on a treasure hunt right now, so I don’t have——”

“Tell me why you were targeting Ayanokōji-senpai during the uninhabited island exam.”

“Ha? W-what are you talking about?”

Nanase didn’t know if Ryūen would butt in if she took her time. She needed to ask the questions while they were alone.

“There’s no point trying to hide it. On the seventh day of the exam, when it was raining heavily, I used a GPS search to find out who was in the vicinity. There was Amasawa-san and one other person, you. And then, not far from the scene, there was a tool for beating people. You can’t make any excuses.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Kurachi denied it out loud and tried to run, but Nanase grabbed him by the arm.

“You see the second-year behind us, right? He is urgently trying to find the culprit who almost attacked Ayanokōji-senpai. In some cases, he may even resort to violence.”

“H-huh? Don’t screw with me, what the hell is that?!”

“Shh. It’s better for you if you don’t antagonize me by shouting too loudly.”

“Huh! B-but, I...I just...”

“Just?”

“...I was told I’d be given money if I attacked Ayanokōji-senpai...That’s what I was told...”

“Money for attacking him, is it?”

“Normally I wouldn’t take it. But I spent all my private points, and...”

“And?”

“I was told I could just ‘pretend’ to attack him and that it wouldn’t be a big deal. I didn’t exactly do anything wrong, you know that right?”

It was true that pretending to attack someone could be treated as a joke.

“Who was it that said they would pay you money if you pretended to attack him? First of all, when?”

“That’s...It was before the start of the uninhabited island exam...”

“B-before the exam, is it?” Nanase was also surprised by the unexpected timing. “In other words, it was planned from the beginning...right?”

“And I don’t know who it was that gave the order. The private points were all transferred to my account without me doing anything.”

“—That’s a lie, isn’t it?”

“Huh?! I’m not lying.”

“You obviously know something and are hiding it, that’s how I see it.”

“I don’t have anything...”

“I don’t think you were well-informed about this, Kurachi-kun, but because of your actions at that time, Hōsen-kun’s plans were changed in addition to Ryūen-senpai’s.”

Kurachi’s eyebrows furrowed as the conversation suddenly switched.

“Right now, he’s gotten desperate and is searching for the culprit. I wonder what would happen if I reported this? I’m sure that Hōsen-kun will mercilessly raise his fists against you, Kurachi-kun.”

Ryūen, a second-year, and Hōsen, a first-year. Two experienced fighters were threatening to come after him.

“W-w-wait! I said wait! Okay, I’ll talk to you, I’ll talk, so please don’t do that!”

He had been whispering, but frantically raised his voice. Hōsen was the most hated and feared among the first-year students. The power of that name was far more effective than Nanase had imagined.

“...It was my classmate, Utomiya.”

“Utomiya-kun, is it?”

“Yeah. He said he wanted me to attack Ayanokōji-senpai and would give me the money after the special exam ended.”

“Is that the truth?”

“Seriously, really, it’s the truth!”

Looking into Kurachi’s eyes, Nanase nodded once.

“I believe you, Kurachi-kun. I just have one last question; do you know anything about the injuries to Komiya-senpai and the others?”

“Komiya? What are you talking about? I got no idea. No, I really don’t know. Anyway, don’t tell Hōsen that I had anything to do with it, yeah?”

“I understand, I promise.”

When she told Kurachi to go, Taguri was released at the same time.

Ryūen immediately approached and demanded to speak with Nanase. Kurachi didn’t seem to know anything about Komiya’s case, but even after she told him that, Ryūen didn’t believe her. Even if he’d only been watching from a distance, he would’ve known that Kurachi had told Nanase something.

“According to him...Utomiya-kun might know something.”

“Utomiya?”

“It’s Utomiya Riku from first-year Class C, just like Kurachi-kun.”

Ryūen immediately took out his phone and checked Utomiya’s face and abilities with the OAA.

“I don’t remember seein’ him around. But an A in physical ability, huh.”

“If it’s him, he might have the ability to push Komiya-senpai without him realising, but we don’t have any proof yet.”

“You’ve started to see things, eh.”

“...What do you intend to do?”

“It’s obvious ain’t it? I’m gonna hunt down this Utomiya brat and get him to talk.”

“Please wait. I don’t agree with that.”

If Utomiya was a student from the White Room, he would be tough to deal with, no matter how many people Ryūen brought with him. Above all else, the fact that she had gone this far without Ayanokōji’s permission was not something to be praised.

“This is a case without conclusive evidence...it’s problematic. Even if Utomiya-kun is the culprit, if it was decided he was innocent, that would be the end of it, wouldn’t it?”

“Just like how Kurachi spat it all out just now, it’s all about how you threaten them.”

“That was because I’d been following him for the past few days and was able to do some preliminary research. Given his personality, I knew I could push him around. However, Utomiya-kun is an unknown quantity.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Give me time. Of course, I don’t mean for free.”

“Oh? Go on.”

“I’ve been keeping quiet about it, but there is a witness to Komiya-senpai’s case that you don’t know about, Ryūen-senpai. I don’t mind telling you who that person is.”

“Who?”

“I can’t tell you right now. I will tell you if you refrain from contacting Utomiya-kun.”

“That’s a tough deal for me, you know? Ah well, whatever, I’ll accept those terms.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll get back to you with the details.”

“But if you’re lyin’, you better be prepared to pay the price, yeah?”

“I’m not lying.”

“Kuku, I bet. Go ahead, and call me before I lose my patience.”

Nanase gave a short reply, nodded and then left.

5.5

I found a few QR codes, but there was still only one that seemed to be worth a large sum of points. There were several students looking for codes in the nearby area, so the competition was definitely too fierce.

Since using waves of non-participants for help was prohibited, it was unlikely that any students were trying to cheat openly, but with over 200 participants, it was inevitable.

I suddenly noticed that Satō had stopped and turned around.

“I wonder what I should do. What do I need to work on so that I don’t cause trouble for the class?”

“What’s up all of a sudden?”

“I’m sorry for asking such a weird question. But it’s not just some random thought, okay? I’ve been thinking about it since before the uninhabited island exam. I was wondering if I was any help to the class.”

After saying that, Satō stared at the palms of her hands.

“I wish I could tell my overexcited self from before I started school, back when I thought I could just have a random and interesting high school life and get a job anywhere, this isn’t just any high school; it’s a hell of a place.”

For lack of a better way to put it, Satō was generally less capable than the average high school student.

However, she was still at the top of the caste and her voice possessed a certain amount of influence. Although academic ability, physical ability, and communication skills all had varying levels of difficulty, most people could improve them with some effort. Sudō’s name probably came first as a clear example.

Sudō, who’d been at the bottom of the class in terms of academic performance, showed remarkable success and rapidly improved his test scores. As could be seen from this, the important thing was to have room to grow.

“If you want to work hard for your classmates, I suppose studying is essential.”

“Yeah...that’s right, isn’t it?” Satō said, scratching her cheek and hanging her head as if to say she already knew that. “A-Ayanokōji-kun, I don’t suppose you could teach me how to study...you can’t, right?”

“Me?”

As soon as I asked, Satō hurriedly put her hands out and waved frantically.

“Sorry, sorry! Forget what I just said! Karuizawa-san will get mad at me...!”

“Wouldn’t it be fine to ask Horikita to teach you?”

“Horikita-san? But we don’t really get along very well, you know?”

The phrase ‘don’t really get along’ was probably a rather mild way of putting it. For almost a year and a half, Satō hadn’t taken any action you could call friendly when it came to Horikita.

“Aside from the fact that you two will need to get along, I think she has a well-established reputation when it comes to teaching. She trained up that Sudō after all.”

There was no need to go into detail regarding Horikita’s interpersonal problems and teaching methods. She was able to develop Sudō, the most problematic student in the school.

“Sudō-kun overtook me before I knew it...that’s true.”

“You don’t want the shameful title of worst in the class that’s bottom of the year do you?”

“A-absolutely not.”

Satō was one of the candidates for lowest in the class, so she felt a strong sense of crisis when it came to that point.

“Then, could I ask you to be the bridge, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“If that’s all you want, it’s not a problem.”

If it would improve the academic performance of the class, Horikita wouldn’t refuse. Sudō may find it complicated to have more people around Horikita, whether of the same or the opposite sex, but he wouldn’t reject her.

5.6

“Horikita-senpai, it’s time for your shift change. Please take a break.”

As noon approached, two hours after the treasure hunt game began, Yagami-kun, who was next in line to confirm the rewards after me, approached me and said so. I closed the first-year register and slowly raised my gaze.

“I’m not particularly tired, so I don’t mind continuing to handle the reward confirmations.”

Right now, I’d like to cherish this time where I could freely look at the list of names while in this small group.

“That won’t do. I have my own job that I’ve been given. I can’t call myself a member of the student council if I leave it to you, Horikita-senpai.”

“...Yes, you’re right.”

If I can take it easy, then I will. It was unlikely that anyone with that kind of thought process would join the student council. I decided not to persist strongly on this point and pulled my chair back.

“Thank you. I’ll take a break without reservation.”

“Of course.”

In that case, I’d help confirm the rewards again at 2pm and then my role would be done. It wasn’t much of burden in terms of time spent working, but...

“Horikita-senpai, how many people have received rewards so far?” Yagami-kun asked, looking down at the list of names.

“If we include both members of a pair, about 40 people, I think. There were some students claiming to have gotten 500,000 points, but I get the impression that a surprisingly large number of students misread it and actually ended up with 5,000 points.”

“They probably didn’t want other people to take the QR code that they thought they were the only one to find, so wanted to scan it quickly. I can somewhat understand it.”

If you overlooked a QR code, there was no guarantee that you’d find it again.

What I was more concerned about was the presence of the other person who came here with Yagami-kun. Yagami-kun turned to that person and flashed a smile at her.

“Well then, I’ll see you later, Kushida-senpai.”

I’d heard that the two of them were close during middle school, but it seemed their relationship had continued at this school, too.

“Yeah, see you later, Yagami-kun.”

The way she affectionately sent him off seemed to go beyond the boundaries of mere friendship. The phrase ‘more than friends, less than lovers’, seemed to be a fitting way to describe their relationship.

“If anything comes up, call me and I’ll be right there.”

“Okay, thank you very much.”

He’d only been involved with the student council work for a short time, but in addition to being able to manage the obvious work, Yagami-kun possessed great communication skills.

He was a reliable underclassman in the sense that I could trust him to do the next job, and there was no doubt that he was much more capable than the other two first-year students who’d joined the student council at the same time. It was still a long way off, but you could say that he was the best candidate for Student Council President for the next generation after ours.

When I vacated my post, rather than staying by Yagami-kun’s side, Kushida-san also left. It was only natural to do so in order not to jeopardize the work to come.

I could only assume that the fact she was walking alongside me meant something.

“So you were with Yagami-kun. Why didn’t you participate in the treasure hunt, Kushida-san?”

“Yeah. I just didn’t really feel like joining the game for some reason. There are a lot of people like that, you know?”

“It’s true that the participation rate for second and third-years wasn’t as high as expected.”

It meant that they prioritized their vacation over the chance to earn a large sum of private points. The time we could spend on this ship was precious, even if it was just a vacation.

“You’re going to take a break now, right Horikita-san? Would you have lunch together with me?”

“With me?”

I couldn’t hide my suspicion at Kushida-san’s unusual proposal.

“Is it weird that I’m asking you out? I mean yeah, it is weird, isn’t it?”

Even while laughing in amusement, the fake smile she showed to everyone else never cracked. This wasn’t a situation where she needed to think about it.

“Well that’s fine; I have a lot of student council work to do after this, so I might as well put something in my stomach. But I might be called away on short notice, so is it okay if we just buy something from the store?”

“Of course.”

I was sure there weren’t that many opportunities for Kushida-san to talk to me like this. It might also be a good opportunity for me to ask the questions that have smouldering inside of me.

“May I ask you a simple question?”

As if to spare time, I spoke to her as soon as we started moving.

“The reason why I invited you out?”

“Well that too, but...”

“The reason why I’m close to Yagami-kun?” It seemed that Kushida-san knew what I was going to ask, as if it were obvious. “I’d be lying if I said it didn’t bother me.”

She herself had been bothered this whole time by the fact that she was behaving in ways that would be incomprehensible under normal circumstances.

“You’re trying to hide your past from middle school. That’s why I, who went to the same middle school as you, and Ayanokōji-kun, who knows

about your past, have been made your enemies... This much makes sense.”

Kushida-san faced forwards and listened without looking in my direction.

“Even if we suppose Yagami-kun doesn’t know anything about it, I get the distinct impression that you’ve always avoided getting close to any one specific boy. I always thought that you were, if I were to put it a little harshly, a people pleaser, or in nicer terms, someone who treats everyone equally.”

“... You know, you didn’t need to say the harsh bit, did you?”

“Right. I’m sorry if I offended you.”

“Ahaha, I’m not mad, so don’t worry.”

I didn’t intend to speak harshly, but I expressed my personal impressions. While I thought that what I said was careless, words once spoken cannot be taken back.

“Why do you think I’m so close to Yagami-kun?”

She turned the question around and returned it to me.

“By any chance—do you have *that* kind of relationship with Yagami-kun?”

I was hesitant to express it directly, so I tried to ask her in a slightly muddled way.

“By ‘*that* kind of relationship’ do you mean to ask if we’re dating?”

“... Yes.”

“It’s unfortunate, but there’s nothing like that. I’m not planning on dating anyone in particular while I’m in school you see.”

That’s exactly what it means to be a people pleaser, isn’t it?

Even I, who had no interest in that kind of thing, knew that Kushida-san was very popular among the boys. It was inevitable that her popularity would start to decline if she were to have a boyfriend, underclassman or otherwise. I didn’t think that would suit Kushida-san, who wanted to be stand out more than anyone.

“Then for what reason do you get along with Yagami-kun so well?”

“It’s obvious isn’t it?” Kushida-san covered her mouth while laughing.
“You say the funniest things.”

“It’s because the best way to get rid of someone who’s in your way is to get into their pocket,” she continued.

“...I see.”

I’d already guessed that was the case, but I was pressured by how the straightforward response and smile was exactly as I imagined. In other words, Yagami-kun was a target to eliminated, just like me and Ayanokōji-kun.

But that didn’t mean that all of my questions were answered.

“What are the chances that he knows about your past? You can’t be absolutely sure, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. There’s no guarantee that he knows.”

“If that’s the case...”

“But there’s no guarantee that he definitely doesn’t know, right?” Kushida continued, her smile never faltering. “Yagami-kun seems to have feelings for me that are beyond that of a normal senior and junior relationship, so sticking close to him is a lot easier than you think. I’m just waiting by his side for an opening.”

Even if there was only a one or two percent chance, if it wasn’t zero then she must eliminate him. That was Kushida-san’s basic stance. So not even Yagami-kun, who was her underclassman, was an exception...

“The number of bumps on the road that you have to deal with just keeps increasing. You haven’t even gotten me and Ayanokōji-kun expelled, yet you intend to make *more* enemies?”

“You must think I’m an idiot, right Horikita-san?”

At the very least, I didn’t think it was a smart move.

“Essentially, I don’t think that we need to be enemies. If it were someone who talks too much it would be one thing, but Ayanokōji-kun and I would never let it slip.”

I wondered why she couldn’t understand this part, and took a step into an area that I’d not quite ventured into before.

“What’s your guarantee? Can you be 100% sure?”

“I’d say it’s as close to 100% as you can get, but...you can’t accept that, can you?”

“Knowing that I have a past to protect. That alone is already like exposing my heart defencelessly, you know? Eventually, you’re bound to come and grab that heart, Horikita-san.”

“I don’t understand. I don’t see the need to do that.”

“I won’t do it because I don’t need to’. Then what if the need arises?”

“...What do you mean?”

“What if I took a class secret and tried to leak it to another class? What if I betrayed you and tried to move to a different class? Can you say that you and the others definitely wouldn’t give me a warning like ‘If you don’t want your past to be exposed, don’t betray us’ at that time, Horikita-san?

“That’s—”

Certainly, I couldn’t guarantee that Kushida-san’s past would remain untouched if a situation where she needed to be controlled came up. If it needed to be done to protect my classmates, I couldn’t rule out the possibility that I might play that trump card.

Of course, Kushida-san would try to write most things off as ‘fabrications’. However, there was a slight breakdown in Kushida-san’s credibility. She made a strategic error during the Class Poll exam, which resulted in her standing out for nothing.

“Up to me, right? I’m feeling very frustrated with the situation where I have to talk about this. Even now, I’m feeling nauseous, and in truth, I’m in a lot of pain.”

Contrary to what she said, her smile and the tone of her voice remained truly calm. She kept a great deal of anger under control, covering it up on the surface.

“I somewhat understand what you’re saying, but...I still believe you are overthinking it. I’m worried about you.”

“Oh, is that so? You’re *worried* about me?”

“I would like to ease your emotional burden, if at all possible.”

“Ahahaha, you don’t need to worry, Horikita-san. I’m fine.”

“You’re fine?”

“I’ve also had enough, and I’ve been thinking I need to get this nasty little problem over with.”

“In other words...”

“I’m trying to figure out a way to get rid of that *burden* in my own way.”

So she means she approached me having come up with a solution?

“I’ve been thinking a lot. If this precarious situation continues as it is, the number of people who know more than they should will only increase.

Therefore...let’s start with this; Horikita-san, could you drop out of school?”

Naturally, the most rational method to lighten her emotional burden was for me to drop out of school. Of course, I couldn’t agree to that. Most importantly, it wasn’t like that would solve everything.

“I don’t see how that connects to our conversation. What about Ayanokōji-kun’s existence? What about Yagami-kun? Even if I drop out, there will still be people that know about you.”

I didn’t think that alone would take away the emotional burden.

“I’m well aware that Ayanokōji-kun is an unpredictable opponent. But did you know? Ayanokōji-kun is supporting me with private points.”

“Supporting you...?”

It was a story I had heard from Ayanokōji-kun before. I’ll pretend I didn’t know what was going on here and ask her back.

“I think he called it a defence plan against expulsion. In other words, it’s proof that he knows that I’m an enemy, and at the same time, that he’s afraid of me. If I show him that I can eliminate *you*, Horikita-san, Ayanokōji-kun will have no choice but to keep quiet, right? And if he *does* do anything wrong, he’ll get expelled himself.”

She flashed an eerie smile and brought her face closer to mine.

“In any case, even if I can’t expel anyone except you right away, Horikita-san, I can still obtain a certain amount of peace. In the meantime, I’ll just have to think up another way to get rid of Ayanokōji-kun, and then it’s all over. And as for Yagami-kun, I think he’ll be okay even if I don’t do anything. He’s a serious guy who just likes me.”

Her big eyes *seemed* to have colour, but actually didn’t. It was possible to read a person’s emotions from their eyes, but Kushida-san was definitely an exception. Her strong will to expel me had never wavered.

“The reason why I absolutely want you to be the first to disappear is because you went to the same middle school as me, Horikita-san. If they looked into it, other people might be able to uncover that fact. But because I first met Ayanokōji-kun in high school, even if he were to expose me, I could always just say he was lying.”

Certainly, what Kushida-san said was correct. If you were ask who would be more troublesome out of me and Ayanokōji-kun should we try to reveal her past, it would definitely be me, who went to the same middle school as her. And that too by an overwhelming margin.

“Do you think it’s difficult to expel someone when you want to get rid of them? You do, don’t you? After all, for the past year and a half, I haven’t been able to do anything to you, Horikita-san. That’s the truth, right? Therefore, I won’t be able to have you expelled in the future… But is that really the case?”

“If we were enemies in different classes, that might’ve been a possibility. But we’re not. It is not easy to expel a student from the same class.”

“I’m definitely going to prove it to you.”

“Can’t we just understand each other? I’m trying to graduate with all of my classmates, including you, Kushida-san. And, in order to do that, your help is essential.”

“I—di—ot.”

She cursed me so quietly that the end of the word almost disappeared.

“I’m not going to cooperate with you. Stop saying things that make me want to puke.”

“Kushida-san...”

“I’m looking forward to the second semester. I’m sure we’ll have a fun time together.”

As her face that had been right up against me slowly separated, the wickedness faded from her expression.

Even so, it was clear that there was a mixture of anger and hatred behind that smile.

“No matter what I try, it’s impossible, isn’t it...”

She moved away from me, as if she’d had enough of our conversation.

“But I believe...one day you will come to understand.”

The words certainly should’ve reached her ears, but she didn’t stop walking.



5.7

It was a little after 2pm. There was still plenty of time before the treasure hunt game would end, but I felt it was safe assume that we'd already searched most of the area. I took pictures of a total of six QR codes. We ranked them objectively, with three of them judged to be a 4 out of 5 in terms of how difficult they were to find. It would be a good idea to choose one of those to scan first.

“Could you open up the camera?”

“Which one should we scan first?”

“You can pick whichever one you intuitively think is good, Satō.”

“E-ehh? Is it really okay for me to choose? W-what if I pick a bad one?”

“There should only be carefully selected QR codes left. Besides, it's possible that they've all been scanned already, so we might end up having to try them all in the end.”

We would have a better chance if we made a quick decision rather than taking our time.

“O-okay.”

Satō took my phone and scrolled through the photos. She seemed to ponder it for a few seconds, but then at last decided to point her own phone camera at one of the photos. It was the QR code I found when I stuck my phone underneath the sofa.

However—

“Ahh, this one's no good. It says it's already been accepted so it's gone.”

It was quite well hidden, but it seemed some other students had managed to find it.

“Don't worry about it, try the next QR code.”

She nodded, and this time she didn't hesitate to scan the QR code that she scrolled to.

However, it seemed the second one had also already been accepted, and Satō stomped her foot in frustration.

“Even though it was so hard to find! This is so frustrating!”

She hurried to scan the third QR code.

After that, Satō stared at the screen for a while, but then suddenly jumped into the air.

“It loaded! Look, something like a treasure chest came out!”

It was a simple illustration of a treasure chest with the word TAP.

“I wonder how many points we’ll get...”

Satō went to tap the treasure chest with her index finger, but stopped just before her finger touched it.

“Y-you press it, Ayanokōji-kun!”

It appeared that she was afraid of seeing the results, so she handed me her phone. From Satō’s point of view, she had to use her precious 10,000 points to participate, so she was scared our efforts wouldn’t bear fruit.

I received the phone from Satō and touched the treasure chest on the screen.

“Wah, Ayanokōji-kun, you’re so bold!”

I didn’t exactly do anything that could be called bold.

The treasure chest glowed simply, and a blue light came from inside the box.

And then—

“Ah!!...oh~”

For a moment, Satō was intensely surprised, but she soon realised the truth and her joy began to fade.

The reason for this was because what came out of the treasure chest was not one million points, but 100,000 points. She was dreaming of the 300,000, 500,000, or even one million points rewards, so she was a little disappointed.

“It appears that the QR code wasn’t as difficult to find as we thought.”

“I see~...that’s too bad. But, but, even after taking away the participation fee, we still get 90,000 points, so it’s more than enough!”

Even without confirming it, I could brazenly say that I was glad I participated.

“Thank you, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“I’m the one who should be saying thank you. After all, the one who found the QR code that hadn’t been scanned yet was you, Satō.”

“...Hehe.”

Showing an expression that was both pleased and embarrassed, Satō smirked.

5.8

Students who scanned a QR code in the treasure hunt had an obligation to report it to the school.



Satō and I returned to the starting point and headed towards Horikita, who was waiting at the reception desk.

“Good work. With this, the procedure is now complete.”

Satō expressed her happiness honestly upon hearing such a report.

“Well then, thank you for today, Ayanokōji-kun. Let’s hang out together some other time.”

Saying that, Satō waved and walked away happily. Now that she had some extra income, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to spend a little time indulging in luxury.

“If we exclude the participation fee, it’s a total of 180,000 points between the two of you. Good job.”

“Yeah.”

By this time, most of the participants seemed to have reached their goals, and only a few people were coming.

“Looks like you’ve had a lot to do too. Have you taken any breaks?”

“Yes, for about an hour. But I can’t complain. It was my own idea to appeal directly to the school from the perspective of fraud prevention.”

“A direct appeal, huh. It’s a small thing, but it’s a step towards becoming the Student Council President.”

Making a good impression with things like that would be appreciated by both the school and the student council.

“It’s not like that. Even if I didn’t suggest it, there wouldn’t be a great deal of cheating. It’s just...well, I thought it might be helpful, even if only a little. That’s all.”

I didn’t really understand, but Horikita’s mind seemed to be elsewhere.

“So, who got the highest number of private points from our class?”

“Who do you think?”

When I asked her, she turned the question around and asked me back.

“I’m hoping it’s not us.”

“Well good for you, you’re correct. There was a pair that won 500,000 private points. It was Wang-san and Kōenji-kun.”

“Kōenji? Participating in the game itself is one thing, but I’m surprised he paired up with someone.”

I didn’t notice the presence of Kōenji at the briefing because there were so many people.

“I’m of the same opinion. I don’t know the circumstances of how he ended up participating and pairing up, but he’s made a considerable amount money in the last couple of weeks.”

“No matter what he does, he’s out of this world, that Kōenji.”

To think he had good luck in addition to having incredible physical abilities. Or maybe it was a QR code that his partner found.

“Not being able to use Kōenji-kun in the future is a big minus for the class.”

“He was never the kind of guy to work hard to begin with; can’t you just be satisfied with him taking first place this time?”

“There’s no way I could be satisfied. It would be too much of a waste not to use his abilities to move up to Class A. Don’t you have any ideas?”

A way to make good use of Kōenji? It was a waste of resources to even think about it.

“It’s impossible.”

“That was a quick reply.”

I was confident that I could control others to some extent. However, the only exception to this was Kōenji.

I’d run countless simulations on how to control all of my classmates and Kōenji was the only one who, no matter how many simulations I tried, I could not get under control.

“Even if you give up, I won’t. His strength is vital.”

Trying to control the uncontrollable. That was simply a contradiction.

“Even if it’s a waste of time?”

“You don’t think we need Kōenji-kun?”

“I think that as long as he doesn’t do any harm, the best course of action is to leave him alone. And now that Kōenji’s been handed a protection point, it’s possible to neglect him more.”

“That sure is a rational thought.”

“If the class couldn’t win without Kōenji, I’d understand why you’d be so eager. However, our class has already grown into a force to be reckoned with that can compete with the other classes. And it will continue to grow in the future.”

“Yes, you’re right, everyone’s much more reliable than they were a year ago.”

“However...” Horikita continued, “While getting to Class A is my top priority and ultimate goal, I want the class to become one. I want to lead them in a way so that we can all combine our strength.”

So she didn’t want anyone to be cut off, even Kōenji.

Horikita’s eyes that stared at me were so straight that I unconsciously choked on my words.

If Horikita could get Kōenji to join her, he would be an irreplaceable and dependable ally.

However, clearing that hurdle was probably more difficult than trying to get to Class A.

In the past, I wouldn’t have taken her statement seriously. I would just put it away as ramblings and beyond her capabilities. Horikita’s growth has been slow, but it was progressing step by step.

Well...I still couldn’t say that Horikita might be able to move Kōenji someday though.

Kōenji really was the only man that my calculations couldn’t comprehend.

“What’s wrong?”

“What do you mean?”

“You looked like you were thinking.”

“No, I was just trying to figure out how I would spend all these private points that I’ve been given.”

“...Right. You’re giving half of your money to Kushida-san, so you should take care of the private points you earned today and not waste them.”

“Yeah, that’s right. I’ll do that.”

I decided to leave quietly, since staying any longer would only get in the way of the operation.

5.9

It was a little after 5:30pm. I had a meeting scheduled with someone before dinner at 6pm.

As I was leaving my guest cabin to go to the deck on the 5th floor, I came across Sudō, who was staying in the cabin two doors over.

“It’s almost time to eat, where you goin’?”

Sudō asked if I was on my way back to the guest cabin.

“Just going for a little walk before dinner.”

“You sound kinda like an old man. Then I’ll see ya at the restaurant.”

We exchanged a few words and were about to part when Sudō remembered something and spoke up.

“No wait, sorry, sorry. Right, actually something a bit surprising happened!”

“Are you talking about how Ike and Shinohara started dating?”

“W-what, you already knew?”

“Yeah, although it was just a coincidence that I ended up overhearing it.”

“Nah, ’course that was a surprise too, he beat me to it... More importantly, he said he wants to study with me. He wants to join Suzune’s study group.”

That was unexpected, or rather, faster than I expected.

“Poor academic performance is fatal at this school after all.”

Students were often in danger of being expelled from school due to academics, which was natural considering it was a student’s duty to study.

“It’s a precious time for me to be alone with Suzune, but if he’s motivated, I’ve got no choice but to support him, right? So Kanji’s gonna study hard, starting with summer training.”

Summer training. Apparently, he intended to start studying right after this trip was over. Whether or not he’d show any immediate results depended on Ike’s efforts, but some growth may become visible early in the second semester. Both Sudō and Ike may transform as a result of their love lives.

“There might be other members joining you, you know?”

“Huh? Seriously?”

“Ike isn’t the only student who started thinking they want to be taught by Horikita.”

“It’s not a guy, right?”

He came at me and grabbed my shoulders with a serious look on his face.

“No...it’s not. It’s Satō, only Satō.”

I didn’t intend to give her name, but I confessed after being on the receiving end of his unyielding pressure.

“So it’s a girl. Well, if it’s like that... but Satō, huh? If it’s not only me, but Ike as well, she’s probably not gonna join the study group, is she?”

“Don’t you think you’re making certain assumptions? She seemed to have a strong resolve.”

“Hmm. Well, it’s okay. I’m not gonna lose no matter who’s comin’.”

He blew air out of his nose, and I could sense the continuation of his strong desire to study.

“Isn’t it a bit tight? What with your club activities going on at the same time and all.”

“Yeah, it’s tough. But I’ve always had enough stamina to brag about. The first time I tried to really use my head, I felt like sleepin’ within a minute, but

now I can go forev...nah, I can go for like an hour.”

If you could concentrate and study for that long, you wouldn’t have any problems. Study for an hour, take a break, study for an hour, and then repeating was more than enough.

“But, you know...shit, I just can’t accept the fact that Kanji got a girlfriend before me.”

Even while laughing, Sudō lamented with regret in all sincerity.

“I’m gonna hold a grudge ’bout that while givin’ him proper training. Gonna give him the basketball club’s spartan training.”

It was a love-hate relationship with a bad friend, but he would take care of him.

“In moderation, right? After all, it’s not easy to fall in love with something that you used to hate, like studying.”

“I know. I know just how much I hated studying myself.”

Saying that, he stuck out his tongue as if he’d taken a bite of something bitter.

After parting ways with Sudō, I approached my destination. I saw the figure of Kushida ahead of me on the deck and hid myself. It was already five minutes past the time we were supposed to meet, so of course she was in a situation where she had to wait.

I took out my phone and called Kushida, and she picked up after two rings.

“Hello?”

After confirming the voice, I walked out to the deck where Kushida was. Mobile phones, because of their nature, prioritized ‘calling’, so even if the recording mode was activated, it would automatically turn off when a call started. In other words, the conversation that was about to take place would be between me and Kushida alone.

“Sorry Kushida, I’m late. I’m on my way right now, are you still waiting?”

“Yeah, umm—ah, over here!” Kushida checked left and right and waved after immediately spotting me.

I didn’t end the call from my phone and, while continuing to run, arrived in front of Kushida. At about the same time, we both hung up on our phones.

“I’m sorry for keeping you waiting. I took a wrong turn somewhere.”

“So even you screw up sometimes, Ayankouji-kun. But what’s wrong? You said you wanted to talk to me.”

“I’ve been debating what to do for the past few hours, but I figured I should be honest and confess.”

“Hmm? Confess? About what?”

“You know that I participated in the treasure hunt game, yes?”

“Yeah. You paired up with Satō-san, right?”

She looked at me curiously, as if to say ‘and what about it?’, like she didn’t understand what I was getting at.

“The reward for the QR code I scanned during the treasure hunt was 100,000 points. In short, that’s 90,000 points after deducting the participation fee. Divide that by two and you get 45,000 points. I thought the right thing to do was to give you half of it, Kushida.”

After saying that, I took out my phone and showed her the records of my deposits and withdrawals. It clearly stated that exactly 100,000 points had just been transferred to my account.

“Ehh? It was just a game, you don’t have to worry about it so much~”

Kushida, surprised by the unexpected topic of our conversation, put her hands out and refused to accept it.

“To be honest, I thought so too at first. That’s exactly what I tried to think, but I couldn’t help but feel that it was a devious way of thinking. There was a possibility you’d say you didn’t want it, and I thought that if I just kept my mouth shut, you wouldn’t find out. It’s because I’m ashamed of own way of thinking that I decided that I have to give it to you.”

“But—”

No matter how I tried to reason with her, it would be difficult for Kushida to accept the points.

“To be honest with you...I want you to take them, as a sign of good faith.”

“Good faith...?”

“I’m giving you half of the private points I receive to buy safety from you, Kushida. As long as I show good faith regarding this, I’m thinking you’ll do the same with me.” Am I wrong? I asked with my eyes. “It never hurts to have more private points, even if only a little. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s true, but wouldn’t that put you in a considerably painful situation, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“I don’t mind. It’s nothing compared to getting in trouble with you, Kushida.”

“Somehow...the opposite is a little scary.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, Ayanokōji-kun, I keep hearing that you’re some amazing student. Are you really giving me half of your private points just because you want to have a truce with me?”

“The way I see it, it’s more dangerous to make an enemy of you, whose personal life comes into play, than a student like Sakayanagi or Ryūen, who we have to fight in special exams.”

Although she was somewhat wary, Kushida nodded her head as if satisfied.

“All right. Then you’re really okay with this?”

“Of course.”

Using my phone, I transferred the private points to Kushida’s account just like I’d done many times before.

“I hate to say it just after giving you my points, but if I ever get into some money-related troubles, I might ask for your help.”

“Ehh~? That’s a little uncool Ayanokōji-kun.”

Kushida laughed a little, perhaps amused by my shamelessness.

“But I think it’s a much, much smarter approach than Horikita-san. I don’t hate that kind of thing.”

“Is that so?”

“For me as well, the only person I don’t want to make an enemy out of is you, Ayanokōji-kun, so I hope we continue to get along.”

“Yeah. I’d like to keep our mutually beneficial relationship going.”

With that, Kushida and I parted ways as if nothing had happened.

Chapter 6: An Inevitable Past

It was evening, and my roommates were having a great time chatting about trivial things.

I was worried about Akito's health, but his fever had gone down within a day and he was on the mend, so he had no issues lying down and talking for the time being. I was basically just spending my evening watching from the side-lines whilst operating my phone, occasionally interjecting with some small talk.

I was surfing the internet, waiting for drowsiness to hit me, when I received a message.

I want to talk to you on the phone for a bit, is that okay?

It was a message from Kei.

It had been a while since the ban on messaging was lifted, but we'd exchanged messages roughly once per day. No emoticons or stamps were used today, which suggested that it was a serious matter.

I'm in my room right now, so wait three minutes.

It wasn't curfew yet, so it wasn't difficult to get out of the cabin. After sending my reply, I decided to make a quick exit from the bed.

"I'm going to go buy a drink."

With those convenient words that could be used at any time, I left the cabin and went out into to the hallway.

Since it was around 9pm, I didn't see any students passing by. I then went out onto the deck and checked my surroundings. After making sure that no one was around, I called Kei.

"Hello?"

"Sorry for bothering you all of a sudden, but I just really wanted to talk to you today."

She said cute things just like a girlfriend would. I wondered if this was one of those ‘I just wanted to hear your voice for some reason’ type requests from a lover.

“So you know——”

After a slight pause, Kei spoke up.

“I heard some unpleasant rumours about you, you know? You’ll give me a detailed explanation, right?”

“Unpleasant rumours?”

Huh? The words I was expecting didn’t jump out; rather, Kei seemed to be in a bad mood.

There was a long silence and I didn’t get a response right away.

“Unpleasant rumours?”

I couldn’t take it anymore so I asked her for a second time, but she didn’t answer, just giving off a hint of frustration. Rather, after I repeated the question word for word, she instead became suspicious.

“Does nothing come to mind?”

“I can’t think of anything.”

I answered without hesitation, but there were a number of things that came to mind.

The first thing would have to be the Ichinose situation. When Nagumo saw the exchange between me and Ichinose, he would’ve figured out that we were in a serious situation. And now that he knew that Kei and I were in a relationship, it wouldn’t be strange if he went around spreading what he’d seen.

In addition to that, the fact that I paired up with Satō, who’d once confessed to me, and had a chat with Matsushita also crossed my mind.

“There’s really nothing that comes to mind?”

There was a long pause, as if she were making a final check before passing judgement.

“Nope, nothing.”

Despite that, I persisted and pretended not to know. If I knew what Kei's 'something that comes to mind' was referring to, I would've readily confessed, whether it was the thing with Ichinose or the thing with Satō. However, since I hadn't identified which it was yet, if I were to say something inappropriate, the problem may worsen. It was a case of letting my own flesh be cut in order to sever the other's bone, I guess.

...Anyway, why was something like this happening instead of it just being a sweet phone call?

"Kei?"

When I prompted her by calling her name, she spoke up, her lips seemingly trembling.

"You've been, like, messing around with an underclassman! That rumour!"

"...Huh?"

She told me what the rumours were saying, but I titled my head, unable to comprehend it. Were all the thoughts that came to mind off the mark? As I thought, it was a good thing that I didn't say anything carelessly.

"Where and how did you even hear a rumour like that?"

"I don't know! But I heard that you were seen repeatedly meeting with some first-year girl."

A first-year girl. The person that immediately came to mind was Nanase...

It was true that I had talked to Nanase many times over this vacation. It wasn't like we were meeting in secret, so there must've been witnesses everywhere. Now that I understood the situation, I could end this quickly.

"She's just an underclassman, nothing more."

"I know that! I mean if she wasn't just an underclassman you'd be out!"
That was for sure.

"And also! You didn't tell me anything about pairing up with Satō-san for the treasure hunt."

So it appeared that Kei was aware of one of the things that came to mind.

“Sure, I didn’t report it, but because it was you, Kei, you’d find out straight away, right?”

Since Satō and I had been walking around together on a treasure hunt, numerous people would’ve seen us. Even Matsushita knew about it.

“Y-yeah, well I did find out straight away...I knew about it, but...”

She seemed to have a lot of complaints and was mumbling something inaudibly.

“Even though I actually wanted to pair up with *you*, Kiyotaka.”

“I understand how you feel, but the order would be reversed then wouldn’t it?”

“Bu—”

“By the way, how were the results after working with Mori?”

“...You’re asking that?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

The mood was plummeting so it would be better not to go too deep into this. I didn’t mind continuing to listen to her complain, but since the topic of Satō had come up, I decided to ask her about it.

“You told Satō already about what we’re planning to do, right?”

“Eh? A-ahh yeah. I wanted to tell just Satō-san first.”

“Well, that’s probably all right. By the way, did you talk about it over a phone call or through messages?”

“No way. You have to talk about these things face to face. It was at the café.”

“The café, huh. Do you remember if anyone might’ve overheard you?”

“I can be careful about stuff like that too you know? At the very least, there weren’t any second-years who could’ve overheard us, so don’t worry.”

Certainly, Kei would be most worried about the second-years. Normally, neither first nor third-years would have any strong interest in the love stories

of other year groups. Especially if the person in question was me.

However, it was quite the opposite for the current third-year students, who only seemed to bite on topics related to me.

“Ah~ but there were some third-year girls sat nearby, so it was a little difficult to talk.”

As if she were checking her answers to an exam question, Kei thought back on the meeting she had with Satō. For Kei, who didn’t know the circumstances, she would’ve had no reason to assume she should be wary of third-year students.

“If she knows, then it’s good.”

“Yeah. But is it really okay? To be open about the fact that we’re dating?”

“Of course, it’s no problem.”

Rather, it was obvious that it would become a necessary action sooner or later. The more we pushed it back, the more troublesome it might become.

“Well, I say we’re going to be open about it, but it’s not like we’re going to go announce it in front of all our classmates. It’ll spread naturally from our friends, and people will find out at different times.”

I was sure everyone would react to their heart’s content for a few days, but it wouldn’t be a big problem.

“But you know...you’re very popular, Kiyotaka.”

“Is that so?”

“Ugh, that whole not knowing anything part of you is super irritating you know.”

“In that case, we can just not talk about it.”

“Yeah that’s true, but even though I know that, I’m worried, so I end up asking!”

It wasn’t like I didn’t know what she was trying to say, but there were some contradictions.

“Isn’t the purpose of the declaration to keep the unnecessary bugs away?”

As long as they thought the person they liked didn't have a boyfriend or girlfriend, they might try and go on an all-out offensive. To avoid this, you had to make a big deal of the fact that you were dating someone. If you did that, most people would give up and stop trying to attack.

Of course, I was aware that there were a few exceptions, but...

“I’m still gonna be worried...”

Those few exceptions, the enemies yet to be revealed, were what Kei was frightened of.

“You might not know this yet, but there are girls who fall for guys who already have a girlfriend, and there are girls who’ll enthusiastically try and steal them.”

“I see.”

“Get it? I’ll never forgive you if you cheat on me.”

As a dependant type, Kei would never forgive her boyfriend if he were to cheat on her. I knew that even before we started dating.

“Don’t worry; I wouldn’t do something like that.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

“Really really?”

“Yes, really.”

We repeatedly went back and forth in what was a seemingly pointless exchange.

However, this seemingly pointless back and forth was just one of the ways of expressing affection in the process of falling in love.

“Do you...love me?”

I checked my surroundings once more to make sure I hadn’t missed anything. Of course, I didn’t think any students would willingly show their face on this dark deck at this hour.

“Yeah, I love you.”

After confirming that nobody was around, I could answer without hesitation.

“...Fufufu.”

“What’s with the creepy laugh?”

I thought she would definitely be happy or respond in the same way, but I didn’t expect to be laughed at.

“It’s kinda funny to think of you saying that while being careful of your surroundings, Kiyotaka.”

Apparently, Kei had seen through my actions.

“I’m hanging up.”

“Ahh wait, wait! Say it again.”

“Mmm.”

The words got caught in my throat after she asked for me to say it again.

“I said I was getting a drink when I left, so it’s about time I head back.”

“Wait! Tell me you love me!”

“I said it earlier, didn’t I?”

“I want to hear it again!”

How selfish. No, even though they were the same words, the weight of them seemed to have changed.

“...I love you.”

“...Pfft.”

“Hey.”

Kei tried to hold back her laughter, but eventually she couldn’t endure it any longer and let her voice slip out.

“Yep, I knew it, you’re the best... I’m absolutely never giving you to anyone else.”

I just said that she didn’t have to worry about that, but her anxiety only seemed to be growing.

“Are you okay not asking me too?”

“If I asked you, would you even say it?”

“Hmm, I wonder?”

“Then we’ll talk again tomorrow.”

“Wait! That’s obviously the part where you ask me!”

How to put it? It seemed like I was given a choice, but I actually wasn’t.

“Then say it.”

“You just threw it out there! Like you don’t care either way! I can’t stomach it~!”

“...Please say it.”

“Eh~? I wonder what I should do~?”

I held back what I wanted to say and waited for Kei’s response.

“...I love you.”

Kei gave a short reply while laughing a little, no, while feeling awkward.

“Good night, Kiyotaka.”

“Yeah, good night.”

As I hung up the phone, the sound of Kei saying ‘I love you’ reverberated in my ears.

“This isn’t bad, huh?”

The thing called love really was interesting. That was what I thought at that moment of the night.

6.1

The date had just changed to August 9th, and the time aboard the cruise ship was coming to an end.

It was past 1am, and most students were likely already asleep. In the late night bar lounge, which was only available to adults, three people had met

up.

“Ahh, I’m so tired. Why do we teachers have to work so late, day in and day out? My skin will get all rough. We want a summer vacation too~” grumbled Hoshinomiya, who was slumped face down on the bar counter.

“You’ve had more than enough rest. You should’ve been able to rest on the fifth and sixth days.”

“That’s only two days you know~? I was so busy today and yesterday~ And what’s with the treasure hunt bonus game? I want *my* bonus~”

“I understand how you feel, but we’re working people, Chie. We don’t get long summer vacation like kids do.” Chabashira, who was sat to the right of Hoshinomiya, admonished her.

“If you consider the effort the students just put in for two weeks on an uninhabited island, it’s not a big deal.” This time, Mashima, who was sat in between the two of them, urged her to hold her ground.

“Don’t force reality on me... I don’t wanna hear it, I don’t wanna hear it.” Hoshinomiya covered both ears with her hands and shook her head in refusal. “Well, at least let me have a vacation on the ship. It’s not fair that the students have access to the pool, the movies, and everything else while we get nothing, is it~?”

Hoshinomiya couldn’t accept the situation where she was just watching every day with her fingers in her mouth.

“That’s what it means to have a job.”

“That’s normal when you’re a working adult, Chie.”

“Ahh nooo, I don’t wanna hear it, damn working people!” She covered her ears with her hands even more strongly.

However, not long after, she released her hands, put up her right hand and raised her voice. “Please give me a drink strong enough for me to escape from reality. Master’s choice.” Then, with her left hand, she banged on the counter table and demanded alcohol.

“Seriously...you never change.” Chabashira let out an exasperated sigh after seeing Hoshinomiya like that.

“Because your goal is to stay beautiful and young forever?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what~?”

“...No, don’t worry about it. There’s no point trying to explain.”

Mashima and Chabashira also ordered beers a step later, and when they all had their drinks, they tipped their glasses and toasted.

“But this time’s special exam had a lot of strangely rough developments. There were too many unplanned incidents.”

“A student was seriously injured, and the watch malfunctions were obviously the result of the students doing whatever they liked. Moreover, to think that only third-year students were expelled... There were a lot of things that we didn’t expect.”

Hoshinomiya took a sip of the cocktail she was served and sighed. “As I thought, giving the students too much freedom was a problem. There haven’t been any reports, but I’m sure there were some boys and girls doing *that* in places where they wouldn’t be seen.”

“I’d like to think that, at the very least, that line wasn’t crossed.”

“You’re naïve, Mashima-kun. Just looking won’t be enough to stop a young girl’s passion.”

“You’re the only one who thinks that.”

When she was told off, Hoshinomiya immediately asked for a refill.

“We’ll be busy again after the summer vacation ends.”

“Ugh, I can’t take it anymore. I don’t want to be a low salary teacher who’s worked to death. I want money.”

“You’ve been bitching the whole time we’ve been here.”

“Well of course. I set all this up because I wanted to bitch didn’t I?” Hoshinomiya said without a trace of remorse and sipped from her second glass.

“You never change, Chie. Although that’s one of the good things about you.”

Chabashira asked for some nuts as a light snack.

“Anyway, I’m relieved about this uninhabited island exam. That the second-years didn’t lose, that is.”

“Though it was ominous that only third-year students had to drop out.”

While sandwiched between Hoshinomiya and Chabashira, Mashima quietly listened to their conversation. However, just as they were about to move onto another topic, he put the half-empty glass of beer on the table somewhat forcefully.

“The second-years are doing well. However, on the flip side, that can invite trouble.”

“What’s that? Are you saying it’s not good to try so hard?”

“It’s not like the school wants anyone to drop out, but still, in reality, not even one of our second-year students has dropped out of school during any special exams so far.”

“In reality, yeah. Even though the school ended up having to choose students to be semi-forcibly expelled from school, a drop-out’s a drop-out, right?”

All three of them remembered the Class Poll very clearly.

“I’d like to believe there won’t be any more special exams with no way out like that.”

Even Chabashira, who usually treated her class with a cold-hearted attitude, wasn’t without heartache. She didn’t agree that students who didn’t make any mistakes should be forced into a corner. Both she and Hoshinomiya were in agreement on that point.

However, Mashima’s face remained grim. Seeing that, Chabashira looked into his eyes as if peering into his soul.

“Don’t tell me another special exam to force people out of school has been prepared?”

“An exam like last year’s class poll isn’t something the school can do just like that.”

“Then there’s no problem. As long as there are no mandatory expulsions, my class will get through it.”

“Oh my? You’ve started talking big all of a sudden, Sae-chan.”

Over Mashima’s back, Hoshinomiya poked Chabashira’s side.

“Stop it.”

When Chabashira grabbed her hand a little angrily, Hoshinomiya turned her sharp eyes back to her.

“You’re not thinking you’ll make it to Class A are you?”

“Nobody said that. However, I’m just saying that this class is superior to the classes from previous years.”

“Hmm?”

In the midst of the tense atmosphere, Mashima guzzled the remaining half of his beer.

“Indeed, there are no mandatory expulsions. But...”

Chabashira, together with Hoshinomiya, turned to look at Mashima, who choked on his words.

“The outline for the next special exam was announced recently. It will be implemented for the first time in 11 years.”

“11 years...We’ll be 29 this year, so...you mean since our third-year of high school? It’s unusual isn’t it? For such an old special exam to be adopted.”

Many of her memories from high school were buried deep in the back of her brain and had already melted away. What conversations she’d had, what special exams she’d done. If she were asked to recall all of them immediately, she wouldn’t be able to answer.

“The school makes special exams according to a year-long schedule. If we take it a step further, it’s based on a four-year rotation. You know this much, yes?”

“It’s to make sure the contents of the special exams don’t get leaked to other students while they’re at school, right?”

Throughout its history, the Advanced Nurturing High School had conducted a number of special exams. Some had only been done once, and some had been included in the quadrennial framework due to their versatility.

“Of course, there are times when we intentionally repeat the same special exam within a short period of time, and there are also some special exams for the purpose of sharing information, but it’s basically a predetermined rotation. However, depending on how the year goes, there are times when special exams from further back than four years are brought in.”

“So you’re saying it’s not that unusual for old special exams to be adopted?”

“That’s right. As long as it’s not a ‘problematic’ special exam, that is.”

Mashima said it in a suggestive way, but the two didn’t think about it too much. Rather, they showed great enthusiasm in response to the new special exam.

“Maybe Sae-chan and I will end up fighting each other~”

“You seem to be expecting that to happen. You think you can beat my class in a fight?”

“Nothing like that. But is it better than fighting than fighting Ryūen-kun’s or Sakayanagi-san’s?

Hoshinomiya grinned and the smell of alcohol streamed out of her mouth.

“My class has grown a lot. Don’t think it will be easy.”

“Heh~ To think you’d say something like that, Sae-chan. Are you acting all tough because you’ve got that special kid, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“Certainly, Ayanokōji is a gem as well. But there are a lot of students in my class who show a lot of potential.”

“As well? Aren’t you relying on Ayanokōji-kun too much, Sae-chan?”

“What in the world are you talking about? When did I rely on Ayanokōji?”

They seemed to be having their usual back and forth, but Mashima, who was sitting between them, felt their conversation could chill his insides. If he

just kept his mouth shut and listened to their conversation, it would only take a few moments for an argument to break out.

“Let’s leave it at that. There’s no point arguing about it here and now.”

“That’s right; I might’ve got a little heated.”

While expressing her remorse, Hoshinomiya gulped down her drink until it was empty.

“You’re going too fast.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine. I’m not so weak that I could be crushed that easily.”

“No, that’s not it. I’m saying it’ll affect your work tomorrow...no, today.”

“I’m saying I’m fine, it won’t affect it, it won’t.”

Hoshinomiya showed absolutely no signs of stopping and asked for a third glass.

“Then, let’s talk before you get too drunk. You can have a look at the outline for the next special exam.”

Mashima operated his phone and placed it on the table.

“The important thing is the name of the special exam. You’ll understand straight away once you see it.”

“The name of the exam?”

“Go ahead, read it.”

The two looked at each other and then, at almost the same time, they peeked at the phone. After seeing the name, Chabashira gasped, as did Hoshinomiya.

It was a special exam that Chabashira and Hoshinomiya experienced when they were students. The news was that it had been decided that it would be held at the beginning of the second semester.

“11 years ago... Even though it was a long time ago, you should remember this particular exam very well.”

Chabashira looked at the name of the special exam over and over again and was left speechless. Hoshinomiya turned away from the phone and held

the third glass she had been brought in her hand. She looked at the reflection of her face and smiled.

“To think we’d see this special exam again, huh...”

Chabashira, unable to say anything, just silently cast her eyes downwards.

“I thought last year’s class poll...wasn’t that supposed to be a substitute for this?”

As if to confirm, Hoshinomiya looked at Mashima.

“In the end, they’re both used for a similar purpose. It means the school had no choice but to include it. If any of the second-year students had dropped out during the uninhabited island exam, the next special exam was going to be a different one.”

“Well, I guess it can’t be helped. We can’t make the written exams too hard just to get people to drop out. So a special exam that’s a big problem has come up because Sae-chan’s class is just too good~?” Hoshinomiya emphasized, as if she were trying to make a point.

“It’s too early to decide it’s a big problem. Depending on how you look at it, it’s just a trivial test.”

“But if you make one wrong choice, it can turn into a difficult problem. Isn’t that right? Sae-chan?”

Chabashira, who had her eyes closed, wouldn’t answer with a yes or no.

“That’s right...you two suffered a great deal with this particular exam.”

“For us, it was the third semester of our third-year. I’ve never forgotten what happened on that day.”

The words were directed to herself and also Chabashira, as if she were nostalgic for the past.

“So, how long are you going to keep your mouth shut? Don’t you have anything you want to say?”

Even after being asked like that, Chabashira couldn’t utter a word, as if she couldn’t get hear head around it.

“Pathetic.”

After complaining briefly, she ignored the unresponsive Chabashira and looked at Mashima.

“What do you think, Mashima-kun? The next special exam...will there be any dropouts?”

“Even though Class A is a head above of the rest, there’s still a chance for those in Class B and below to turn things around. If you put up a strong challenge with the intention to win, there’s a good chance we’ll end up on the same path that you were on.”

“A premonition of quagmire—I guess,” Hoshinomiya muttered, and asked for a fourth glass. The pace of her drinking was going up and up.

“Well, my class is probably okay in a bad sense, but what about Sae-chan’s? Right now, they’re flying high and coming up from the bottom. If they can increase their class points here, they could become Class B straight away. If it were me...”

“I’m going back to my room.”

Chabashira, who had been silent the whole time, stood up and said so before she even finished her first glass.

“Just when I thought you were finally going to talk, you say you’re leaving...The lively atmosphere’s been ruined...”

“I’m sorry, but you two will have to continue without me.”

Chabashira turned her back, and Hoshinomiya’s sluggish expression changed completely.

“Hey!”

Hoshinomiya slammed the now empty glass down onto the table and stood up with great vigour.

Perhaps because it wasn’t just Chabashira, but also Mashima, who were surprised by her actions, she was unable to speak and showed signs of agitation. It was probably fortunate that they were the only three customers at the bar.

“How long are you going to chase after your boring love?!”

“...What are you saying?”

“Do you know how old we are now? We’re 29 you know? I’m saying that romance was years ago!”

“Hey, you drank too much at once——”

“You stay quiet, Mashima-kun!”

“...”

The bartender, who’d been wiping glasses nearby, sensed it was a serious matter and excused himself to use the restroom.

“If you consider just your age, you’re getting older and older, and yet you’ve been stuck in your third-year of high school all this time. And now you’ve taken it upon yourself to weigh down the kids...hah? Are you an idiot?”

Chabashira left in silence, not even bothering to say anything back in response to the barrage of abuse.

There was silence between Hoshinomiya and Mashima, who were left at the counter.

“Oh my, she’s gone.”

Feeling disappointed, Hoshinomiya retrieved the drink left by Chabashira and sat back down.

“You’re a malicious one too, Hoshinomiya.”

“I had no choice, you know. It’s bad that this special exam of all things is coming up.”

“It was this special exam that proved decisive for you two after all.”

“If Sae-chan had chosen the right answer, we would’ve graduated from Class A you know?”

“...You’re still holding a grudge, aren’t you?”

“Of course I’m still holding a grudge. I failed, and now I’m a teacher at this school. In reality, I should’ve gone on to a more sparkling world.”

“Dorm life must’ve been tough after that exam, since you and Chabashira were in the same room.”

“There was no way we could live together after what happened. We probably would’ve killed each other.”

“The fact that I can’t even say that you’re exaggerating is what’s so scary about you two.”

Hoshinomiya grabbed a strand of hair and pulled it out.

“Didn’t you fix that habit?”

“Ah, I shouldn’t have done that. I did it unconsciously...my precious hair...you want it?”

“I don’t.”

He ignored the hair he was offered and asked the bartender, who had now returned, for a second drink. Seeing this, Hoshinomiya also prompted him for a fifth drink.

“Sharing a room isn’t a good idea. It’s fine when things are going well, but when there’s trouble, relationships change drastically. At least when love and the future come into play that is.”

Before anyone noticed, Hoshinomiya had returned to her usual cheerful expression.

“Even though all the second-years worked so hard to stay afloat during the uninhabited island exam...the school does some terrible things.”

“Originally, a few students would drop out every year, that’s the policy this school was built on. There are too many second-years still here. However, the school fully acknowledges the hard work of the second-year students. That’s why we have this special exam. We still don’t know what the outcome will be after all.”

“That’s true, but...that exam brings out the ugliness and the weakness in people’s hearts. At least it helps that the first semester of the second-year has only just ended. Oh, so the fact that the school approved it has something to do with that.”

“The less time remaining in the school year, the more valuable class points are and the more difficult special exams become. There’s some

salvation compared to what we had to do in the third semester of our third year.”

“I definitely wasn’t at fault…It was all Sae-chan’s fault…”

“That depends on how you think. You and Chabashira both made the right decision.”

“I’m not so sure…”

When she went to reach for her newly arrived drink, Hoshinomiya’s hand stopped.

“What’s wrong?”

“My class…at the very least, won’t reach Class A.”

“What are you saying?”

“I already know it. I don’t think we can reach Sakayanagi’s class. But… but even if that’s the case, I absolutely won’t let Sae-chan’s class graduate from Class A. For us, graduating from Class A was a long-held dream. The one who destroyed that dream has no right to have her students graduate from Class A. Isn’t that right, Mashima-kun?”

“Aren’t this and that separate issues?”

“They aren’t separate. Absolutely, you hear?”

“Besides, Ichinose’s class is excellent. There’s still a long way to go until we graduate from Class A. Ichinose’s class will probably get through the next special exam with ease.”

“I’m saying they’re not good enough. No matter how unjust a future awaits, you need to become a demon to win Class A. Just like I tried to do.”

“Even if it means students are expelled?”

“Even if it means students are expelled.”

“At any rate,” she paused for a moment. “Hirata, Kushida, Horikita, Kōenji, Ayanokōji…No matter how much I think about it, it’s too unfair.”

“As usual, it’s a class with many students considered to be troublemakers, but there’s a strange sense of solidarity. It’s as if every flaw is being eliminated one by one.”

“I’m hoping the next special exam will smash that to pieces.”

With that, Hoshinomiya rested her head on Mashima’s shoulder.

“I might’ve gotten a little drunk… I think I’d like to take a little break… in your room, Mashima-kun.”

“If you’re going to sleep, sleep in your own room.”

“So harsh. Surely there’s a kinder way to put it?”

“If you’re going to sleep, it would be better to go back to your own room.”

“It hardly changed!”

She pulled herself closer, as if hugging his muscular left arm. However, Mashima used his strength to forcefully pull it out of her grip.

“Are you bothered?”

“I’m not bothered.”

“Ehh, then at least take me back to my room~ And then maybe we should have another drink in there? Until morning.”

“I’m sorry, but I’m also going back to my room. You too, don’t drink too much, okay?”

“Don’t you think this is a once in a lifetime opportunity?”

“I’m sorry, but I have no intention of getting involved with you or Chabashira. It’ll only cause trouble.”

“Sooo strict~”

Hoshinomiya quietly sipped her drink at the now empty bar counter.

6.2

It was the same day as the get-together where the teachers complained to one-another. The students, who didn’t know anything about their teachers’ troubles, joined their friends to make memories during their remaining time on the luxury cruise ship.

But I, Horikita Suzune, was going to use what little time remained of these holidays for something else entirely.

There was a counter for employees and receptionists in front of the entrance to private pool. If it was available, you could register and pay here to use the pool. However, I heard that the private pool was very popular among the students, so it was likely that it was almost fully booked. Of course, that was convenient for me.

“Excuse me, I’m thinking of making a reservation for the private pool.”

I spoke to an employee stationed at the reception desk. The employee started to give a simple explanation in a familiar manner, as if he had already had the same conversation with many students over and over again.

“Please fill out this form with your preferred time slot. If it’s full, there is also a waiting list.”

With that, the employee handed me a clipboard. I didn’t come to this place to enjoy the private pool. I went through all this trouble to get my hands on the clipboard that I just received.

“I’m borrowing this.”

The reception areas for cafés and such all had a reservation system using tablets and machines. However, in the case of the private pool, where the time was fixed to an hour for each group and reservations could be made several days in advance, all reservations were made on paper.

I pretended to look for a day and time to make a reservation, and took note of every person’s handwriting.

The private pool was used by multiple people, but only one representative had to fill in the form.

In truth, I intended to settle this with the treasure hunt game the other day. About half of the school’s students participated, and for first-year students, the participation rate was more than 66%. Before the game ended, I checked the names and handwriting of all the first-year students who had participated, but there wasn’t a single candidate whose handwriting matched what I remembered.

Did it just so happen that the one who left me that note was among the 34% remaining? No, maybe they didn't participate because they didn't want me to match their name to their handwriting?

In any case, because of this, I'll continue searching from the remaining 34% of first-year students.

But still, what struck me was the reservation rate for the private pool. Almost all the time slots were filled, including the last day. Cancelling a reservation didn't cost anything up until the day before the appointment, so some students may just be holding onto it for now, but it really was popular.

There was a space where you could write the name of the representative and the number of students, but there was no need to write your year group.

The words I saw written on that paper were truly beautiful. I flipped through the pages and checked everyone's handwriting, but I couldn't find anything on the same level. I had a feeling it wouldn't be easy to find, and unfortunately it seemed to be just as I imagined.

It wasn't every day that you got a chance to see a student's name and handwriting, and since I couldn't find it, the tedious work would have to begin. It would be necessary to look at each individual name once again and match it to the OAA.

Although it wasn't like there were hundreds of reservations on the list, the confirmation process alone would take a long time. It would be easy to skip students with blatantly messy handwriting or different habits, but I wanted to make sure and be clear about who I could exclude here.

I could exclude Kibayashi-kun of first-year Class B and Mochizuki-san of first-year Class D... Etou-san... I'd already checked her handwriting after she participated in the treasure hunt game yesterday, so I could also exclude her. The receptionist must've had a lot of duties to see to, and I was grateful that he wasn't paying attention to me as I looked at the list with my phone in hand.

Even so, it really wasn't easy to find. Just to be sure, I checked the registers for the second and third-year treasure hunt participants, but there was no one who seemed to match.

Where on Earth was the person who wrote that note...?

I didn't even know how many minutes had passed by the time I finished eliminating the ninth person. Just as it seemed the receptionist was starting to become suspicious of me, I was unexpectedly approached from behind.

"Um, are you going to take much longer?"

"Eh?! Ah, yes. I'm sorry. I'm having a little trouble finding a time for me and my friends."

I was so focused on looking at the register that I didn't notice the student standing behind me. I'd assumed that almost no students would come to make a reservation, but I wasn't followed was I...?

Making him wait now to make a list of students to exclude from my investigation would be difficult. In that case, I decided that it would be better to let the boy make the reservation first. He didn't look like an upperclassman; he was likely a first-year.

"It seems like it will take me a while to decide, so you can go first."

"Is that so? Then I'll go ahead."

With that, the male student received the clipboard from me. He was tall, about the same height as Sudō-kun, or maybe a little shorter. I waited for the visitor to finish filling out the reservation form, pretending to message a friend while working my phone.

Perhaps because there were only a limited number of openings to make a reservation, he decided sooner than I expected. He finished writing his reservation in no time, and the boy looked back at me.

"Thank you very much. Excuse me."

I received the register as we switched places, and immediately checked the name the first-year had filled in.

"...Got it."

Representative name, Ishigami Kyo. The number of users was five.

He didn't participate in the treasure hunt game, so I was seeing his name for the first time.

Looking up his name in the already open OAA app, I also found out that he was a first-year Class A student. His handwriting was very refined, and it wouldn't be inappropriate to say he'd been practicing penmanship for many years.

However, handwriting was very prone to habits, and it didn't have the same exemplary feel as the machine-like handwriting I had seen on the uninhabited island. Even so, it was also a fact that it was the closest handwriting I had seen so far. If I had the paper in hand, I could've cross-checked it, but since Amasawa-san tore it up and threw it away, that also wasn't possible. I couldn't be sure that the letters in my memory and those written by Ishigami-kun really were different.

As I stared at the words, I felt like they lost all meaning. I'd been looking at people's handwriting for a few days now, and it seemed to have taken a toll on my brain.

"I'm very sorry; could you wait for a moment?"

I called out somewhat loudly to Ishigami-kun as he was quickly leaving.

He looked back at me curiously, and I continued, "Actually, I just finished discussing with my friends, but it seems to coincide with the time you wrote. Do you mind if we discuss it a little?"

Whatever the topic, I'd like a hint as to whether he was the one who implied Ayanokōji-kun's expulsion.

"It's not like we can't discuss it, but I just told my friends that I reserved that time."

I lifted the phone to my face with the back side facing me. For now, because I succeeded in calling out to him, I managed to keep his attention. If the man in front of me was the one who wrote that note on the uninhabited island, there was a good chance that he knew me, even if I didn't know if he personally delivered it to my tent.

"May I see the list again, please?"

"Of course. I'm sorry."

"No, it's fine, Horikita-senpai."

Hearing him call me by name, my heart started to beat a little faster.

“...So you know my name. I don’t remember talking to you before though.”

“I learnt most of the names and faces of the more academically gifted second-year students for the first special exam just after I entered the school.”

The handy OAA also helps you remember the names of your upperclassmen and underclassmen.

“You must have a good memory. I also intended to remember some of the more academic students, but I didn’t know about you, Ishigami-kun.”

“That’s because I’m not someone who stands out.”

The discussion went smoothly, without any conflicts and without me being suspected. I didn’t get anything definitive, but I still felt that there was something different about his handwriting. Thinking that I shouldn’t keep him any longer, I decided to let him go.

“Can I ask you one thing, Horikita-senpai?”

This time, however, I was the one who was being spoken to by Ishigami-kun.

“When you stopped me, you said you also intended to remember some of the more academic students, but didn’t know about me, right?”

“Yes, what about it?”

I didn’t remember saying anything strange, but...

“You really have no memory of me?” He confirmed, as if as a reminder.

“Of course, I really don’t.”

It was a fact that I had no memory of Ishigami-kun.

“Then, when did you find out that I had high academic ability? If you were discussing the time of your reservation with friends, I think it would take a fair amount of time before you could start up the OAA and check it.”

It was an astute point that I hadn’t thought of, and I couldn’t respond right away. There wasn’t anything strange about finding his name on the list. But

certainly, just as Ishigami-kun said, there *was* something strange about the fact that I knew about his high academic ability.

He should've been able to point that out at an earlier stage, but he threw it in slowly. Just when I was feeling relieved that it was going without a hitch, as if he'd been watching and waiting for it, he completed his response.

"I just happened to have the OAA open and it was running in the background. Your name was in the time slot I wanted to reserve, Ishigami-kun, so I hurriedly checked the photo to make sure it was you."

After checking with his friends on his phone, Ishigami-kun nonchalantly changed the reservation time.

"I see. I apologise for suspecting you."

"It's all right. You must've been a little surprised, so it's understandable that you'd be suspicious."

"Well then, I'll take my leave."

"Ah...that's right, Ishigami-kun, thank you for the reservation."

"I don't mind, but—"

He was about to speak up about something, but he seemed to be a little hesitant about what to say next.

"What is it?"

"No, it's nothing. I'll see you again, Horikita-senpai."

"Yes, that's right. See you."

It didn't turn out the way I thought it would, and Ishigami-kun turned his back and walked away. I didn't get the sense that he was guilty from his handwriting, but I was strangely curious about the student.

For now, it was best to position him as possibly being the culprit, but leaning more on the side of being innocent.

After seeing him off until his back disappeared, I stood there clutching the register. Now that I'd made a reservation, it would be unnatural for me to sit here poring over the list.

I had to make sure to remember to call and cancel the reservation after giving it some time. Moreover, since I didn't find any leads, I had to think about my next move.

"You've got a very serious expression on your face there~ Horikita-san."

Rather unusually, Hoshinomiya-sensei appeared and called out to me. She seemed to be with Kanzaki-kun from her class, and our eyes met.

"Is that so? I don't think it's any different than normal."

"Really? That might be so..."

What I was more concerned about was that Hoshinomiya-sensei had her hand on the wall.

"Um, are you feeling unwell?"

"Ohh~ this? Don't worry about it; it's a disease specific to adults."

A disease specific to adults? I wonder what disease it was...

"Anyway, that cool kid from before...um, who was it again~? I feel like I've been him before somewhere."

The person Hoshinomiya passed by just before could only be Ishigami-kun.

"It was Ishigami from first-year Class A."

Before I could answer, Kanzaki-kun, who was stood next to her, responded.

"Eh? First-year? That's...well for a second or third-year, it's only natural that you'd know, but..."

For some reason, Hoshinomiya-sensei tilted her head curiously.

"Is something wrong? Do you have thoughts regarding him?" I asked, hoping to get any clues, no matter what they could be.

"Yeah, I think I saw him at school once a while ago, but...maybe I saw wrong. Sorry, Horikita-san, but I don't think I can do this!"

With her feet wobbling, Hoshinomiya-sensei ran out and headed for the deck. I followed her, wondering what was going on.

“Agh, ugghh, eek!”

I didn’t really understand, but she went outside with a pained voice. Then, with an especially loud gurgle, she grabbed the deck railing, trying to keep her mouth from opening.

“Bluurrghhhh!!”

The glittery (but in reality not that pretty) vomit was blown away by the strong sea breeze. I just watched her together with Kanzaki-kun, who arrived a little later. What on Earth were we being shown here?

“Sensei...I think there are a lot of problems with what you just did.”

I pointed out the hygiene and moral aspects.

“Ugh, it’s a mix of hangover and seasickness, sowwy, Horikita-sa—Bluurrghhh!”

At least there was some salvation in that there was an ocean beneath us...

“Sorry, I’m gonna go back to my room and sleep after all... I’m sorry, Kanzaki-kun...even though we were in the middle of a conversation.”

“Please don’t worry about it. I will call on you again at another time.”

“And also, I’m sorry for showing something strange, Horikita-san...ugh!”

She waved her hand with a flutter, but quickly clamped her mouth shut and rushed back into the ship.

“...She’s seems to be a busy person.”

“It must be confusing if you’re not used to seeing it.”

“You’ve seen it more than once?”

“We’ve been shown things like that around three times in morning homeroom.”

That’s...what can I say? They have my condolences.

With Hoshinomiya-sensei out of sight, I bowed lightly to Kanzaki-kun and turned to leave.

“Horikita, what’s your connection to Ishigami?”

At the moment he called out to me, he started speaking about something I hadn't expected to hear.

“What do you mean by that?”

I had no choice but to reply, as I didn't know the true meaning behind his words.

“You were talking to him, right?”

“The way you're talking, you must know him in no small way. You knew his name too.”

“I had a lot of opportunities to make contact with the first-years because of the special exam we had just after we became second-years.”

Many of the best students in the first-year were taken by Sakayanagi-san and Ryūen-kun classes. It wasn't surprising that Kanzaki-kun came to know Ishigami-kun in the process, but... I was a little surprised that Kanzaki-kun, who didn't usually talk to me, took an interest.

“We just had a little clash over a reservation for the private pool.”

I explained the situation simply, but Kanzaki-kun seemed a little unconvinced.

“By the way, do you see him as a trustworthy underclassman?”

I still didn't know how much of a clue I was following. That was why I wanted to get as much information as possible, even if it was from just one more person.

“His academics leave no room for criticism. You can tell that much from the OAA.”

“That's true, it was an A grade with no complaints.”

In contrast, his physical abilities weren't so good, with a D-.

“But being able to study and being trustworthy are not the same.”

“Why do you want to know if you can trust Ishigami? It seems irrelevant to the reservation.”

Right now, we were in the middle of a summer vacation with no special exams taking place. Certainly, it wasn't surprising that he was concerned

about that. I asked Kanzaki-kun about it because he seemed interested, but I'll just leave it at that.

“You don’t have to worry about it. I just thought I’d ask.”

In order to not give up any information about the handwriting, I’ll try and divert the conversation. However, he didn’t turn away from me and kept talking.

“It’s not like I don’t have information on whether or not you can trust that man.”

It was a strange way of putting it, but it meant that Kanzaki-kun knew something about Ishigami-kun.

“If you answer my questions, I don’t mind telling you about Ishigami.”

I decided that he was leaning more to the side of being innocent, so there was no need to force myself to go along with the conversation. However, the fact that the expression on Kanzaki-kun’s face was different from the calm one he usually showed stuck out to me.

“Questions? About what I wonder?”

“I’ve been pondering about your class for a while, Horikita.”

“...My class?”

“Among your class, in particular...I want to know Ayanokōji’s true ability.”

“Even if you ask me something like that, I can’t answer. Can you ask him directly?”

While I was inwardly surprised to hear Ayanokōji-kun’s name mentioned here, I deflected the conversation.

“I don’t think he’s the kind of person who would give a straight answer when asked.”

“That might be true. But it’s not like you can trust the words that come out of my mouth, can you?”

“If you could tell me just one thing that might be helpful, that would be fine.”

“We’ve know each other for a while now, but I don’t know anything about him.”

“Saying you don’t know anything is too much of an exaggeration. If you call yourself a leader uniting your class, you should have some knowledge of the internal affairs of your classmates.”

“I haven’t gained the trust of all my classmates just yet. That includes Ayanokōji-kun too.”

I didn’t have the qualifications to proudly call myself a leader yet. At the very least, I wasn’t at the level of Sakayanagi-san, Ichinose-san or Ryūen-kun.

“So you can’t answer me straightforwardly. He’s a valuable asset to your class after all.”

“Just the fact that that I’m alerting you like that should give you a feel of his value to some extent.”

Regardless of whether Ayanokōji-kun was using all of his ability, if he was splitting his effort to think about it, I would be glad to hear it.

“Is there anything else you would like to ask me?”

“No, that’s all I’m concerned about right now.”

If that was the case, then there was no choice but to accept that he wouldn’t tell me anything about Ishigami-kun. I was thinking that I couldn’t make any strong demands, but...

“The student known as Ishigami is excellent, compassionate and can get things done. Already recognised as the leader of first-year Class A, his comrades no doubt have complete confidence in him. The best way to describe him might be to say he is a combination of the best parts of Ichinose and Sakayanagi.”

“I’m sure that makes him dependable for his classmates.”

“However, that is only to his allies, and does not apply to those who threaten his comrades. He’s likely the type to bare his fangs without mercy.”

It was difficult to imagine with the information I had so far, as he seemed like a mild-mannered student to me.

“So how does he behave towards someone who is neither friend nor foe?”

“If it’s someone who’s neither friend nor foe, then he’s indifferent.”

“Indifferent?”

Kanzaki-kun, who had been speaking right in front of me, stopped moving.

“...Yes. For those who are meaningless existences to him, I’m sure he wouldn’t care.”

“He said ‘I’ll see you again’ to me. Would he leave a word suggesting a reunion to someone he was indifferent towards I wonder?”

“Ishigami did? No, he’s not the kind of man who says things like that easily. Did he really say that?”

“As long as I didn’t mishear him that is. Even so, you seem to know a great deal about him.”

I wondered if there was something going on between Kanzaki-kun and Ishigami-kun that had nothing to do with the case I was following.

“I don’t have any details. He’s never taken me on.”

After muttering to himself, he continued. “It’s a fact that that man is only interested in those who are either friend or foe. In other words, it means that Ishigami has already classified you as one of them, Horikita.”

“Even if you say that, I don’t really understand.”

I made contact with Ishigami-kun for the very first time today. Before that, we had never met face to face or even exchanged greetings. A normal analysis would be that I was neither a clear friend, nor a clear foe.

“Unknowingly having a relationship happens all the time.”

“So my actions are indirectly affecting him?”

“We can’t rule out that possibility.”

There was something about what Kanzaki-kun was saying that I just couldn’t understand.

Kanzaki-kun was thinking about it for a while, but eventually he murmured quietly. “I’ll give you one piece of advice. Don’t get involved with

Ishigami any further.”

“I didn’t want to get involved in the first place. Seeing as you’re giving me advice, are there any other first-years I should be aware of?”

“Other first-years?”

So far, there was not one person who could be clearly identified as a suspect. I wanted clues. If Amasawa-san or other names were mentioned, it would also give his statements more depth. That’s what I thought, but...

“The only person you need to worry about among the first-years is Ishigami,” Kanzaki-kun answered, before turning and walking away.

Along the way, Kanzaki-kun passed by Ibuki-san, who was looking in our direction, but she didn’t even make eye contact with him.

“Are you close with Kanzaki?”

“No, not at all? We just happened to have something in common to talk about today. What’s wrong?”

“I don’t like the fact that he’s got that clever face just like you.”

It was a waste of time to listen to her seriously.

“What do you have in common with him?”

“A first-year called Ishigami-kun. He’s a student whose handwriting looked a little bit like the one we’re looking for.” I said, and then brought up Ishigami-kun’s profile on the OAA.

First-year Class A Ishigami Kyo:

- Academic Ability: A (95)
- Physical Ability: D- (25)
- Adaptability: B+ (77)
- Social Contribution: D (31)
- Overall: B- (61)

“Moreover, the way he spoke and behaved, like there was no bottom in sight, was a little unsettling.”

“Hmm? Does that mean he’s suspicious to you?”

“I’m not sure. I think he’s leaning more on the side of being innocent, but...if this physical assessment isn’t his true ability, then I might just become suspicious in a heartbeat.” I said, but there was no way to be sure at the present time.

“This Ishigami is innocent.” Ibuki-san interjected with a few words, as if to reject my deductions.

“How can you be so sure?”

“The day before yesterday, I was just kinda watchin’ people playing around from the floor overlooking the pool.”

“Alone? How sad.”

“Ha? Do you want me to stop talking?”

“I’m just kidding, go on.”

“Fuckin’ hell... He was tall, so he stood out a little and came into view. He had no upper or lower body training, just a normal body. He definitely doesn’t work out. You’re expectin’ the guy you’re lookin’ for to have strength like Amasawa or Ayanokōji, right?”

“Could it be that the reason you went to the pool...was to find people who work out?”

She shrugged her shoulders, as if to say ‘you finally noticed?’ and continued. “Strength and the body are always proportional. If you can move well, you’ll definitely have a toned body, and if you’re strong, it’d be strange if you didn’t have well-developed muscles.”

If it was an amateur’s judgement it would be one thing, but, though misguided, Ibuki-san was a martial artist. If she saw Ishigami-kun’s bare upper body, then this data was highly credible.

“Considering it’s you, that’s a good observation.”

If Ibuki-san’s information was correct, it meant his physical ability was undoubtedly around a D-. Of course, the culprit might not necessarily be a potentially strong person like I had initially guessed, but...I think it was safe to assume he was completely innocent.

“Either way, the holidays are almost over, so we’ll have to wait until the second semester starts before we can continue.”

“How long will this take?”

It wasn’t like I didn’t understand why she was feeling dismayed, but there was no conclusive evidence right now. We would just have to keep at it for a while.

6.3

It was a time when many students were turning their attention towards the facilities on board the ship.

First-year Class A student Amasawa Ichika walked into a guest cabin where a lone student was waiting for her.

“What are you going to say if one of your roommates comes back at this time? Is what I’d usually say, but since it’s you, you’ve calculated everything so that they absolutely won’t come back, right?”

When Amasawa asked him such a question, he just smiled and didn’t say anything.

“Do you understand the situation? It seems Nanase-chan, Horikita-senpai, and Ryūen-senpai are all frantically searching for you. Is it really okay to just leave it like that?”

“It’s fine as is. An interesting plan is underway.”

“Then let me in on the details of this plan of yours...Takuya.”

Yagami Takuya, the second-year Class B student who she had just called by name, quietly stood up from his bed.

“You never learn, do you, Ichika?”

Amasawa, wary of the approaching Yagami, stared unblinking at that action. This was because there was a chance that she would receive some powerful attack the moment she blinked.

“I wouldn’t raise my hand in a place like this.”

“I’d like to believe that too, you know?”

“Certainly, you’re no longer a person on the side the White Room. That’s why, to me, you are an enemy.”

With his right arm outstretched, he gently touched Amasawa’s bangs.

“I know that’s what you think, but...I don’t even recognize you as an enemy.”

“Oh my, you’re really saying it.”

“It’s a joke. It’s just that now that you’re a civilian, I can’t afford to behave carelessly.”

“I could even be recording our conversation, right?”

“If it’s only that much, you can do as you like.”

Yagami knew that there would be no detriment whatsoever in recording their current conversation. If Amasawa was completely on Ayanokōji’s side, she could just speak to him directly about Yagami. It might not be enough to convince him that the story was true, but it would be enough to put him on his guard.

“I called you out here because I wanted to find out your real intentions. Did you repeatedly interfere with my plans because you want to protect Ayanokōji-senpai with all your heart?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, nya~”

Seeing Amasawa’s playful response, Yagami laughed and removed his fingers from the tips of her hair.

“There are too many to point out, so I’ll ask you about the one that forced me to change my plans. Why did you interfere with Kushida and Kurachi, who I sent after Ayanokōji during the uninhabited island exam?”

“You know even without me explaining, don’t you? It’s because it’s a painful strategy for Ayanokōji-senpai. I didn’t want her to film a scene where he was fighting Nanase-chan and Kurachi-kun, two unconnected people. I’m sure senpai would’ve got through it fine, but even so, it would inevitably become disturbing footage.”

“That’s right. Certainly, if it’s him, whether it was Nanase or Kurachi, he’d cope without difficulty. However, a recording of how he dealt with the situation would’ve been a good bargaining chip. Even If Ayanokōji forcibly took the tablet from Kushida, he wouldn’t be able to unlock it, and destroying it would create other problems.”

The plan was thwarted by Amasawa, who anticipated his actions.

“Are you angry?”

“No way. I think it resulted in a more interesting production. It also gave me some insight into his character and the certainty of his ability to read a situation. Even though he had a feeling that he was going to be attacked, he chose not to do a GPS search. He was able to do that because he read what I was doing correctly and knew that it would only be a distraction. Normally, doing a GPS search like Nanase did and tracking down Kurachi and Kushida would be the standard move.”

Even after returning to the ship, there was no visible change of behaviour on that front.

“As a result, it seems Nanase-chan and Ryūen-senpai stepped into the lost woods. I don’t think he’s been contacted yet, but questioning Utomiya, who has been irrelevant until now, won’t be of any help. But what about Horikita-senpai? It seems she’s trying to identify you using that paper you wrote on as a hint, Takuya. It was quite an idea to have everyone write their name into the register by hand for the treasure hunt game.”

“I’m sure if I give her a few more hints, she’ll get to me eventually.”

There was no sense of impatience in Yagami; rather, he was waiting for the right moment.

“So you planted that paper on purpose?”

“Of course, that was also part of my production. I want her to try her best and reach me.”

Yagami would continue to sprinkle hints for that purpose. Even without asking him about it directly, Amasawa could understand that very well.

“And what comes after? If she can match it to your handwriting, Takuya, that information will reach Ayanokōji-senpai’s ears too.”

If that happened, he would be suspected as a potential White Room student.

“He doesn’t trust me to begin with, and I’m sure he’s aware of some of the lies I’ve spread. This roundabout way of doing things was originally because Tsukishiro was in the way. Now that he’s withdrawn, that need has also faded. It wouldn’t mean anything if I beat Ayanokōji to a pulp in a prepared and advantageous situation after all.”

“So you’re saying it’s okay if he finds out?”

“That’s what I’m saying. I think it would be fine even if I reveal myself to him directly.”

From the very beginning, Yagami intended to go head to head with Ayanokōji. However, if he acted carelessly during the preliminary stages, it was possible that Tsukishiro would interfere. He made all sorts of plans and obeyed Tsukishiro, but that was all just to buy time.

“But now that the uninhabited island exam is over, we won’t have a chance to compete with the second-years for a while, will we? I think returning to the White Room quickly would be better for you~”

For Amasawa, who had no intention of returning, her expulsion from the White Room meant everything worked out as she desired. But for Yagami, it was the only place he could go back to.

“I need to smash him completely in a perfect way. I can always catch up on my studies.”

His smile, a grin with his teeth showing awkwardly, was nothing like his usual refreshing one.

“Your personality really is twisted in different way to mine, isn’t it, Takuya?” Although she was appalled, Amasawa continued. “I feel sorry for Utomiya-kun too. He’s only thinking of his friends, but to think he’d team up with you to protect Tsubaki-chan. If he knew that you were the one that expelled his friend from Class C, he’d get angry, wouldn’t he?”

“We knew from the start that he was clumsy and always putting his friends first. After one of his classmates was expelled, he was thinking that he would definitely stop it the next time. To team up with another class who

originally wouldn't join hands with you, the quickest and easiest method was to create a common enemy, Hōsen. I got into the pockets of Tsubaki and Utomiya, developed a strategy that was never going to succeed, and checked Ayanokōji's cards. Thanks to that, I was also able to see that he has a connection to the leader of second-year Class A, Sakayanagi."

"Ah~ the one who came to see me. Arisu-senpai."

"There's a chance she'll come in and interfere in a fight between me and Ayanokōji in the future, so I'll have to think about how to deal with her."

"Yeah, yeah, do what you want."

Amasawa, who was tired of watching Yagami talk on and on, sighed in boredom. When he was in a good mood, Yagami would keep talking forever, even when he was left alone just like now.

He was enjoying this situation more than anyone else, even though he was putting himself in danger of being exposed for who he really was.

"Are you satisfied now that you've made your speech? Can I leave now?"

"Before that, the thing I wanted to confirm to the point of calling you out was your intentions, Ichika."

"Hmm~ intentions?"

With a childish smile, Yagami grabbed both of Amasawa's forearms in an instant.

"Tsk!?"

Amasawa, who was being vigilant with the intention of avoiding it at all costs, didn't let her guard down, but she still couldn't react.

"Utomiya or me? It'll all be revealed at a time when everyone's not so far behind. That's when it starts."

"So then he's going to give you the serious contest that you're hoping for?"

"It'll be a contest of true strength, with both sides recognising the other as the enemy."

“Instead of going about it in such a roundabout way, why don’t you settle it with your fists like men? With your fighting ability, you can compete even if your opponent is Ayanokōji, right?”

“I don’t use violence except for the minimum necessary.”

“You’re really saying that?”

The force of the hand restraining her was so great that even Amasawa was unable to break free. Having said that, even if he chose some other means, it wouldn’t even be a match considering her current condition.

“Can’t you understand that what I’m doing right now is the minimum requirement of violence?”

Amasawa smiled back at him, but she was already imagining what would happen next over and over in her mind. However, no matter how many times she repeated it, she couldn’t find a pattern to break out of her current situation.

“The reason I called you here today is because I was actually thinking of injuring beyond recovery. Seeing as you know who I am, Ichika, no matter what I do in the future, you will only be a hindrance. Did you notice?”

“Ahaha~, that’s not funny.”

Amasawa took the face of the approaching Yagami head on and started preparing herself—

The pressure was removed from her forearms that had been clenched in his grip and she was released.

“Just kidding.”

Smiling kindly as always, he put his hand on the door behind Amasawa’s back.

“What an intense joke, nya.”

“Sorry, sorry. I really was thinking I was going to crush you today. But I stopped.”

“Ooh, really?”

At such a response, Amasawa leaned back and pulled away.

“It’s because I heard that you’ve already been sanctioned by Shiba. You were right not to fight back.”

“If you turn him away once, he’ll just come back twice as hard. I learned that as a child. But is it really okay to leave me alone?”

“I know that you’ll remain quiet, Ichika. If you had made the decision to completely side with Ayanokōji, I would’ve finished it already.”

“It’s a little difficult to balance the scales between the senpai I admire and the friendship of one of my peers.”

“You don’t need to worry. The competition that I will have to beat Ayanokōji in will be a battle of wits. There’s no need for me to be violent with him. It will be one of two things; either I get expelled or he does.”

With that, Yagami opened the door to the guest cabin and sent Amasawa off like a gentleman.

6.4

It was just past 2am at the concert hall. I opened the heavy door quietly. In the spacious room, there was one person seated with their back towards me. I approached the figure, the silence so absolute that it was almost like my footsteps echoed on the carpet.

“Students aren’t allowed to leave their cabins at this time, you know?”

“Don’t say that. This was the only time when we could be sure that it was just the two of us.”

“If anyone sees us, you’ll be taking responsibility, right? Chabashira-sensei.”

Chabashira didn’t even look at me.

“Don’t worry. The teachers’ night watch only lasts until midnight.”

“If that’s the case then it’s fine. So what’s on your mind for you to go to the trouble of calling me?”

“When the summer vacation is over, the second semester will begin. And then, the next exam will take place.”

“Yes, I suppose so. Last year we went straight into the sports festival.”

“Yes. But this year is different; there will be one special exam held before that.”

“Is this okay? For you to give me this information?”

A teacher shouldn’t be allowed to give advantageous information to a particular student or class.

“Or are you saying that the next special exam has already begun?”

“No——It’s nothing like that.”

In that case, it meant my being brought here and told this was all Chabashira’s own decision. It was surprising only because I had thought that she was a homeroom teacher who wasn’t especially supportive of her class.

I didn’t know what she was thinking, but she suddenly fell silent. There was no point in just standing nearby, so I made my way to the platform.

Normally, this concert hall was a place where you could enjoy live music. The large, high-end grand piano was just left in place. Perhaps because a performance was held in this hall today, there naturally wasn’t any dust or the like visible.

“Acting director Tsukishiro was willing to risk his career to get rid of you on the uninhabited island. Even if your father was famous, his persistence is extraordinary.”

“It seems so. However, if I may correct one thing, Tsukishiro was never interested in the Chancellor’s position to begin with. He was only using the position to get rid of me.”

“So you’re saying that’s just how powerful a force is at work?”

Saying she didn’t understand it at all, Chabashira crossed her arms.

“Are you ready to talk now?”

“...Yes.”

After a pause, Chabashira spoke quietly. “How do you analyse your class?”

“What do you mean by ‘how’?”

“Do you think they have the strength to move up to Class A?”

“You’re really asking that to a student in your class?”

“I want to hear what you think.”

Unusual...or maybe it wasn’t. That was just how much Chabashira had on her mind.

“Yes that’s right; without a doubt, I think that it has the highest potential among all the second-year classes. However, it’s not like we can just say that, do nothing and then move up to class A. It will be a considerable challenge to catch up with Sakayanagi’s class, which is currently in the lead as Class A.”

The teachers should know this school very well.

“I think the minimum requirement is for the class to be united as one. And that includes you too, Chabashira-sensei.”

After saying that, Chabashira looked at me with a surprised expression. It was a face that said she already knew that.

“I’m...What kind of teacher do I look like to you?”

If I had to say it, Chabashira had always been cold-hearted towards my classmates up until now. Rather, she spent her days shunning and abandoning them.

“A teacher who, while thinking she can’t win, can’t give up hope. In a nutshell, is it something like that?”

“That’s harsh.”

“My impression of you and the fact that you tried to take advantage of me hasn’t changed at all, even now.”

“That’s true, you’re right.”

Unless she sincerely corrected that mistake, Chabashira would never change.

“You shouldn’t make your students work hard because you yourself want to reach Class A. *You* should work hard for your students who want to reach Class A.”

“Ayanokōji...”

“If you do that, the answer will definitely come to you. That’s what I think.”

“...You said the class needs to be united as one, right?”

“Yes.”

“That naturally includes you too.”

“Of course.”

Our gazes crossed each other’s and Chabashira gulped heavily.

“What if I told you I’m throwing my past self behind?”

Her eyes questioned my resolve. It would be better to believe that any lies told here would be seen through.

“If you say you’re going to throw it away, then I’ll throw away my way of thinking up until now too. If you seriously aim for Class A, then I won’t hold back any longer.”

“...Is that so?”

With these words, what about Chabashira would and wouldn’t change? That remained to be seen at the moment...

“When you’re ready to look forward, the class will start to change for real.”

“...That’s right.”

Looking up at the high ceiling, Chabashira closed both of her eyes. It seemed certain that a deep shadow was cast in her heart.

I should just walk away, but for some reason I felt a little different than usual at this moment.

My assessment of Chabashira as a homeroom teacher remained low. However, when looking at her as a person, my assessment was starting to change, although only slightly. She was much more fragile than I thought, a woman who seemed to have grown up only in appearance.

I sat down on the chair and opened the keyboard lid.

“...What are you doing? Don’t tell me you can play the piano?”

Without answering any of her questions, I ran my fingertips over the keys and started to play a tune.

As the performance came to an end, Chabashira applauded uncharacteristically.

“I’m not well versed in music, but that was magnificent. Even if I practiced, I surely wouldn’t be able to play at that level in this lifetime. If I’m not mistaken, the piece was—”

And then, in the silent the concert hall, there was a sound slightly behind me.

Chabashira stood up and turned around in a hurry.

The one who revealed himself from within the darkness was a smiling Tsukishiro.

“Beethoven, Für Elise, right? Even though the piece itself is not very difficult, to play it so perfectly shows magnificent skill. It’s a shame that it was only me and Chabashira-sensei watching. However, it’s forbidden for students to go out carelessly at this hour. You know there are penalties for easily breaking the rules, don’t you?”



“Acting Director Tsukishiro, this is...”

Chabashira hurriedly tried to make excuses, but Tsukishiro stopped her softly.

“Don’t worry. As of today, I have been dismissed from my position as Acting Director. Now that it has been decided that Chancellor Sakayanagi will be reinstated, I am just an irrelevant civilian. I will not report this to the school.”

“...Can I trust you?”

“You don’t have to trust me. However, from the moment I showed up here, Ayanokōji-kun was aware of my presence. If there is a disturbance in emotions, it’s communicated through the performance, but I didn’t see even the slightest hint unrest in your performance... Why was that?”

“It’s simple. Suppose I was punished, I can’t be expelled for something like this. The fight between you and me is only about whether I’ll be expelled or not, so there’d be no point in going to the trouble of penalising me for going out without permission.”

“Even if you know that, you would normally panic when someone sees something that you don’t want them to see. I wonder if you got that courage from your father.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t remember being brought up that way.”

I closed the lid and moved away from the piano.

“Once the morning comes, I won’t be able to speak to you again. With that in mind, I thought I’d give it one last go.”

There were surveillance cameras installed on board the ship. Had he been keeping an eye on the footage of the hallway outside my cabin all this time? He needs a hobby.

“If you’d prefer I leave my seat, I will.”

“No, you’re fine as you are. It would be more inconvenient for Ayanokōji-kun to be left alone with me. It would be better for you to stay here to protect your student.”

Tsukishiro walked up to us and sat down two seats away from Chabashira.

“Is the concert over already?”

“If you have something you need to say, please do as soon as possible.”

I knew it was a joke, so I urged Tsukishiro to speak quickly.

“I’ve got nothing to lose, so I’ve come to negotiate for the last time.

Would you notify the school that you will be dropping out and return home?”

“Tsukishiro——san. What on Earth are you trying to do?”

Hearing him say ‘dropping out’, Chabashira interrupted him with some anger.

“What do you mean?”

“You interfered in a special exam without authorization and tried to get Ayanokōji expelled. That alone is an unforgivable act.”

“It’s the same for you, Chabashira-sensei. Didn’t you bring in your own feelings and try to tell him about the next special exam?”

The details were unclear, but it seemed Tsukishiro had figured out Chabashira’s objective in one way or another.

“Certainly, it’s not something to be praised. But I wasn’t talking about the details of the exam to give him an advantage.”

“You might think that inside, but you can’t prove it. I just happened to be here to prevent it from happening in the first place.”

“That’s...”

“And your sins are not limited to just one. You know what I mean, don’t you?”

At this moment, Chabashira’s sins included calling a student out at a time when they weren’t allowed to go out. Even if it was between a teacher and a student, the fact that we were a man and a woman was a point that shouldn’t be overlooked.

Tsukishiro was able to relentlessly exploit that slight gap.

“The one who’ll be in trouble if you make a fuss isn’t me, Chabashira-sensei, it’s you. And also Ayanokōji-kun.”

If it became a case of sexual misconduct with a teacher, it would go beyond a warning.

It was a threat from Tsukishiro, ‘*If you understand, then keep your mouth shut*’.

“Tsk...”

Chabashira, having lost track of that part, understood the situation she was in and took a step back.

“That’s all right.”

Without breaking his smile, Tsukishiro approached me, reducing the distance between us to about two metres.

“There are no tricks set up here so don’t worry.”

“You will act in any situation if it’s in your best interest to do so. That’s my analysis of the kind of person you are.”

“I guess that means you’ve been buying into it to a certain extent.”

Up until now, I’d somehow managed to evade Tsukishiro’s tricks. However, that was only because Tsukishiro went through what could hardly be called an outrageous strategy until the very end.

Manipulation of exams, violence, taking captives and so on, and that was about it. It was likely that if this man was so inclined, it wouldn’t have been as easy as it had been until now.

“I won’t drop out.”

“It’s a pity, but I guess it’s no use. So you mean to stay at school as you are until you graduate.”

“That’s the plan. As long as I follow the rules of the school and don’t get expelled that is.”

“No matter how much you want to stay in this world, you certainly can’t fight against it.”

We didn’t talk about it here, but the shadows of the White Room students still flickered around me.

“You are intelligent. And strong. It’s excellent that anyone who knows what you’re capable of would think so too.”

Before long, Tsukishiro was standing right in front of me.

“But no matter how exceptional you are, you are still only a child. You should understand that that man sent me here with your strength in mind.”

In other words, did that man foresee the future wherein I would remove Tsukishiro...?

“If you want to stay in school for even one day longer, you would do well to think about it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Tsukishiro smiled thinly and laughed once by himself.

“However, this school is surprisingly fascinating. It’s probably the only school in the world that can hold special exams on an uninhabited island. It reminded me of a period when I was a little boy and I was enthusiastic about the Boy Scouts.”

With that, he put his left hand out in front of me.

“With this, it’s farewell, Ayanokōji-kun. Could you shake my hand?”

I didn’t think that this outstretched left hand was just a simple farewell.

I held out my left hand in the same way and grasped it back. As if satisfied, Tsukishiro nodded.

“Well then—let’s meet again soon.”

Lastly, he tapped me on the left shoulder with the palm of his right hand and turned on his heel.

“Oh and also, make sure to disperse within five minutes. If you don’t, I will report you.”

Chabashira and I saw Tsukishiro off until he was no longer visible.

“It’s no use worrying about the finer things, but to think he’d dare ask for a handshake with his left hand. So he had hostile intentions right to the very end.”

Generally, a handshake was done with the right hand. Well, people nowadays didn’t care about that, and they may not even know what it meant.

“I didn’t see it that way though.”

“What do you mean?”

Without any lead up, Tsukishiro told me that he was enthusiastic about the Boy Scouts. It was usually considered impolite to shake hands with the left hand, but the exception to this was the Boy Scouts.

What it meant was—

“Forget it. It’s no use thinking about that man’s thoughts.”

While giving it meaning, it was also conceivable that it was meaningless.

“I’ll go back first.”

“Yes that’s right, that would be best.”

Now that Tsukishiro had spotted us, ignoring the warnings here would only be a risk.

“I’m sorry. On account of me calling you out so easily, I gave Acting Director Tsukishiro an opportunity to take advantage you.”

“I don’t really mind. It’s only somewhat, but there are some things I can see now.”

As I neared the exit, I decided to leave a few words for Chabashira without looking back.

“I said it just before, but whether the class will stay afloat or sink going forward isn’t something completely irrelevant you, sensei. It would be better if you understood that.”

No matter what special exams were waiting, the students could only look ahead and keep moving forward. And the only people that could lead the way were the teachers of each class.

Epilogue: When Hearts Touch One Another

After our holiday on the luxury cruise ship ended, we boarded a bus and returned to the Advanced Nurturing High School.

Since then, I spent my days going back and forth between the dormitory and Keyaki mall. You could almost call it lazy and self-indulgent, and I think I've spent the time rather insipidly.

During that time, the number of people I hung out with increased incomparably to last year.

There were the members of the Ayanokōji group, Sudō and Ike, who I'd been friends with from the beginning, Ishizaki and Hiyori from another class, and in the end, I even had a little chat with some members of Ichinose's class. Even if I told myself from last year, I wouldn't have believed all the things that had gone on.

And then—

“Ahh, today's the last day of summer vacation...”

Sitting down on the bed with a poof, Kei looked up at the ceiling and muttered gloomily.

My girlfriend, Karuizawa Kei, and I had been regularly going on secret dates so that we could reveal our relationship once the second semester started. Today would be the last one.

While we shared a somewhat uninvigorating time; it was by no means an uncomfortable one.

If we hadn't been friends who'd known each other for a long time, I might've been impatient to say a few words and felt a bit muddled.

“From tomorrow, it's okay for me to tell others about my relationship with you... I feel kinda nervous.”

“There's no need for you to force yourself to tell people. I won't be held responsible if your status drops.”

“I’ll absolutely tell them. Even if something happens, you’ll protect me so I’ll be fine. Right, Kiyotaka?”

Kei said it jokingly, but they were unmistakably her true feelings. By clinging to a strong host, parasites were able to protect themselves.

I finished the last sip of my coffee and sat down next to Kei.

I squeezed her slender hand and she gently squeezed mine back. Kei turned towards me, looking embarrassed.

“Kei.”



At that moment, I pressed my lips onto her soft lips.

“K-Kiyotaka...”

“Were you surprised?”

“Y-yeah, I was surprised. C-couldn’t you give me a little more...advanced notice?”

Rather than with words, I answered her question with actions.

I grasped her shoulders gently and pulled her close.

“Mmm...!”



A second kiss. The moment our lips touched, Kei's shoulders jerked upwards slightly, and I could feel her surprise.

I quickly separated from her lips, and while she was relieved, she looked at me with eyes that also seemed to regret it.

“... You caught me off guard again.”

“Really? I thought it was rather normal.”

The only way to learn the timing was to repeat it over and over again.

“At least, my heart wasn’t ready for it...”

“Then, are you ready for it this time?”

“Eh?... Yeah...”

She nodded her head and closed her eyes, showing a gesture of acceptance, and I kissed her again.

The previous two kisses only lasted for a second or so, but this time was different.

Five seconds, ten seconds and longer.

And then, moving our lips gradually, we repeated the kiss like little birds pecking at one another.

In that passage of time that felt like only Kei and I were frozen in place...

It was the last day of the summer vacation of our second-year in high school. Kei and I learned about kissing and took another step forward together.

The first half of the curriculum of love had finished and we moved into the second half.

From now on, we would go about our school lives with pride as lovers.

As a result, we may get into a bit of trouble.

Even so, we would face up to the challenge hand in hand.

Slowly but surely, one step at a time, as the seasons change from summer to autumn, from autumn to winter.

Our relationship would be imbued deeper and deeper and become indispensable to us.

While tasting her lips repeatedly, my thoughts involuntarily drifted off towards the future.

Before long, when the season of farewells approached, this romance would enter its final phase—

Because it's a given that it will face an arduous trial.

When Karuizawa Kei is separated from her host, she will have to stand up and look forward on her own.

That was the most important thing in this curriculum of love.

Afterword

Hello, I'm Kingusa and this season is hotter than ever, so I'm having a hard time.

I'm dreading it because it's the harbinger of my least favourite season, but I'm fortunate that there's been a trend of self-restraint recently, so no one will be angry if I stay at home. Having said that, I'm sure the kids would love to play outside, so it would be nice if there was a way to let them play without disturbing other people.

That's where skills with DIY, etc can be shown off...

Yes. I started by talking about something unimportant, but volume 4.5 was the summer vacation edition.

The summer vacations from when I was a student were a long time ago, but...while people often say they want to go back in time and re-live their school days, I've not thought that even once. It's not like I had any bad experiences, and I enjoyed my school life to a point, but I don't have the patience and confidence to repeat the cycle of getting up in the morning, studying, part-time job and then going home at all! This is the decline.

My eyesight is getting worse day by day, and even just thinking about what it will be like in another ten years is terrifying... The future is scary too!

Unlike last year, this is the story of a holiday on a luxury cruise ship without any special exams.

The relationship between Ayanokouji and Kei, and the changes in their classmates.

The changes in the new first-years, and Nagumo and the other third-years.

I think the students have grown tremendously from the summer vacation the year before.

And in contrast to the students who are growing, the adults who oversee them...

Now then, this is going to be a bit of a spoiler, but were you able to guess who the White Room students were?

Yes, you've been keeping up with me, right? I understand, the story starts here.

From Volume 5 onwards, we will be in the second act of the second year, and I think it will be a big turning point.

Next time will be the start of the second semester, and it will be a special exam separated by year group.

While I was surprised when I realised that this will be the first time in several books that we have had a special exam for second year students only, I will be happy if you enjoy the next volume too.

I know there's a lot going on in the world right now, but let's all do our best to get through this.

Well then, I hope to see you again soon!

Karuizawa Kei SS: A Dream I Have Seen Before

It was the last day of summer vacation.

It was probably the day where every student across the country would get nostalgic.

I was, just as everyone else, reminiscing about how enjoyable the cruise had been.

“Oww, so today is the last day of summer vacation”

Saying it out loud makes it feel that more real, that summer vacation really has ended.

While it makes me feel melancholic, it doesn't mean there were no pros at all.

I could meet Kiyotaka face to face everyday and not just by phone or chat.

We could be together the whole time from morning to evening.

If we'd been in different classes, met and begun dating, it would surely have been vexing.

Or maybe not, maybe we wouldn't even have started dating in the first place, I wonder.

I would have been the same as always, hiding my darkness inside my heart while continuing to don a fake mask.

I really— realise how happy I am right now.

“So I can tell the others about our relationship tomorrow was it?... I think I'm getting nervous now.”

While our relationship itself wouldn't change, our surroundings may do.

“There's no need to tell them if you don't want to. I won't take responsibility if you do drop down the social rank after all.” He said, but I don't want to keep this a secret forever.

I had an awesome boyfriend I wanted to brag about... and what's more...

My feelings for him had grown so much I couldn't keep quiet about it anymore.

"I'm definitely going to tell them! If something happens, you will protect me so I'm going to be fine! Right?"

That being said, I was only going to tell my closest friends for starters.

But it's certain that it would spread throughout the whole school like wildfire.

With a shade of exasperation on his face, he nodded back at me.

Then he sat down next to me and held my hand.

His hand was larger than mine but still pretty and sturdy-looking. No signs of ruggedness whatsoever.

Being held by this hand made me feel so comfortable and safe.

I wished we could stay this way forever.

"Kei."

I suddenly heard my name being called right by my ear. My heart skipped a beat while getting embarrassed.

Having someone call my name that close is—

I faced Kiyotaka straight on and looked at his face. The face of my beloved was inching ever closer to me.

I was caught off guard. Our second kiss.

Or may not?... I'd already forgotten it but if we include that dream I'd seen before, this was our 3rd... kiss.

Satou Maya SS: A Bad Girl, But Just a Little Bit

The treasure hunt game with Ayanokouji was about to end.

What was it called again? The climax? Well, anyway, it means the end was near.

“Could you open the camera app?”

I followed his directions and turned on his smartphone.

Looking at the photo gallery, I saw pictures of the QR codes we’d found today along with some other ones as small icons, 15 in total.

My heart started beating faster thinking of how I could take a sneak peek at his everyday life.

But, he only had pictures of food and landscapes.

He didn’t have a single photo of Kei-chan in there, which made me happy.

I’m such a bad girl...

“Which should we scan first?” I asked.

I put a lid on my feelings and just showed him some random QR code.

“Just follow your instincts and choose one you think is good.”

“E-eh? You mean I can choose? W-what should I do? What if I choose a bad one?”

The thought of receiving a hefty reward was blown away this very instant.

What if it became my fault we only ended up getting 5000 points?...

Not even covering the participation fee is bad, isn’t it?

What shall I do? What shall I do? This pressure is way too heavy!

“The bad ones should have been removed already. And there is a chance every code has been scanned already as well so there is a chance we just have to try them all.”

Hearing that made me so relieved.

“O-okay!”

I prepared myself, took out my own smartphone and opened the app.

Next is to choose which code to scan.

I slid across them all in order to find one as quickly as possible.

Hmm, this one should be the most difficult to find, perhaps? ...

The one Ayanokouji-kun found behind that sofa?

I was perhaps exaggerating a bit, but my hands started shivering as I pointed the phone camera towards the code.

After scanning it, the screen suddenly turns black and—.

“Ah, this one is no good. It says it has been claimed already.”

Which means someone had found this code and scanned it already.

And I thought nobody would find it!

“Don’t worry, just scan the next.”

Holding back the frustration, I hurriedly chose another one.

But this one had been claimed as well.

“And after all we did to find it too! This is irritating!”

Now I just want one of them to work.

My thought patterns did a 180-degree turn, forfeiting the jackpot.

This is the 3rd try. And once again, the screen turned black. As I started to get worried again, smoke started to appear on the screen unlike previous attempts.

“It worked! Look! It looks like a treasure chest!”

A screen that begged you to tap on it.

I thought it felt a bit like a game, but this treasure hunt was certainly a game.

“I wonder how many points it contains?...”

I was so excited and was about to tap on it.

But... What if this one only had 5000 points?

My fingers started becoming heavier as my imagination constructed the worst ending result.

“Y-you do it, A-Ayanokouji-kun!”

I gave him both the smartphones at the same time.

I received them without showing any kind of displeasure on his face while he put his own in his pocket and looked at the screen of mine.

Then he tapped on the treasure chest without hesitation.

“Wah, You’re so daring, Ayanokouji-kun!”

The screen started to flash blue and change.

What appeared on the screen was letters saying 100000 points.

“Ah!! ...Ah~”

I thought maybe we’d won 1 million points, but that was wrong.

There were 5 zeros so 100 000 points. They looked alike, but that was it.

“It seems we didn’t find that rare of a code after all.”

Hmm, but this is no time to get depressed, right?

Since we went into the positives for sure.

“I see~... That’s too bad. But you know, even with the participation fee, we did win 90 000 so that’s more than enough!”

I was so happy that when I looked at his face, I noticed how close we were to one another.

I somehow wanted to avert my eyes, but still thought of it as a little bonus.

“Thanks a lot, Ayanokouji-kun.”

And I’m so sorry Kei-chan. But this is a game so it can’t be helped, right?

“I’m the one who needs to thank you. The one who found this QR code was none other than you, Satou.”

“...Hehe.”

I had such a good time that I ended up thinking I maybe was a bad girl after all, only slightly though.

Nanase Tsubasa SS: A Double-sided Favour Repayment

With a sandwich and milk carton in hand, I waited by the cashier trying to calm down my impatience.

That was not due to a slow queue since there weren't that many students checking out the store today even though it was noon.

No, the reason for that is because I was tailing a 1st year student named Kurachi-kun.

He had gone to the store and bought something that looked like lunch and went to pay, and therefore I did the same.

I don't know where he was heading for after, but he hadn't realised he was being tailed, nor was he aware of the person tailing him. Thus I could be more proactive and follow him closely without being noticed.

The reason I was tailing him was because when I used the GPS Search feature to find out who the person trying to attack Ayanokouji-senpai was, his name had appeared.

But according to Ayanokouji-senpai's hypothesis, there was a good chance Kurachi-kun hadn't really planned to attack him for real.

But if we look more closely into it, we may discover the person behind it all.

That's the reason I've kept it a secret from Senpai.

If the one I'm tailing was a formidable opponent however, then maybe I wouldn't be a match for them.

But still—

Even if I had to flee with my tail between my feet, I wouldn't have minded it at all.

Because if I could leave behind at least something for Ayanokouji-senpai, it would have been worth it.

A small advantage would surely help him tip the scales and help him overcome his trials.

Yes, this is my own decision.

I took out my sandwich and began blending in with the students having lunch here.

Just before biting it, I suddenly remembered that moment during the uninhabited island exam.

When Ayanokouji-senpai told me there was no need to leave the school.

Letting him pamper me would have been an easy decision and I would surely have been able to lead a fun school life.

But that doesn't sit well with me.

Tailing Kurachi-kun had led me to the upper deck which seemed to be a perfect spot for a light lunch as a huge amount of students were gathered here.

It looked like they were waiting for someone as they were looking around unrestly.

I wonder who they are waiting for? Naturally, it could be some of their friends who I have no connections with whatsoever...

I took a bite and just as I was about to start chewing—
“Nanase.”

A voice from behind startled me as I was so focused on Kurachi-kun in front of me.

Recognising it as Ayanokouji’s voice, I turned around to face him while hiding my surprise.

“Ah, senpai.”

I started chewing in a hurry in order to calm myself down.

Strange, I couldn't taste anything.

“Ah, my bad. Shall I come back later?”

He said apologetically, but there’s no way I would have him do that.

“Phease huht waid a bid.”

I continued to chew faster and swallowed the food in my mouth.

“Ehem...err, I’m sorry, you see, the truth is... I was eating.”

I couldn’t tell him the fact I was tailing Kurachi-kun, nor that I was currently observing him right now.

“Eh well, is there something you wanted from me?”

I lost Kurachi-kun from view for a bit, but I endured it for now.

Anyway, I just had to finish this conversation as quickly as possible in a natural way.

“Ah no, it looked like you wanted to say something to me the other day. I kinda wondered about it. It kinda fizzled out when Ninomiya interrupted, you see.”

So that’s how it is... that would certainly have made him curious.

“Ah-”

I’m indeed tailing Kurachi-kun right now.

And I was hesitating whether to consult him about it now or not.

I could have just told it as it was, that I had used the GPS Search, notified him about Kurachi-kun, and asked him what to do about it.

That would definitely have been the right answer I think.

“Sorry, That’s something I’ve already taken care of so can I ask you to forget about it?”

But I’d decided to abandon that route.

The words screaming inside me had perhaps been conveyed to him.

“Sorry for calling out to you so suddenly. I’ll return back inside then. There are so many people here that I can’t relax.” He said, not pursuing the topic.

“Is that so? See you later, Senpai.”

I couldn’t detain him here any longer so I just saw him off.

As I looked at his retreating figure, I apologised to him in my mind.

I'm sorry, Ayanokouji-senpai... I already knew I should have just told you all this upfront.

But since you just would have been that kind Senpai, you would have stopped me saying it was dangerous.

Please give me some time.

I will work hard to leave behind some accomplishments to my name, no matter how small they may be.

Sakayanagi Arisu SS: Sakayanagi's Unexpected Assessment

I stood up after seeing Ayanokouji-kun returning back inside the ship, escaping the eyes of the 3rd year students.

Showing himself here has to be a coincidence I think, but that's also why it was the perfect opportunity to meet each other as well.

But before leaving the scene, I moved my attention to Nanase Tsubasa.

There was a chance there were students from the White Room among the 1st year students, but it seems I can remove her from the list. Ayanokouji-kun seems to trust her as well.

Or, fufu. Though the word trust is overselling it.

Taking the White Room's environment into account, there is no way Ayanokouji-kun has anything close to those feelings.

Whether she was a White Room student or not, just leaving her close by wouldn't be a hindrance, he probably thinks. That's all there is to it.

And in order to get information about the 1st year students, it was a fact you had to get intimate with one.

In that sense, Nanase-san was a crucial piece for him.

Right before passing by her, I checked her figure again.

I could see that she didn't put her high stats in athleticism in the OAA app to shame with her toned arms and legs.

Those parts representing her femininity were well developed and based on her sitting posture, she must have had a good upbringing.

"Maybe that is why boys would want to keep her close by, rather than due to her abilities."

Then I took a peek at her lunch.

A sandwich and a carton of milk.

It was a balanced, light and quick meal. A good choice.

You wouldn't think she was a first year student from looking at her body and how little she ate.

As I figured, she wasn't just talented in school, but was also blessed with a body from birth.

"You'd better treasure those talents of yours."

Even though so many want to be talented, that they had Nanase's body proportions, to many girls, that would be a wish that would never be fulfilled.

... My thoughts ended up drifting off in a strange direction. How unlike me.

"Well, let's chase after Ayanokouji-kun now then."

Based on this situation, I could more or less guess where he had to be now.

Even if I, for some unlikely reason read it wrongly, finding him on this ship itself wouldn't be so hard if I just made some calls.

I had my own kind of weapons.

In order to get Ayanokouji-kun to become my opponent, this was nothing but a minor inconvenience in the end.

Kiryuuin Fuuka SS: When You are the Older One

I watched the sun rays through my sunglasses and became one with nature.

I've gone cruising with my parents when I was younger, but never since.

"Spending a holiday like this just relaxing ain't bad from time to time."

If I had to raise a complaint, it would be how many students there were at this pool.

That being said, it was just a minor problem.

Let's just relax for the whole day, shall we?

After I had received the drink I'd ordered, I noticed a change in my surroundings.

The 3rd year students, my classmates in other words, suddenly changed their facial expressions.

They looked in the same direction in unison while conversing with their glances.

That piqued my interest and I followed their cue...and Ayanokouji was standing there.

It seems like he'd just arrived at the pool as he surveyed his surroundings.

But it didn't seem like he had noticed the stares from the 3rd year students, his facial expression unchanged.

Nah, there's no way he wouldn't have noticed stares this obvious.

It's better to say he's pretending to not notice.

The 1st years and the 2nd years didn't seem to have taken any actions whatsoever.

"I see... so that's what's going on."

I had planned to be in my OFF-mode today, but my switch had oddly enough turned ON.

“Looks like you’re in for some trouble, Ayanokouji.”

I couldn’t suppress my curiosity anymore and called out to him from behind.

He noticed me, but he looked the same as always.

“What are you talking about?”

It looked like he was playing the fool, but there’s no way he was.

“I’m talking about the 3rd year students. There’s no way you haven’t noticed them, am I right?”

“I’m not quite sure what you are talking about though.”

“While I’m not taking part in it, I’m still a 3rd year student. I’ve at least heard a bit about it.”

“Are you perhaps talking about the stares in my direction?”

“So you did notice after all.”

“I don’t find it particularly troublesome though. I’m just being watched, that’s it.” He said as if it wasn’t worth paying any attention to, but that’s taking it too lightly.

Since the Student Council President is involved, that means trouble is brewing.

It seems Nagumo has started taking Ayanokouji seriously somehow.

Good grief, Ayanokouji is seriously an interesting man.

Indeed, If we were the same age, I could have observed him for yet another year.

Those feelings had unexpectedly begun to form within me.

That’s just how interesting this man is.