Volume 14 Chapter 3 Part 4

By the time we finished eating dinner, the sun had already set into the night. It was just around 8:00 PM, and we were all freely passing the time on our own. This ‘freedom’ came with limitations, however, as it wouldn’t exactly be a wise choice to go on a stroll through the surrounding forest in the dark like this. There were mosquitos upon mosquitos out there, so we were essentially forced to stay cooped up in our tents.

Given that, we naturally began conversing through the mesh fabric of our protective barriers.

Nanase, Ike, and I all had our tents set up in a row. Hondō’s tent was set up directly across from Nanase’s with Sudō’s right beside it.

“So Nanase-chan’s in Class D, huh? I never wouldda guessed.”

Hondō seemed pretty happy to be talking with a girl, seeing as he was the one asking Nanase the most questions out of all of us.

“No no. I’m really not a very capable person… Class D seems like an appropriate place for me.”

“Eh? No way. If anything, we’re the incapable ones here, ain’t that right guys?”

Hondō burst out in laughter alone, amused by his joke, but Sudō’s expression remained rigid. He was laying down on his back, staring at the roof of his tent without even trying to join in on the conversation. And while I couldn’t see what Ike was doing, he didn’t seem to be genuinely engaged with the conversation either since he wasn’t doing much more than passively comment on what was being said from time to time.

“The atmosphere feels down in the dumps. Kanji, Ken, what’s with you guys?”

“Nothin’ really. But lemme warn ya Ryōtarō… Nanase ain’t trustworthy.”

“Wha? Why’s that?”

Hondō pressed his face up against the mesh screen of his tent and stared straight at Sudō, shocked about what his peer was saying about such a cute underclassman.

“No reason, really. Just stating a fact.”

“And what’s that supposed to mean!?”

“It’s okay Hondō-senpai. I did something rather rude to Sudō-senpai in the past, that’s all.”

“Rude? So it’s not cuz he tried to touch you inappropriately or somethin’?”

“You think I’d do somethin’ like that?”

Even though he had somehow come up with the idea himself, Hondō immediately realized the flaw in his logic after hearing Sudō’s response.

“Well, it is true that you’ve always been devoted to Horikita. But like, what the hell happened then?”

“It’s not somethin’ you need to know about.”

Sudō shifted around so that his back was turned to the entrance. Hōsen Kazuomi of Class 1-D had done something truly unforgivable to the girl Sudō loved. And, the one who had colluded with him was none other than Nanase herself. From Sudō’s perspective, as someone who knew all the details, it made perfect sense for him to be wary of her. If Horikita were here, she probably would’ve said the same thing. Hondō probably wasn’t fully satisfied, but since Nanase herself said it was fine, he didn’t really have the right to keep pressing Sudō about it.

“Well, alright then I guess… But Kanji’s been pretty out of it this whole time.”

“O-oh, uh, I… same old same old, ya know?”

Ike began to panic, having suddenly become the topic of the conversation.

“‘Same old same old’ my ass. This is a good chance so I’ll just come out and say it: something’s been up with you since before the exam even began.”

“Sudō took the words right out of my mouth. You’ve been really out of it man.”

Sudō readjusted his posture to face toward us once again, clearly interested in where the conversation was headed.

“What’re you guys saying? L-look, there’s this whole uninhabited island exam, and like… I mean, I’m just under a lot of stress cuz there’s a chance I might get expelled. That’s all.”

“Stress? Yeah right. Weren’t you super pumped back when we first heard about this exam?”

Ike had plenty of camping experience, and he even played an active, important role during last year’s island exam. His close friends were well aware of this too, so there was no way they’d let him get out of this with an excuse like that.

“Well, erm… That’s uh, but like…”

Hearing as Ike incoherently struggled to put together a response, Nanase looked over at his tent and spoke.

“Even though we’ve only just met, I also got the impression that you were rather lacking in spirit.”

“What do you think Ayanokōji?”

Hondō asked me for my opinion, prompting me to break my silence.

Given the flow of the conversation so far, it’d probably be the most natural to just be honest and agree with them.

“It’s been on my mind since we first met up earlier today.”

“See? All four of us managed to pick up on it.”

Ike had been pushed into a corner, left only to stammer as he tried to come up with a solid excuse.

“Earlier, Ayanokōji-senpai told me that you and Hondō-senpai are the type of people who add a lot to the class’ atmosphere. But, so far, it just seems to me like your mind is somewhere else entirely… Is something troubling you, Ike-senpai?”

In all likelihood, Ike was probably shocked that Nanase’s words had hit the nail right on the head even though she knew nothing about what had happened.

“Uhm, how do I put it…”

Ike frantically tried to find the right words.

“C’mon, if you’re bothered by something just come out with it.”

“It’s prolly not a big deal anyway.”

Despite being two of his closest friends, they both seemed to think that Ike’s troubles would end up being trivial.

And because of that, they just wanted him to come out with it already.

However, their approach only seemed to make Ike more reluctant to speak.

“Just forget about it…”

“Could you two please hold off and give him a moment?”

After hearing Ike’s dejected response, Nanase quietly whispered to Sudō and Hondō.

For a moment, Sudō seemed indignant and offended, upset that Nanase had even asked, but once he took a look at Ike’s troubled expression, he realized that his friend might be going through something worse than he had been making it out to be.

“There’s no need for us to hold off, Nanase-chan. In the end it’s probably nothin’ big.”

“No. It might be a bit too early to say that Ryōtarō. Let’s try waitin’.”

“Eh? A-ah… Well I guess we can try.”

Reading the room had never been one of Sudō’s strong points. From the look of it, however, he had gradually picked up on how to pay attention to his surroundings and notice the subtle nuances of a situation. This was probably yet another byproduct of Horikita’s teachings over the last year.

The four of us quietly watched over Ike, making sure not to make him feel pressured to speak. Of course, it wouldn’t be easy for Ike to speak in a situation like this, but at the same time, he wouldn’t be able to turn tail and run away. We simply needed to wait for him to feel ready on his own.

Eventually, after about ten minutes of silence, Ike made up his mind and began to open up.

“To be honest… There’s… a girl I’ve had my eye on for a while now.”

Surprised, Sudō and Hondō turned and looked at each other through the screens of their tents.

Hondō then became very animated, excited about the sudden emergence of such an interesting topic.

“What!? Who!? Who is it!?”

“Let’s wait until Ike-senpai feels ready to tell us himself.”

Nanase gently intervened, looking to stop Hondō from hounding Ike with questions.

It was difficult to imagine that his current mental state had come about simply because he had a crush on someone. To that end, there had to be something else that had happened afterward to make him turn out like this. Nanase probably understood this as well.

“H-hey but like, you’ve gotta dive in head-first with this kinda stuff!”

“How about you calm down and wait to hear what Ike-senpai has to say? Instead of worrying about who he likes, don’t you think that it’s more important to find out how it relates to the matter at hand? Or am I wrong?”

Nanase’s words were calm, yet firm, bringing Hondō screeching to a halt.

“I-I guess you’re right.”

Upon being rebuked by his underclassman, Hondō seemed to realize that he was being tactless and awkwardly scratched at the back of his head.

“The girl I like…”

Once Ike began to speak, the two boys definitely let their imaginations run wild.

Was she in our school year? A senpai? Or was she one of the new students?

And, if she was in our school year, was she a classmate?

Popular, attractive girls like Kushida or Ichinose were no doubt the first to come to mind.

“The girl I like is… uhm… Sh-Shinohara… Shinohara Satsuki.”

When they finally heard the name, for a moment it seemed like Sudō and Hondō were genuinely unable to process it.

After all, to them, Ike and Shinohara must seem like nothing more than classmates who butt heads with each other.

She wasn’t exactly the best-looking girl out there either, so their confusion was perfectly understandable, given how much Ike had boasted about his plans to go out with a cute girl.

“B-but Kanji, like… You’re on bad terms with Shinohara right? You’re always talkin’ about how crazy ugly she is.”

Hondō asked, unable to stop himself from pointing out what seemed to be the most glaring problem with the idea.

“It’s not like I’ve been conscious of her from the start or anything. Hell, I hated her at first. But… I dunno why, but at some point I started caring about her and, well… I guess I didn’t wanna admit it to myself, so just went along pretending that I hadn’t fallen for her.”

He probably wasn’t lying when he said this. It was a natural scene for those of us who were forced to listen to Ike and Shinohara’s daily bickering sessions back in the classroom.

“I mean, if you like Shinohara, then why don’t you just go confess to her?”

Sudō offered a blunt, somewhat crude suggestion, but Ike replied with a tone of despair.

“It’s just not that simple. Not anymore.”

“Did something happen, Ike-senpai?”

“Shinohara is in a group together with Komiya right now. That guy… probably likes her too.”

At this point, Hondō and Sudō finally began to get a grasp of what was happening.

“Plus, well… it seems like she sees him as someone special as well.”

A boy and a girl who were conscious of each other, working together in the same group to get through all of this. This exam was a crucial battle with our futures at the school hanging in the balance, so the conditions were perfect for the formation of close bonds and strong feelings that weren’t there before.

“I… I only realized that I was fallin’ in love with Shinohara a little while ago… So when this exam came around, I wanted to group up with her more than anything. But I just couldn’t be freaking honest about it so we started fightin’ like we always do… It’s pathetic… This whole time, I’ve just been searching for her…”

Ike had been distracted for a while now; His eyes had been searching, chasing after a glimpse of Shinohara’s shadow.

“Maybe I just got the wrong idea at some point, thinking she liked me somehow even though we argue so much… I’m such a loser. Even now I’ve got no idea what I shouldda done differently.”

There would always be times when you wonder if the feelings you have are mutual, just as Ike had. But even so, it was impossible for anybody to truly know the feelings of the other party.

This was something I had experienced firsthand back when I confessed to Kei.

“Can’t you just be honest with her, Ike-senpai? I don’t necessarily think that’d be a bad thing.”

Nanase shared her thoughts after hearing out what Ike had to say.

“But… Shinohara’s together with that Komiya guy while I’m here in the friendzone.”

“I’m not so certain about that. This is just a guess, but… don’t you think Shinohara-senpai has just been waiting for you to draw the line?”

“Draw the line…?”

“From what I’ve been told, you’re someone who’s always bright and cheerful to everyone. Someone who often speaks what’s on your mind. Of course, I’m sure that Shinohara-senpai has a high opinion of you in this regard as well. That said, don’t you think she might wish she could be someone a little more special to you?”

He often freely spoke what was on his mind, or put in other words, he often spoke without thinking.

“Don’t you think maybe she wants you to be more upfront about your feelings?”

It was already a well-established fact that Ike had feelings for Shinohara.

And at the same time, I felt pretty confident that Shinohara had feelings for Ike as well.

Yet, Ike constantly argued with her, sometimes even going so far as to make fun of her. He treated her no differently than one of his male friends.

However, that alone probably wasn’t enough for her, just like Nanase said.

“I…”

“Ike-senpai, would you be happy if the girl you liked never took you seriously? There’s nothing wrong with trying to hide your embarrassment, but you won’t get anywhere if you don’t convey your feelings to her. Wouldn’t you want her to look at you a little more seriously as well?”

You could gain new insight by looking at it from the other person’s perspective.

How would it make you feel if the special someone who was always on your mind constantly spoke ill of you, day-in and day-out?

“…Dammit.”

Ike hung his head and held his face in his hands. Right now, he was probably recalling memories of how he had treated Shinohara in the past and putting himself in her shoes, doing his best to understand how his actions had made her feel. Or no, given his reaction, he had probably already understood.

“Feeling troubled about this isn’t a bad thing, per se, but you’re currently in the midst of a special exam where your future here is at stake. You wouldn’t be the only one expelled either; Your actions could very well drag Sudō-senpai and Hondō-senpai down along with you. I fully understand the feeling of wanting to go chasing after Shinohara-senpai, I do, but you should focus on fighting for survival first.”

Before I knew it, everyone present had been mesmerized by Nanase’ words.

After all, she had responded to Ike’s woes far more sincerely than even his own best friends, but that wasn’t the only reason.

“If you can’t meet… If you can never reunite with someone you care about… then you’ll never ever be able to let them know you love them again…!”

There was no need to look at her expression. Just the sound of her voice alone was more than enough to make it clear.

“Y-you, why are you crying?”

Despite his lasting distrust of Nanase, Sudō spoke up in a panic.

“Ike-senpai, you don’t have the time to be feeling caught up in your troubles, wouldn’t you agree?”

Sudō’s question went unanswered as Nanase posed Ike one of her own, completely disregarding the fact that tears were streaming down her own face.

“…Yeah. I’ve gotta get through this exam safely first right?”

Nanase’s words, the words of a here-before stranger and underclassman, had touched Ike’s heart more than any of us could’ve expected.

“Ken, Ryōtarō, I’m sorry guys. I… I’ve prolly troubled you two a heck of a lot these past two days, haven’t I?”

Ike expressed his remorse, to which Sudō─

“No, you haven’t… Eh, well, maybe just a lil’ bit.”

He wasn’t able to get himself to say that there hadn’t been any problems, but that was probably for the best.

“To be honest, I’m still anxious about Shinohara. But… that won’t matter anyway if I don’t get through the exam first. All my worrying, all this time I’ve spent, everything wouldda been in vain if we don’t pass.”

“Eyy, attaboy Kanji!”

Hondō agreed, shouting out so as to rally everyone’s spirit.

Sometimes friends could be a nuisance, but in other cases they could be truly irreplaceable.

I felt like this was my lesson, my takeaway from what had happened tonight.

And as for the tears Nanase had shed, my gut was telling me that it hadn’t been a mere performance, nor had it been the result of her getting caught up in the atmosphere.