Volume 14 Chapter 4 Introduction

Chapter 4: What it Means to Like Someone

It was just after 6:00 in the morning, right about when the inside of my tent began to heat up, when I heard a voice coming from outside.

“Uhm, Ayanokōji-senpai, are you awake yet?”

“Please wait a second, I’ll be right out.”

I emerged from within my tent, responding to Nanase’s call.

“I’m sorry to bother you so early in the morning.”

“I was already awake so it’s fine. We need to start tidying up and get ready to head out soon anyway. What’s up?”

I took a look around at the other tents and noticed that nobody else had woken up yet, so I kept my voice to a whisper.

“It’s about Ike-senpai. Do you think I said a little too much last night…?”

“Well, rather than having said too much… To me it felt more like you just called it like it was.”

While I did think that she had gotten a bit too involved in his personal matters, it seemed like she had more or less reflected on it.

“Thanks to you, Ike’s managed to get back on his feet. Or, I guess it’s more like he’s managed to finally take a stand. I think he appreciates what you’ve done for him.”

“You think so?”

I nodded immediately, but she still seemed somewhat unconvinced.

“I feel like Ike-senpai is in a sort-of precarious position right now. I’m afraid that yesterday’s discussion might backfire and cause him to act recklessly… That’s why I’m not sure if we should split off from them right away.”

“It’s not that I don’t understand how you feel, but…”

While I was also worried about Ike’s mental state, traveling together with them would come with great risks of its own. Our groups each had completely different Tables, so there was no way to predict where our designated areas would be.

Depending on this next designation, we might have to head off in entirely different directions.

Given that, I found myself wondering whether her feelings were genuine or perhaps something more artificial.

If it was the latter, was she simply looking to keep me from going to the designated areas?

No, a move like that felt far too weak and short-sighted.

At some level, I couldn’t exactly dismiss the idea that she might hold me back, but…

“It’s no good, huh… I thought so. If we split up with them, it would probably be impossible to meet back up again.”

“Well, let’s see…”

I wouldn’t say it was the best idea out there, but I guess it wouldn’t be entirely impossible to implement.

There would still be ways to keep an eye on Sudō’s group and stay on top of our own affairs at the same time.

“It’s extreme, but as far as meeting back up with them is concerned, it shouldn’t be that difficult. It’s just a matter of deciding on a meeting place in advance. Even if it’s a long distance away, as long as we have the stamina left to walk, it should still be possible.”

Be it designated areas or Tasks, the day’s obligations always came to an end by the time 5:00 PM came around.

In other words, we were basically free to do whatever and go wherever we wanted from 5:00 PM to 7:00 AM the next day.

“That’s true and all, but…”

Of course, whether or not this was actually the correct course of action was another story altogether.

The further away our designated areas were from each other, the tougher it would be to decide on a suitable meeting place.

“In any case, we should probably wait and see what designated area they get first.”

If their route was completely different from ours, then it’d be for the best to give up on the idea sooner rather than later.

After packing up camp and eating breakfast, 7:00 AM came around and with it the announcement of the first designated area of the day.

“H7, huh?”

I wouldn’t say it was the worst outcome, but it certainly wasn’t ideal by any stretch of the imagination.

It wasn’t clear whether we’d be able to make it there within the next two hours or not.

However, if we didn’t make it there in time, it would be our second missed area in a row.

In which case, if the next area ended up being randomly designated and showed up somewhere off to the west of the mountain range, we’d really be in a pinch.

“It would be quite troublesome if the randomly designated area were to happen at 9:00.”

Under the assumption that everything went smoothly for these next two hours, we’d probably only reach I7 or I8 at the very most.

Of course, it’s not like it would be impossible to reach H7 in two hours, but…

Getting Nanase involved in something so drastic would come with an equivalent amount of risk.

“We can always choose to conserve energy and miss the area for a second time.”

The point reduction penalty only began once a group had missed three area designations in a row.

So in that sense, even if we didn’t make it to H7, we should still be fine…

That being said, should the situation turn dire, we could very well be subject to the mercy of our destination, forever unable to find our way to the designated area in time.

“Sudō, what designated area did you get?”

“We got I8 so if you two are goin’ the same way we can head out together. I’m fired up so let’s get this done!”

While our destinations were different, our routes would, for the most part, be the same.

However, this turn of events was far from convenient. In fact, I felt more inclined to call it unfortunate instead.

Thanks to this, I would be prevented from taking any extreme measures.

If we were to go all out trying to get there, Ike and Hondō would certainly not be able to match our pace.

“We’re heading in the same direction again, so how about we stick together until we have to split up?”

I figured we might as well travel together with them since we probably wouldn’t reach our area before the time limit anyway.

After all, Ike’s situation was still a concern, and we’d at least be able to collaborate should something happen along the way.

“Sure thing. You down, Kanji?”

“A-ah, of course.”

Ike looked somewhat flustered as he responded, the memories of last night’s conversation probably still fresh in his mind.

Nanase’s presence, that of a stranger, had helped to spur Ike forward.

And while this had been an unfortunate beginning to the third day, there at least seemed to be some upsides to it working out the way it had.

Under normal circumstances, Ike would crack jokes and try to smooth-talk Nanase, prattling off about how cute she was or something, but that wasn’t the case here at all. It would be undeniably outrageous if he acted that way after everything he said about Shinohara just last night. However, given that Ike was exactly the type of person who did undeniably outrageous things from time to time, the fact that he was showing restraint now may very well be proof that he was beginning to change.

“Well, anyway. I guess I’ll lead, so you all can just follow me.”

With that, Ike rolled his shoulders, stretching them both out in their full range of motion before taking up the lead and setting out. He had gotten much more lively ever since we started traveling together with them. After all, a false show of courage wasn’t all that different from the real thing.

“You don’t seem to be enjoying this very much, Ayanokōji-senpai. Your expression is quite stiff.”

“It’s nothing out of the ordinary.”

“Is that so?”

While it was true that I was somewhat bothered about our designated area, I felt pretty confident that I hadn’t let it show on my expression.

“There’s no use worryin’ ‘bout that. Ayanokōji’s always got that sorta look on his face.”

Sudō chimed in, having heard what we were saying from over his shoulder.

I wasn’t sure if I should be thankful for his support or offended by it.

“Well there’s your answer.”

I had slightly mixed feelings about it, but in the end I just went along with Sudō’s explanation.

Sudō let show a mischievous grin before heading up to the front and striking up a conversation with Ike.

“You’re still thinking about Ike-senpai, aren’t you Ayanokōji-senpai?”

“You’re reading too far into it. I’m glad to see that he’s grown up a bit, but honestly outside of that I’m not sure what you’re referring to.”

“…Is that so?”

Since there was a chance that Ike and Sudō might overhear what we were saying, I cut our conversation short.

As he was now, Ike was certainly more energetic than he had been yesterday, so it wasn’t incorrect to say that he had grown up in a mental sense. In that respect, the response I had given Nanase technically hadn’t been a lie at all.

However─ Most of this ‘growth’ was superficial. This was nothing more than the first step of his journey of change. Depending on the situation, his progress may stagnate, or possibly even go through a major regression.

People are not so simple that they can change just because they want to, a truth that Nanase also appeared to be well aware of. And to that end, she wanted to have me understand it as well. From off to the side, I could tell that her gaze was fixed on Ike as he walked in front of us, and upon seeing this, I couldn’t help but wonder to what extent her thoughts were really about Ike.

From just ahead of us, Ike and the others raised their voices in surprise.

A wild bird had suddenly spread its wings from further within the forest and took off into the open sky.

It was the type of special, firsthand look at nature that we’d probably only get to experience on an uninhabited island like this.

At any rate, if I wanted to find out the truth about Nanase, my only real option seemed to be traveling together with her, at least for the foreseeable future.