Ch5 Part 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 when 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 got the impression that a surprisingly large number of students misread it and actually ended up with 5000 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 read 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 Yagami-kun, in addition to being able to manage the obvious work, 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 to not 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’s weird, isn’t it?”

Even while smiling 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 Ayanokouji-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 got 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.”

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 Ayanokouji-kun and I.

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 upperclassman and underclassman 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 expection…

“The number of bumps on the road that you have to deal with just keeps increasing. You haven’t even gotten Ayanokouji-kun and I 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 to much it would be one thing, but Ayanokouji-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 escape using ‘fabrications’ most of the time. However, Kushida-san’s credibility has broken down a little bit. 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 controlled a lot of anger, 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 Ayanokouji-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 Ayanokouji-kun is an unpredictable opponent. But did you know? Ayanokouji-kun is supporting me with private points.”

“Supporting you…?”

It was a story I’d heard from Ayanokouji-kun from 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, Ayanokouji-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 Ayanokouji-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. She’d never wavered in her determination to expel me.

“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 Ayanokouji-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 Ayanokouji-kun and I 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 gonna 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.