

NOVEL

4.5

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR

STORY: SYOUGO
KINUGASA
ART: TOMOSE SHUNSAKU



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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

YEAR 2

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"Well, that's because you weren't getting out here fast enough!"

*"H-hey! That was so mean,
Haruka-chan, pushing me
like that!"*

Haruka stepped out of the changing room, appearing after Airi.

"H-hey, hey..."

How should I put this? Both of them were wearing incredibly daring swimsuits.



KARUIZAWA KEI



YAMAMURA MIKI

A second-year student from Sakayanagi's class. She's academically brilliant but blends into the background.

TOKITOU HIROYA

A second-year student from Ryuuen's class. Opposes Ryuuen's way of doing things and feels animosity toward him.

HIMENO YUKI

A second-year student from Ichinose's class. She stands one step removed from the rest of the close-knit class.

4.5

WELCOME TO THE CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE YEAR 2

CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

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NOVEL 4.5

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku



Seven Seas Entertainment

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Chapter 1: The Curtain Rises on a Fun Summer Vacation

WITH THEIR CELL PHONES back in their hands after a long two-week absence, many students were overjoyed. Their faces all relaxed into broad, joyful grins. Mobile devices had become invaluable tools for people living in the modern world. Smartphone adoption rates among teens and twenty-somethings were expected to exceed 99 percent sometime around 2020. When you considered the kind of world we lived in, there could be no doubts about the truthfulness of that statement. As for me, since I've only had a mobile device since becoming a high school student, I still didn't think of it as something so important that it was a daily necessity or anything, but I supposed it was probably only a matter of time before that became true for me too.

The cruise ship sailed gracefully through the ocean waters, offering the students their first summer vacation experience in a long while. Looking back, I couldn't honestly say that I enjoyed summer vacation before. I wasn't going to sing its praises or anything. But when I considered the number of people I could call a friend, the fact that I had a girlfriend, and all the people I could call by name, even if we were only just acquaintances, that indicated to me that I had made a significant leap forward since last year. In almost every regard, this year and last year were practically incomparable.

I expected that the time we spent on this cruise ship would be yet another unforgettable memory for both me and the rest of the students here—one more page in the journals of our lives. Whether we were having fun in the pool, indulging in delicious food, or just chatting with loved ones on the deck overlooking the ocean, I was sure of it. But that didn't necessarily mean that we could do whatever we wanted. We still had to enjoy ourselves within the confines of the rules that had been established.

For instance, we were forbidden to leave our rooms after ten o'clock at night, except in special circumstances. The rules this

year seemed to be much stricter than they were aboard the cruise ship last year. Those “special circumstances” I mentioned included things like if you suddenly fell ill during the night. In such cases, students were to go to the infirmary, which was open twenty-four hours a day.

Of course, it was unlikely any student was going to break the established rules for no good reason, though. The school had established that we would face severe punishments even for simple accidental blunders. Some could even result in immediate expulsion. Considering all of that, there probably wouldn’t be any problems. In addition, the school had decided in advance that students would not be permitted access to certain areas of the ship, regardless of the time of day, so it wasn’t like we were allowed to go anywhere we wanted. Even within the areas that we were permitted to go, there were places that were off-limits.

Well then, let’s enjoy a week of cruising, while making sure to take things in moderation, and sticking to moral standards.

Chapter 2: Ike and Komiya and...

IT WAS NOW the morning of August 4, the day after the uninhabited island special exam had come to an end. Starting today, students would spend their vacation aboard this luxurious cruise ship for a total of seven days, until August 10. We were explicitly promised that there would be no special exams of any kind on board, like how that zodiac special exam was held last year. There were all sorts of amenities on the ship, including a swimming pool, a fitness center, a movie theater, a concert call, a large bathhouse with a viewing platform area, a shopping area with various eateries, a café with open-air seating, and other various recreational facilities.

In other words, we'd earned the right to enjoy ourselves to the absolute fullest starting today. So, where was I on this long-awaited day of rest and relaxation, you ask? I was kicking back and unwinding in the four-person room I'd been assigned, phone in hand. There wasn't any need to rush out to play just because it was a holiday. If anything, it wasn't a bad idea to just ignore all the entertainment options and use this time to rest. This ship was equipped with first-class beds that cradled your body gently, unlike the hard beds in the school dormitories. The feeling of comfort was even more pronounced now, considering we had immediately come here after sleeping in tents on an uninhabited island.

At any rate, let's leave discussion of the situation of the first day there for the time being. With the results of the uninhabited island special exam factored in, the August Class Points had been finalized and announced. Normally, our Class Point standings were announced on the first day of each month, but since we were still in the middle of the uninhabited island exam at that time, and because the results of the special exam were going to be reflected in the announcement, this particular instance was somewhat irregular, and the results came later than usual.

For students enrolled in this school, we began every month by checking our Class Points. There was our individual ranking too, of course, but Class Points were directly related to how many Private Points we got, or in other words, our monthly allowances. Without pocket money on hand that we could spend freely, a holiday spent on this luxury cruise ship would be a total waste, after all.

Second-Year Students / August Class Points

A Class, led by Sakayanagi: 1206 Points

B Class, led by Ichinose: 578 Points

C Class, led by Horikita: 571 Points

D Class, led by Ryuuuen: 551 Points

As a result, our class had risen to Class C, though only by a narrow margin. We'd had the chance to move up to Class B in one fell swoop, but regrettably, we had just barely missed it. However, there was nothing for us to feel discouraged about, and honestly, these were fantastic results. Thanks to Kouenji earning first place all by himself, we had earned 300 Class Points. I was once again reminded of the awesome power of this point bonus we'd been given.

Until now, many in our class held the firm opinion that Kouenji was a nuisance, but he essentially forced everyone around him to change their perspective. However, I was skeptical about whether this change in viewpoint would last forever. After all, in exchange for earning these Class Points, he basically had been given blanket permission not to cooperate with the rest of the class from this point onward until graduation day. If that fact were ever made public knowledge, there would probably be even fewer people jumping for joy over this turn of events.

However, I still thought that everything that happened was ultimately positive. If not for the 300 points Kouenji had given us, we would have to continue fighting for a while longer, dealing with the anxiety of wondering whether we could honestly catch

up to the upper-level classes. Having three classes all lined up side by side like this in the rankings would likely be a tremendous help to the students emotionally as well. Now, we could move onto the next steps, which were to shoot up in the rankings, standing proud and tall above the competition once we were unmistakably in Class B, and then, challenge Sakayanagi's class directly so that we could close the gap. Similarly, that plan to reach the top also applied to Ryuuen's class as well, which had fallen to Class D.

Since Ryuuen didn't finish in the top three in the uninhabited island exam, there was no getting around the fact that his class was going to drop in the rankings. In fact, they had gone down by two rankings. Still, his class had no shortage of talent. The addition of Katsuragi would raise the overall academic ability level of his class as well as give the class a sense of stability. Also, Ryuuen had made some kind of transaction with Sakayanagi as well. At this point, it was difficult to guess whether their deal involved Private Points, Class Points, or something else completely outside of my expectations. Regardless, it might be something that would bring about change in the battles to come.

Despite some concerns, that class was far from faltering. In fact, they were only increasing in strength. They were undoubtedly the scariest group in the school right now. The fact that they had fallen to Class D for the time being was really only on paper. They probably didn't even care one bit about their drop in the rankings.

In contrast, Ichinose's class, which had once again taken their position back as Class B, didn't look to be in bad shape either if you were only looking at these results. With Sakayanagi at the lead, Ichinose had managed to gain some Class Points by cooperating with her. However, she couldn't rest easy. The gap between Classes B and D was only a mere twenty-seven points. Thanks to this special exam, we had gotten ourselves into a situation where it wouldn't be surprising at all to see further shake-ups in the rankings by September 1, due to simple fluctuations in points from things like trivial behavioral issues in class. The anxiety that Ichinose was feeling must have been

intense. Depending on the results of the uninhabited island special exam, she could well have fallen down to Class D. No, she had to have been quite worried.

At last, this is where your real moment of truth comes, Ichinose. I sent her that message in my mind, not speaking it aloud. I couldn't imagine that there were going to be additional exams where all classes and grades participated together one after another, not like this last uninhabited island exam. If that was the case, the next special exam we were going to have would most likely be one divided by grade level. And, if Ichinose's class lagged behind C and D, the future of her class looked bleak.

In other words, the situation we were in, where all three lower classes were lined up side by side, could be summed up rather simply: the next battle could very well determine the future of our classes...

But lastly, there was Class A, led by Sakayanagi. As always, it was no easy task to close the gap to catch up to them, and they were keeping it that way. They had a firm sense of stability and security, and thanks to Sakayanagi's group coming in third place in the uninhabited island exam, they had accumulated a fair number of Class Points. There were many talented individuals in Class A, and Sakayanagi's ability to control them was impeccable. Furthermore, their leader's strategies weren't limited simply to those that were orthodox or unorthodox, or the right way or the wrong way. She thought cleverly, using multiple angles. She had outstanding performance as a leader, one that was worthy of the unshakeable Class A.

At a glance, there didn't appear to be any gaps in her armor. But if Horikita's class gained momentum, it wouldn't be impossible for her to catch up to Sakayanagi. Which meant that, yes, Horikita's class could very well find an opening to exploit. Of course, Class A was still far and away in the lead, so for that to happen, they would have to be thrown off balance in some way. The quickest way to achieve that would be to get rid of Sakayanagi, but that would be extremely difficult. Even if she didn't have a Protect Point, she still wouldn't be an easy opponent to face.

It would probably be wiser to crush her pawns instead, those who functioned as her arms and legs, rather than going for the head, so to speak. Doing so, though, would require us to eliminate more than just one or two people. Still, supposing if Kamuro, Hashimoto, and Kitou were gone or rendered unusable somehow, that would limit how much Sakayanagi could do. On one hand, much about Kitou remained unknown. But as for the other two, they were people with their own fair share of problems.

Well then, that was that. Leaving the analysis of the other classes there for the time being...

Now that we had officially entered summer break, each grade temporarily stopped fighting. It was a ceasefire of sorts. Right now, it was our turn to enjoy ourselves as much as we wanted, just like normal students. Until recently, our wallets had been completely empty. But, with the recent Class Points announcement, they were going to be fattened up considerably all at once with the points we were awarded in August. We had 571 Class Points, which meant that each person in our class was going to receive the equivalent of 57,100 yen in Private Points.

Since we didn't get into the top three in the special exam and thus didn't get any of the additional rewards, we weren't going to be receiving any bonuses. Even so, it was enough. Having Private Points was vital for enjoying quality time on this luxury cruise ship. There was a system in place that required you to spend Private Points to do anything, whether it was enjoying a movie or having a favorite meal. Last year, all facilities on board were available to us free of charge, but this year's rules were much stricter in terms of finances as well. Of course, you could spend an entire week holed up inside your room without spending a penny, and then you wouldn't have any expenses. But really, that wouldn't be any different from being holed up in your dormitory on a holiday.

Ping. I heard the quick, pleasant sound of a notification, indicating that I had received an email. Looking down at the phone I had recently gotten back, I saw a message informing me that the detailed results from the uninhabited island exam would

be posted publicly for two days, starting today, in the rest area located next to the fitness center. Since we only knew the final rankings of the few groups at the very top and very bottom of the rankings, I was sure that many students would be interested. As for me, personally, I wanted to make sure I checked it out so that I could keep an eye on things for the future.

Still, it would have been easier if they had just sent the rankings out to all of us via our phones. Since they didn't send it out to us electronically, did that mean that the school didn't want the students to be able to look at the results in private and spend a long time analyzing them? I supposed it could have also been a contingency plan to avoid leaving any unnecessary evidence behind as well, since Tsukishiro had been moving about behind the scenes in this exam. I was somewhat tempted to go and check the results right away, but I thought it was probably safer to give it some time. It was possible that students might be flooding the area in droves.

With that in mind, I decided to forget about checking out the exam results for the moment and instead focused on taking care of other matters. I used my phone to send Ichinose a brief message, asking her if she had some time to meet in the evening, three days from now. Of course, it was probably easy for her to imagine that this was so that I could give her a formal response after she spontaneously confessed her romantic feelings for me on the island.

I had thought about going to see her right away to give her an answer, but the grueling exam had only just ended. I figured that we should recover our strength, first, and then it would be nice to spend some time relaxing with good friends. Since it didn't seem like my message was read straight away, I turned my phone's screen off. Then, I decided to pay attention to what my roommates, Miyamoto Soushi, Hondou Ryoutarou, and Miyake Akito, were going to do now.

"Hey, Ryoutarou. Sounds like the exam results have been posted. Why don't we go check them out?" asked Miyamoto.

"Hm... Yeah, I'm gonna pass," Hondou replied. "I'm completely wrecked, dude, I can't even walk. Right now, all I wanna do is just lie in bed..."

That was completely understandable. Not only was he exhausted, but the beds were so comfortable that they robbed you of any desire to move. Everyone, me included, was drawn in by the captivating allure of the mattress. Hondou was particularly worn out. He weakly turned to the left, with his back toward me.

"You've been like that since yesterday," said Miyamoto.

"Well, I was working myself half to death on the last day, man," Hondou said. "I really, really wanted to eat something, and I was so wiped I couldn't even get a bite down my throat."

He curled up under the covers of his futon, still turned away from me. His blanket was pulled up to his face. For the time being, it seemed like all he wanted to do was lie down and sleep. This luxury cruise ship trip was going to last a whole week, after all. It was a wise decision to wait until our strength returned instead of rushing anything.

"What about you, Miyake, Ayanokouji?" said Miyamoto.
"Aren't you a little curious about the rankings?"

Akito directed his gaze at Miyamoto without moving his body further, still fiddling with his phone. "Nah, I'm good," he said. "I think I have some idea of where my group is in the rankings anyway. To be honest, right now, I'm just happy that I avoided getting expelled, and that's enough for me. I think I just wanna take it easy for today at least, like Hondou."

Akito had been paired up with Haruka and Airi during the exam. Being the only guy in his group, it wasn't hard to imagine he must have gone through quite a lot helping his teammates. I figured he was likely more worn out mentally than physically.

"But I mean, dude, you were in the same group as Sakura and Hasebe, right?" asked Miyamoto, still sitting on his bed.

"What are you askin' me that for all of a sudden?" said Akito.

"I mean, I was in a group of *three dudes*," Miyamoto went on. "My entire time there was a sweaty, stinky hell, but it must've been, like, heaven for you, man! Bein' surrounded by girls like that, yeah?"

"Whaddaya mean, heaven? If you ask me, *I* was in hell! I had to take care of 'em all the dang time. I would've definitely been way more comfortable being around a bunch of guys," replied Akito.

Both groups had different experiences, each one claiming their own version of hell. As I listened to the conversation, I honestly felt glad that I hadn't been in either of their groups. I thought it was better to be alone for that kind of exam, unless you were working together with exceptionally close friends.

Anyway, since both Hondou and Akito had refused to go, Miyamoto then turned to look at me. Unlike Hondou and Akito, I had been able to regain much of the energy that I had lost on the uninhabited island by getting a good rest in my bed. For the most part. I couldn't say that I was back in top form or anything, but my physical state wasn't going to be an issue when it came to just moving about the ship.

Still, there was no need to rush. I could always look at the exam results later. Even if Akito didn't go to check them out, it was possible that some of the other Ayanokouji Group members could go instead.

"I think I'm going to take it easy today myself. I'm sure that everyone is concerned about what their placement is, but I'm not really fond of crowded—"

THUMP! THUMP! THUMP!

Just as I tried to say that I was going to pass on going like Akito and Hondou, someone pounded on our door several times. The force behind those knocks was so intense that it seemed like there was some kind of emergency or something. Akito jumped out of bed and hurriedly opened the door, revealing Ishizaki standing there. There was a tension in the air, and it felt like something was going to happen, but then...

"Ayanokouji! Let's go check out the exam results together!" shouted Ishizaki.

Ishizaki's big smile and the words that came out of his mouth were kind of anticlimactic, and everyone was somewhat stunned. Akito turned back and looked over at me, at a loss for words.

"Well, I was..." I began.

"Come on, dude, you're free right now, ain't ya? So come on, let's go. 'Kay?" Ishizaki rudely barged into the room without asking for permission and forcefully grabbed hold of my arm as I was sitting on the bed.

"When did you two guys become such good pals?" asked Akito.

Akito was the one most surprised by this turn of events as he was someone who spent a lot of time with me on a daily basis. Ishizaki was from a rival class and was a troublemaker, so it wasn't surprising that Akito was visibly wary of him. In fact, my other two roommates remained somewhat stiff, like they were taken aback by Ishizaki's sudden appearance.

"Well, I guess it just kinda happened over time," I replied. I didn't have any more of an answer than that, but I figured that probably wouldn't be enough to satisfy Akito.

The pressure of Ishizaki's smile was so strong that it pulled me in a little, but despite that, I had decided to decline his offer. "I'm a little worn out today," I told him.

"Whaddaya mean, you're worn out? Like, how? Come on, *you*? You're fine, dude! So, let's go, yeah?" repeated Ishizaki.

He showed no signs of giving up, as he seemed intent to drag me out by force, without any consideration of how I felt on the matter.

"...All right," I conceded. "At least let me get changed first though."

"Sure, dude! All right, I'll wait for ya in the hall!" answered Ishizaki.

He must have been happy that I told him I'd go because he stepped back out of the room and into the hallway.

"Seems like you've attracted the attention of a real troublemaker," said Akito. "If you need any help, let me know, okay?"

"Thanks, Akito. Ishizaki's not a bad guy though, so it should be okay," I replied.

"Not a bad guy, huh? I don't really have a good impression of him though... Ryuuen might be pulling his strings from behind the scenes. You'd better be careful."

We had clashed several times with delinquents led by Ryuuen up until this point, so it was only natural for people who didn't know the inner workings of Ryuuen's class to think the way Akito did. However, Ishizaki wasn't the sort of person who could hide things or be shrewd. If he was being controlled from behind the scenes without him even knowing it, then he could be troublesome to deal with, but considering that we weren't in the midst of a special exam right now, it was probably safe to conclude that wasn't the case here.

After changing into my uniform, I gave a little wave to Akito and left the room. Ishizaki seemed to be the only one in the hall as I didn't see any other students.

"Awright, dude, let's go!" shouted Ishizaki.

"There's no need to be in that much of a rush, is there?" I answered.

"Huh? Whaddaya talkin' 'bout?"

"Even if we don't hurry over there, it'll be fine. The exam results are going to be available for two days, so we can always look at them later, right?" I explained.

"I wanna look at 'em right away, though," Ishizaki replied. "I'm the kinda person who can't wait to go check stuff out. You know, like when there's a new movie out."

Even if you explain to me that's the type of person you are, there's no way I'm going to understand you. It was a little difficult

for me to imagine Ishizaki visiting a movie theater with such a great degree of enthusiasm on release day for a new movie.

"Yeah, man! Actually, I went to see *World Domination 16* on opening day, back when it came out," said Ishizaki.

That was the first time I had ever heard of the film, but just from the title, it sounded like the kind of movie with guns shooting off and fists being thrown constantly. And on top of that, it was apparently an exceptionally long series, considering that it was the sixteenth installment. Still, I couldn't help but wonder why the title didn't captivate me in the slightest.

"Still, though, I'm really curious... I wonder what place Ryuu-en-san's group got?" said Ishizaki.

At any rate, Ishizaki didn't seem like the kind of person who wouldn't have many friends in his own class. He probably didn't need to have deliberately gone out of his way to invite someone from another class like me.

"Shouldn't you have invited Ryuu-en to come with you, or another classmate was curious about their ranking?" I asked, trying to find out what his true intentions were.

"He's the kind of person who'll call when he needs ya. If he's not callin', then that means he probably doesn't need ya."

"That's easy to understand."

"I know, right? As for the others, a lot of 'em just said they were too worn out from the island or that they wanted to pass."

That meant that many of the students in his class were like Akito and the other guys. They just wanted to take a break for now.

"You're sure full of energy, Ishizaki. Aren't you exhausted?" I asked.

"Me? Nah, dude, I just slept some so I'm up and runnin' again."

"I see."

It was a surprisingly simple response, but it was easy to understand. Maybe Ishizaki wasn't particularly athletic or

coordinated but more resilient than most. Still, saying that he chose to go out with me because of a process of elimination didn't really make sense to me.

"You're easy to talk to, Ayanokouji," said Ishizaki.

"...Is that so?" I asked.

I found that a bit surprising since I wasn't exactly a social butterfly, not by any means.

"You're way, way easier to talk to than that weirdo, Kaneda," he added.

I didn't know much about Kaneda at all, but I felt conflicted about being compared to him. Just then, Ishizaki and I passed by a shop while we were on our way.

"Whoa! Dude, they're sellin' flags!" Ishizaki exclaimed.

The store was selling flags of places from all over the world. With a twinkle in his eye, he excitedly picked up several. As I looked over at Ishizaki curiously, wondering what was happening, he rubbed the bridge of his nose with his index finger.

"Y'know how when we went to Albert's room before? He's got a collection of national flags. I guess maybe that's kinda what inspired me to start collectin' 'em myself," explained Ishizaki.

So, one person's hobby had influenced someone else, and that person became interested in it too. At any rate, it seemed like Ishizaki and Albert now had something in common in the sense that they both had the hobby of collecting flags. A hobby like that seemed to be something of a rarity these days.

"I don't know Albert very well, but he seems like a good guy," I told Ishizaki.

"Yeah. He definitely is. I mean, we butted heads now and then when we first started at school and all, but now we're best buds."

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

"I guess it's smooth sailing for you, in terms of friendship," I replied, with honest admiration, but Ishizaki's face stiffened as he

walked beside me.

"Nah, not really... I'm not exactly the most popular dude in my class or nothin'," he replied.

"It that because you're working for Ryuuen?"

"I dunno if that's really, like, the whole reason or not, since that kinda happened right after I started school here," Ishizaki said. "But anyway, after that fight we had with you back on the rooftop, Ayanokouji, the story was that it was supposed to be me who defeated Ryuuen-san, and that I won the class back from him, y'know? And then I started to hang out with more people that I never would have before and all."

He started to fumble his words after telling me that much, stopping there. It was true that Ishizaki might be in a complicated position right now. There were more than a few students who wanted Ryuuen to be defeated, so they were grateful to Ishizaki for that. It was inevitable that those students would be angry with him if he were to fall back into line, serving Ryuuen once again.

"Guess I'm one of the causes of that then," I mused.

"Ah, sorry, that was probably a weird way of puttin' it. You're not responsible for any of it, Ayanokouji. Besides, we were the ones who originally started that fight. It's true that more than a few friends walked away, but I guess I got to be friends with you in exchange, so I don't mind," said Ishizaki, turning to me with a huge smile on his face.

However, it looked to me like that smile was somewhat fragile and fraught.

"You shouldn't think that you're going to solve all of your class's problems all by yourself," I told him.

"I know, I know. Our class's problems are going to be solved by the whole class. Even Ryuuen-san's got the determination to make a comeback."

Ishizaki believed that, and he was going to do his absolute best to follow Ryuuen.

2.1

“WHOA, DUDE, there's a TON of people!” exclaimed Ishizaki.

As expected, the break area located near the fitness center where the exam results were posted was packed with students. Two adults who must have been connected to Tsukishiro were watching the students closely. There was also a large sign that told us that photography was strictly forbidden posted near the monitor that had been set up in the area. Displayed on the screen were everyone's ranking and scores. The lists scrolled by automatically. Right now, we could see listings of group members and scores for groups in fiftieth through sixtieth place.

“Hm...?”

A bizarre feeling of discomfort suddenly shot through my body. I felt like there was something off, but what

was it? I didn't immediately understand the cause, but I felt an indescribable feeling of unease. Something unpleasant.

“I figured I was gonna to take my time to look at the scores, but it doesn't seem like I'm gonna be able to concentrate at all,” muttered Ishizaki irritably, looking at the monitor.

It didn't seem like Ishizaki had that same feeling of discomfort that I did.

“Nothing we can do about it,” I answered. “I figured that a lot of people wanted to know more about the exam results.”

Ishizaki clicked his tongue in dissatisfaction. We didn't have any other choice though, so we had to watch the results scroll by from where we were standing. Ishizaki had a bold personality, but there was no way that he could push ahead of the upperclassmen and move closer. The trouble was that although the monitor was set to auto-scroll, it seemed like you could stop it in place by touching the screen with your fingers to view specific rankings. One of the third-year students had reached out and was fiddling

with the screen. Because of that, it didn't seem likely we were going to see the top scores, which Ishizaki was most curious about, anytime soon.

"What now?" I asked.

Even if we stuck around and waited for a while, it would probably be some time before our turn came.

"Well, I'm still curious and all, but let's not stress about it," replied Ishizaki. "We can check it out later."

That was exactly what I had just said only a few minutes ago, but... Well, if he understood that now himself, I supposed it was fine.

"By the way, did you notice anything off?" I asked.

"Huh? Notice what?" he replied.

Ishizaki turned to look around. It seemed like he hadn't picked up on anything after all—namely, this bizarre feeling in the air. There were a number of gazes directed at me, and they couldn't be dismissed as simple curiosity. And it wasn't like Ishizaki standing next to me was too dim to notice things—he hadn't noticed them because those glances weren't directed at him or any other student. They were all focused solely on *me*.

These people were watching my every move, and they were being obvious about it, not even trying to hide it. The people watching me all had one thing in common: they were all third-years. I didn't understand what exactly was going on yet, but I had zero doubt that Nagumo was involved. He must have been setting one of his schemes in motion today. A scheme that he had put on hold until after the uninhabited island exam was over.

"What's up?" asked Ishizaki.

Apparently, I had been so deep in thought that Ishizaki had started to get worried about me.

"Never mind, it's nothing. Anyway, it seems like even more students are coming, so let's turn back."

"Sure, dude. Okay."

I had imagined that Nagumo would try something eventually, but this was certainly a little troubling. It would have been much easier if Nagumo tried to confront me directly, but his first move was to hit me with something I really didn't like to deal with right.

"Hey, you haven't eaten yet, right? Let's grab a bite together," suggested Ishizaki.

"Huh? No, I haven't eaten yet, but..."

As I started to walk away, there was no sign that the third-years were following. All they were doing was looking at me, nothing more. It certainly wasn't a pleasant feeling to be stared at so intently.

"Hey, what the hell, man?" Ishizaki huffed. "What's with you, bein' so vague and junk? You don't wanna eat with me? That's rude."

"It's not like that," I replied. "I was just thinking about something else, something kind of unrelated."

I was thinking that I couldn't carelessly let Ishizaki get involved in this situation, but I figured that if he didn't follow me, then it should be okay.

"Well, thinkin' 'bout other stuff is rude too, y'know."

He certainly had a point. I decided to just forget about the matter of the third-year students for the time being.

"You sure you're okay with having me along?" I asked.

"Whaddaya mean? We're just havin' something to eat together, that's all."

I couldn't deny that I was feeling a persistent, overwhelming pressure from him, but it wasn't a bad feeling at all. I was still just trying to wrap my head around the fact that Ishizaki was treating me as one of his friends.

"Anyway, I mighta said this before, but it ain't like I'm askin' you to come along just because I'm tryin' to swipe you for our class or anythin,'" he said. "It's just 'cause I like you, as a friend, okay?"

Without hesitation, Ishizaki said something that kind of set me on edge. But just after he said it, Ishizaki turned around with a start, as if he had just realized something.

"Am I...botherin' you, maybe?" he asked.

"No, it's not like that," I replied.

"Sweet! Awesome," he exclaimed cheerfully.

For a moment, Ishizaki looked as though he had some doubts about what he was doing, suspecting that his actions were selfish. But then he immediately broke into a nonchalant grin, like nothing had happened. Well, I already knew that he had that kind of personality. I didn't have any ill feelings toward him whatsoever, so I decided to go with him. As we left the area and began to walk elsewhere, I heard footsteps coming from behind. It sounded like someone jogging up toward me.

"Ayanokouji-senpai~!"

It turned out to be none other than Nanase, the person who had accompanied me throughout the entire first half of the uninhabited island exam.

"You came to see the exam results too, senpai?" she asked.

"Yeah. But that being said, we couldn't take our time and look, so I gave up on trying," I answered.

"Is that so? I suppose it'll be a little while before we younger students can freely view the results on the monitor since the third-years are using it now," said Nanase.

Apparently, Nanase also wanted to know detailed results of the exam, but she opted to refrain for now. Ishizaki watched our conversation with a glimmer of curiosity in his eyes. Now that I thought of it, Ishizaki had never met Nanase directly before, had he...

"H-hey, Ayanokouji. When the heck did ya get to know such a cute girl?" he asked.

"Long story," I answered.

Explaining the whole situation from the top would've been an extraordinary hassle, so I left it at that.

"Whoa, dude, don't tell me, are you like...you ain't, like, datin' this girl, are ya?" he asked.

"Don't jump to conclusions," I told him. "We have a simple relationship, as she is my junior."

It was unusual for him to prod me about this sort of thing. I had thought Ishizaki wasn't too interested in matters of the opposite sex, but apparently not.

"Did you need something from me?" I asked Nanase.

"No, nothing. I just felt like talking to you once I saw you." Her eyes sparkling, Nanase looked me straight in the eyes as she said something that might've been somewhat embarrassing without hesitation. "Sorry to have bothered you. I'll be going now!" she added.

I had been thinking that she ran up to me kind of quickly before, and now off she went, trotting wherever she was going in a similar fashion. I had thought that the inside of the ship would be like the halls at school, so therefore not a place for running. But I supposed she was going at a speed that was just barely within acceptable limits.

"Dang, man, she sure was a cutie," said Ishizaki. "And her, y'know, were kinda, y'know."

Sorry, but let's just ignore the "y'know" part.

"You really ain't datin' her or nothin'?"

"No, we are not dating," I repeated, firmly denying it once again.

It'd be annoying for him to get the wrong impression due to carelessness on my part. I didn't want to have people spread any rumors around. That was precisely why I had to respond to Ishizaki that way, firmly denying it once again.

2.2

AFTER I FINISHED MY MEAL with Ishizaki and returned to my room, I found Ike standing right outside my door. He was looking down at his phone restlessly, but when he raised his head to look around him, he spotted me, and our eyes met.

"Oh, Ayanokouji! Oh man, am I glad to see you! I've been waiting for you!"

Ike was waiting for me? That was yet another unexpected occurrence today.

"To tell you the truth, I was thinkin' of going to pay Komiya a visit, but I was wonderin' if you'd come too," Ike explained.

"Me?" I asked.

Ike approached me and urged me to lean in close and give him my ear. I tilted my head toward him to listen.

"Well, uh, it's like, y'know...? I just feel a little awkward about goin' to see him by myself," he mumbled quietly.

"Why?"

"Why...? Well, y'know. It's, uh... I'm going out with Shinohara. After the exam, when we were on our way back to the ship, there was a moment when we were all alone, just the two of us. And that's when, uh..."

Apparently, he had told Shinohara how he felt about her, and she accepted his feelings. I'd been thinking there might have been some progress on that front, but apparently, things had exceeded my expectations.

"That so? Congrats," I replied, sincerely happy for him.

Ike averted his eyes bashfully. "Th-thanks man. But, um... I was thinkin', maybe from Komiya's point of view, I did somethin' unfair" said Ike.

"I don't think so," I told him.

"Well, I guess maybe I shouldn't say, like, 'unfair,' but... It's kinda like I swooped in before he could."

It was true that Komiya had been eliminated early from the uninhabited island exam due to his injuries. I suppose you could describe what Ike did as "swooping in," but that would've been true of anyone. Apparently, Komiya had been planning to tell Shinohara how he felt about her during the exam.

"I was actually thinkin' I'd wait until Komiya fully recovered, y'know? But, well, I was so relieved when the exam was over, and then Shinohara was right there next to me, and... Then, I just felt this intense, irresistible urge to not just hand her over to Komiya, and..."

From the sounds of things, Ike then proceeded to tell her how he felt about her, without even thinking about it. Of course, there was the risk of being rejected, and if that had happened, I could see how it could've made things even more awkward in the future if Komiya and Shinohara got together.

"So, that's why I figured I had to go tell Komiya about it and give him a proper report. If he was still planning to tell Shinohara that he had feelings for her, it'd be pretty complicated, right?" said Ike.

"If you didn't make the first move and take care of that, it'd be really tough for you if Shinohara decided to go with Komiya in the end."

"Urp...! Wh-why'd...?!" he stammered, flailing in exaggerated fashion, clearly shaken.

I guessed that half of the reason Ike had wanted to talk to him was that he wanted to report on what he did, but the other half was that he wanted to stop Komiya from telling Shinohara how he felt about her.

"You're prepared to at least take one punch, right?" I asked.

"Huh?! I'm gonna get punched?!" he wailed.

"If someone snatched away the person you loved right out from under you, wouldn't you do at least that much?" I asked.

"...Gulp."

Ike was shaking. He must have been terrified just from imagining it. Komiya wasn't exactly a big guy or anything, but it wasn't like he was only playing basketball for show. Ike, on the other hand, was small. There was a pretty significant difference in size between them.

"Well, he's got an injured leg now, so he won't be able to put much weight on it," I added. "He shouldn't hurt you too much."

"Th-that's not really the issue here, but, uh... I'm prepared."

Ike seemed like he was determined, at least to some extent, so there was no reason for me to object. I was curious about Komiya's condition anyway, and this would be a good opportunity to see it for myself.

"I heard that Komiya's still resting in the infirmary," said Ike.

"I'm sure it would've been tough for him if he were staying in a regular room."

It wouldn't be a surprise even if Komiya ended up spending most of the vacation in the infirmary.

Ike and I arrived at the infirmary. Ike took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. There was no point in rushing him, so I just waited patiently. But as we stood there, we heard loud laughter coming from inside.

"Wh-what was that? Let's head in."

Ike, surprised by the unexpected sound, opened the door to the infirmary and stepped inside without even fully taking the time to prepare himself mentally. We found Komiya sitting up in his bed surrounded by several of his classmates, including Ryuuen. Aside from Ryuuen, there were four other people: Albert, Kaneda, Kondou, and Yamawaki. Now that people from outside their class appeared, Ryuuen stood up, not even sparing us a glance.

"See ya later, Komiya," said Ryuuen.

Then, as though he was finished talking, Ryuuen left the infirmary with his companions in tow. I shot a quick glance over at him, but he made no attempt to look in my direction. Ike, on the other hand, seemed like he couldn't look directly at Ryuuen at all.

"Ryuuen's as scary as ever, man... Anyway, what did he want?" asked Ike, turning his head down, speaking in a quiet mutter.

When Komiya overheard what Ike said, he gave a nod of understanding.

"Yeah, he's certainly intense," he agreed. "Anyway, though, despite how it looks, it seemed like he just came to pay me a visit."

There were some items placed on the small table beside Komiya's bed, including some orange juice. They most likely had been brought for him.

"C-came to pay you a visit, huh... He doesn't really seem the type to do that though," said Ike, telling Komiya his honest feelings.

Komiya agreed with him on that. "Yeah, if it had been the old Ryuuen-san from around this time last year, I couldn't imagine him doing somethin' like this."

Komiya smiled somewhat nostalgically as he thought back to a year ago.

"But, y'know, Ryuuen-san's changed a bit. He's softened up... Well, maybe not exactly, but still," he added, sounding both somewhat bewildered and happy.

Ryuuen had taken complete control of his class as soon as he started school here. He treated everyone as a tool to be used without mercy. It wasn't surprising that many of his classmates would honestly reject him in their heart of hearts.

"But, well, with how he is now, I honestly feel like I can follow him," said Komiya.

"Follow Ryuuen...? Can't say I get it," replied Ike.

Ike seemed like he was completely unable to understand what he was hearing. His whole body shivered, in an exaggerated fashion.

"Anyway, Ike, Ayanokouji, don't jus' stand there. Sit on down," said Komiya, kindly welcoming us in without reservation, even though we were from different classes.

Deciding to take him up on his offer, Ike and I proceeded to sit down on chairs nearby.

"You seem well," I observed, checking Komiya's condition as I looked at his leg, which was fixed in place.

"As you can see, I'm in pretty good shape everywhere else except for my leg," he said. "But I gotta say, I can't help but feel frustrated, seeing everyone on the other side of that door having fun. I hope I heal up soon."

"When do you think you'll be able to walk out of here?" asked Ike.

"I'm in the process of askin' for permission to start using crutches."

Even though they were rivals in love, these two were able to carry on a conversation alone. My presence here might have been a bit superfluous after all.

"It's just... I'm a little worried," said Komiya.

"Worried? About what?" asked Ike. He straddled the chair backward, his arms laid over the backrest.

"Well, it's just... Ryuu-en-san's been tryin' to figure out who pushed me, from the sounds of things. He asked me a bunch of questions to see if I remembered anythin'. Like I told Ayanokouji before, though, I don't remember anythin' at all about being attacked."

There didn't seem to be any difference between his memory right now and his memory at the time of the incident. Right now, Ryuu-en's class was gaining momentum day by day. This was the time when they should be focused on the battle of the second-years and reaching for Class A. The same went for my class as

well, of course, but in any case, it wouldn't do them much good to delve too deeply into this incident. If Amasawa or another White Room student were involved—or anyone else associated with Tsukishiro, for that matter—there was no guarantee that even Ryuuuen would be safe.

"I hope that Ryuuuen-san doesn't overdo it," said Komiya.

"It almost sounds like he wants to beat the culprit half to death," remarked Ike.

I supposed that from Ike and Komiya's point of view, it was impossible to imagine Ryuuuen getting beaten. If anything, it was more natural for them to be more worried for the culprit than Ryuuuen.

"So? It's not like you just came here to pay me a get-well-soon visit, right?" said Komiya, sensing that there was some other reason for Ike's arrival.

In that instant, Ike stiffened in surprise.

"Oh, uh, well... I, uh..." he stammered.

He must not have been mentally prepared yet because he started choking on his words. Seeing this, Komiya simply waited for Ike to be ready. There was a serious look on his face, but he didn't pressure Ike to keep talking. The atmosphere in the room had changed in the blink of an eye. There was no longer any trace of the relaxed mood that we were enjoying until now.

"...I... Man, I dunno how to say this... It's like..." sputtered Ike.

Ike's talkative demeanor quieted, and he became unable to express himself eloquently.

"Ike," said Komiya. "I don't know what you're tryin' to tell me, but if you've got something important to say, look me in the eye and say it."

It seemed like Komiya had guessed what Ike was going to tell him. Still, he simply urged Ike to come out and say it clearly while pretending that he didn't know what this was all about. I couldn't imagine that Ike noticed that Komiya sensed what was

happening here, but I think that these two must have felt something toward each other. It was like they both knew that this was news that shouldn't be reported in a leisurely, casual manner. Ike, using both hands, slapped his cheeks, and then forced his eyes open wide.

"I told Shinohara how I feel about her!" he exclaimed, sounding determined.

His declaration was brief, but he communicated it in a loud voice. A silence fell over the room immediately after he said it. With him standing right next to me, I could hear Ike gulp loudly.

"So? What did Satsuki say?" asked Komiya.

"She said okay. We're going out," replied Ike.

"I see..."

Komiya only gave a brief response, but Ike kept looking directly at his face, not averting his gaze. Like Ike said before, wouldn't have been any surprise if Komiya decided to complain about the situation, thinking that Ike had swooped in ahead of him. My threatening warning seemed to have been effective, but Ike looked like he was ready for a sudden smack.

"Did you think I was gonna punch you?" asked Komiya.

"Huh?" sputtered Ike.

"It's totally written all over your face," Komiya teased. "It's like, 'Oh no, I might get smacked around.'"

"W-well, I mean, uh... I guess a little," said Ike.

"All right, guess that means you're prepared. I can't move right now, so come over here," said Komiya.

Komiya demanded that Ike come over beside him. Ike couldn't read his true intentions from his face, but Ike seemed to have made up his mind on the matter, perhaps because of the persuasive power of Komiya's demand. Despite his trepidation, Ike went to stand right beside him. As soon as Ike was in place, Komiya reached out with his right arm, and grabbed his shoulder.

"Ngh!"

Komiya pulled himself up, pushing his aching body to its limit, and peered into Ike's eyes with an angry, evil expression.

"If you make Satsuki cry, I'll *really* let you have it," he said, and gently pushed his left fist against Ike's chest with a light *pomf*.

"K-Komiya...?"

Komiya's expression relaxed, changing into a smile. "Come on, dude, don't be so gullible!" he said. "Satsuki chose you, that's all there is to it. Right?"

"But... If you hadn't gotten hurt, it might've turned out the other way..." said Ike.

"Sorry dude, but I don't think so. Satsuki's had a crush on you for a long time now. That's why she accepted it right away when you told her how you felt. I really don't think it was the kinda situation where whoever got there first won or something. It's just..." Komiya trailed off.

"Just what?"

"It's just, if you hadn't started paying attention to Satsuki and just kept running away, then I might've had a chance."

It was exactly as Komiya said. I also thought that it wasn't that important whether Ike told Shinohara how he felt about her first or if he told her later. There was a terrible accident where people were seriously injured, and Ike just so happened to be nearby. That created an opportunity for him, giving Ike a big push that enabled him to face Shinohara. That was most definitely the most crucial factor in how they had come to start dating. If fate had different ideas in store, like if Komiya hadn't been injured, or if Ike hadn't been by Shinohara's side at the time, then it might have been Komiya who was standing beside Shinohara right now.

"I guess in that sense, this injury was really unlucky," mused Komiya.

Although Komiya's romantic wishes hadn't been realized, he still seemed to be sunny and cheerful.

"Thanks, Komiya," said Ike.

"You better study and all, okay?" Komiya told him. "Satsuki... I mean, Shinohara worries about you, in that area."

"...Yeah. There's no way I can let myself get expelled," said Ike.

This tumultuous love affair might become an extremely important turning point for Ike. Like Sudou, Ike had been given the opportunity to fight hard, both for his own sake and for the sake of someone he loved. At any rate, Ike had now given Komiya his full report, and things seemed to have calmed back down.

"Sorry Ike, but can I talk to Ayanokouji alone for a minute?" said Komiya. "There's something I wanna confirm with him about my injury."

"Sure, dude. See you, Komiya. Later, Ayanokouji," said Ike. After his goodbyes, Ike immediately left the room.

Now that the two of us were alone, Komiya spoke up once more.

"Sorry. I'm sure Ike brought you along because he asked you for help, right?" asked Komiya.

"Nah. I was curious about how you were doing anyway, Komiya," I said. "If anything, I was a bother."

"No way man, not at all," he said. "Actually, it's like... I just don't know."

"Hm?"

"Even though you guys and me are in different classes and we're supposed to be fighting each other, we've started talking normally. It's kinda like something's been taken away from us, that feelin' of wanting to fight. Last year, things were so bloodthirsty."

Normally, if someone was in a different class, that meant they were an opponent for you to defeat. Someone that you had to take down. There weren't many advantages in getting along with other classes except in the cases of certain strategies.

"The uninhabited island exam was a competition between grade levels, and besides, we've all been in this school for a long

time now. So, like, maybe that's why?" Komiya mused.

"Hm, maybe so," I answered.

"So? You wanted to talk about my injury, right?" asked Komiya.

It was obvious that what Komiya had been saying before was just an icebreaker, something to start the conversation. Now, we needed to get to the topic at hand.

"I mentioned it before, about what Ryuuen-san is doing," he added.

"From what you've said, it sounds like he's searching for the culprit."

"I'm against it, just for the record," Komiya said. "To be honest, it's like, I just want to say this accident was just the result of my own slipup and be done with it."

"But Shinohara honestly saw someone attack you," I pointed out.

"I know. But it's just... I got this bad feeling. Or like, I feel like it's not going to end well."

Perhaps it was precisely because he *had* been attacked that he strongly felt like there was something dangerous going on.

"Would you mind keeping an eye on the situation?" he asked. "Even if it's only a little bit?"

"I don't think I can really do anything about it though," I answered.

"To be honest, I'm not expecting you to take care of it directly or anything. Just, if you feel like there's something off, let me know," said Komiya, appealing to me with a powerful look in his eyes.

We did have each other's contact information so we could contact each other at any time.

"All right," I agreed. "For the time being, it'd be best if you just focus on getting better as soon as possible, Komiya."

Rest was the only shortcut to making a full recovery, after all.

"Thanks. Oh, yeah, and if you don't mind, I'd like to show my thanks to you properly next time," said Komiya. "And I wanted to talk to the other guys who helped too."

"I'm sure they'd be glad to hear that. Maybe Ike will bring Shinohara along too," I answered.

"I hope not. I feel like if I see those two getting all flirty, I might cry."

He had a smirk on his face, but Komiya was more heartbroken than he looked. Carelessly making that teasing comment had been a mistake on my part. At any rate, while I wouldn't say that his injury had been a fortunate error or anything, I felt like the distance between Komiya and I had shortened a little.

"See ya, Ayanokouji," said Komiya.

"Yeah," I answered.

After I said goodbye and left the infirmary, a strange feeling suddenly washed over me. My classmates Sudou and Ike, and now people from other classes, like Ishizaki and Komiya... Little by little, the number of people whom I could call my friends was gradually beginning to increase. It wasn't that I had been actively trying to make friends or anything, but in the end, that was exactly what was happening.

"The way to make friends isn't something you find in a textbook, I suppose," I muttered aloud.

It was a little stupid, but that's what I seriously thought to myself.

Chapter 3: The Beginning of a Short-Lived Vacation

FOR MANY STUDENTS, each day spent on the uninhabited island felt like an eternity. In contrast, each day on the luxury cruise ship seemed to be over in an instantaneous flash of light. How could the flow of time be so different when it was still the same twenty-four-hour period? I supposed the most crucial factor was that here, we rarely thought about the time for most of the day. During normal school days and special exams, we frequently thought about the passage of time. On the other hand, on days off, we usually did not, and so the difference in our perception of time was striking.

Today was the second day of our festive holiday. The number of students that passed by one another in the ship's corridors increased dramatically. Many students' fatigue had finally abated, and they finally started to enjoy their vacation in earnest. Even someone like me, who had been spending most of my time quietly all by myself, received a message from a rather unexpected someone inviting me to hang out with them. It was none other than Vice President Kiriyama, from Class 3-B.

The invitation said to meet him by the pool. I wondered if he intended to have a light-hearted chat while we floated around on pool floats, or maybe to deepen our bonds of friendship by way of a game of volleyball. I immediately banished such incomprehensible predictions from my mind though. Although he was inviting me out by the pool, I was sure that his intentions in inviting me weren't just to "hang out."

I could have refused his offer, of course, or I could've ignored it. But whatever I decided, I was sure that I was going to have to hear what he had to say anyway. Depending on how things played out, it was entirely possible that I could have been called out in a far, far more unpleasant way than this. I responded to his invitation with a simple, indifferent "Yes," and promised to head over to meet him at the appointed time. Besides, there was a

significant possibility that this could solve the mystery of the nagging stares from the third-years that I felt the other day.

"Kiriyama, huh..." I muttered to myself.

Right now, I was in the break area next to the fitness center. Before me was the monitor where the results of the special exam were posted. It seemed that most of the other students had already finished checking their exam results because I was the only student here now. The number of teachers monitoring the students checking their results had similarly been reduced down to one person. I had already committed the exam results to memory more or less, but I slid through the results once more. Once the positions of the top groups were shown on the screen, I focused on Kiriyama's group's results.

The overall rankings had already been announced out in front of front of the entire school earlier, with Kouenji Rokusuke coming in first place by himself. Nagumo's group came in second place, and Sakayanagi's group came in third. I saw that Kiriyama's group had come in fourth place by just a slim margin, at only six points behind. His group had a total of 255 points. That meant Sakayanagi must have gotten the lead over him at the last second and clinched the third-place position to secure herself a place at the podium. The difference between third and fourth place was not limited to a mere difference in ranking, but also a number of benefits.

"Naturally, this must have been quite frustrating for the third-year students," I mused.

First place has slipped away from Nagumo, and Kiriyama had missed getting into the winner's circle entirely. Moreover, all the students who had been expelled had been third-years, which was quite an anomaly. I still had about twenty minutes to go before I was supposed to meet with Kiriyama, but I decided to head to the pool area ahead of time. I wanted to confirm that I wasn't simply being overly self-conscious in noticing the stares I was getting, but rather that there was some kind of plan in motion.

The answer was immediately apparent, without any need for careful observation or scrutiny. Within a few dozen seconds of me arriving by the pool, I had attracted stares from an unspecified

number of third-year students from all over the place. Students who were engrossed in conversation, students who were swimming, it didn't matter. As soon as they noticed my presence, they started to observe me closely. The glances I felt yesterday hadn't been mere coincidence.

"I know I came here to find proof, but I feel like I got it almost too fast," I muttered to myself.

This gave me such an intense feeling of unease that it actually made me want to grumble about the situation. I was just supposed to be here as an inconspicuous, nondescript student, someone who blended into the background, but now I was sticking out more than anyone else. Even if I wasn't trying to think about what was going on here, I naturally wanted to find out what was behind this and what the true intent was. The orders had come from Nagumo, most likely, but at this point in time, it was completely unclear *what* those orders were exactly.

Many students were directing obvious glances my way, but I continued to deliberately pretend not to notice anything. It was much easier to play the part of a foolish, thick-headed person. However, I knew Nagumo must have assumed I'd be aware of the strange looks I was getting from all these students. On top of that, I wouldn't have been surprised if he was enjoying seeing me being the center of attention. Regardless, the best plan of action for the time being was to just completely ignore the stares and let the moment pass.

I looked around the pool to see if anyone else was around besides the third-year students, and I saw Ichinose and some of her classmates. Ichinose alone had just so happened to notice my presence, and our eyes met. Her shoulders twitched, and then she proceeded to hide behind her classmates like she was trying to escape. Ichinose's sudden, bizarre movements prompted a response from her companions, who asked her if something was wrong.

I supposed Ichinose reacted that way because she had confessed her romantic feelings for me back on the island. It was no wonder that simply locking eyes with each other at a distance like we just did would make things feel awkward. If Ichinose were

the only one here, I would've done things differently, but since she had classmates with her, I figured I'd keep my distance for the time being. Even if I left her alone right now, I had already planned to meet with her on the evening of the day after tomorrow.

I saw a few of my own classmates around here and there, but unfortunately, I couldn't find anyone with whom I was particularly close.

"Seems like things are starting to get quite serious, Ayanokouji."

I turned my head to glance over in the direction that voice had come from, slightly diagonally in front of me. When I did, I saw Kiryuuin, lounging on a beach chair on the deck.



"What has?" I asked.

"Things with the third-year students," she said. "You surely couldn't possibly be unaware of it, are you?"

"I'm not sure I understand," I replied.

I tried to play dumb, but Kiryuuin simply continued acting nonchalantly, not even snickering at me over it.

"Though I am not complicit in what is happening, I am a third-year student too," she went on. "I've already heard some things about it, at least."

"Are you referring to the looks that I've been getting, by any chance?" I asked.

"Surely you know what I'm talking about."

"It's not a big problem," I said, trying to act like I didn't care about what was going on. "They're just looking at me, that's all."

"That's all, huh." Kiryuuin was clearly unconvinced by my façade. "To me, this seems like one of the most frightening strategies I could possibly imagine. Don't you think so? Especially for someone like you, this would be something fairly troubling."

Though Kiryuuin was teasing me somewhat, what she was saying certainly wasn't wrong.

"That's just what I'd expect from the Student Council President," she added. "It's a bizarre card to play, but it's effective, even against someone as flawless as you."

"Flawless?" I repeated. "I think you're overestimating me."

"Don't be modest. We've experienced a brush with death together now, and I understand that you possess a bottomless well of strength. Isn't that right?"

She lifted her sunglasses, resting them on her forehead, and looked at me with a piercing gaze. Even if I were to clumsily continue to deny her assertions, there was a considerable number of students in the vicinity, and I had no way of knowing when or if our conversation might be overheard. Of course, though, I was sure that Kiryuuin would have taken our environment into consideration.

"I understand," I said. "For the time being, I'll admit that much."

"*Fu fu*, well, good. Now, getting back to the topic at hand, what happened with Nagumo at the tail end of the exam anyway?" Kiryuuin asked. "There was no such directive given to the third-year students, at least up until the end of the exam."

"It's frustrating that... Well, I can't say with certainty that I don't remember doing anything that would have given him cause to resent me," I answered, doing my best to be evasive.

Kiryuuin had been reclining comfortably in her chair up until this point, but now she adjusted her posture slightly.

"If we're talking individual ability, the man known as Nagumo Miyabi is among the best in our entire school," she said. "Academic Ability, A. Physical Ability, A. Adaptability, A+. Societal Contribution, A+. Truly impeccable."

"I know. As far as OAA is concerned, he is by far the top student in our school."

A small number of students, like Sudou and Kiryuuin, had A+ rankings in certain areas. The number of students who had two or more A+ rankings was also extremely limited. Nagumo was the only student with all A's or higher across the board.

"With his elevated academic and physical abilities, his charisma that allows him to rally the rest of the students from our grade, and his achievements like having cinched the position of student council president, no one in our grade is a worthy foe for Nagumo," Kiryuuin went on. "The only other student that people accepted as his equal at our school was Horikita Manabu, but now he's gone as he's graduated."

Kiryuuin took a breath, and then picked up the wine glass that had been on the table.

"In Nagumo's eyes, you should have been nothing more than a toy. However, it seems as if something must have happened during the uninhabited island exam that had caused him to start taking you seriously."

"It would be best if he simply left someone like me alone," I answered.

"If that's the case, then you made the wrong choice somewhere along the line," said Kiryuuin.

It was painful for me to hear that, but still, she spoke mercilessly.

"There are probably few people who could defeat you one-on-one," she said. "I am quite confident in my skills, but if there's a type of person that I'm not good at dealing with, then it's probably someone like you, Ayanokouji. However, Nagumo is in a completely different category. I believe that he's the type of person that *you* are not good at dealing with. What do you think?"

"I can't deny that possibility," I agreed. "I've misjudged his true nature."

The other students were just looking at me, but I hadn't realized how stressful and repulsive it would feel. Though I had been under constant surveillance in the White Room, this was completely different. To put it another way, I was being forced into an environment that I had never experienced before in my entire life. The only way for me to escape this situation was to stay hidden away indoors, which wasn't a realistic solution here.

"You're right about that," said Kiryuuin. "Nagumo tends to prefer employing flashy moves, winning in a spectacular fashion, and facing opponents one-on-one. But when it comes to making sure that he'll win for certain, he'll employ any strategy, no matter what it is. Even if it means mobilizing all the third-year students, as he's doing now. No matter how underhanded the method might be, his priority is to win in the end."

That meant that having many people watching me was just the opening act, the prelude to whatever he was planning.

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you with this one," Kiryuuin added, as though she was trying to get ahead of me asking her to cooperate with me.

And with that, she put the sunglasses that had been resting on her forehead back over her eyes.

"I never said anything about wanting you to help me though," I said.

"After spending about two and a half years of being free do whatever I pleased, I...admit that have a few regrets about my time spent at this school. If this school had a system in place where students could repeat a grade, I might have considered going for it," said Kiryuuin.

Repeating a grade, or in other words, doing the same year's classes over again rather than advancing to the next. She was talking about staying here another year.

"There you are, Ayanokouji."

As Kiryuuin and I were engaging in our conversation, Vice President Kiriymama appeared, all by himself. Kiriymama struck me as a serious person, and he had arrived much earlier than we were scheduled to meet. After casting a quick glance over to Kiryuuin relaxing beside me, he directed his gaze at me once more.

"I know that there's still a little time until we were supposed to meet, but do you mind if we start now?" he said. "This isn't a good place though. Let's move elsewhere."

"I suppose that means it's a conversation that you don't want me to overhear then, eh, Kiriymama?" chided Kiryuuin.

She had just said that she couldn't help me, but apparently, she was interested in hearing what we were going to talk about. She lifted her sunglasses once again.

"It's simply because we would attract too much attention here. I would prefer for us to speak in a quiet place, if at all possible," said Kiriymama.

The pool was one of the most popular areas on the ship, so there were a considerable number of students around. For some reason, the only available seats seemed to be the ones directly next to Kiryuuin, but I figured there wasn't any reason to question that too deeply. It just seemed kind of uncomfortable, in a way.

"Now that's odd, saying that you don't want to attract too much attention," said Kiryuuin. "That's quite a contradiction, Kiriymama."

"What?" he asked.

"If you wished to talk in a quiet place, then meeting by the pool, where a considerable number of people gather, would be utter nonsense. Am I wrong?" asked Kiryuuin.

"So, you're saying that you'd prefer that I told you from the very beginning that I didn't want to talk next to you, as it would've been irritating?" Kiriyama spat back in response to her prodding.
"Is that it?"

When Kiriyama spoke, his face was pale and devoid of color, like he was completely dead inside. The look on his face made it clear to me just how many times Kiryuuin had caused him grief up until now.

"I see. I suppose I've made you uncomfortable then," said Kiryuuin.

Once a conversation began, if Kiryuuin was around, it would always start to revolve around her. Kiriyama didn't like that, so he tried to get away from her, but his attempts appeared to have backfired, giving Kiryuuin an opportunity to plunge right back in.

"In any case, why not allow me to listen in on what you're about to discuss?" she asked.

"Absolutely not. It has nothing to do with you," said Kiriyama.

"Nothing to do with me? I wonder how it is that you can assume that it doesn't."

"What?" asked Kiriyama.

"Ayanokouji and I have a relationship, as boyfriend and girlfriend. That being the case, how can you say that it has nothing to do with me?"

Before I could even react to that, Kiriyama alternated between looking over at me and Kiryuuin with a look of astonishment on his face.

"*Fu fu*, that was a joke, Kiriyama. You are a boring guy, but your reactions are amusing from time to time."

Seeing an amused smile on Kiryuuin's lips, Kiriyama's face twisted in indignation. He stormed off without a word. From the

way he moved, it was like he was telling me, "Just leave that woman there and hurry along."

"I can't ignore this, so please excuse me, Kiryuuin-senpai," I told her.

"Please give my regards to Kiriyama," she replied.

Please don't ask me to do that. Even though he left, I'm sure he doesn't even want to hear the name Kiryuuin right now.

I followed Kiriyama and arrived at the deck one floor above where we were, overlooking the pool. It was relatively quiet in this area, with most students there sunbathing or taking an afternoon nap. There were still a fair number of students gathered here though, so having a conversation could very well raise suspicions.

However, there were no other third-year students aside from Kiriyama present, which suggested that he had cleared the room. With that in mind, I figured that neither the first- nor second-year students would pay much attention to our chat. Another redeeming quality was the fact that there was no one lying in wait to ambush me, so this was going to be a one-on-one talk from the looks of things.

"So, then, what did you call me all the way out here for?" I asked.

"I'm not going to beat around the bush," said Kiriyama.
"What did you do to Nagumo on the final day of the uninhabited island exam, Ayanokouji?"

"What did I do?" I repeated.

"Don't play games. It's obvious that you had something to do with the exam results."

I could hear people talking on the other end of the line on the walkie-talkie when I encountered Nagumo on the final day of the uninhabited island exam. He was still in the middle of conducting his operation to suppress Kouenji. It was no surprise that Kiriyama would have found out what happened.

"I don't mind answering your question, but could you answer one of my own first?" I asked.

"One of yours?" he repeated.

That was right. When I first got this call to meet with Kiriyama, I decided there was something that I wanted to verify myself. Kiriyama eyed me suspiciously, but I continued speaking.

"I've been wondering about this ever since we first met, Vice President Kiriyama. Back then, it seemed like you were working against Nagumo, to defeat him. But you appear to have abandoned the fight at some point along the way... Did you give up?"

If Kiriyama were expecting Nagumo's downfall and defeat, then what happened should have been a welcome development for him.

"Give up?" said Kiriyama. "I don't understand what you mean. My personal battle is continuing on, even now."

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

When I denied his claim, Kiriyama seemed to immediately understand what I was after.

"You seem to think that I'm taking Nagumo's side, but I'm not," he said. "The changes in Nagumo's plans are simply beginning to have a negative impact on me and my surroundings. I believe I told you this before the uninhabited island exam. I said to stay out of my way."

His response just now was a rather ordinary, yet overly verbose way of rejecting my assertion. However, human beings are prone to make trivial slips of the tongue like that.

"You seem to have interpreted what I said rather broadly," I said. "I was simply asking whether you've abandoned the fight. Instead, you seemed to jump right to the question of whether you're in the student council president's camp, Kiriyama-senpai."

"...Isn't that the same thing?" he asked.

"Admitting defeat and joining the other side are two completely different things. They are absolutely, unequivocally, not the same thing at all. I'm sure that you understand that much, Vice President."

Prideful people who think of themselves as superior think that they don't make mistakes. That was exactly why, if you turned around and asked them, "Well, since you're so superior, there's no way you could be wrong about this, right?" they'd have an even harder time admitting to a mistake.

"What are you trying to say?" he asked.

He wasn't admitting to anything or denying anything. He just attempted to move the conversation forward. Right now, the easiest option for him was to just let what I said slide and ignore it.

"I simply wanted to ask you where you stand, that's all," I told him. "Even though you've given up on fighting, are you still Nagumo's enemy? Things haven't changed there, have they? Or are you under Nagumo's thumb, perhaps? After all, this is a matter that Horikita Manabu entrusted to me."

Perhaps because it had been some time since he had heard Manabu's name, Kiriymama's expression stiffened.

"...Yes, I suppose he did."

Maybe he was thinking back to the time that he and I had first met.

"Looking back, the relationship between me, and Nagumo, and Horikita-senpai... Well, in short, you were someone who had no interest in the student council whatsoever. In that sense, you shouldn't have gotten involved in the situation."

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

"It's true that I was planning to take down Nagumo. If we don't beat him, then it'll be impossible for my class to rise back up to Class A. Unfortunately, that fighting spirit started to gradually fade away sometime around the middle of my second year."

The current third-year students allowed their Class A to run ahead unchallenged, far more than we did in our grade level. At this point in time, there was a difference of more than 900 Class Points between Class 3-A and Class 3-B. Even if you looked at the midpoint of last year, there would've still been a difference of 700

points or more. They had allowed Nagumo to establish a commanding lead early on, and it had now gotten to the point where it was impossible for anyone to catch up with him.

"We third-years shifted over to individual competition early on," Kiriyama continued. "We started competing according to Nagumo's own unique rules, and things like Class Points and the school's own rules became secondary."

I was sure that played a big part in the improbable, commanding lead Nagumo had created for himself. Once that had happened, the hurdle would've been too high for Kiriyama to clear on his own.

"I struggled to break through somehow, but as soon as I entered my third year, I was swallowed up by that wave," said Kiriyama.

What was that look? Frustration? Resignation? Looking at Kiriyama's side profile, his expression was indescribable.

"What happened to you then?" I asked.

"Ugh... I suppose you won't be satisfied unless you hear it right from my own mouth," he replied.

"It's important to me."

"Nagumo handed me a ticket to graduate from Class A, so I decided to follow the rules that he set... That's what you wanted to hear, right?" said Kiriyama.

In other words, as things stood now, not only had hostilities been ceased, but he had been turned into one of Nagumo's allies. Graduating from Class A was just that important to an ordinary student, apparently. It also proved that twenty million points just had that much value and allure.

"Whether or not you earn this school's greatest privileges will have a significant bearing on the rest of your life," Kiriyama said. "Even if your classmates might ultimately resent you, it is far, far more important to graduate from Class A than anything else. The three years we spend in high school are a mere blink of an eye compared to the decades that follow, after all."

It was no wonder, then, that Kiriyma was so outraged, and that he wanted to know the details of what happened so badly that he called me up to find out.

"Ensuring that Nagumo got first place was our challenge, our mission. However, *your* involvement caused a disturbance in the chain of command. Kouenji took first place, and Nagumo came in second. As a result, we lost a great deal of both Class and Private Points. Do you have any idea just how much that cost us?"

As I had already confirmed on OAA, I knew that Nagumo had the Trials and Tribulations Card as along with seven Bonus cards, so the number of points that he had lost by not taking first place in the exam amounted to about seven million. Furthermore, if all twenty-eight of the Free Ride cards that the third-year students had were applied to Nagumo's group, they would have received an additional reward of fifteen million Private Points.

However, the result was that they had gotten almost half of that when Nagumo fell into second place. Of course, it was still an enormous amount of money, there was no doubt about that. But if you were to include the effect the Trials and Tribulations Card would have had on their Class Points, then their losses were even greater.

"We third-years are approaching graduation now. Missing out on first place is a significant loss. We need to be collecting as many Private Points as we possibly can and not wasting a single one," said Kiriyma.

Considering that Kiriyma's group had intended to take second place, and the fact that they had collected a number of Bonus Cards for their own group, they had lost even more Private Points than I had calculated.

"It would seem the fact that your group missed out on a prize isn't unrelated either, Kiriyma-senpai."

His shoulders twitched slightly in response when I pointed that out.

"...Yes," he replied slowly. "I was quickly dispatched to function as back-up for Nagumo's group. However, that slight delay in response caused a chain reaction, resulting in issues on all sides

until the very end. We didn't just lose to Kouenji either. Third place was also snatched away from us by a group of second-year students."

If everything had gone according to plan, the third-years would have been rewarded with a massive number of Private Points. Although this might've been a rough calculation and somewhat over-optimistic, that substantial number of points might have been the exact sum needed to save their fellow students for certain.

"The ticket to move up to Class A costs twenty million points," said Kiriyma. "We are constantly searching for optimal ways to generate that sum. As it now stands, you could say that there is one less ticket available."

The rewards for winning the uninhabited island exam were all appealing, for sure, but when it came to Private Points, the total effect of the Bonus Cards and Free Ride Cards would have caused the total amount to soar even higher.

"Until now, Nagumo has continued to produce results that have earned the trust of everyone else in our grade level. But by coming here and stubbornly clinging onto you, he lost a great deal of money, and his credibility has taken a hit. If he stopped thinking about you, I suppose that the problems would have been minimal, but after the special exam ended...Nagumo took unbelievable actions."

"You mean how those third-year students were expelled, right?" I asked.

"Correct," said Kiriyma. "Originally, the plan was for the higher-ranking groups to take in groups that deliberately let themselves sink to the bottom of the rankings, with the intent of bailing them out at the end of the exam. That way, they'd be prevented from getting expelled."

However, this part of the plan was not executed, and the third-year students in the lower rankings were all expelled simultaneously.

"Fifteen people were expelled. There wasn't anything they could've done. They didn't even have the time to cry about it," said

Kiriyama.

"That must have been terrifying, from the third-years' point of view."

"Obviously. One whim reduced three whole years to nothing for those students. If it were due to their own actions, they could accept what happened, resign themselves to it. But if it was the result of Nagumo's irrational actions, then that's a different story."

If everything Kiriyama said was true, this could very well be a wake-up call for the students who blindly followed Nagumo all this time. Well, no, rather, I should say that it was strange for the third-year students to have shown no signs of trying to defy Nagumo, especially after an event like that.

"You find it strange, don't you? The fact that Nagumo isn't being raked over the coals for this, I mean," said Kiriyama.

"It certainly was a huge failure on his part," I agreed. "But a lot of people in Class B and below who don't have a way into Class A are keeping quiet."

"Even if we wanted to defy him, there's no way we could pull it off. Nagumo and the rest of the students in Class 3-A have created an impenetrable fortress," said Kiriyama.

An impenetrable fortress. By that, I'm sure he meant some kind of system has been created that prevented those in any of the other classes from possibly defying Nagumo. If that were the case, then...by posing just a single question, I might be able to unravel this mystery.

"Do you have a ticket in hand right now, Vice President Kiriyama?" I asked.

It was a question that normally would've been satisfied with just a simple yes or no. However, Kiriyama answered in a different way in the blink of an eye, without changing the expression on his face at all.

"If I had a ticket in my hands, I wouldn't be having any problems."

"I see. I suppose if Nagumo still has the tickets in his possession, then that certainly changes things," I answered.

It was obvious, but Nagumo really was enacting quite a cunning strategy. If Nagumo controlled all the Private Points, then no one could defy him. Putting it simply, Nagumo had made an agreement with people that he would spend twenty million points and bring them up to Class 3-A. No, actually, even going as far as calling it that might be too generous. *If you continue to pledge your loyalty to me, I will prepare a ticket, just for you.* I could assume he said something along those lines, or something similarly ambiguous, avoiding making any clear promises. Given the situation, if anyone were to carelessly defy him, then Nagumo would likely terminate that agreement without a second thought.

"We're also forbidden from secretly saving up Private Points on our own," Kiriyama explained. "Basically, individuals are free to hold up to a maximum of 500,000 points. Anything beyond that is siphoned off by Nagumo," said Kiriyama.

"That's harsh."

Unlike cash, which you could stuff away under your mattress, Private Points basically existed as a form of electronic currency and couldn't be hidden. Nagumo must have put certain rules in place to have students monitor each other too. This way, even if Nagumo were to get knocked down a peg by some means and ended up getting expelled as a result, he'd still have tens or even hundreds of millions of Private Points in his possession. Considering all of that, even if people *did* want to stage an uprising, they'd never be able to.

"Surely now you see the reason why the third-year students back Nagumo to such an unusual degree, and why they protect him?" said Kiriyama.

"Yes, I understand very well," I replied.

You could say that it was a perfect dictatorship. No one in their grade could possibly compete with Nagumo—it was impossible.

"He's playing with the entirety of the third-year grade level," Kiriyama said. "He's using us. Nagumo makes the students without tickets compete with each other, and then makes a big show of

handing out tickets and making students pledge their loyalty to him."

Which meant, of course, for the students in Class 3-D and Class 3-C who had absolutely no chance of winning, Nagumo was nothing short of a god. That was only natural, I supposed, since they were being publicly told that if they could prove themselves useful, they could graduate from Class A. However, they wouldn't know it was true until they actually got moved up to Class A, right when they were about to graduate.

"In the little time we have left here at this school, we want to compete and fight so as many people can get tickets as possible. That's why your presence is nothing but a hindrance, Ayanokouji."

Thanks to Nagumo focusing his attention on me, he was losing out on precious Private Points. And with the losses that came with that, students who should have been saved no longer would be. So, that was the situation the third-years were in right now, from the sound of it.

"But do you really think that I *want* to be in this situation?" I countered.

"I know, I know," said Kiriyama.

"Okay, then what do you want me to do?"

"Let's go back to where this conversation started," said Kiriyama. "First, tell me what happened on the island, and then I'll look for a solution from there."

"Nagumo doesn't want that though, does he?" I asked "I mean, he didn't even tell you what happened, and you're the vice president. Right?"

"That might be true...but leaving things alone won't solve anything," said Kiriyama.

He wanted to stop Nagumo's rampage, even at the risk of losing his own means of getting into Class A. Well, no, he feared that if he *didn't* stop Nagumo, he had no idea what would happen to his own ticket.

"If you don't want to talk to me, then I want you to meet with Nagumo immediately and talk to him. I can arrange a

meeting if necessary. Surely no one stands to gain anything from you and Nagumo going at it from this point onward, yes?"

"You are absolutely right about that," I agreed.

"I will also advise Nagumo that this strategy he's executing must be stopped. I want you to trust me," said Kiriyama.

This strategy... I didn't even need to bother asking him what that strategy was about.

"You mean the stares I've been getting lately."

Kiriyama looked down at the pool and nodded.

"What is he after?" he said. "And for what purpose? And how long will this go on? There's no explanation for it at all. This bizarre behavior is seeding distrust among the third-year students."

And yet, despite their disbelief, they had no choice but to obey Nagumo, as he held supreme authority over their grade.

"Nagumo's regime is rock-solid... However, if he continues this reckless behavior, it's possible the worst could happen," said Kiriyama.

Kiriyama, and the others who'd been promised tickets, would continue to serve him faithfully, but many of the students who had not been promised anything would not. Kiriyama couldn't let a revolt break out. It wouldn't be surprising if some students were plotting to get Nagumo expelled now if they weren't going to get a ticket anyway. For Kiriyama and his crew, that would certainly be a very bad scenario.

"Hypothetically, even if I told him that I would talk to him, I can't imagine that would be the end of it," I said.

"In that case, what should I do? You're not giving me any details, but you have no intention of seeing Nagumo either. That's just making the situation worse."

"Can you give me a little time? I will definitely give you an answer in the near future," I replied.

Perhaps the news that would follow would reach Kiriyama's ears not from me, but from Nagumo.

"...Fine," conceded Kiriyama. "But do decide before Nagumo makes his next move."

Kiriyama had been surveying the entire area around the pool, and he immediately noticed the arrival of a certain someone. It was, of course, Nagumo himself, the person that we had been discussing all this time.

"It's time to go. If he finds out that I met with you, there's going to be trouble again."

That was probably wise. Kiriyama must have taken a considerable risk to reach out to me like this today. At any rate though, just learning the details of the third-year students' situation made this a worthwhile conversation.

3.1

AS MORE OF NAGUMO'S FRIENDS showed up, the pool quickly started to clear out. If he wanted to talk with me directly, it was clear that even if I tried to let things be and didn't try and make contact, Nagumo would send a messenger. If he wasn't sending one right now, I concluded he must've had no intention of setting up a meeting. But just when I had finished changing in the locker room and was trying to make my escape...

"Ayanokouji-senpai!"

I happened to bump into Nanase, who spotted me in the hallway again. She ran up to me with a happy look on her face. I supposed that on a ship with a fixed number of places we could go, it wasn't that unusual for me to see her two days in a row as I was constantly passing students I was acquainted with when I was outside my room. Nevertheless, she appeared before me in exactly the same fashion as she previously did, reminding me of the spectacle I saw yesterday.

"May I have a moment of your time?" she asked.

She briefly glanced around, checking my surroundings. She seemed to be looking to see if I was with anyone. I was with Ishizaki yesterday, so she might not have been able to start a conversation with me because of that. I felt somewhat bewildered by this strong pressure she was exerting on me, or rather, by just how close she was. Despite that, I nodded my head anyway.

"Actually, I've been agonizing over whether I should report on something that's been concerning me a little," said Nanase.

"A report?" I asked.

Nanase nodded. Her cheerful mood dissipated and was replaced with an air of seriousness. She spoke to me in a whisper, being mindful of our surroundings.

"There's one thing that I've been keeping from you, senpai. I thought if I told you, you might get angry, but..."

I might get angry? What in the world was she talking about?

"Well, it's—"

Nanase tried to tell me what it was in a soft whisper, but then...

"Oh? Ayanokouji-kun?"

Hearing my name being called by someone she didn't recognize, Nanase quickly put some distance between us. The voice belonged to Ichinose's classmate, Kobashi Yume. If this was the old days, like how I'd spent my time at school until this point, we probably wouldn't have greeted each other if we saw one another. However, during the uninhabited island exam, we had spent some time together, albeit brief. That seemed to have brought about a change in our relationship.

"Oh, am I...interrupting something? Maybe it'd be better if I waited," said Kobashi apologetically, seeing Nanase hiding behind me.

"Oh, no, it's all right," said Nanase. "I was just asking Ayanokouji-senpai about something that I didn't understand."

"Are you sure?" asked Kobashi.

Nanase vigorously nodded twice, trying to convince Kobashi that nothing nearly so serious was going on here.

"I'll come talk to you again when I have time," the first-year said.

The only thing I knew for sure was that it was something that Nanase didn't want other students to overhear. She then bowed deeply and respectfully not only to me, but to Kobashi as well, and ran off.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize that you were in the middle of a conversation," said Kobashi. "She's a first-year, right? I hope I didn't upset her."

"I don't think you need to worry," I assured her. "Anyway, what did you want with me?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, the girls in my class are thinking of throwing a 'We made it!' party tonight to celebrate the exam

being over. I was wondering if you might like to join us, if you're interested? Plus, I wanted to thank you again for saving Chihiro-chan."

I was getting invited to something. However, her phrasing, specifically about the girls in her class, stuck out to me.

"Who else is going to come?" I asked.

I was worried, so I tried to check and see who would be there. But Kobashi didn't know the details. She tilted her head to the side, looking lost in thought.

"Well, we're still kinda in the middle of putting it all together. Don't worry about it though, it's not like there are any weirdos in my class, so it'll be all right."

It wasn't like I was afraid of strange people showing up, but it didn't look like Kobashi understood what I was getting at.

"But, I mean, only students from your class are going to be there, right, Kobashi? Wouldn't it be a little awkward for someone like me, an outsider, to drop in?"

"You think so? No way, it wouldn't be awkward at all! So, what do you think?"

I found myself with a vague, casual invitation to a post-exam party. To be honest, I wasn't too keen on the idea, partly because there weren't many people in Ichinose's class that I could talk with intimately. Especially with the way things were right now, it was doubtful that I'd actually be able to get into a good conversation with Ichinose, even if I ran into her there. It'd feel a little regretful over it, but I figured that I should decline.

"Hey, sorry, but I think I'll—"

Seeing that I was about to refuse the invitation, Kobashi clasped her hands together and spoke up again, cutting me off.

"Please! It's just that I think, like, us meeting here is like fate, right?"

It was hard to refuse her when she put it to me like that, but I wasn't going to be broken so easily. It was plain to see that if I

went with the flow right here, things would not go so well for me later.

"So, I guess this...means it's my fault, huh?" sighed Kobashi.

"Huh?" I replied, confused.

"Yeah, it's all right," sighed Kobashi. "Guess there's nothing I can do. I think I'll just go tell the rest of the class what happened. I asked Ayanokouji-kun to come, but I flubbed the invitation, so he turned me down."

"Wait, hold on. Why would it be like that?" I asked.

"So, will you come?"

"...Well, that's..."

"I knew it, it was a bother after all. If only I were a little better at inviting people out to stuff... I'm sorry, everyone," said Kobashi dejectedly.

"I don't really like seeing you get so depressed over it..."

"Please, even just showing your face for like a second is fine! Please come! Honami-chan is coming too!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands together once more. She was pleading for me to go to the party with fervor, even more intensely than before. Now that we'd gotten to this point, it felt like there was already no way out.

"All right," I conceded. "It's really okay if I just make a brief appearance?"

"Yes! Thank you!" she said. "Oh, but keep the fact that you're coming to the post-exam party tonight a secret from Honami-chan, okay?"

She was smiling so cheerfully that it made it hard to believe she had been so depressed and sad just moments ago. They do say that women are born actresses, after all. Anyway though, keeping it a secret from Ichinose? That part kind of struck me as odd.

"Why keep it a secret though?" I asked. "I'd like to get permission from everyone to see if it's okay for me to show up."

If there was even one student who didn't want me there, I'd prefer that they just came straight out with it and tell me. And that

way, I could refuse the offer to attend once again, more openly, and it would be with good reason.

"Well, it's because, you see... Don't you think it would be better to be a surprise, Ayanokouji-kun?"

I couldn't help but think that, while it *would* be a surprise, it wouldn't be a particularly good one. I didn't want to get into it, but from the sounds of things, Ichinose's classmates had their own ideas about me and Ichinose.

"Okay, we'll be waiting for you in room 5034 at eight o'clock," said Kobashi.

"5034... The party is in someone's room?" I asked.

I had thought for sure that they would've held this in the break area somewhere, or on the deck. Moreover, the room number she gave indicated that it was one of the rooms that girls stayed in, not guys.

"Is that a problem?" she asked.

"Well, I...wouldn't say it is," I replied, "but I feel like it would make it a little more difficult to go there."

"Oh, no, not at all! Okay?"

Somehow, that last "Okay?" made me feel like I had been pushed into a corner. My escape route was being locked off and blocked.

"All right then, we'll be waiting for you! You've gotta come!" she exclaimed happily.

Seemingly satisfied that I had promised to attend, Kobashi walked away with hasty steps.

"Good grief," I muttered.

It still wasn't time for me to talk with Ichinose face-to-face yet, but...well, I supposed that if we were going to be in a crowd of people, then it'd probably be fine. If it was a post-exam party, I was sure that quite a few guys would be attending too.

3.2

AFTERWARD, I didn't really feel like playing around. I ended up kind of hanging around my room, not really doing anything and feeling depressed. After I had dinner at six o'clock, eight o'clock rolled around before I knew it.

"Guess I...should be going now," I muttered to myself.

Right now, if I could choose whether to go or not, I would decide not to go without hesitation. That was just how unwelcome this invitation was. But I supposed that if I really didn't want to attend, I should have refused the invitation without hesitation in the first place. I figured that it was because I had given such a wishy-washy response earlier that I was in this situation now, so really, I had no other choice but to reap what I had sown. Though I had renewed my sense of determination...when I arrived at room 5034, I just stood there outside the door.

A minute had passed since I arrived in front of the room. I thought about knocking, but I could hear the sounds of girls talking and laughing coming from inside the room from time to time. And yet...there wasn't any sign whatsoever that there were any guys there yet. I had a bad feeling about this. I didn't know why, but I was starting to break out in a kind of cold sweat. The only thing I was certain of was that I was more nervous right now than when I squared off against Tsukishiro during the uninhabited island exam.

"Wouldn't it be wiser for me to just turn around and head back now?"

A devil had whispered those words into my ear, and I found that they leaked out of my own mouth, coming out in my own voice. Maybe it would be less painful if I just gave a humble apology later, giving them the excuse that I inadvertently forgot all about the party? No, I also wanted to avoid being branded as the sort of person who broke his promises...

What in the world should I do? I was unable to move, like I had been bound hand and foot. But suddenly, the spell on me was broken from an unexpected direction.

"Oh, you came!" exclaimed Kobashi, happily.

Kobashi had appeared, standing at the end of the hall. I wasn't sure if this was just bad timing or what. There were plastic bags in her hands, with assorted items peeking out from inside like snacks and bottles of juice. Now that I had been discovered, my option to run away had been obliterated.

"I think that everyone's already inside, so don't be shy, head on in!" she said.

"O-okay... I was just about to do that," I replied.

Someone, save me...

Kobashi, without hesitation, gently started to open the door that I could not open before. It simply felt like it was too heavy.

Was this really okay? To open the door so easily like that? I needed to mentally prepare myself a little more... Just as I was thinking that, the door, the only thing separating me and the inside of the room, was being taken away from me.

The first of my senses to be stimulated was not my sight, but rather, my sense of smell. It smelled like flowers. It was a thick smell, but it was sweet and pleasant. It wafted through the air. Immediately after picking up that smell, my eyes caught sight of girl after girl after girl—girls as far as I could see.

"Ta-daaaa! I brought Ayanokouji-kun!" announced Kobashi.

There were girls sitting all around the room, crammed tightly in a space that you couldn't by any means say was spacious for four. What was this world before my eyes? One, two, three... Including Kobashi, who had just come inside, there were a total of ten girls in here. That meant that half of the girls in Ichinose's class were here. And on top of *that*, there wasn't even the slightest hint of a guy around. I almost felt like I had been betrayed somehow.

"Hey, phrasing! Saying that you *brought* him is a little weird, Yume-chan!"

"Really? Oh, I bought the stuff that you asked for," said Kobashi, setting down the plastic bags on the small table near the bed in the cramped room.

What was this? What was with the lighthearted, fluffy, airy atmosphere of this gathering? The only thing I knew for certain was that it felt slightly different from when Kei and her group of girls got together. Most of the girls attending this party were people that I hadn't spoken to before, but I remembered their names and faces from OAA, more or less. While I was overwhelmed by the spectacle before me, rendered unable to move, Kobashi lightly patted me on the back.

"So, Ayanokouji-kun, where should we have you go?" said Kobashi. "Oh, how about right next to Honami-chan?"

While it was certainly true that Ichinose was the one I was the closest to out of everyone there, Kobashi decided on my spot for me without even the slightest hesitation. To be fair, I didn't think that I really had any other choice of seat to begin with since the room was so small, but still, it seemed like I didn't even have the right to choose for myself from the very beginning. What I did find a little strange, however, was that despite the fact there were ten people here in this room, they had somehow left enough space for one boy to sit next to Ichinose without any issues, right from the start.

That meant that the space wasn't available out of sheer coincidence. It was highly likely that they had planned it that way in advance. I thought back to what Kobashi had said when she had invited me this afternoon, and it all seemed to fit... Anyway, I wasn't sure that thinking it out was going to be any help to me in this current situation. If I just stood there, I'd keep getting stared at by ten people, and that would only make me feel even more uncomfortable. I hurriedly excused myself and went next to Ichinose.

"...May I sit here?" I asked her.

"O-of course you may," she replied.

Ichinose immediately agreed to let me sit by her, so I sat down, but I still seemed to be getting stared at by almost

everyone there. Or rather, apart from Ichinose, Kobashi, Shiranami and another student named Himeno, it felt like everyone there was observing me, like the six of them were trying to evaluate me. No, I needed to stay calm and keep a straight face here, pretending not to notice anything. Then, when the timing was right, I would be able to leave early.

Kobashi poured some tea into a clear cup and handed it to me. Once everyone had drinks in hand, Amikura, who seemed to be the facilitator of this event, spoke up in a loud voice.

"Well then, without further ado... Let's begin the post-exam party to celebrate a job well done, along with the 'Thank you, Ayanokouji, for saving Chihiro-chan when she got lost on the uninhabited island' party. Cheers!"

After Amikura made that announcement, everyone raised their cups high.

"Um, first of all, I just want to say, thank you, Ayanokouji-kun. You really saved me back then," said Shiranami, seated to the left of Ichinose, offering me words of gratitude.

I didn't think that I did anything that would make people thank me so much or be so humbled by me, though... At any rate, I simply nodded my head gently, since I couldn't really say anything to expand on the conversation for the time being. Personally, I would have liked to have said that the party was in full swing then. But just as I was lamenting the fact that only ten minutes had passed, Shiranami came over to me with a serious look on her face.

"Um, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"What is it...?" I asked.

She was tightly holding her can of orange juice with both hands, and the look on her face suggested that she wanted to say something.

"I'm, um, I'm very grateful to you for helping me," she said. "But I just can't accept it yet."

"Huh...?" I answered, bewildered.

She offered no further explanation. After saying her piece, she forcefully gulped down her orange juice.

"Wah! I can't say anything more than that!" she wailed.

Wait, hold on a minute. What in the world...? She walked away, leaving me behind, dumbstruck. The people around Shiranami showered her with words of encouragement and appreciation, praising her for doing her best and telling her she did a good job. Shiranami seemed a little embarrassed but didn't appear as bothered by it as you might have thought. Seriously though, what was happening here? Since I was out of my element though, I couldn't ask those kinds of questions in return.

Though Shiranami had talked about me at the start of the post-exam party, after that point, the girls started talking more about whatever was on their minds. I just sat there quietly on the sidelines, not making a peep, like a well-trained pet. Of course, if someone were to ask me if I were comfortable in this situation, then I would have immediately said "no." At any rate...

I had witnessed firsthand just how amazing girl talk was, and how they effortlessly transitioned from one topic to another. The conversation didn't stick to any one thing, and they moved from subject to subject as busily as an airplane flying around Japan. But no matter the topic, there was one thing all the girls had in common. Namely, many of the girls centered their thoughts around Ichinose, placed a lot of trust in her, and had blind faith in her. I wouldn't say that was a terrible thing, though.

The girl known as Ichinose Honami was, without a doubt, the most trustworthy person in our entire grade. I could make that assertion regardless of whether she was my friend or foe. The standards of what made someone trustworthy came down to the individual, sure, but trust was something that was built up day by day. No one would ever trust a student who had never once spoken up before if they suddenly said "Trust me" one day.

But trustworthiness and blind faith were not the same thing. Even if Ichinose were a trustworthy person, there were times when she'd make the wrong choice now and again. If you continued to trust someone when they made mistakes, you wouldn't get any

results. There was a definite need for students who could point out when something was wrong to correct those mistakes.

As the girls' excitement had visibly peaked, one girl raised her hand. Up until this point, she had only made some general comments to show that she was listening, rather than contributing to the conversation.

Now she asked, "Can I have a sec?"

"What's the matter, Yuki-chan?" asked another girl.

"Just one of my typical headaches," said Himeno. "Look, sorry, but I'm really out of it. Is it good if I head back to my room? I'm seriously not feeling great."

I wouldn't have paid any attention to what she said if I were just focusing on the message, like if it had just been a casual remark or request. But I was surprised by the unexpected tone of voice she spoke in. Many of the students in Ichinose's class were generally courteous and well-mannered. Himeno had curtly told everyone that she wasn't feeling good and that she wanted to go back to her room.

"Of course you can. Want me to walk with you?" said Ichinose. She and the other girls at the party hurriedly offered their support when they heard that one of their friends wasn't feeling well.

"Nah, it's fine. I'm fine... I'm not a little kid, you know."

Himeno stood up, seeming like she was fed up with her classmates' overprotective behavior. There was even *this* type of student in Ichinose's class, huh. As I recalled, Himeno was in a group of all students from their own class during the uninhabited island exam.

At any rate, up until that point, I hadn't gotten the feeling that I would've been able to leave, but now the winds of change brought me an opportunity to go. If I missed this chance, I didn't know when I'd find the next window to leave. I decided to take the plunge and followed Himeno's lead.

"Well, I think it's about time I be going too, actually," I added.

"Huh? You're already leaving? You can still stick around a lot longer though!" said Kobashi.

"Nah, I was only planning to make a brief appearance anyway," I replied. "And besides, I had plans to meet someone after this."

If I said that I had plans, then Ichinose and the other girls would surely refrain from asking me to stay, out of politeness.

"W-well, see you later then, Ayanokouji-kun," said Ichinose, still sitting pretty.

She and the other girls waved goodbye, seeing me off as I left the room.

3.3

"PHEW... I felt like I was about to break out in a weird sweat," I muttered to myself.

No, actually, I had already broken out in a sweat. Less than thirty seconds after Himeno had left the room, I also managed to escape from the devilish room 5034. I figured that for some people, that situation would've been heaven. But for me, personally, it was a painful place to be. You couldn't call me particularly good at getting close to people, after all. It would have been a different story if I were to completely create a new role for myself, but since I was operating on the premise of playing the part of an inconspicuous high school student, it wasn't that easy for me to change.

However, I supposed that in a way, the fact that I had little connection with Ichinose's class up until this point

might have helped me get closer to her. With Ichinose at the center of her class, I could see, albeit just faintly, what kinds of kids were beside her. What did she have, and what was she lacking? At this point in time, I knew the strengths and weaknesses of Ichinose's class.

Students who could speak up and make themselves heard were essential, no matter who would be the leader in the future. The only person that I could think of at the moment who could do that would be that guy Kanzaki. However, with the class centered on Ichinose, the girls' collective voices seemed to be just as strong as the guys'. Kanzaki, as an individual, was the type of person who could speak up to Ichinose, but whether he could appeal to the class as a whole and whether he could control the girls was another matter.

"Hm?"

Himeno had complained of a headache earlier and said that she was going back to her room, but she was walking in a different direction from the guest rooms. She left and turned the corner in

an instant, but considering that distinctive hair color of hers, there was no mistaking her. There was something about Himeno that I felt was off during the girls' party just moments earlier. Since I was somewhat curious about what was up with her, I decided to follow.

I found myself at the aft deck. It was nighttime, and there was no sign of anyone else around. As I continued to look at Himeno Yuki's side profile from a distance, I recalled her profile in OAA.

2-B Himeno Yuki

Academic Ability: B- (63)

Physical Ability: C (51)

Adaptability: C+ (58)

Societal Contribution: C+ (58)

Overall Ability: C+ (57)

Other than her high level of academic ability, she wasn't particularly skilled or lacking in any way. She had no outstanding abilities as far as I could see. However, that was just a view of her abilities only as far as the school's metrics were concerned. It was possible that any student had invisible strengths and weaknesses hidden away. I decided that I wanted to investigate a little further, and that direct contact would be the fastest way.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Huh...? What?"

She averted her eyes, looking somewhat uncomfortable. Considering that she slipped out of the room after saying that she had a headache, it was strange for her to be in a place like this.

"Your headache all better?"

"Gawd..."



Her short mumbling was almost completely drowned out by the wind, but it sounded like she was telling me to shut up. There were several guys and girls who used harsh language in our school, but in Himeno's case, it seemed like her way of speaking was a defense mechanism—a way for her to keep people away rather than meaning to be hurtful.

However, perhaps because she was concerned about her public image, she coughed, and then directed her gaze over to me.

"I just stopped here because I thought the breeze would help me settle down. Okay?"

"Do you get headaches often?" I asked. "You said something earlier that gave me the impression you do."

I tried pressing her for more details, but she must not have wanted to engage in conversation with me any further because she fell silent. Even during the girls' party earlier, she hadn't spoken up at all except to say that she was leaving. In addition, I had noticed that the other girls generally didn't really start conversations with Himeno either. It wasn't like she was being excluded on purpose or anything, as Ichinose would never tolerate such a thing. And if their relationship was that bad, I was sure they wouldn't want to show that to someone from another class, like me. In that case...

I supposed that they must have somewhat forcefully invited Himeno to come out to the post-exam party then, twisting her arm a bit. If I framed what happened as the girls doing it because they wanted to get their classmate to have at least some fun, then it all made sense.

"I get migraines. That's what they say," said Himeno, her comment brief and muddled.

"If you have migraines, then cooling down is the right choice," I replied.

Migraines are caused by the dilation of cerebral blood vessels due to things such as changes in female hormones, fatigue, lack of sleep, and so on. Blood vessels are less dilated when cool and

more dilated when warm, so stepping outside to feel the cool breeze wasn't a bad idea.

That is, if she really did have a migraine.

"Pain in the..." she mumbled.

"Aren't you just using headaches as a way to get out of uncomfortable situations?" I asked.

"Huh? You callin' me a liar?" she huffed.

Himeno had been acting relatively indifferent up until this point, but the look on her face changed as soon as I had pointed out that she might have been stretching the truth. She was an unusual type for Ichinose's class, which was full of mild-mannered people. My intuition had not been wrong.

"You look pretty angry. That mean I hit the bull's-eye?"

"Wrong," said Himeno. "Actually, you know what? Ugh, my head's startin' to hurt again. I'm going back to my room."

"Sorry if I offended you," I said. "But would you mind listening to me for just a minute?"

Himeno, her hand held up to her forehead, turned and shot me a disgusted look. "Look, my headache's getting more intense. Okay?"

"Sorry."

"Sorry,' huh... So, you assume I'll listen to you if you say sorry?"

"You don't seem to want to talk."

"I don't."

After trying to engage in conversation a few times and getting a couple of responses now, I could start to see that this person in front of me was the real Himeno. This seemed to be her true self.

"I see," I said. "Well, nothing I can do, then."

She shrugged her shoulders in indignation, seemingly telling me, "*You get it now?*"

"Guess this means I don't have any other choice but to head back to the girls' party and report that Himeno might be faking being sick," I told her.

"Huh? Say what?" she said. "Don't just go acting like I'm faking it. You're a liar."

"Liar?" I repeated. "All I said was that you 'might' be faking it. Besides, as long as I feel like that might be true, then I have the right to raise the question, don't I? You can just prove it to everyone at a later date whether it's true or not."

"There's no way someone can *prove* they have a headache, though," said Himeno.

"Maybe," I answered.

"The hell? Everyone was all praising you up and down, but you sure have a nasty personality."

"Hey, at the very least, I wasn't being praised for having a *good* personality though, was I?"

I didn't really want to say this myself, but really, all Shiranami did was express her gratitude to me for helping her.

"Guess so," she replied.

"Anyway though, you're a strange one, Himeno," I told her. "It's like you don't seem like someone from Ichinose's class."

"Strange?" she scoffed. "If you ask me, the people in my class are way too nice. Our class is always getting together in big groups to do stuff. And sure, that's fine. But the issue is that each time we do something, it takes friggin' forever, and nobody ever leaves."

I supposed that if I had to repeatedly go to meetups I didn't like, I couldn't help feeling fed up either. Ichinose's other classmates, however, enjoyed those gatherings. That was probably why no one wanted to leave each time they met, which resulted in each meeting getting drawn out for long hours.

"If you don't like it though, you don't have to participate. Right?"

"You really think I could get away with something like that?" said Himeno. "Even if it's annoying, it's important for me to keep in line."

"Well, I suppose so."

Her whole class was united, and there was an especially strong kind of camaraderie among the girls. It would take courage to toss a stone and cause a ripple, even if you felt dissatisfied with things on the inside.

Himeno. Maybe our chance encounter right now could change the direction things were headed in. Normally, I wouldn't get too deeply involved with a member of the opposite sex like her unless it were a special situation. However, I figured that it wasn't a bad thing to deliberately take a step forward here.

Of course, if this ended up making trouble for her as a result, then, well, c'est la vie. There was no getting around it.

"If you want to relieve stress, then isn't screaming the best thing you can do?" I asked.

"Screaming...?" Himeno repeated. "If I did that in a place like this, it'd just draw attention, whether I liked it or not."

"Not many students come to the aft deck, and besides, given the noise from the ship, there won't be an echo," I pointed out. "It'd just get drowned out and disappear."

"But..."

She looked bewildered, like she had never cried out as loud as she could before.

"Then why don't you go ahead and scream first?" she said.

"...Me?" I blinked.

Her totally unexpected response had managed to get me to feel flustered too, despite myself.

"I don't really know anything about you," said Himeno. "But you strike me as a pretty quiet person. Or like... You don't look like the type who'd scream. If you show me how it's done, I'll try it myself."

Now I was in trouble. I didn't remember ever experiencing intense stress in my life, so if you were to ask me if I had ever screamed out as loud as I could myself, then the answer would be no. That's how little experience I had with this kind of thing.

"If you can't, then I'm out of here," Himeno said.

If I backed down now, this would probably be the first and last time that Himeno and I would interact.

"All right."

With Himeno watching me, I steeled myself, faced the ocean, and shouted in a loud voice.

"AAHHHHHHHHH! There. Your turn, Himeno."

"...Are you kidding me?" she replied.

"No, not at all?" I answered.

"Your shout barely had any volume to it," said Himeno.
"You're seriously messing with me right now."

"Then show me how it's done," I countered.

"I ain't showing you shit after that."

Exasperated, Himeno tried to escape, but I shouted at her back as she was trying to leave, stopping her in her tracks.

"I thought if I did it, you were gonna do it too?!" I asked.

"No, it's just that I'm annoyed that you think what you did actually counted," said Himeno.

"Hey, whatever volume the shout, the fact is that I complied with your request. But if yours is just as quiet as mine, then you have no right to make fun of me at all."

I preemptively blocked her off so that she wouldn't shout at the same quiet level that I did.

"Oh, for the love of... Fine. Just once is okay, right? Then I'm getting out of here."

After first taking a deep breath, Himeno brought both of her hands up to her mouth, a look of resignation about her, like she figured she had no choice but to do it.

"WAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!"

The sounds of the ship's engine and the wind drowned out the sound enough so that no one heard her except for me. However, her voice echoed in my ears, and it was twice as loud as I imagined it would be. I felt like the ship was shaking... But it was only just a feeling. The ship wasn't actually shaking from that, of course.

From the way she spoke and acted, she seemed like kind of a downer. Or rather, she was someone who was pretty reserved and had a quiet, subdued voice. As it turned out, she had a tremendously loud one.

"Phew... That feels better." Himeno nodded her head in satisfaction, seemingly unconcerned about my shock.

"Right? Screaming was worth it for me too," I told her.

She gave me a cold look. "No, you really didn't scream at all though."

"Well... I think I probably could've done better if I were feeling stressed."

"Really? You don't look it though."

"You were even better than I thought. You must be under a lot of stress."

"Huh? I'm gonna kill you, y'know?" she huffed, with a sharp glare.

She was the sort of person who resorted to using her mouth before using her hands and feet when she was angry.

"I went a little too far," I admitted. I apologized to her sincerely, but she didn't seem like was offended. Maybe Himeno had a fearless side to her, after all.

"I'm headed back to my room," she announced.

"All right. Sorry for holding you up."

"If you know you did something wrong, then that's good at least," she said, and then she headed back inside.

"Guess I'll head back to my room too," I said aloud to no one in particular.

I knew that I had just been to a post-exam party to relax after giving it our all on the island, but even so, I was unusually exhausted. I had a feeling I was going to sleep very deeply that night.

Chapter 4: Everyone's Holiday

BEING ON THE CRUISE SHIP came with the problem of where to have lunch every day, and what to eat. The school provided buffet-style meals to us every morning and night, free of charge. Students were free to visit the buffet or not, if they wished. Aside from being free, the food was also exceptionally delicious, so it was quite popular amongst the students. The school divided the breakfast buffet service into three separate admission blocks between seven and nine in the morning.

Each block of time was limited to sixty minutes. It operated on a reservation-style system where we used our phones to reserve whatever time we wanted. I generally had breakfast at eight o'clock in the morning, but since I was late to make a reservation, the eight-to-nine block had filled up, so I ended up having to eat a little earlier at seven o'clock in the morning. As a result, I was feeling strangely hungry by the time noon rolled around. Perhaps my body was craving energy because I'd only been meeting my minimum caloric intake requirements during the uninhabited island exam.

Dining in the open-air café was a popular option, but, regrettably, the meal prices were high. If you wanted to have a lunch combo set with a drink included, you would need at least 2000 points. If you wanted to enjoy a meal together with friends, the café would be a fine option, but unfortunately, I was alone today. It made sense for me to be as frugal with my points as possible, considering the costs, so I was extremely grateful for the concession stand kiosks.

In short, they were places where you could easily purchase items such as rice balls, sandwiches, and so on, just like at a convenience store. I quickly marched up to the kiosk and paid 250 points for a rice ball and a small tea. Then, plastic bag in hand, I went in search of a place to eat. I figured using any suitable break area that was available would've been fine, but most of those

places were occupied, and I felt a strong aversion to sharing such a small space with someone else. I figured that if you wanted to find a place where you didn't mind being near strangers, at least to some extent, then being outside was generally the best choice.

As I continued searching, I arrived at a spot on the deck on the sixth floor near the bow of the ship, overlooking the ocean. It didn't cost anything for me to use this place, so I figured it was an appropriate place to eat the light meal that I had purchased from the kiosk. I'd been thinking I would enjoy the magnificent view of the ocean while enjoying my little snack, but it seemed like I picked the wrong time of day to do it. There were many other students who had come here to take in the view, and it didn't seem likely that I'd be able to relax.

Though the deck was spacious, if there were many people on it, it would obviously be a challenge to find space. I scanned the area and found an empty bench. And, next to it, I saw Nanase from behind, seated on the adjacent bench. A sandwich and a carton of milk were placed beside her. She must have purchased them from the kiosk too. It was kind of funny—this was the opposite of yesterday, where she was the one who found me. Aside from Nanase, there were many second-year students here as well, who, like her, were enjoying their lunches while taking in the view of the ocean. For example, I spotted my classmates Ijuuin and Okiya, as well as Sakayanagi from Class A, and Nakaizumi and Suzuki from Ryuuuen's class.

Ultimately, people tended to think in the same ways. I didn't move from my spot and turned my gaze out to the ocean. Surely, a meal would be utterly delicious if you were to eat it while taking in this spectacle. However...just as there were many students from my own grade, there were many third-year students here too. Some of the third-year students had noticed me, though it was only a handful of them. They immediately began to turn their watchful gazes in my direction. On the other hand, if I were to leave immediately, that would mean that I didn't like the way they were looking at me, and they'd know that I had decided to run.

Doing so might encourage the third-year students further as they would likely conclude what they were doing was effective.

Come to think of it, Nanase seemed to have something she wanted to talk to me about the other day. I remembered that we were interrupted at the time because Kobashi had come up to speak with me, so I decided to call out to Nanase now. It would at least provide me with some pretext to go over and talk to her.

"Nanase."

When I called her name, she turned back with a start.

"Ah, semffai!" she said in surprise.



Apparently, I had gotten her attention just as she had a mouthful of sandwich, and she looked at me while trying her best to keep the contents from spilling out. I felt a little sorry for her when I saw her hurriedly trying to swallow her sandwich. I was just using her as a means to combat the third-years, but from the look of things, I had put her in an unnecessary panic.

"Oh, sorry. Should I come back later?" I asked.

Even though I said that, I knew that there was no way Nanase would allow it, considering her personality.

"Please whaid a momend, howd om," she sputtered.

She couldn't spit the food out now that she already had it in her mouth, so she quickly started to swallow it down.

"*Gulp!* ...Um, sorry, excuse me," said Nanase. "I was, um, well, to tell the truth...just having lunch."

She said that like she was confessing some kind of secret, but I could tell just by looking that she was eating. Actually, I knew it the minute I saw her from behind.

"Um, is there something I can help you with?" she asked.

I felt like there was something a bit strange about Nanase, when I saw her so flustered like this. Her eyes were restless, darting all over the place. She seemed to be unable to concentrate on having a conversation with me.

"Well, not exactly, it's just that you seemed like you wanted to talk to me yesterday," I replied. "I was wondering what about. You just kind of left after Kobashi came up to talk to me."

"Oh," said Nanase.

Her train of thought was slow. Her words weren't coming out right away.

"I'm sorry, but it's already been resolved, so would you mind just forgetting about it?" she asked.

"It is? Well, in that case, all right."

I had been planning to talk to Nanase about whatever it was because she had helped me out in many ways, but if the issues

had been resolved, it wasn't of any consequence. More than that, though, the biggest reason I decided to let it go was that I sensed that it didn't really matter anymore.

"Sorry for bothering you so suddenly," I said. "Anyway, I'm going to head back inside the ship. There are more people than I thought there'd be, so it doesn't seem like I'll be able to relax here."

"I see," said Nanase. "Well then, I will see you later, senpai."

As soon as I finished getting my stuff together, I left. I looked back out at the deck once more and saw that Nanase was once again facing forward and had resumed having her lunch.

4.1

IN THE END, I made my way back to a less-populated area—the aft of the ship, on the fifth floor—to find a place to have lunch. It was the same place where I talked with Himeno the other night, and I already confirmed that few people usually went there. For a few minutes, I just stared out at the rough waves created by the ship as it sailed through the waters, forgetting about my original purpose for coming here. Then, an unexpected visitor approached me.

“You’re going to have lunch all by your lonesome here? In a place like this?”

“Sakayanagi? What a coincidence.”

As I recalled, she was on the same deck as Nanase earlier.

“That’s correct. Well, that’s what I’d *like* to say; however, I did chase after you, Ayanokouji-kun.”

She chased after me? But her legs were in such bad shape that she wouldn’t have been able to match even my slowest walking speed. There was no indication that she had assigned someone to tail me ahead of time either.

“It was simple deduction,” Sakayanagi said. “You made an appearance at the deck near the bow of the ship earlier to have lunch. But you gave up on the idea after seeing how many people were there, didn’t you? It wasn’t difficult to predict where you’d ultimately decide to go, given the fact that you were carrying a light meal and you were looking for a place with a view of the ocean.”

She had perfectly read my behavioral patterns and had arrived here based on them.

“I see that you also wish to enjoy your meal while taking in the view, Ayanokouji-kun.”

“Unlike back at the bow of the ship, the view here isn’t top-rate,” I said, “but there aren’t that many opportunities to gaze out

at the wide-open ocean like this."

There was no guarantee that there'd be another uninhabited island exam this time next year. There were other school trip events planned for our second year, sure, but the details remained unknown for the time being. Perhaps this would be the last chance I'd have to gaze out at the ocean in this fashion.

"I'm sure there will be many more sights like this ocean view for you to see in the future," said Sakayanagi. "In that sense, you were probably correct in choosing this school, Ayanokouji-kun."

"Yeah, that's right. I think so too. You know, though, I actually had seen the ocean before, prior to coming to this school."

Sakayanagi was, surprisingly enough, a little shocked by that. Well, no, to be fair, it might have been reasonable for her to have been surprised. The truth was that I didn't leave the facility even once until I was fourteen years old, which would have put me in my third year of junior high. That fact was common knowledge to someone who knew what the White Room was generally like. Anyway, I had seen the ocean once. It was when I had the opportunity to be outside for a short while after I was transferred out of the facility.

Although I didn't have any direct contact with the water, I walked along a path with a view of the sea. However, the first time I saw it, I wasn't moved or anything. I simply walked through the outside world, emotionless. Nothing more.

"Have you heard of *Beneath the Wheel*?" asked Sakayanagi.

"It's a novel by Hermann Hesse, right?" I said.

Out of all of the novels he had written, that work was particularly well-known in Japan. In some languages, it was called *The Prodigy* instead.

"Hans, the protagonist of the story, was a genius gifted with incredible talent," said Sakayanagi. "Though he attended an elite school and had a bright future ahead of him, he only lived for his studies. Eventually, he began to have doubts about himself. He tried to live up to the expectations that were placed upon him, but he suffered setbacks and started to decline."

The protagonist, Hans Giebenrath, met a tragic end. At the end of the story, he fell into a river and died.

"What of it?" I asked.

"I don't think he was a prodigy, myself," she said. "The reason being that real, honest-to-goodness prodigies do not suffer failures like that. And choosing death at the end was just sheer stupidity."

Sakayanagi seemed to have interpreted his death as a suicide rather than an accidental one.

"Some time ago, I told you, 'People can come to know warmth by touch. And that is precious. The warmth of another's skin is by no means a bad thing.' Do you remember that?" she asked.

"Yeah, I think I recall you saying something like that."

Was that at the end of the third semester of our first year? Right after the special exam ended?

"Hesse, who wrote *Beneath the Wheel*, was also troubled and suffered setbacks in his life, just like Hans, the protagonist of his story," she explained. "However, he said that it was because of his family that he was able to keep going. He didn't feel the need to take his own life."

From the sounds of things, the author, Hesse, and the book's protagonist, Hans, had strikingly similar personal backgrounds. You could therefore see the story as the author's psychological projection of his self. As Sakayanagi looked out at the ocean, she was suddenly hit by a strong gust of wind.

"Ah—"

I saw the instant Sakayanagi's hat started to fly away, and I immediately reached out my hand to catch it.

"Whoops... That was close," I said, taking hold of it.

If my reaction speed had been even slightly delayed, her hat probably would have been carried off into the vast ocean.

"Thank you very much," said Sakayanagi.

"It's not safe to wear that on the deck," I warned.

"*Fu fu*, yes, I suppose you're right," she said. "But it is my trademark, of sorts."

She held the hat in her hands, holding it tenderly against her chest.

"Something quite nostalgic sprang to mind, just now."

"Nostalgic?" I repeated.

"Oh, it's nothing important. It's just that I have a few memories of the ocean," said Sakayanagi.

I supposed that even a single body of water, though it would look the same to anyone, could hold many different memories to different people.

"By the way, you never told me the reason why you chased after me," I told her.

"Is it so much of a bother that I came after you without one?"

I was wondering what she was going to say, but she responded with an answer that I hadn't even considered.

"You don't have one?" I asked.

"I just thought that I wanted to talk to you, Ayanokouji-kun. I could have approached you before, at the place you just left. However, I imagine that you wouldn't want to be seen speaking with me that much, no?"

That meant she was trying to be thoughtful and considerate, for which I was grateful. However, I wasn't a skilled conversationalist, so I didn't have any particular topics that I could go into with her.

"Would you mind if I led the conversation with some idle talk?" she asked.

"That's fine. Is it okay if I eat while I listen?"

"Please, by all means, go ahead. I do not mind. If you simply lend me an ear and listen, that would be plenty for me."

I took a single rice ball out of the bag and began to peel off the wrapping with my fingers.

"You know, Ichinose came to see me yesterday," said Sakayanagi.

"She did?" I asked.

"Yes."

Sakayanagi recalled yesterday's events, telling me what had happened as she thought back on them.

4.2

“UM, EXCUSE ME... Sakayanagi-san? Do you have a minute?”

After lunch, I was enjoying a nice relaxing break in the café on the ship’s deck when Ichinose-san approached me. Since I was enjoying my tea alone, I had no reason to refuse her.

“Whatever is the matter?” I asked.

I already knew what this was all about before she even said anything, but I deliberately cocked my head to the side anyway, making myself appear puzzled.

“Well, about what happened during the special exam... I felt like I needed to apologize,” said Ichinose-san. “I did something really selfish on the last day, and...I am truly, deeply sorry!”

Ichinose-san bowed deeply with as much respect and intensity as she could manage. She must have been prepared for the worst, assuming this to be a situation in which I would accept no excuses from her. To be honest though, I didn’t think that she would have made careless excuses to anyone. I was sure that she probably felt as though her actions had angered me, the leader of Class A. And, also, she probably assumed that what she did had caused our cooperative partnership to be dissolved. It wouldn’t have been surprising at all for her to feel that way.

“Please lift your head back up, Ichinose-san. I am not angry about anything at all,” I told her.

“Huh...?” she blinked.

“If anything, I must say that I recognize your efforts as a fellow member of the group. You have contributed well. You masterfully played a vital role in the harsh, unforgiving uninhabited island experience by bringing together our disparate allies, and also by getting a high percentage of correct answers on Tasks. As a result, we managed to achieve third place in spectacular fashion. Did we not?”

“B-but...” she stammered.

"Yes, it certainly is true that you acted somewhat selfishly on the final day of the exam. However, the loss our group incurred as a result of that was only a few points at most. If we were to compare that to your contributions, then it's hardly anything worth chastising you over. If we had fallen into fourth place by a slim margin, then you *might* have been on the receiving end of some criticism, but that didn't happen," I answered, cutting her off.

"But that's a conclusion we can only make in hindsight..." she insisted.

"Sometimes, though, it can be a good thing to simply look at the results, no?" I argued. "Things don't necessarily always go as planned. Supposing we had slipped down to fourth place by a narrow margin in the end after fighting with everything we had, then surely the psychological damage you suffered would have been great."

I had wondered if my attitude of not putting any blame on her whatsoever was actually making Ichinose-san feel even more guilty and apologetic. Her feelings of remorse had not yet faded away.

"The face you're making seems to be saying that you won't feel like this has been resolved until you take responsibility for it somehow," I observed aloud.

"Um, well, I suppose that's...not inaccurate," she conceded.

"Well then, in that case, I can hand down a punishment, if you would like."

Ichinose-san seemed to be intimidated by the scowl I was wearing, but she still gave a small nod.

"Yes," she said. "I think that would make me feel better about this."

"*Fu fu*, you certainly are a strange one. Well then, in that case... Please sit down, right here." I urged Ichinose-san to step forward and take a seat.

Ichinose-san was as timid as a little lost lamb. I asked the wait staff to get a menu for her.

"Go on. Please order whatever you like," I told her.

"Um, excuse me, but...what about my punishment?" she asked.

"You are to sit down for about thirty minutes, starting now, to accompany me for afternoon tea," I replied.

"Huh? Th-that's my punishment?" she stammered.

"Yes, it is. I am taking up thirty minutes of Ichinose-san's valuable time. Clearly this is nothing other than a punishment."

"I-I'm not sure about all that...but, if you say so Sakayanagi-san, I'll obey your order," said Ichinose-san.

Although Ichinose-san didn't seem to understand what was going on, she nevertheless followed my instructions and ordered a drink.

"You really are quite honest, Ichinose-san," I remarked. "You were humiliated by me in the past, and yet you don't seem to be showing the slightest hint of it now. You're even willing to accompany me like this."

"I don't think that you humiliated me, though. Besides...the truth of the matter is that I *did* make a mistake in the past, after all."

"At the very least, though, I'm sure that you would want to hide an incident that you felt guilty about, as something that you wouldn't want others to know. Even if it is true as you say it is, Ichinose-san."

Thus far, in my life, I had seen many outstanding people up close, ranging from children to adults. While still knowing that I, of course, was the best, there were many whom I recognized for their talents.

On the other hand, I had probably seen dozens of people who were completely useless and incompetent. Yet, regardless of excellence or incompetence, I had never known a single person that could be called purely good. That was the same for even my own father, my mother, and Ayanokouji-kun.

"You are quite a difficult one to qualify," I said. "Perhaps that's why you seem so very terrifying to me at times."

"I'm...terrifying?" Ichinose-san asked.

I was sure that no one had ever said something like that to her in her entire life. However, I was also certain that one or two people had been afraid of the person known as Ichinose Honami.

"All people who live in this world have some evil in them to some degree, but I don't sense any evil in you whatsoever. You're like a bundle of goodness."

"You're really overestimating me though," she replied, sadly. "I have done bad things, just like that time in junior high..."

Her shameful past, something that she could by no means be proud of, remained an indelible reality, even now.

"The goodness that I'm speaking of has nothing to do with such things," I said. "Besides, even if you did engage in some temporary wrongdoing at that time, there was still an irreplaceable familial love behind it in the first place."

Even if what she had done then was deemed as wrong in the eyes of the law, it could still be interpreted as good in other ways, depending on your perspective.

"That goodness of yours is both your strength and your weakness," I warned her. "Please be careful not to let others take advantage of it."

"Do you mean Ryuu-en-kun?" she asked.

"Yes, but not just him. I myself, as well as Horikita-san, would also use your goodness for the sake of winning."

I took a deep breath, and then continued, adding the most important part.

"And that includes Ayanokouji-kun too."

It applied to all of the class leaders, including Ryuu-en-kun, who she had mentioned herself. However, the sudden mention of Ayanokouji-kun's name seemed to have resonated with Ichinose-san, and she appeared shaken.

"Most likely, it was thanks to your efforts that Ayanokouji-kun was saved on the final day of the uninhabited island exam," I added.

"W-wait a minute, what? Um, what does that...?" she stammered, trailing off.

"This is nothing more than my own speculation. There are honestly many things which I do not understand myself, so please simply regard what I said as me thinking aloud, to myself."

I could easily imagine that if I pursued the matter further, Ichinose-san might shed some light on the more unclear parts of what happened, but it would be less fun to go about asking that way.

"Looking at you, I can more or less infer that your feelings for Ayanokouji-kun are different from those you have for other students," I remarked.

"H-huh?!" she wailed. "W-wait, I, um, well, that's, um...!"

"Well, that's a good thing, though. After all, it's only human instinct to have special feelings for a particular someone of the opposite sex. However, excessive devotion may result in painful repercussions. Especially so if the person in question is Ayanokouji-kun," I added.

"I don't really understand what you mean by that, Sakayanagi-san," said Ichinose-san.

Today was just a warning. I was not going to delve into the matter any further at this time.

"Let's leave it at that for the time being," I replied. "It's time for afternoon tea."

Right now, Ichinose-san likely wouldn't even be able to enjoy the taste of the black tea she brought to her lips all that well. I was sure that the words I had uttered would be stuck in her head, leaving her unable to forget them.

That was a slight maliciousness on my part, my pity, and my strategy.

4.3

SAKAYANAGI FINISHED telling me about the exchange she had with Ichinose. I had finished eating and had also just finished drinking my 200 milliliters of tea.

"To be able to win the heart of Ichinose-san, one of the most popular students in our entire grade? My, you are quite the sinful person, aren't you?" said Sakayanagi.

It might have sounded like a flirtatious remark, but I couldn't take her comment in a positive way, not even in the slightest.

"Harsh, Sakayanagi," I replied.

"*Fu fu fu*, it's my nature, after all."

Sakayanagi was acting like she was trying to protect Ichinose, as if she was preparing for something in advance. At the same time, she was setting things up so that she could use Ichinose herself.

"And if I do anything to hurt Ichinose, she'll trust you more," I replied.

"If I can gain her trust, then it will be easier for me to take action in the future," she said.

Though Sakayanagi was partially my ally, at the same time, in a way, she had another side to her that was my enemy. Just like how a coin has two sides, she was making use of the relationship we had.

"Why tell me all of this?" I asked.

"What I just told you was about Ichinose-san, but that's not important right now. The number of people who know about you at this school is gradually increasing, Ayanokouji-kun. And those people seem to have a strong interest in you."

It was certainly true that if Ichinose and I only had a tenuous relationship during the uninhabited island exam, then she wouldn't have rushed over to my side at the risk of causing trouble for her allies.

"In addition to that, the third-year students are giving you odd looks, aren't they?"

I see. Sakayanagi had said she chased after me because she wanted to chat, but by the sound of it, that must've been the main topic she wanted to get to. In only a short span of time, Sakayanagi likely noticed that I was being monitored by the third-year students. I expected no less from her.

"Has there been some kind of trouble with the third-years?" she asked.

"Well, I guess 'trouble' is certainly one way of putting it," I replied. "Seems like I made an enemy out of a particularly worrisome foe."

"A worrisome foe... The student council president, then?"

Nagumo was probably the only person who would come to mind among the upperclassmen who might be a difficult opponent.

"I had a little incident with the student council president on the final day of the uninhabited island exam," I told her. "That was the reason he missed out on getting first place, and now he sees me as his enemy."

"He had the rug pulled out from under him while he was attempting to stage a dramatic victory, didn't he?" said Sakayanagi.

"You picked up on all of that?" I asked.

"I'm sure that the majority of those participating in the uninhabited island exam held the opinion that Kouenji-kun was an unparalleled lone warrior without peer," said Sakayanagi. "However, I discovered early on that the student council president was intentionally suppressing his own score. If he led the way by too wide of a margin, it would have made it blatantly obvious that the entirety of the third-year grade was working together to make a particular group win. I noticed it when I saw the cards in his possession, which enabled me to deduce his strategy."

I had thought that I was already fully aware of Sakayanagi's abilities, but she exceeded my expectations. That was proof that

she had a perfect grasp on everything that happened during the uninhabited island exam and on the sequence of events.

"Is there anything that I can do to help?" she asked.

"No, it's all right," I replied. "Nagumo can't make any dramatic moves so easily. Besides, I'm already quite indebted to you for what you did for me during the exam. I can't rely on you anymore than I already have."

"Oh, no, you don't need to worry yourself about that," said Sakayanagi. "I was quite glad that you relied on me, and besides, I took full advantage of your proposal."

"Took advantage?" I repeated. "Meaning what?"

She giggled softly and looked out at the ocean with narrowed eyes.

"As we neared the final stages of the uninhabited island exam, I determined that it would be difficult for me to take first or second place," she said. "That was because the pace at which Kouenji-kun and the student council president's group were scoring points far exceeded the maximum that my own group could have collected."

Well, that was because those two groups were fighting on a completely different level.

"I was intending to get third place, but one of my rivals during the final stages of the exam was actually Ryuuuen-kun. Though he was in a small group comprising only two people, the other being Katsuragi-kun, their group still showed incredible tenacity. That was why I decided to appeal to him for help, and had him clash with Housen-kun," Sakayanagi explained.

"I see, so that's what you meant," I remarked.

"No matter how or why, drawing Ryuuuen-kun away from the core focus of the exam would slow his efforts to score points. In the end, he was eliminated, which was the best possible result for us."

Sakayanagi was able to successfully crush her rival Ryuuuen while helping me at the same time. Even after hearing all of that, though, there were some things that I still didn't understand.

Ryuuuen had been working tirelessly for a whole two weeks to try and get into a top spot, and yet he had readily cooperated with Sakayanagi. And he had to have anticipated that he wouldn't come out of a clash with Housen unscathed. The only thing that was clear to me was that they had made some kind of promise, but... If Ryuuuen had to give up on the possibility of taking third place in the exam as part of the deal, then I was sure whatever was in it for him couldn't have been something minor.

"Appropriate compensation..." I mused. "Did he possibly ask you to pay out a hefty number of Private Points or something?"

If Sakayanagi had made clever use of the Bonus card that one of her classmates had, then she should have taken in quite a sum of points. It would make sense if she had made an offer of that to Ryuuuen, as he was trying to collect an enormous number of Private Points.

"I have not paid out a single point, nor do I plan to pay anything in the future," she answered.

"Meaning it wasn't money?"

At our school, the exchange of Private Points was the standard form of doing business.

"It might sound like a riddle, but I'm afraid I can't tell even you about it right now, Ayanokouji-kun. That's the promise that he and I made. Or at least until I am told to carry out my end of the deal in near future, that is," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi had said, "*That wish of his might end up strangling him in the near future.*" Thinking about it further, I supposed I could understand why she hadn't repaid him in the form of money, like Private Points.

"At any rate," said Sakayanagi, "please do be careful, Ayanokouji-kun. You may have solved one problem, but the issue of the White Room student still remains, and now there's the problem of the third-years, as well."

"It's definitely been one hassle after another, but I'll try to be careful," I replied.

I heard a ringtone coming from somewhere on Sakayanagi's person. Sakayanagi gently signaled to me to excuse her for a moment, and then she took the call.

"...I see. I will head there straight away," she said into the phone.

Without even speaking for five seconds, Sakayanagi ended the call and moved away from the railing.

"I'm afraid I have an engagement to meet with someone," she said. "So, if you'll please excuse me."

"Ah, okay. See you," I replied.

"It was quite fun speaking with you. Well then, 'til we meet again."

After I watched Sakayanagi slowly walk away, I decided to gaze out at the ocean for a little while longer.

4.4

THAT SAME DAY, Amasawa was walking around the ship aimlessly, all by herself. Though some of her classmates tried to speak to her at times, she'd just flash them an amicable smile and that would be that. She never once did anything like hang out with a group of friends.

"I wanna see Ayanokouji-senpai," she muttered listlessly, stepping out onto the deck.

Her voice was so faint that what she said was drowned out by the wind. Amasawa was someone who had no interest in other students at all; Ayanokouji was the only person who stirred her heart, and she considered the times she spent with him the only instances where she felt bliss. However, due to the position she had been put in, she had to intentionally refrain from contact with him at the moment.

"Ughhh," she whined. "I'm sooo bored, I feel like I'm gonna die..."

"Good day to you, Amasawa Ichika-san."

The person who approached Amasawa as she gazed out at the ocean on the deck alone was none other than Sakayanagi Arisu from Class 2-A. Amasawa, not particularly surprised by this, didn't even turn her head. She simply directed her gaze at her visitor.

"And you are?" She cocked her head to the side in apparent curiosity, as though she had never seen Sakayanagi before today.

"My name is Sakayanagi Arisu, of Class 2-A. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance," said Sakayanagi respectfully.

"Sakayanagi...senpai? What do you want from me?" asked Amasawa.

"*Fu fu*," Sakayanagi chuckled. "There's no need for such a farce. You are a White Room student, aren't you, Amasawa-san? Surely you already know who I am as well, I assume?"

Once Amasawa had heard the words *White Room student* from Sakayanagi's lips, she immediately understood what was going on. There was no way she wouldn't understand.

"Hmm, I see, I see. So, you're the chairman's daughter, the person that Ayanokouji-senpai relied on recently. Well, seems like you know at least a little about the White Room, so I guess this might be inevitable. So?" Amasawa was unsurprised. She just wanted to know what business Sakayanagi had with her.

"Well, it's only natural that I would wish to find out what this White Room student that he's concerned about is capable of, you understand," said Sakayanagi.

"Well, it's nice that you're so willing and motivated, but does this mean that you have Ayanokouji-senpai's permission?"

"Permission?" said Sakayanagi. "Oh, no, I don't need a thing such as that. I'm here of my own volition."

"Wow, you've got *such* great confidence in yourself, don't you, Arisu-senpai?" teased Amasawa.

"I am proud to say that I at least have that degree of competency," remarked Sakayanagi.

"Wow, so coool!"

Though Amasawa was complimenting and applauding Sakayanagi, she seemed somewhat aloof and absent-minded.

"But hey, sorry, but like, I'm feeling kinda sentimental right now. So can we do this another time?" asked Amasawa.

"Of course, I don't mind at all. I simply wanted to come see you today, face-to-face. That was all," said Sakayanagi.

Sakayanagi, satisfied after having introduced herself, politely bowed and then turned to leave.



"Oh, hey," said Amasawa, "while I've got you here, Arisu-senpai, do you think you can knock off the surveillance you've got me under now?"

Sakayanagi had been constantly monitoring Amasawa's location using the students of Class A and had waited to approach her until she had found Amasawa alone.

"I instructed them not to be detected, yet you noticed them anyway. Right?"

"A *ha ha ha!* Oh, wait, they were supposed to be *hiding*? That's so cute."

"My sincere apologies for any discomfort I may have caused you," Sakayanagi said. "However, as you can see for yourself, I am disabled, and thus it is not easy for me to locate and come see you otherwise. Please pardon my rudeness."

"Oh, actually, there is one thing I wanna ask you. I'm the kind of girl who can smack a disabled person without hesitation. Is that okay?" asked Amasawa.

"Violence certainly is a strong card to play," said Sakayanagi, "however, it is not necessarily the strongest there is."

She then lightly tapped her cane against the deck a couple times, with a quiet *tok tok*. That must have been some kind of signal, because her classmate Kamuro appeared somewhere in the distance, as if on cue.

"Oh, that's the senpai that's been following me around," said Amasawa. "Are you suggesting that she might be able to compete with me?"

"No, that's not what I'm implying. This means that uncivilized acts can be quickly detected."

"So, what, you want to engage in a battle of wits with me? Don't make me laugh."

"You are rather hasty, aren't you? Please don't arbitrarily jump to conclusions. After all, though you may be a White Room student, aside from Ayanokouji-kun, you're all failures, no? I don't expect too much from you."

For the first time during their conversation, Amasawa's eyes sharpened as she glared at Sakayanagi.

"What I mean to say is that no matter the stage, I will show you who's the clear winner and the loser," added Sakayanagi.

"Heh. So that does even include what we talked about before? Violence?"

Amasawa licked her thumb, just now becoming interested in Sakayanagi for the first time.

"Yes, of course," said Sakayanagi amicably. "Please use whatever means you like."

"I'll remember you, senpai," said Amasawa.

"It would be my pleasure to be etched into your hippocampus. Well then, good day to you."

Sakayanagi slowly walked away, and Amasawa took a deep breath, standing on the now empty deck.

"I might be able to have a little bit of fun, even without Ayanokouji-senpai," she mused. "Do I torture Kushida-senpai and have my fun with her? Or would looking at Arisu-senpai's crying face be better? Normally, I would probably be feeling really excited, but..."

As she placed a hand gently on her aching abdomen, she thought about what was to come.

"...I guess I'll just sit tight and watch carefully, for the time being."

It would take a little time before she was fully recovered. Besides, Amasawa couldn't make a move until she saw how things were going on the *other* side.

As for Sakayanagi, she left with Kamuro in tow and returned to the passage.

"That first-year seems like bad news," said Kamuro.

"Oh, my, how you can tell?" Sakayanagi responded.

"Just a feeling, more or less. Maybe after hanging around you for so long, I've developed a bit of a strange intuition. To be

honest, I don't want to get involved with her any further."

"Please cherish that sense you've developed. Nevertheless, she should be monitored to a certain extent."

Though Amasawa had warned Sakayanagi not to monitor her anymore, Sakayanagi had no intention of complying, not in the least. If Amasawa knew that she was being relentlessly followed, she wouldn't be able to ignore Sakayanagi. And if that was the case, it was possible that Sakayanagi could provoke Amasawa into making a move.

"She noticed that I was following her though, didn't she?" said Kamuro. "Are you going to use Hashimoto?"

"If I use him, I suppose he might be able to skillfully talk his way out of things even if he is discovered, but..."

Engaging clumsily with a student of the White Room could possibly prove detrimental in the future.

"At any rate," said Sakayanagi, "thank you for your efforts, Masumi-san."

Having finished her part, Kamuro quickly left. Afterward, Sakayanagi took out her phone and made a phone call.

"Can you please continue?" asked Sakayanagi, speaking to the person on the other end of the line.

She was asking the person on the other end to keep monitoring Amasawa. After making her request, she had added one final comment.

"After all, you seem to be the only one in class I can count on, Yamamura-san."

Chapter 5: Everyone's Growth

THE DAYS SPENT on the luxury cruise ship for our summer vacation continued to prove to be a valuable experience, and our trip had already passed the halfway mark. As the students enjoyed their remaining time on the ship to the absolute fullest, they might have loosened their purse strings much more than ever before. While this might have all sounded shocking to those students who were planning to move up in the class hierarchy, it wasn't like splurging a little during a period of rest and relaxation was a totally bad thing by any means. It relieved the fatigue that had built up within us, and at the same time, provided a sense of euphoria and happiness.

Still, that was a very charitable way of putting it, and I supposed it might have sounded like I was just making excuses I was using my meager Private Points too.

I changed into my swimsuit. Once I opened the door leading out of the changing room, an expansive pool stretched out before my eyes. This luxury cruise ship had a large pool which was open to anyone, but, in addition, there was another pool on board as well. That one was called the private pool, and, as the name suggested, you could reserve it for private use.

The reservation fee wasn't cheap, at 20,000 yen for sixty minutes. But the time spent with close friends was more than worth the money. Moreover, up to a maximum of forty people could use that pool at a time. If you were to rent out the pool as a whole class, then it would only come to 500 points per person. The private pool was unexpectedly popular with the students and was almost always fully booked during its operating hours, which ran from eight in the morning to eight in the evening.

Also, it was difficult to swim freely in the large pool as it was often packed with lots of people. On the other hand, the private pool offered plenty of space, enough that you could enjoy yourself without any inconveniences.

"Whoa, it's huge, isn't it?" marveled Akito, having arrived at the pool slightly after I did.

This pool was roughly the same size as the large pool that could be used freely, without reservations, but it looked so big now that it felt like the scale of its size changed once you reserved it for yourself.

"Where's Keisei?" I asked.

"He said he'll come after he finishes using the bathroom. The girls are still getting ready, unsurprisingly enough."

I didn't need to bother asking to confirm that the girls didn't change into their swimsuits in as short a time as guys did. Akito reached over and picked up a menu that had been left beside some pool chairs.

"Dang... It's more expensive than the other place," he remarked.

The prices of the drinks at the private pool were considerably higher than at the free pool. Almost double the cost, actually. That might not have been entirely surprising, considering the number of orders there compared to the number of people staffed to prepare them, but it was still rough. This was yet another example of the relentless exploitation we were suffering under. The fact that we were prohibited from bringing our own food and beverages was another indicator that they had thought this out very well.

Just then, the door to the changing rooms cracked open. Akito and I turned to look at almost the exact same time, but we still couldn't see any signs of anyone physically coming through yet. Instead, we heard a number of voices.

"Come on Airi, what the heck are you doing? Hurry up!"

"B-b-b-b-but! But! Th-this is so embarrassing, Haruka-chan!"

"What's embarrassing about it? You've posted all kinds of embarrassing pictures online, so this is totally fine, isn't it?"

"B-but it's not like people were looking at me *directly*!"

"Well, if you ask me, those pictures are *way* worse. Come on, let's go."

"Ah! Wait, hold on!"

Haruka and Airi were going back and forth in an indescribable conversation.

"Wow, dude. It's like, sometimes *not* seeing is pretty great too, huh," said Akito.

That was a rather unexpected remark from him.

"What?" he asked, turning to me.

"I was just thinking, wow, you think about that stuff too, Akito."

"Hey, listen man... It's normal for guys, right?" he said. "I mean, it's not like I casually say stuff like that on a daily basis, like Ike and those kinda guys. You're the same way, right?"

Akito was looking at me with a somewhat dumbfounded expression in his eyes, and at the same time, there was this feeling in the air like he wasn't going to allow me to deny it. It wasn't as though I was explicitly trying to read between the lines here. But I did understand that Akito summoned courage to say what he did. Since I knew it wouldn't be a good idea to bluntly deny it, I admitted it, openly.

"Well, yeah," I said.

Akito chuckled a bit, as if he were relieved. "If the girls heard us, they'd probably call us idiots or somethin'."

Akito was usually quite calm and composed with somewhat of a poker face, but it was obvious from how much he was talking right now that he was feeling anxious. However, it sounded like Haruka and Airi were still going back and forth, and they weren't quite coming out yet.

"But it's so embarrassing!"

"Hey, listen here! I feel the same way, you know!"

"Um, H-H-Haruka-chan... This is a very daring outfit though, isn't it?"

"You promised me that you'd show it to everyone if you wore it!"

"Eek!"

Waiting for the girls, Akito and I were left in a state of limbo.

"Daring, she says," remarked Akito.

"Sounds like it," I replied.

Anticipation filled the air, accompanied by a feeling of embarrassment. Where should we look and what should we say to the girls when they come out?

"No, no, I can't do this! At least let me go borrow something to put on over it!"

"Absolutely not! Come on, you are not running away!"

"Ughhh, but this kind of swimsuit is just so embarrassing, Haruka-chan!"

"Well, it's embarrassing for me too, okay? Besides, I have no choice but to do this along with you!"

"I never asked you to do that!"

We were eagerly, impatiently awaiting their arrival, but from the sounds of things, Haruka's attempts to wrangle Airi were going to continue for a little while longer yet.

"Hey, Ayanokouji," Akito said. "What do you think about Airi?"

Akito had been looking in the direction of the girls earlier, but I realized now that he was looking over at me. I knew he wasn't just asking me some random, off-the-cuff question.

"In what way?" I immediately understood what he was trying to get at, but I deliberately decided to play dumb.

"I mean, mixed-gender groups can be a little complicated, right?" he said. "I mean, someone could end up getting a crush on somebody else or something. That wouldn't be so weird."

It was becoming more difficult for me to respond to that question.

"What about you?" I asked, turning the question around. When I did so, Akito had a somewhat conflicted look on his face.

"Ah, I see," he replied.

After a brief period of silence, Akito spoke once more. "I'd probably be lying if I said I didn't have any feelings at all." With that answer, he didn't deny there was someone. He admitted it. "But if it might break this group apart, I don't think I'd push it."

That meant that he was going to leave those feelings to smolder deep down in his heart of hearts. I couldn't determine right now if he was talking about Haruka or Airi, but... I wondered what the right thing was for me to say. Unlike with math, it wasn't like you could find a clear, quantifiable answer for something like this.

"Kiyotaka, you—"

"Kyaaaah!!!"

Just as Akito was about to say something, the half-opened door swung wide with great force. Airi came rushing out, like she had been falling forward. Akito and I exchanged looks once again as we heard loud shouting coming from their direction.

"H-hey! That was so mean, Haruka-chan, pushing me like that!"

"Well, that's because you weren't getting out here fast enough!"

After saying that, Haruka stepped out of the changing room, appearing after Airi.

"H-hey, hey..."

Akito stared, dumbstruck. It went without saying that I was similarly astonished. How should I put this? Both of them were wearing incredibly daring swimsuits. If this were not a private pool, I'm sure they would have attracted many stares from men and women alike. Haruka immediately raised her gaze, looking over at us. Somehow, I got the feeling like it was somewhat criminal for us to stare at them like we were, and Akito and I both averted our eyes at the exact same time. We both randomly turned to look in another direction. However, something else must have caught Akito's curiosity, because he said something to me as we kept our gazes fixed elsewhere.

"Airi really makes a different impression, huh?" he remarked.

I had really wished that he wouldn't talk to me about that right here, but I figured that Akito must have been in a painful situation too.

"Yeah. She has this sense of purity," I replied.

"Yeah, that's it," he agreed.

As Akito and I were expressing our thoughts about Airi, Haruka had a clearly disappointed look on her face.

"And I'm common? Ordinary?" she huffed.

"Don't say that," I said. "It's just...I'm too surprised to say anything."

I would have really loved it if Haruka caught on to the part where my vocabulary was rapidly declining.

"I'm...gonna swim for a bit," announced Akito.

Perhaps the two girls were too stimulating for him because Akito quickly turned his back to us and jumped into the pool without even doing any warm-up stretches or anything. Splashing around, he swam through the pool, all alone. I knew how it felt to be overcome with the feeling of wanting to escape. It was precisely because of the environment we were in, a private pool, which we rarely got to experience, that when faced with the overwhelming destructive power of these two in front of us, it became impossible for us to escape.

Running away like he did by diving into the pool and swimming away so that he could rid himself of his various worldly desires had been the correct choice. That being said, if two men suddenly poured all their energy into swimming, the vibe would obviously become awkward. I had no other choice but to continue facing them, acting as a shield.

What should I do...? I casually glanced over at the two of them and noticed that Airi seemed fidgety and nervous. She was blushing. Upon seeing this, Haruka merrily went around behind Airi, and grabbed both of her shoulders tight.

"Eep!" she squeaked.

"Sooo? Come on Kiyopon, whaddaya think of the new-and-improved Airi?" she asked.

With that, Haruka suddenly shoved Airi forward, launching her toward me. Airi and I were now at so close a distance that if we weren't careful, we'd touch, skin-to-skin. Actually, then again, it wasn't just *like* we were that close. We really *were* touching. I backed off just enough that she wouldn't notice me retreating, putting myself at a good distance.

"Ah, um..."

Since both Haruka and Airi's swimsuits were showing a lot of skin, coming in contact with them thoughtlessly would've been problematic. Airi, unable to bear the situation any longer, opened her mouth to speak, seeming like she wanted to run away.

"I-I'm going to jump in the pool too!" she shouted.

"Hey, Airi, hol—"

Haruka reached out to grab hold of Airi, but she failed to take hold of her in time. Then, she jumped into the pool, diving right in...

Well, actually, that's what I *thought* she was going to do, but instead, she slowly lowered herself into the water while firmly holding onto the stainless-steel rails, which was a very Airi-like thing to do.

"Ugh, come on. And it was super embarrassing for me too..." muttered Haruka.

That certainly made sense. The swimsuits they wore greatly accentuated their breasts, but what was more embarrassing was the fact that the lower part of the swimsuit had much less coverage. Even though the bottom half of the swimsuit was linked with string, they both must have been anxious that something might happen.

"So, just for your information," said Haruka, "it was actually Airi who chose that ridiculous swimsuit, okay?"

"I wasn't planning to just ask you about it, but what's the story behind all this?" I said.

Haruka wasn't normally the kind of student who liked to show skin in public. Seeing her like this, drawing so much attention to her chest and the lower part of her body, was definitely out of the ordinary.

"What's the story, huh? What's the story..." she repeated.

For a moment, she had an anxious look on her face. But then, choosing her words carefully, she started giving me an explanation.

"I'm not really sure how to say this, but I guess it's like, I'm trying to go along with Airi?"

"What does that mean?" I asked.

She had chosen her words *too* carefully. I couldn't even begin to understand what she was saying.

"I mean, she's trying desperately hard to change," she said. "And I am too. I'm not sure if this is right for me to say, but... I know there are things about me that stand out, more than for other girls. Y'know?"

She said it in a deliberately roundabout way, but she was, without a doubt, referring to parts of her that I was having trouble looking away from.

"I know I shouldn't care, but it's like, their stares do make me uncomfortable," she added.

I could understand her concerns, but it was extremely difficult to ignore her, considering typical male psychology. It was unavoidable that their eyes would be drawn to her.

"I picked out a daring swimsuit for myself too to try and encourage her, and she said that she'd wear hers if I wore mine."

That was a good response on Airi's part. I could easily imagine Haruka refusing to wear such a flashy swimsuit. If Haruka didn't wear her swimsuit, then Airi could reply that she wouldn't wear hers then either.

"I'm not going to stumble during the first phase of the Airi Remodeling Project," Haruka said. "I've got the willpower."

I supposed now that Haruka had accepted the conditions that Airi had set, Airi herself couldn't run away either.

"Besides, neither of us would be able to wear something like this over in the open pool over there, but here, that's different," said Haruka.

It sounded like it was because the three guys here were good friends that they managed to make it happen. Still, even from a guy's perspective, it was easy to imagine that the girls would be feeling considerably shy about it.

"Did...you look?" she asked, sounding more like she was trying to hide feelings of revulsion rather than embarrassment.

"Well, to be honest," I admitted, "it's a little difficult even if you tell me *not* to look."

There was no helping it, especially since they were right there in my line of sight when we were talking in the first place. The only way to avoid looking would be to look directly above or directly below, or by turning my back to her.

"I see," said Haruka. "I think I get the differences between men and women, but I don't understand psychology."

The differences in curiosity regarding breasts, hips, and the abdomen was not something that men and women could understand about each other. Well, no, actually, it wasn't just men or women. It was impossible to know because every individual person had their own interests.

"Hey, come to think of it, where's Yukimuu?" asked Haruka.

"Sounds like he'll be a minute," I replied.

I wasn't sure if it was because his stomachache was still bothering him, but I didn't see any sign of him yet.

"Hmm?" she hummed. She was looking far away in the other direction as she did so, as if to confirm that she wasn't interested.

Our conversation stopped there for the time being, and there was a brief moment of silence.

"Ugh... It's no use," Haruka said. "I can't stop thinking about it."

"Sorry. I'm trying to be careful not to look."

I couldn't help the fact that her body was in my field of vision because I was looking at her face while we were chatting.

"No, no, it's not like that," she said. "It's not like you did anything wrong, Kiyopon. I know I'm way too self-conscious anyway to begin with. And I know you're not looking because you like it."

Well, no, not exactly... It wasn't like I *didn't* like what I saw. But I figured I'd keep that part to myself.

"If something stands out, people's eyes are drawn to it. I know that's how it goes, it's just like anything else. It's just...when I think about how it's just *me*, I can't help but feel, well, not good."

In Haruka's case, it wasn't just the male gaze that bothered her. She didn't welcome attention drawn to her breasts period, not even in a hypothetical same-sex gathering.

"Sorry, I think it's going to take me a little more time to calm down, mentally," said Haruka.

"It's no problem, really," I assured her. "If you feel like you can't deal with it though, you could just head back and change."

"No, I can't do that. As long as Airi is doing her best, then I don't want to back down either."

If I recalled, she had called it the "Airi Remodeling Project." I could tell that she was thinking about it.

"Let's change the subject," she decided. "I know it's kind of late to mention this now, but seriously, Kiyopon, it seems like you just barely made it out okay in the exam, huh?"

Haruka had been late to bring the subject up because the Ayanokouji Group hadn't been able to get together for the past few days. Even though the exam was a completely unrelated topic to what we were talking about before, that fact might have made now a suitable time to bring it up.

"Well, I guess I can't really laugh about it," she added, "since it was the same for our group."

"To be honest, it was pretty rough, yeah. I did my best, and well, you saw the results. That's all I managed to get. Sorry."

"No, no, you don't need to apologize at all. Actually, if anything, I wanna say I'm a little relieved."

She took a short breath, and then looked over at Airi awkwardly trying to swim.

"Relieved?" I asked. "Even though I got miserable results?"

"Well, there were all those rumors going around that you were, like, this super incredible person because of the whole math test incident, Kiyopon. But now, I think things will calm down a little. Don't you? I'm sure you don't want to be feeling all that weird pressure from people."

Apparently, Haruka was thinking about my future.

"You know, you're much more like a saint than the other guys, Kiyopon," she said.

"What about me makes you think that?" I asked, doubtful.

I thought she was thinking way, way too highly of me. I had just as much libido and interest in the opposite sex as the average person.

"I guess maybe it's the expression on your face, or the way you look at me. I don't really feel as bothered by you as I do by other guys."

Well, I wasn't sure what to say about that. It seemed like she was certainly attracting all sorts of expressions from people here. I was grateful that another guy was handling the role of the flustered person. I wondered if we had some kind of synergy.

"Whoa..." said Keisei, astonished, finally arriving at the pool after being late to get changed.

That word just slipped out of Keisei's mouth. It was clear that his reaction wasn't exactly in response to seeing the private pool that we rented. Instead, it was likely because he saw Haruka standing next to me wearing a bold outfit.

"Yo, 'sup, my dude?" said Haruka.

Perhaps she was playing the fool with a silly look on her face and greeting Keisei in such a funny way to retain a sense of normalcy.

"H-hey..." he replied, dumbly.

He pushed up his glasses, which looked like they were about to slip and fall off his face, and then looked in another direction. I supposed this meant that Keisei was also a fine young man, even though he usually spent all his time studying. The fact that both guys had reacted in a uniform way and had tried to escape in a similar fashion showed the character of this group of friends. If he was a person like Ryuuuen or Kouenji, I was sure his reaction would have been completely different.

"Well, uh... I think I'm gonna go for a little swim too," said Keisei. And with that, he leaped into the pool to escape, joining Akito, who was still swimming with vigorous intensity.

Keisei had escaped in much the same fashion Akito did. Airi, on the other hand, couldn't swim very well, and had her feet touching the bottom of the pool. She waved over to Haruka.

"Haruka-chan, come on in!" she called. "The water feels great!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming. Hold your horses a minute."

Haruka stood beside me and started doing warm-up exercises with a "*well, guess we're doing this*" type of air about her.

"Seems like you two have gotten to be even better friends since you tackled the exam together," I remarked.

"Well, yeah, of course, y'know?" said Haruka. "We shared all sorts of stuff, from top to bottom."

"Wah! Hey, don't say it like that, it's a little embarrassing!" squeaked Airi, splashing about in panic where she was waiting at the edge of the pool.

Top? Bottom? Those were frequently used words, but in this situation, they apparently meant something profound.

"I mean, you know, Airi's basically helpless, so I can't just leave her all alone," Haruka said. "She's, like, both my best friend and my little sister. Know what I mean?"

It would've been unthinkable to say that kind of thing when we first met. And it wasn't limited to just Haruka, either. The same was true with Keisei, and even though there weren't any major changes with Akito, it was true for him as well.

5.1

WE ALL TOOK TURNS playing around in the pool as a group of friends and enjoyed ourselves to the fullest. After a round of two-on-one volleyball, we were now in the middle of some one-on-one matches, with the first to five points being the winner. The first game was between Keisei and Airi and Keisei won, five-to-two. Then, Akito and I played a game and Akito won, five-to-three. Airi's stamina wasn't great, so she was probably worn out after just one game. I decided to call out to her when she sat down poolside to rest.

"You looked like you were having a lot of fun," I remarked.

"Oh, Kiyotaka-kun. Yes, it was really, really fun. I'm not much of an opponent, of course, but..."

I wasn't sure why, but for some reason, she tried to stand back up. Instead, I motioned for her to stop, and decided to sit down next to her.

"To be honest, I'm surprised," I said. "That you had the courage to do something like this, I mean."

"That's...yeah. I thought I'd try and take the plunge... But I'm still super embarrassed, even now."

"Why did you decide to summon the strength to do this anyway?"

I didn't imagine that she had done it simply on a whim.

"Well, during the uninhabited island exam, we were basically together with our groups twenty-four hours a day, right?" she said. "So, Haruka-chan and I talked about all sorts of things together. We talked about when we were little, we talked about junior high, and so on. And we talked about how we came to this school later, and how we all got to be friends with each other."

If you were with someone for a long duration, small talk wasn't going to be enough to fill time. It wasn't any surprise that their conversations had moved on to deeper topics. Perhaps

through that rich, meaningful time they had shared, they had both come to understand one another, as if they had been best friends for a long time.

"I thought to myself, I can change now, I think I can do it... And I thought, it's now or never..."

"Change? You don't mean just physically, in terms of outside appearance alone, right?"

"Yeah. I can't say anything for certain yet, but...I've been starting to think, 'I need to change, I have to change.' I can't just be 'me,' someone who struggles both academically and physically."

Despite the fact she was blushing and feeling embarrassed, Airi expressed her determination to see things through.

"I guess your physical appearance is the starting point then?" I asked.

"Haruka-chan told me that it's not okay to deliberately keep yourself from standing out, to hide away," said Airi. "She got angry with me about it."

Airi had always been reluctant to stick out because of her personality. That was why she had a modest hairstyle, and she wore eyeglasses that she didn't actually need when she went about her everyday life. In terms of her posture, she often hunched her back and tended to keep her face down. She wouldn't be able to magically see results for academics or sports overnight, but she could certainly start by improving her appearance.

When Airi looked over at the pool, she saw that there was a new match going on. The ball struck the surface of the water, and Akito had just gotten one more point against Haruka. Now, Akito had taken the lead in their game, making it three-to-one.

"I wonder...if it's too late," she muttered.

She looked up at me, a look of anxiety on her face.

"No, it's not too late at all," I replied. I honestly wanted to commend her for making this decision. "I'm rooting for you," I told her.

"Th-thank you, Kiyotaka-kun. I... I'll do my best."

Haruka stopped just as she was about to serve and turned to us. "Oh, yeah, that reminds me," she started. "I forgot to tell you. Airi's makeover is still just between us. We're going to unveil it to everyone once the second semester starts."

I figured it would be better to do something like that in the classroom when everyone was present. If she was going to be nervous about it in any case, then the fewer times she had to go through it, the better.

"Anyway, what do you think, Yukimuu?" Haruka turned to Keisei, who had also been watching the game. "Did you take a look at Airi?"

"D-don't ask me that," he replied.

"We won't know unless we ask though, will we?" said Haruka. "Come on, let's hear your unreserved opinion."

When Keisei heard that, he turned to look at Airi, examining her from top to bottom. Airi naturally must have felt embarrassed by this, so she tried to move away.

"You can't run away, Airi," said Haruka.

Airi was whimpering and cowering, her arms and legs restlessly fidgeting as Haruka tried to order her to stay put. Once Keisei had finished making his observations, his evaluation was...

"Well...uh, it's not, um, bad?" he stammered shyly. "I mean, no, she looks totally fine, but..."

Keisei normally showed no interest in girls.

"Oh! Well, if it gets that kind of reaction out of Yukimuu, then it must be perfect!" exclaimed Haruka, overjoyed, jumping high in the air. Then, she served the ball, slamming it into Akito. He was still looking over at Airi, since she had caught his attention.

"Ugh!"

"That's one point for me! Now it's two-three!" shouted Haruka.

"Hey, no fair, Haruka!" he shot back.

"Hey, it's your fault for gawking at girls, Miyacchi," she teased. "You know what they say, carelessness is the great

enemy!"

"Don't be ridiculous. Anyway, though...how is it possible for a girl to change that much just by taking off her glasses and doing her hair a little differently?" he said, mystified.

"It's because she was already outstanding to begin with," said Haruka. "Don't you understand that much?"

"Come on, even if you say that it's... Y'know?" said Akito.

Akito and Keisei looked at each other and nodded in unison.

"Oh, good grief. Well, I guess it's because you guys are like this that I feel comfortable hanging out with you," said Haruka.

Akito shook off his worldly desires and focused on his serve. As the match resumed, though, Airi quietly muttered something to herself.

"I wonder how I can improve in my studies? Or, like, I wonder how I can make myself smarter..."

Although Airi and the other students were studying for tests on a habitual basis, they generally weren't holding regular study group sessions the way Horikita and Sudou did. That would be essential in raising her low level of academic performance.

Overhearing Airi mention something related to studying, Keisei quickly launched into an explanation. "Just start by figuring out what you can do and what you can't, right?" he said. "We all start from the same place in first grade in primary school, with everyone progressing side by side. But after that, people gradually start to show strengths and weaknesses in their studies. Do you know why that is?"

"Um..." stammered Airi.

"There are individual differences in learning ability and the ability to absorb information, as well as in the ability to concentrate," Keisei explained. "Some students can't even concentrate for a minute, while others are able to control their powers of concentration as needed and get through an entire hour of class. That alone can start to make a difference in learning ability. But how much you study outside of class is another key factor."

"That's true, that's a good point," said Airi, nodding her head in agreement. What Keisei was saying was clear as day to her. "I remember that the kids who went to cram school were really smart."

"Oraah!" shouted Akito.

Haruka tried to bounce the ball back, but it flew the other way, resulting in Akito getting a fifth point. As a result, he won the game, five-to-two.

"All right! That means I win," he said.

"Ugh, dang it. But you know, the reason I lost is because I was kinda interested in their conversation, so I wasn't able to concentrate," said Haruka, offering both an analysis of why she lost and an excuse for it.

She then came over to the side of the pool. "Why don't you tutor her, Kiyopon?" she suggested, jumping into our conversation.

"Sorry, but I'm not good at tutoring people," I replied.
"Besides, don't we have a specialist tutor nearby?"

I looked over at Keisei, trying to urge the girls to look away from me and focus their attention on him.

"Well... I suppose if Airi says it's okay, then I don't mind doing it," Keisei said.

"Wait, hold on, Yukimuu," Haruka cut in. "I was thinking of having you help me and Akito from now on, actually. Wouldn't it be tough to tutor us and Airi, since she's at a different level?"

"Um, does that I mean I really am an idiot...?" said Airi sadly.
"Sniff..."

"Oh, no, no, that's not it!" said Haruka. "That's not what I meant!"

Akito found himself unable to cover for her. "Well, you know, that's pretty much the only way to interpret what you just said, Haruka," he muttered under his breath.

"No, I was just, you see, I... Oh, jeez, I'm so sorry! I went way too far!" Haruka wailed.

Haruka bowed deeply to Airi, apologizing. And at the same time, those two massive mounds on...

No, no, let's not look there. If I did, my concentration would be totally broken, and I'd be focused entirely on that. Just then, everyone started laughing, and the atmosphere became more relaxed.

"Okay, now it's time we have a rematch between Airi and Keisei," said Akito.

"Huh? Wait, but I won't win no matter how many times I try!" wailed Airi.

"Then I'll join in, as a helper," Akito said. "You don't have to worry."

"W-wait, hold on, Akito. If you do that, I'll be at an overwhelming disadvantage!" complained Keisei. But he still went back into the pool, despite his protests. He was profoundly serious about these things. "But I'll do my best still, so bring it on!"

Airi, who now had a dependable partner in Akito, pumped her fist, striking a small pose. Haruka and I watched this novel two-on-one battle from the side of the pool.

Shortly after the match started, Haruka turned to look at me. "Hey, can I ask you a question?"

"Hm?"

"This might just be my imagination, but aren't you being a little cold to Airi, Kiyopon?"

"I'm not trying to be," I replied.

"But, I mean, you could've tutored her one-on-one, that would've been great," she said. "You could manage doing at least that much, couldn't you?"

If the question was whether I could or couldn't do it, then the answer would be yes, I could. I would be able to do it without any problems.

"It just feels kind of unfair, I mean. To Airi," said Haruka.

"I'm fair to everyone," I replied.

"Really?" she asked.

"I haven't ever really shown favoritism to any one particular person, except just for show."

"...Does that mean you'd be just as fair with your best friends as your girlfriend?" Haruka pressed. "That you'd treat them the same?"

"Yeah."

"But then, this is all kinda weird, isn't it? It's like, you're keeping us at too far a distance. I'm just going to come out and say it. Kiyopon, you've just been looking at us from far off for a long while now, haven't you?"

It seemed like Haruka had picked up on that as well, then.

"I haven't even seen you smile once, or anything like that," she added, reaching over with her right arm to pinch my left cheek. She played with my cheek, tugging on it with a little bit of force.

"I wish that we could make you smile at least, Kiyopon," she said.

"It's not that I'm intentionally keeping myself from smiling or anything," I replied.

She pulled her hand away from my face and crossed her arms in apparent displeasure.

"There are other reasons that I can't tell you about directly," I went on. "Actually, Airi and I might have been too close from the start."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't think it's me that's helping her develop as a person. I think it's her surrounding environment."

"The environment?" she asked.

"She has you, Haruka, and Akito, and Keisei too," I said. "Being surrounded by her best friends is the most crucial factor in Airi's development as a person. In fact, right now, she's making a huge change thanks to you, Haruka."

"I think that the most important person to Airi is you though, Kiyopon."

"If she were the type of person who grew through romantic entanglements, then yes, I suppose that might be true."

"You know, I've heard before that you've actually noticed Airi's feelings for you, Kiyopon. But it's like, what you said just now, the way you said it was a bit harsh..."

She turned to me with a conflicted look in her eyes, like she didn't know how best to express herself.

"Airi's had major feelings for me since we were first-years," I acknowledged. "I'm happy about that. It's just..."

Haruka looked at me with anxious eyes, like she was a girl waiting for a response after telling someone that she had romantic feelings for them. Airi's love. It was an undeniable fact that as her best friend, Haruka was praying for Airi to find success in that regard.

"What Airi needs now are friends that she can trust," I added.

"B-but, hey, you know what? It would be okay if there's a romantic element too, wouldn't it? Maybe she'd be able to work even harder then," argued Haruka.

"It's true, there might be a synergistic effect," I conceded.

But the trouble was, love basically couldn't be happening multiple times in parallel. Essentially, you could only have one person fill that role at a time. If you wanted to bring in a second person, you would have to cut things off with the first. Of course, it wasn't totally impossible to have a relationship with two or three people at the same time if you played your cards right. But a closed, insular environment like at this school wasn't suitable for such a thing, and the risks would be far greater if you were found out.

"Airi is going to be in for a bit of an emotional shock in the days to come," I said. "When that time comes, it's you, more than anyone else, who should be by her side to encourage her and cheer her up, Haruka."

"Wait, hold on, what is that supposed to mean?" she asked.

"Sorry, but I can't answer that right now," I replied.

Airi was the least valuable person in our class. That was because of her academic ability, along with her physical ability, and some other factors. Viewed overall, we had no choice but to judge her that way. That wasn't just based on the OAA—it was my own personal opinion on the matter as well. However, Airi was trying to change herself right now. So, depending on what she did, she would slowly grow. Maybe in six months, or in a year from now, she'd be able to break free from being dead last in our class.

5.2

OUR TIME AT THE PRIVATE POOL came and went in the blink of an eye, and we started getting changed. Reservation times were fixed as employees needed time to clean and such before the next group came in. As a result, the system did not allow for extensions. The three guys quickly showered and changed out of our swimsuits and left the private pool area. Unlike the guys though, the girls needed more time to change, so we didn't see them quite yet.

"Guess the girls are still getting changed."

We hadn't discussed what to do after this, so we simply decided to wait for the girls to come out.

"Ayanokouji-senpai!"

"Hm?"

I suddenly felt like someone was looking at me, and lo and behold, Nanase appeared. We had set another record today. I had bumped into Nanase every single day on the ship.

"I asked Nanase to help me find a partner for that written exam before," I said, explaining who she was to Akito and Keisei. "She helped me out on the uninhabited island more than a few times too."

"That so?" Akito nodded, impressed. "She must be a pretty amazing girl then."

He casually raised his hand, offering Nanase a greeting. Keisei followed suit. Perhaps Nanase was part of the next party who reserved the private pool? That's what I had thought, but...

"I had just so happened to be passing by here," said Nanase, as if to deny my suspicions. Her being here was really nothing more than a coincidence?

"I see," I replied.

"I don't mean to intrude though, so I'll be going," she said.

The private pool was the only place in this part of the ship where students could really play around. The truth of the matter was, as Nanase was walking away, I couldn't see why she would have shown up here. Well, actually...perhaps it would be too simple to dismiss this as just another coincidence. Nanase seemed to have some understanding of my actions, and she was checking up on me every step of the way.

However, I didn't sense any kind of ill intent behind what she was doing. In that case, what was she after?

Just then, Nakaizumi and Suzuki walked past the three of us. Even though Akito and Keisei saw this too, they didn't seem to notice anything unusual.

"What's wrong, Ayanokouji? Something up with those two?" asked Akito.

"No... I was just wondering where they're going," I replied.

"Ah, yeah, you've got a point there," Akito said. "There's nothing up ahead that way. Maybe they're lost?"

It was true that there were no special facilities beyond this point. Of course, it wasn't unthinkable that someone could get lost on board. People didn't visit this level of the ship for anything other than the private pool anyway. Like Nanase, they were walking around in a place where it was a bit unusual for them to be. Come to think of it, I had seen Nanase, Nakaizumi, and Suzuki near the bow of the step yesterday as well...

"Man, Airi's sure got it rough," Akito muttered from behind me. "Seems like she's got lots of tough opponents."

"What's that?" asked Keisei, quite suddenly.

"Nah, it's nothing," said Akito.

Not long after Nanase left, the two girls came out of the changing room.

"That was fun, wasn't it, Haruka-chan?" said Airi.

"Yeah, I guess it was. Playing in the pool isn't so bad if it's with close friends," said Haruka.

The two girls seemed very satisfied, still smiling from ear to ear even after they finished changing. Haruka was probably still concerned about what I said to her a little while ago, but she wasn't showing it.

"Oh..."

Just as our full group had gathered and we were about to leave the private pool area, another group, probably the next reservation, showed up.

"Oh, so you're next, huh, Ike?" asked Akito.

"Y-yeah, man, looks that way. This is the only time I could reserve," said Ike.

"You're not swimming alone though, are you? Where are Sudou and the other guys?" said Akito, puzzled. He looked behind Ike but didn't see any sign of anyone else.

"Oh, well, uh, about that..." Ike stammered.

Ike was fumbling his words and seemed fidgety about something. Just then, something caught our attention, out of the corner of our eyes.

"Sorry to make you wait!" exclaimed Shinohara.

"Huh, now isn't that unusual, Ike, seeing you spend time together with Shinohara," said Akito. "Where's everyone else?"

Neither Akito nor Keisei were in anyway suspicious of anything. Akito had asked that question in a very indifferent, casual manner. Of course, Haruka and Airi immediately seemed to sense what was going on, and though they were surprised, they started shoving the boys out of the way from behind.

"Okay, okay, let's not worry about that now," Haruka said. "Let's just be on our way."

"Huh? What's the hurry?" asked Akito.

"C-come on, let's go, Satsuki," said Ike.

"Okay," Shinohara replied.

Ike took her hand and rushed toward the receptionist area of the private pool like they were trying to make an escape. I

supposed they didn't have time to dawdle, since the reservation times were fixed.

"Satsuki?" repeated Akito.

He finally noticed something strange about Ike and Shinohara after Ike called Shinohara by her first name, and again when they disappeared into the changing rooms, hand-in-hand, all friendly.

"Wait, so he... Huh?" Akito said. "When did that happen?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Keisei.

He still didn't understand what was going on, but Haruka cut in with an extremely straightforward explanation.

"They started dating," she said.

"What are you saying? Ike and Shinohara are like oil and water. Why would those two date?" said Keisei with a serious look on his face, certain that people who didn't like each other would never date.

"Yukimuu," said Haruka, "you might be smart, but... You're an idiot."

Perhaps girls were more adept at picking up on stuff like this when it came romance because Airi nodded, signaling that she understood.

"I think that while they might have disliked each other at first, they gradually grew closer over time," she said. "Lately, I've been getting the feeling that they've been thinking about each other a lot."

"Yeah, I suppose. But still, wow, I never imagined that. I'm shocked that they actually started dating," said Haruka.

"...I-is that so?" said Keisei. "Ike and Shinohara? No, I really don't get it after all..."

Having gotten a grasp on the situation, Keisei stood there, aghast, searching for Ike and Shinohara, who had already disappeared from view.

5.3

NOT TOO LONG AFTER I finished hanging out with my friends and returned to my room, I heard Miyamoto mumbling.

"Man, dude, that is *scary...*"

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"Well, kinda, I guess, but not to me," said Miyamoto. "It's just...that Tokitou dude was grabbing Katsuragi by the collar in the restroom nearby. Tokitou is really quick to start a fight though, for real. They were havin' a pretty serious disagreement."

"Hey man, you didn't stop them?" said Akito. "Hiroya can be pretty terrifying when he loses his temper, y'know?"

Miyamoto looked somewhat offended by Akito's comment, like Akito had forsaken him.

"I couldn't stop them," he protested. "It's none of my business, and it would've been a huge deal if I got involved."

Katsuragi and Tokitou Hiroya were both students in Ryuu'en's class.

"Katsuragi just transferred over there from Class A," Akito said. "They were enemies until just a little while ago, so it makes sense that they'd get into a scuffle or two. Right, Kiyotaka?"

"You might be right about that," I answered.

"I'm a little worried. Why don't we go check it out?" said Akito.

"Just leave it alone, Miyake," said Miyamoto. "Besides, if an enemy class is fighting, that works out in our favor, right? Katsuragi was originally from Class A, so it's not strange that that they aren't getting along."

"But...we're all second-years, aren't we?" countered Akito.

"If we carelessly stick our necks in it, we might end up getting pulled into it ourselves, couldn't we?" Miyamoto insisted. "And what do we do if we catch Ryuu'en's attention?"

Akito seemed dissatisfied with Miyamoto's argument, but he listened for the time being. It was conceivable that the situation could take a turn for the worse if Akito went and got involved. After listening to the two of them go back and forth, I silently stood up.

"Just leave it alone," warned Miyamoto.

"Oh, no, I agree that just quietly observing is the correct choice in this whole Katsuragi situation," I assured him. "I'm just heading to the kiosk because I'm thirsty, that's all."

With that, I left our cabin. If I recalled correctly, Miyamoto had mentioned that the two of them had been arguing in a nearby restroom. If it was just a trivial dispute, then the best thing to do would just be to leave it alone as Miyamoto said. But...

When I heard the name Tokitou, the first person who came to my mind was Tokitou Katsumi, a classmate of Ichinose's. That Tokitou was in the same group as me during the mixed training camp exam last year. But the person involved in this dispute right now was a different person, Tokitou Hiroya. I remembered being surprised to hear that it wasn't just a coincidence that they shared the relatively rare surname Tokitou. They were actually distant relatives. Although I hadn't exactly had a close relationship with Tokitou Katsumi since the mixed training camp, we had been friendly at that time and shared food, clothing, and shelter together.

I may not have known much about Tokitou Hiroya, but I figured that if it was all right for an outsider like me to step in, I'd like to try reaching out and talking. That's what I thought anyway when I decided to come out here. However, when I got close to the restroom, I still couldn't see Katsuragi and Tokitou. There had presumably been some small trouble, but it might have already been resolved.

Just as I was about to take a look around the area, Hiyori approached me.

"Ayanokouji-kun," she said.

"Have you seen Katsuragi?" I asked.

"So, other people saw them after all. I heard that Katsuragi-kun and Tokitou-kun were having a dispute, so I came here too. That's why I asked them to go somewhere else."

That made sense. They couldn't help but draw attention if they were near the restrooms. I followed Hiyori's lead as she guided me to where they were now. As I followed her, I began to hear faint voices coming from a place where there weren't many people around. Hiyori instructed me to peek out from the shadows and quietly listen for the sources of the voices. As Miyamoto reported earlier, the two people in question were there, both Katsuragi and Tokitou. But it also seemed like a female student, Okabe, was there as well.

"Katsuragi, are you really working for Ryuuen?" asked Tokitou.

"I feel like we're talking in circles," said Katsuragi. "This is the third time you've asked me that same question, though you've changed the wording somewhat."

"Because you haven't given me an answer," said Tokitou.

"Because I can't give you one. Again, what do you mean exactly when you say, 'working for'?"

It sounded as if Katsuragi was handling the situation calmly, but Tokitou's emotions were getting the better of him.

"I'm asking you if you're his *dog*," Tokitou snapped. "If you'll follow any command he gives you."

"I don't remember ever becoming a dog, nor do I intend to follow his commands."

"Sorry, but I don't think so. If that was the case, then why'd you work with him on the island, huh?"

"I'm struggling to understand what that is supposed to mean. I did it so that our class would win, obviously," said Katsuragi matter-of-factly, as though there could be no other reason.

"And yet you couldn't even manage to get into third place?" said Tokitou.

"Things certainly didn't seem to go as planned," Katsuragi admitted. "However, the end results weren't all that bad."

"The hell is that supposed to mean?" huffed Tokitou. "It makes no difference what place you got, fourth place and below are all the same. And on top of that, the Trials and Tribulations card ended up bein' totally pointless."

"It means that Ryuuen has more on his mind than you think," said Katsuragi.

"You say that, even though yer an outsider. Okay then, tell me. What is he thinkin' about?"

"We are not yet at the stage where I can talk about that. Sorry, but I just can't."

"Okay, what gives? It's probably nothing, isn't it? Pfft, well, whatever, I hate Ryuuen's guts anyway."

They were just arguing in circles, a verbal tug-of-war. The exchange seemed to drag on and on. One thing was for certain, though, and that was that Tokitou deeply disliked Ryuuen.

Katsuragi nodded in agreement on that point. "If you were to ask me if Ryuuen is someone who could be looked upon favorably, then I couldn't honestly say yes to that question," he said.

He wasn't refuting Tokitou's point of view, but it seemed that even that attitude wasn't to Tokitou's liking.

"But despite that, you still partnered up with Ryuuen on the island, and you were all buddy-buddy with him eating together today, weren't you?" he demanded.

"We are talking in circles. Apparently, there seems to be a misunderstanding—"

"Hmph, after all that hostility, you got bought so easily, huh. I thought you had more backbone than that," said Tokitou, aggressively cutting Katsuragi off just as he was about to deny it.

"Regardless of the question of friend or foe, I've clashed with Ryuuen on more than one occasion. However, now, as a member of this class, I'm fulfilling my rule as Ryuuen's classmate. And if

this class is centered around Ryuuen, then it makes sense to follow his lead," argued Katsuragi.

"I can't believe that's something a guy who went up against Sakayanagi would say," said Tokitou.

"The process was different," Katsuragi said. "When we started at this school last year, we had not yet decided upon the matter of our leader. And because there was a conflict between my opinions and Sakayanagi's, when she stepped forward as a candidate, I elected to come forward as well to oppose her. However, as for the class I am in now, Ryuuen has already been selected as leader. He is the one steering the ship, so to speak. Besides, would you even recognize me as a leader of this class in the first place, as someone who transferred into it?"

"That's..."

"On top of that, Sakayanagi and Ryuuen are different types of people," Katsuragi continued. "The feel of their respective classes is also vastly different."

Though Katsuragi had countered with a sound argument, Tokitou hardly seemed convinced at all.

Okabe had been quietly watching the conversation up until this point, but now she spoke up. "I told you so, Tokitou. I told you Katsuragi-kun wasn't going to listen."

She tapped Tokitou on the shoulder, telling him that it was pointless to try and press any further.

"In the end, I'm sure you were happy Ryuuen picked you up, Katsuragi-kun, since you didn't have any place in Class A," said Okabe. "Weren't you? That means that, in other words, you are his dog."

"Even if I try and deny anything, I don't think you two would understand," said Katsuragi.

I see. I could now start to understand the root of this argument, although only roughly. Hiyori lightly tapped me on the shoulder with her finger, and I pulled my head back in and turned to look at her.

"This isn't the first time that some of our classmates have been voicing their complaints," she said.

"I can imagine," I replied. "I'm sure they've had a lot of resentment building all this time."

Ryuuuen's dictatorship naturally gave rise to strong opposition. He had been forcefully suppressing it until now, but I guessed that lately, it was finally beginning to spring back up.

"And what about Ryuuuen?" I asked. "He wouldn't have shown any mercy in the face of an uprising before."

"Before, yes," agreed Hiyori.

"Then the fact he no longer does that is the reason behind incidents like this?"

Hiyori gave a small nod.

"Everyone is changing," she said. "I didn't really have strong feelings about the class in the beginning either. I hardly spoke up about anything, and it was fine as long as I could spend my three years here surrounded by books."

That was true. If you asked me if Hiyori had a strong presence at the start, I'd have to say no. In fact, I previously never even really paid attention to her presence.

"Tokitou-kun has always hated Ryuuuen-kun's way of doing things," she went on. "Well, actually, it's not just Tokitou-kun. Okabe-san, who was just with him now, is the same."

"So you're saying that they want to embrace Katsuragi and raise the banner of revolution against Ryuuuen?"

"Maybe, yes."

In terms of ability, Katsuragi would be a good enough substitute as leader. And it was precisely because he was a student who had just transferred into the class that he could press back against Ryuuuen without hesitation.

"Still, Tokitou Hiroya, huh," I mused. "Seems like Ryuuuen has made yet another troublesome enemy."

Though similar things had been said about Akito, Tokitou Hiroya was known for his unyielding personality, his coarse way of

speaking, and his persistent tenacity.

"You think so too, Ayanokouji-kun?" asked Hiyori.

Just as Hiyori feared, this situation benefited nobody.

"It's certainly true that our class is doing quite well right now," she said. "I think it's because of how much Ryuuuen-kun has grown now that he's returned to the front lines after withdrawing previously."

Compared to the beginning of our first year, Ryuuuen, along with those around him like Ishizaki, had indeed demonstrated significant growth.

"However, whether our steady progress will continue indefinitely is another matter. I suppose the same might be true of any class if they were to lose their leader, but I think that for us, if Ryuuuen-kun were to be expelled, our class would immediately fall apart."

"The way that Ryuuuen fights is always fraught with danger, I suppose," I agreed.

It was likely that he'd continue trying to win big by taking major risks in the future. I was also intensely curious about that promise that he had made with Sakayanagi.

"If that time comes, then it's absolutely essential that there be someone who can contain things," said Hiyori.

She meant a candidate to step forward as leader in the event of an unforeseen situation. Hiyori turned to look at me, smiling.

"When that time comes, Ayanokouji-kun... Won't you come to our class?" asked Hiyori.

Despite appearances, Hiyori wasn't taking an optimistic view. She was strategizing how her class could take the win.

"Again? That's a really bold suggestion," I replied.

"I know that we invited you to come to our class before," she said, "but I was half-joking then, playing along with Ishizaki-kun. But the invitation I'm giving you now is different."

In other words, she was being serious.

"I do not think that our class is weak by any means," she added. "But it is also true that we lack someone to guide us in the event of an emergency. What do you think?"

So, I'd be fighting with Hiyori, Katsuragi, and Kaneda backing me up as my council...

"But this development isn't necessarily going to lead to Ryuuen's expulsion. Right?" I said.

"Of course. It would be best if that didn't happen."

Still, I felt like this was a somewhat outlandish, spur-of-the-moment invitation for Hiyori to extend to me. Even if she had been thinking about this deep down, I had my doubts that she would just come out and say something like that now without having some reason.

I decided to come straight out with it. "Did you hear something worrisome?" I asked her resolutely.

However, Hiyori just smiled a little, and didn't give me an answer.

While I was talking with her, the discussion between Katsuragi and Tokitou continued, the two of them still arguing back and forth. Katsuragi's rigidity had finally loosened, and Tokitou was still displeased with every answer that he gave.

"...This is a waste of time," said Tokitou. "I thought you'd get it, so I came to talk to you. I guess I was wrong."

"It seems you understand now," said Katsuragi.

"I ain't gonna ask you to keep quiet about our conversation. Go ahead and report it to Ryuuen. Do whatever you want."

"I do not plan on reporting anything."

"You sure? I said it because I'm bein' serious. You don't know what'll happen if you let it go."

"Do not misunderstand me, Tokitou," Katsuragi said. "There are many things wrong with Ryuuen's way of doing things. I do not think it's wrong to have complaints about it, as you do. However, I am not impressed with your overzealous behavior."

It was obvious that Tokitou had something on his mind, and there was no doubt that it was his intention to eliminate Ryuuen.

"Shut the hell up," he snapped back.

With that, Tokitou left, leaving Katsuragi behind. Hiyori and I hid ourselves so we wouldn't be noticed, and we watched Tokitou and Okabe walk away. After that, I planned on just quietly walking away myself, but...Hiyori proceeded to tug on my arm, pulling me out in front of Katsuragi.

"What do you want, Ayanokouji?" asked Katsuragi.

It would've been strange for me to just run away at this point, so I went with the flow and walked up to him.

"It's just, I was thinking you have lots of issues in this class too, Katsuragi," I said.

"It's the same for any class," said Katsuragi. "And it's something that I would prefer not to be overheard, if possible."

He briefly shot a glance over at Hiyori next to me.

"I am not impressed, Shiina. You seem to trust Ayanokouji, but I cannot say that dragging your personal feelings into class affairs is the correct decision."

What Katsuragi said sounded harsh, but he was right. If you let the enemy in on unnecessary information, it could prove to be fatal.

"That might be true," Hiyori said, "but who can we talk about this amongst our own classmates? Ryuuen-kun is one of the parties involved in this matter. If he catches wind of it, then he won't leave Tokitou-kun or the others alone. And the same goes for the rest of the students too. Some students might even try to score points by selling out friends who have betrayed Ryuuen-kun."

"This is not something that can be solved by letting Ayanokouji know," said Katsuragi.

"Don't you think this a good opportunity for you to organize your thoughts on what you're going to do, Katsuragi-kun?" she asked.

"What?" he blinked.

"Why don't you come out and say what you're thinking right now so that you can settle on a course of action?" said Hiyori.

Guess she was a schemer, huh. Hiyori was trying to use me as a positive influence on Katsuragi. It wasn't easy for Katsuragi, a solitary thinker, to open up to other people. He must have noticed what Hiyori was trying to do because he agreed with her request, albeit with some dismay.

"You seem to be thinking of the class more than I expected, Shiina," said Katsuragi.

"Of course," she replied. "It's because I intend to graduate from Class A together with all my classmates."

As if he were spurred on by what she said, Katsuragi began to put his thoughts into words.

"Speaking as the only second-year student so far who has been in two different classes, I feel that there is a definite difference between Sakayanagi's class and Ryuu'en's. In both cases, the leaders seem to cause frustration amongst the students easily, but despite that, there is still a certain cohesiveness to Sakayanagi's class. On the other hand, there are many students in Ryuu'en's class who remain unsatisfied with him and are increasingly displeased."

That was precisely the case with students such as Tokitou and Okabe, who had been hounding Katsuragi moments earlier.

"That frustration has continued to build even while the class was on the upswing, but the students seemed to have been able to keep it in check. Yet..."

"You're afraid of the next time things start going downhill," I added, finishing his thought.

"Yes. Depending on how the situation plays out, a single mistake could destroy half the class. I can't imagine that he wouldn't have foreseen something like that, but...I also can't imagine that he'll change his current system either."

"That's what you've read from this situation though, right, Katsuragi? I'm sure that Ryuu'en understands that too," I told him.

"But if he does understand, then he should do something about Tokitou and the others."

"Still, I guess it's inevitable that Ryuuen's methods will generate opposition," I conceded.

Apparently, Katsuragi thought Ryuuen should be the one to solve this problem.

"I wonder, didn't Ryuuen pull you out of A Class because he anticipated this?" I asked.

"...Me?" he blinked.

"If something were to happen to Ryuuen, you could step in and take his place when the time came," I pointed out. "I think that's why he pulled you into his class."

Katsuragi was exactly the kind of leader candidate that Hiyori was looking for.

"I find that hard to believe," he said.

Of course, this was all just my own personal interpretation.

"For Ryuuen, as someone who takes a high-risk, high-reward approach, it's entirely possible that he could graduate from Class A," I reasoned. "But it's also possible that things could end all too soon with him getting expelled as a result of some exam along the way. That is exactly why he needs insurance, just in case."

It was also quite conceivable that Ryuuen's administration could collapse due to the betrayal of just one person.

"If that's the case, then...I don't like it," said Katsuragi.

I'd been thinking that Ryuuen had done this because he held Katsuragi in such high esteem, but Katsuragi made no attempt to hide his dissatisfaction with the idea.

"Ryuuen and I oppose one another because of our difference in values," he said. "That has not changed, not even now that we have become classmates. However, I think that since we are allies now, our minimum goal is to graduate from Class A without either of us getting lost along the way."

I figured that Ryuuen, knowing that Katsuragi was the kind of person that he was, wouldn't have told him anything directly.

When looking at Ryuuen's individual development, his progress was remarkable, but his classmates might not have been able to keep up with his momentum.

"By the way, about what happened earlier," I said. "You made the right decision to not let Ryuuen hear about Tokitou."

"It would be nice if we could leave rebel elements alone, but if they are eliminated, it would lead to a bigger problem," said Katsuragi.

This issue had to be headache-inducing, but at the same time, it would end up being worthwhile for Katsuragi. At the very least, the situation was quite different from when he was in Class A. There, he was kept in captivity without being given the opportunity to shine. The expression on his face softened slightly, as though some new idea had sprung to mind.

"What are you thinking, Katsuragi-kun?" asked Hiyori.

"I've got it," he replied.

After clearing his throat once, Katsuragi turned back toward me.

"Now that I've had you listen to what I had to say, I have a clearer idea of what I need to do. You have my gratitude," he said.

"No," I replied, "all I did was say what I thought."

"If what you said was nonsense, then it wouldn't have been worth having this discussion. But what you said was right on the mark. I'm sure that Shiina had asked you to listen because she knew you would give an appropriate answer."

Hiyori smiled happily. I had been taken advantage of here, but I hoped this would be a sign of things to come in Ryuuen's class.

"By the way, Ayanokouji," Katsuragi said, "I'm sure that there are other students who thought the same, but I must say, I was somewhat surprised."

"Surprised?" I repeated.

"The previous special exam. You were dangerously close."

Many students, such as Matsushita, had their suspicions about my abilities. In that sense, Tsukishiro's presence turned out to be in my favor in the end.

"Was that a reflection of your true skills?" asked Katsuragi.
"Or did something unexpected happen, perchance?"

"Who can say?"

I had tried to brush the question off, but Katsuragi wasn't letting it slide.

"Shiina, I'm sorry, but I would like to speak with Ayanokouji alone for a moment," he said.

"I understand. I'll head back to my room. See you later, Ayanokouji-kun," said Hiyori, offering me a casual farewell. Then she exited, leaving me there with Katsuragi.

Now, it was just the two of us.

"During the uninhabited island exam, Ryuuen told me everything he knew about you," said Katsuragi.

"Ryuuen honestly told you?" I asked.

"He was a little evasive at first, but I told him that if he recognized me as a member of his class, he was going to have to tell me."

Well, in a certain sense, that was a decisive factor. If that was true, then that meant Ryuuen told him about my position within Horikita's class as X, the person operating behind the scenes. It meant that Katsuragi knew about everything that happened up until the rooftop incident. As Sakayanagi said earlier, the number of students who knew about me was bound to increase no matter what I did, little by little.

"It seems like you've been managing things well so far," said Katsuragi.

"As long as I can lead a quiet life at this school, it doesn't make that much of a difference to me whether I'm in Class A or Class D," I replied.

"Is that the reason you're hiding your true abilities? Well, I won't say a word to anyone, but other people will find out, sooner

or later."

That was true. There was virtually no way for me to contain the information that had already begun to spread.

"I'll just continue being myself and do what I have to do as a student," I told him.

"Well, I don't know when it will be, but I look forward to the day when I can fight with you for real," he replied.

On that note, Katsuragi gave me a deep nod, and then walked away.

5.4

IT WAS LATE AFTERNOON, and I was walking to the open-air café with one of my friends.

"It's been a long while since we've hung out like this, huh, Satou-san?" I said.

"Yeah, for sure," she agreed. "Probably the first time since then."

She was referring to the time that I told her that Kiyotaka and I were going out. Still, ever since then, Satou-san had been a good friend... Actually, no we'd gotten to be much, much closer than before, and now, I could call her my best friend. But still, my group of pals was typically made up of four or five people. I was always hanging out with about that many, with different people swapping in and out.

I didn't often find myself in this kind of situation, being alone with just Satou-san. It was the same here on the ship during our summer vacation. If anything, we had even less private time; here, we only really had the opportunity to hang out in groups of seven or eight people. I still felt somewhat hesitant about the idea of going to the pool too... Well, I supposed I could cover up my skin with a rash guard, so that wouldn't be a big problem.

Anyway, there was a reason I forced myself to make time to be alone with Satou-san today. First things first... I needed to find open seats. Before Satou-san and I placed our orders, I looked around the area, making sure that we had a spot to sit. Unlike at school, the open-air café was expansive, so finding space wasn't an issue. However, because of the topic of today's conversation, I wanted to avoid other people being around, if I could help it.

If you wanted to keep some distance between yourself and other students, then the likely place would be somewhere with less sunlight. What should I do...?

"I'm okay with sitting toward the back if you want," said Satou-san. "Okay?"

"Huh? You sure?"

"Well, you had something important you wanted to talk about, right?" she answered with a cute smile on her face. She must have guessed what was going on.

"Thank you," I said.

We decided to take seats in a less populated area that had no view of the outside. After flipping over the card on the table to indicate that it was occupied, we went to put in our orders.

She seemed hesitant, so I urged her on. "Let me treat you. I was the one who called you, Satou-san."

We ordered two coffees, both the same kind, and went back to our seats.

Satou-san got right into it after we sat down. "So... What did you wanna talk about?" she asked.

I didn't plan to drag this out either myself, but...

"Umm... Hold on a second," I said.

"What's wrong?"

"I dunno, it's like, don't you think there's something weird about the vibe here?"

There was this feeling in the air that there was something off here, and I wanted to make sure it wasn't just me.

Satou-san cocked her head to the side, looking puzzled. "Weird?" she echoed. "I don't think there's anything really weird about it..."

"Yeah, you're probably right," I said. "Sorry for just blurting out something odd."

At first, I didn't understand why I sensed things like this. Maybe it was something I picked up from spending so much time with him... I mean, with Kiyotaka. He never failed to notice even the slightest change, whether it was people's facial expressions, feelings, or the atmosphere. Whatever it was, he could detect it, and he always recognized abnormalities. Maybe I gained that kind of ability too, to pick up on things like that...?

I didn't really know for sure what was going on, but right now, that's what I had decided, that there was something off. But still, why? Why was I sensing such an unpleasant feeling? I tried to remain calm and quietly observe my surroundings.

"Seriously, it'd be great if we could just like, keep living on this cruise ship forever, wouldn't it?" I mused.

As I spoke those words, I brought my cup to my lips, scanning the nearby area with my eyes.

"*A ha ha*, yeah, I feel the same way," Satou-san replied. "But I think if we spent every day here, we'd end up running out of money."

"Yeah, that's definitely true. Between the pool, the movies, and the tasty food, I bet I'd run out of cash, like, right away."

I noticed that the strange atmosphere had disappeared. Or rather, that it faded somewhat. Was it simply a misunderstanding on my part? Or perhaps I was just too preoccupied with reconnaissance, and I was too late to notice that the situation had begun to change. A group of three third-year girls were at the table next to us, engaged in a friendly conversation amongst themselves.

"Oh, hey, get this! So, you know Kisarazu-kun, from Class B?"

"No way, for real? I didn't know that!"

They were chatting amicably, laughing loudly, and having a great time. Ugh, geez... I should have started talking sooner. Even though the side facing the ocean was more popular, some people were obviously going to choose this area instead to avoid the crowds and the sun. I didn't think they'd be interested in our conversation or anything, but we were close enough that they'd be able to hear us anyway.

Satou-san and I could move and get away from here, but I didn't want to make a bad impression. If they were first-year students and therefore younger than us, that'd be one thing, but they were third-years. I couldn't rule out the possibility that they might get upset and hold a grudge against us just because I

moved away so I wouldn't be sitting next to them. I knew very well that bullying could start from trivial things like that.

"To tell you the truth, there is something that I thought I should tell you first, Satou-san," I declared.

Let's not worry about the irrelevant third-year students being here, and just focus on Satou-san I decided. It would be rude for me to fret about unnecessary things, anyway.

"I think it's about time that I tell everyone. About me and Kiyotaka, I mean."

"...Okay," she answered slowly.

Satou-san must have been expecting me to bring up this topic. I guess she might have been thinking that maybe I was going to tell her that we broke up or something, but... Well, actually, no, she probably didn't. If that was what happened, there's no way I would've been in a normal emotional state. I couldn't imagine myself just casually going, "*Oh, well, we split up I guess, no big deal,*" with a smile on my face.

"Which is why, I...thought I should talk to you first, Satou-san," I went on.

"Still, everyone's going to be really surprised when they find out, huh? That the two of you are going out?" said Satou-san.

I had repeatedly played that simulation over and over in my mind. I knew that no matter when I came out and told people, people were probably going to make kind of a big deal out of it. I don't mean to be self-deprecating or anything, but I'm not very nice at all. I'm always acting snobbish, and trying to boss people around... Before I had met Kiyotaka, I acted way more selfish than I did now because I didn't want to be bullied. I even gave flirty glances to boys I wasn't interested in.

"So, when are you planning to do it?" asked Satou-san.

When she asked me about the timetable, I answered immediately.

"It's summer vacation right now, so I was thinking of doing it once we start the second semester."

"What did Ayanokouji-kun have to say?" asked Satou-san.

"He said that he'd adjust to whatever timing I liked."

Satou-san sucked on her straw, taking a sip of her drink.

"I see. So, you all lovey-dovey?" she asked.

"Huh?! What?" I stammered.

"Come on, it's all right, isn't it? You can tell me," said Satou-san.

"Y-yeah," I stammered. "W-well, I mean, it'd be weird if we weren't lovey-dovey, I guess, considering that we're boyfriend and girlfriend."

"Have you kissed and stuff?"

"Whaaaa?!"

"You've been going out for a while now already, right? So, what kind of progress are making in that area?" she asked. She held her right hand up to my mouth, making a fist with it and pretending it was a microphone.

"J-just once...and it was a surprise attack."

When I gave her an honest answer, Satou-san smiled, giving me a wide grin.

"Nice, very nice! I think I kinda like the idea of a surprise kiss."

"R-really? I wasn't able to prepare myself for it, mentally... And it was my first, too..." I mumbled.

When Satou-san heard that, her eyes widened a little.

"Huh?" she asked. "Karuizawa-san, you never did anything like that with Hirata-kun then? You guys were going out for a pretty long time, right?"

"Huh?" I stammered.

"And I bet someone like you would've had a boyfriend back in junior high, Karuizawa-san."

As I listened to Satou-san's follow-up questions, I felt the blood drain from my face. Karuizawa Kei was a woman at the top of the social hierarchy, a popular girl who was always bouncing

from one guy to the next. It was definitely a problem for that kind of person to announce that her first kiss was something like *that*.

"Uh... Well, you see, it's because I'm a virtuous girl," I said, trying to my absolute best to appear calm and composed.

"So you mean that you'd only allow a very special person to do that kind of thing, even if it was a boyfriend?" she asked.

I felt myself getting extremely thirsty, and I gulped down a third of the coffee in my cup in just one go.

"But Hirata-kun... He was a super cool boyfriend, wasn't he?" Satou-san pressed.

"Yeah, I suppose. I guess he just didn't excite me enough, though."

It was fine. I could do this. Now that I'd made a slip of the tongue, the only thing I could do was go with the flow as best I could and keep fooling her.

"Hirata-kun's a passive kind of guy," I added. "He didn't even make any moves on me. He was a little unsatisfying."

Sorry, Hirata-kun! Though I apologized to him deep down in my heart, I was sacrificing him for my own sake.

"I see," mused Satou-san. "Well, there's definitely a part of you that wants a boyfriend to take the lead, to be proactive."

"I know, right?" I replied.

"Still, Ayanokouji-kun looks like he'd be more passive... I guess he's actually more aggressive then?"

I felt like Satou-san looked like she was a little upset, even regretful, as she spoke.

"Satou-san... I..."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Karuizawa-san," she said. "I didn't mean...!"

Today's meeting was just supposed to be me telling her I wanted to go public with Kiyotaka and I dating, that was it. And yet, it turned out like this, and it was starting to sound kind of tasteless, like I was just bragging about what I had.

When I first came to this school, I thought being like that was fine. I was a nasty, sarcastic girl who selfishly went around saying all kinds of things about Hirata-kun. But I didn't think that was okay anymore. I needed to avoid making any careless remarks, because I considered him to be an important friend. And yet... I could say that this was a defense mechanism to protect myself, but that just sounded like an excuse. That was simply my selfish ego talking.

"It's all right, really. I think it's completely fine for people to both fall for the same guy at the same time. I think it's normal, or like, it's something that's happened a bunch of times, for a long while. But...in my case, I guess I always lose." Satou-san pursed her lips into a pout, sounding disgruntled.

But the next moment, she went back to being her usual cheerful self.

"Just in case, though, just to check," she said, "if you *do* dump Ayanokouji-kun, then...would it be okay?"

By asking me if it was okay, she basically meant *that*, right? She continued speaking before I could finish getting my thoughts in order.

"You know, it's like, now that Hirata-kun is single, it'd be okay for him to get a new girlfriend, right? So, wouldn't it be the same for Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Well, yeah, that's true..." I replied.

That was absolutely NOT going to happen! We are not splitting up! I was screaming those things in the back of my mind, but it was tough, because I couldn't let it show on my face.

"Actually, I think you could get an even better guy, Karuizawa-san," said Satou-san.

"An even better guy?" I repeated. "Like who?"

"Well, it's kinda tough to answer when you ask me who exactly so suddenly, but, like... Someone like Tsukasaki-kun or Nagumo-senpai, maybe?"

I blinked. "Say what?"

Either one of those guys was out of the question for someone like me. It was true that when it came to looks, Tsukasaki-kun was one of the hottest guys out there, and the student council president might be in the same category. If you were going to categorize them like that, they'd definitely be the best. But...yeah, I didn't think they were any match for Kiyotaka.

He was... Well, he had his flaws, but... But he was so strong, and cool, and mysterious. And on top of that...he understood me.

"Okay! I totally said something unnecessary there. Thank you for the drink!" said Satou-san happily.

"H-huh?"

"Come on, Karuizawa-san, it's written all over your face, you know? That Ayanokouji-kun is number one."

Ugh... I guess my poker face didn't work against Satou-san, especially since she already knew the details of my love life.

"Thank you for telling me about this first," she added. "It made me really happy."

"Really? Well, in that case, I'm glad."

After that, our conversation turned to gossiping about other people's love interests. We looked back on the uninhabited island too, and then on things that had nothing to do with the exam. For the first time in a long while, we were able to enjoy a fun time together, just the two of us.

5.5

THAT SAME DAY, at just after 2:10 in the afternoon. At this time, many students had finished having lunch and were now messing around, having fun. I was quietly gazing out at the ocean as I waited for the person I had called to arrive. I took out my phone and, opening the OAA app, clicked on my own name, Horikita Suzune. I was wondering if there had been any changes in my scores since the results of the uninhabited island exam were announced, but apparently, there weren't any. I supposed it was possible that our scores had not been updated because there were only a limited number of occasions during which the teachers were able to actually observe each student individually during the exam.

There weren't any changes in the scores of the girl that I was going to be meeting with shortly either. I quickly shut my phone back off and quietly looked out at the ocean once more, alone. It had already been a few days since that intense and somewhat surreal uninhabited island exam. Although I wasn't exhausted physically anymore, I still lacked a feeling of normalcy because we were here on this luxury cruise ship.

After a while, I heard a voice directed at me from some distance away.

"Ugh. You're still here?"

Before I could turn around, that person continued speaking.

"Don't call me out by going through someone else," she said. "People will get the wrong idea and think you and I are friends."

I had spoken to Yamaga-san, who was in the same guest cabin on the ship as this girl.

"Unfortunately, I had no other way to contact you," I said. "Or perhaps you would have preferred that I reached out to you during mealtime, when a large number of people were present?"

"Absolutely not, no way. But I hate the way you did it today just as much."

"In that case, can you tell me in advance what method I should use if I do wish to talk to you?" I asked.

"The best thing would be if you didn't think about talking to me at all," she snapped back.

Ibuki-san had arrived at our meeting about ten minutes late with a disgruntled look on her face. She hadn't even offered a single apology, and ever since she got here, she did nothing but grumble.

"It doesn't seem like there was any particular reason that you were delayed. Are you trying to be like Miyamoto Musashi?" I asked.

"Huh? I don't even know what that's s'posed to mean."

It meant, basically, that she was trying to make me angry. Apparently, she hadn't intended to. Well, if that had been her plan, she should have made me wait for two hours rather than just ten minutes.

"If you didn't do it to give me a hard time, then I'd like to hear why you were late."

"Huh? Well, from where I stand, you're the one giving me a hard time by calling me out here," she retorted.

"I see. I suppose that's certainly true."

When I responded with a serious answer, she sighed, exasperated.

"And what was that supposed to mean, anyway?" she huffed. "That stuff about how if I ignored your request to come here that meant I was running away? That really pisses me off."

"Well, if I tried asking you to come out normally, you would have ignored me, wouldn't you?"

"Well, yeah, I would have," she said. "Who would meet up with *you* by choice?"

I had considered that she might just completely ignore me, but she did come, albeit late. I supposed that she disliked losing to me more than anything else, so I had made the right decision in wording my invitation like a challenge.

"Ugh, fine, fine, I get it." She was acting impatient and flustered, as though to tell me, "*If you've got something to say, then hurry up and say it.*" I would have liked to be sympathetic to her feelings, but the circumstances made that impossible.

"Let's walk while we talk," I proposed. "This conversation will take some time, and if we stand around while we talk, we'll draw attention."

This was an appropriate place to meet, but it wasn't the best place to have a confidential conversation.

"Huh? ...Ugh, come on," she whined.

She was irritated, but she still followed along relatively obediently. She must have been frustrated by the fact that she had lost to me in terms of our scores during the uninhabited island exam. It wouldn't have surprised me if she were to reach out, seeking a chance for revenge.

Now that we started moving, we managed to blend into the crowd around us, so I started the conversation.

"It's about the person we fought on the uninhabited island," I told her. "Amasawa-san."

"Oh, that piece of crap, upstart first-year, huh," she replied.

Since Ibuki-san was walking slightly behind me, I couldn't see the look on her face.

"I'm having a little difficulty carrying on a conversation this way," I said. "Could you please pick up the pace somewhat?"

"Ugh, this is so annoying. Whatever pace I walk at is *my* decision, isn't it?"

"If you're all alone, then sure." I stopped and turned to look at her. "I'd like to wrap this up quickly myself. Which is why I would like to make this as brief as I possibly can. But your cooperation is required for that."

"Yeah, yeah, fine, I get it already," she sighed. "I just need to walk faster, then, okay?"

With that, she walked ahead, going right past me. She was going so fast that it was like she was in a speed walking race. How

could I describe it? It was childish, in a bad way. Of course, since she wasn't kidlike in a good sense, that meant one couldn't consider it a strong point. Mulling these impressions over in my head, I shot an exasperated look at Ibuki-san's back as she walked. She then turned to look back at me with an angry look on her face.

"What, can't keep up?!" she shouted.

"Going at too quick a pace is a problem too. Can you walk at an appropriate speed?"

"Augh, you have got to be kidding me!" She angrily ruffled her own hair, then came back over to me. "Fine," she snapped. "I'll listen to what you have to say, but you have to agree to a revenge match against me! Got it?!"

"Right. We can expect that there will likely be a sports festival in our second semester... Depending on how things play out, we might be able to make that happen."

"So I can take that to mean you accept?"

"I just told you. Depending on how things play out, potentially yes."

Ibuki-san spent a bit of time sorting out what I had said in her mind. Then she bit her lip, looking frustrated.

"Meaning you also might not then, depending on how things play out?" she concluded.

"Oh, my, I'm surprised you can decipher that with your level of intelligence. I'm impressed, truly," I answered, clapping my hands.

Ibuki-san must have felt she was being made fun of because she slapped my hands away as I applauded.

"You're certainly violent," I observed.

"Shut up!" she shouted. "If you don't promise me for certain that you'll accept, then we're done talking!"

"I don't mind," I said. "But then you'll never get the revenge match you hope for."

"Wh—"

"I cannot make you any definite promises right here and now, but depending on your actions, the possibility remains," I elaborated. "Don't you think that's particularly important? I don't think I've lost to you. Which means, until graduation... Actually, no, even *after* graduation, you'll have regrets about not beating me."

"Grr...!"

"So? Will you listen, or will you not? The choice is yours, Ibuki-san."

"Fine. Fine, I get it! I just have to listen, right?!" she roared.

"This would have been easier if you had just been obedient right from the beginning," I reminded her, deciding to give her some advice for the future. "It would've made this short. You know, having to talk with me, someone you hate."

Ibuki-san was hoping for a revenge match, but that depended on how things went in the days to come. Of course, if it didn't align with our class's direction, then I wouldn't bother dealing with her. I wouldn't mention a word about that here though, since it would only lead to negative consequences.

My opening up the possibility of engaging in a revenge match with her might have quelled her anger somewhat. Ibuki-san stopped, hung back a bit, and then started walking in pace with me.

"So? What about that upstart first-year?"

"What did you sense when you traded blows with her?" I asked.

"What did I sense...?" she repeated.

"Didn't she make you feel that she was stronger than anyone you've ever fought before?"

"Well... Considering she wasn't in top form, I guess I have no choice but to admit it, yeah."

Whether it was me or Ibuki-san facing her, there was such a difference in ability between us and Amasawa-san that it would be impossible to beat her, no matter what we tried.

"I definitely think that Amasawa person had a freaky amount of strength, for sure," Ibuki-san said. "Ugh, don't you hate even thinking about it? It pisses me off."

"Don't say that. You are the only one who I can talk about this with, and we need to have this conversation."

Ibuki-san understood precisely what I meant because she had confronted Amasawa-san directly. If I were to try to explain Amasawa-san's strength to someone who didn't know her, they likely wouldn't even begin to be able to grasp it.

"It's a strange situation," I went on. "And one that might bring some harm to you as well. I thought that I'd offer you an apology for that first."

"Harm?" Ibuki-san cocked her eyebrow, as if she didn't understand what I meant.

"I intend to investigate Amasawa-san's identity in the days to come," I replied.

"You're gonna stick your nose into her business? It'd probably be better if you just quit while you're ahead. She seems like she's got a few screws loose. With someone like that, you don't know what they'll do."

Amasawa-san must have made quite a striking impression on Ibuki-san for her to say all that.

"She certainly is a dangerous opponent," I conceded. "But I have a feeling that if I leave things be, something unpleasant will happen in the future."

"She didn't seem all that interested in you though," said Ibuki-san.

"This isn't about me. It's about Ayanokouji-kun."

When Ibuki-san heard his name, she looked to the ocean, as though she understood now what I meant.

"Ayanokouji, huh," she said. "I don't really know what's going on, but she sure seemed to know a lot about him."

Yes, Amasawa-san did know about Ayanokouji-kun. It didn't seem as though she had only known him starting from this year,

simply as a new student.

"He's my classmate. If there's anything that I can do to help, then obviously I'm going to lend a hand," I asserted.

Honestly, even my teeth felt a little on edge after saying that aloud. If you had asked me if I felt that way when I started school, I would've gotten goosebumps and denied it with all my might.

"But if she suspects you're looking into her business, she'll probably come after you," Ibuki-san pointed out. "You don't stand a chance of winning against her if that time comes, you know?"

"Her strength is... Well, how do I put this? I feel like it's on a different dimension from the world we live in," I replied.

"Well, I don't really like you saying *we*, but yeah, she might be something else," said Ibuki-san.

"I take it that means that no one you can recall is as capable as she is, then?" I asked.

"I'm the strongest out of our year," Ibuki-san said. "It was the same for me back when I was in junior high. There weren't many girls who were into martial arts, and I never lost to anyone who just dabbled in it. As far as I remember, I was always the best."

"I see," I replied. "I think your strength is second only to mine, in our grade level, so I don't deny that."

"Uh, yeah, you're denyin' what I said like crazy," snapped Ibuki-san. "You don't recognize my strength?"

"No one said that. It's just that I don't think I'm weaker than you."

"Uh, no, no way. I am absolutely way stronger than you," she shot back.

"I wonder where in the world you get such confidence in yourself. It's quite a mystery. What's your evidence?"

"Intuition?"

"I wouldn't count that at all," I said. "You're just analyzing things through your own lens. We've never fought each other at

our best. I don't think you have enough information to make a clear judgment on which of us is stronger. Don't you think so?"

"Fine, in that case, why don't we just say that I'm tentatively the best?" said Ibuki-san. "Besides, why would I be second to you?"

"The result of objective evaluation," I replied.

"I don't get what that means."

We had reached our destination—the open-air café.

"This might take a little while, so allow me to buy you a drink. What would you like?" I asked.

"I'm fine with anything, I guess, but... I'll take a lemon iced tea."

Ibuki-san and I finished putting in our orders, and I paid using my phone. 1,400 points for two drinks. *How expensive.* I took the two drinks from the clerk once they were ready.

"Here you go," I said. "It's my treat."

"It feels pretty weird, you buying me something," said Ibuki-san.

"You should accept it with open arms."

"Yeah, whatever."

Ibuki took the cup with her left hand and took a sip while looking far off into the distance. We moved slightly away from the counter and stopped once we got to a less populated area.

"I know this because I fought with her, but she shares the same sense of strength as me," said Ibuki-san. "Besides that, did you sense anything? Like her weaknesses, or her fighting quirks, stuff like that?"

"I don't think she's an opponent that can be analyzed so easily," I answered.

"...That's true."

It would be best if this didn't lead to a rematch, but...there was no telling what would happen if I pursued this matter too deeply.

"If you try to take her on by yourself, she's going to turn the tables on you and that'll be the end of it," Ibuki-san said. "I don't think there's any changing that result."

She wasn't belittling me or anything like that. She was simply speaking the truth. Even if I were to go through training myself again, things would likely go as she had described.

"You can think about this and that all you want, but it's probably best to just let it go," she went on.

"I told you already, didn't I? Ayanokouji-kun—"

"Yeah, that's what I mean," she interjected, gesturing at me with the hand she was holding her cup in. "Whatever Amasawa tries to do, he can manage it on his own, can't he?"

"What...do you mean?"

It was true that Ayanokouji-kun was an exceptional person. It was because I had the opportunity to watch him from close by for over a year now that I came to learn a little more about him. But even so, there were still many mysteries about him, and his academic and physical abilities had yet to be made clear. Even I, someone in the same class as him, didn't know those things. Someone from another class like Ibuki-san shouldn't understand him more than I did. Viewed from the outside, all people should have known about him was that he was good at math and his motor skills weren't bad.

"I feel like the way you said that was close to an assertion," I said. "You seem to have quite a high opinion of Ayanokouji-kun."

"I don't have a high opinion of him or whatever," she insisted. "Anyone would think so, considering how strong he is."

She was saying quite clearly that if you knew his strength, then you would think so too.

"Did you perhaps hear about what happened between him and Housen-kun from somewhere?" I asked.

"Huh? Housen? Who is that? Oh, wait...that gorilla-lookin' guy, yeah?"

We were clearly not on the same page here, and I was starting to feel a kind of uncertain haze surround me.

“Where did you get information about Ayanokouji-kun being strong?” I pressed.

“Where...?”

While Ibuki-san was choosing her words, she had a puzzled look on her face, like she wasn’t sure what exactly to say.



"Did he order people to keep quiet about what happened then?" she muttered to herself. She closed her eyes and crossed her arms, looking as though she were trying to recall something. "Or didn't he? I forget..."

I decided to push the matter a little. "Did something happen that I don't know about?"

"Wait, so you're telling me that *you* don't know anything?" she said.

"Um... Well, I don't think there's anything I don't know about, but I don't know what you're talking about."

We both seemed to be trying to rein the other in, playing it safe. I decided to take the plunge and try to move this conversation forward.

"I think we need to get our stories straight here," I said.

"I don't want to."

"That won't do. Since we're here talking about this, tell me everything you know," I commanded. "Tell me everything you know about Ayanokouji-kun that I don't."

This was a one-in-a-million opportunity for gathering information. If Ibuki-san knew anything more, anything at all, no matter how insignificant, then...

"Well, all right. What don't you know about?" she asked, phrasing it like she couldn't be bothered. I guessed that was because I hadn't defined exactly what we were going to talk about.

"I assumed this would be difficult... I'm curious about what you were about to say earlier."

"Well, what I was going to mention earlier was what happened on the roof between Ryuuuen and Ayanokouji," Ibuki-san said. "Like, y'know, how Ryuuuen called Karuizawa out to the roof and dumped ice cold water on her to torture her, that stuff."

"Hm? Wait, what? What are you saying...? I haven't a clue what you're talking about."

Ryuuuen-kun? The roof? And...wait, Karuizawa-san too? Water torture? I started to feel question marks pop up in my mind one after another.

"Ohhh, so it's like that, huh. He hasn't told anyone in his class about it, has he?"

Ibuki-san nodded in satisfaction, as though she had reached a point of understanding first. Then, she started to tell me a story about Ayanokouji-kun that I hadn't heard. While I listened to her talk, I stared out at the glittering ocean, trying to stop myself from getting too worked up. At the same time, I tried to organize my thoughts. She told me how Ryuuuen-kun, in order to find Ayanokouji-kun, who was laying hidden in our class, turned his attention toward Karuizawa-san. To save her, Ayanokouji-kun went up to the rooftop alone.

Ibuki-san said that once he was there, he showed an overwhelming strength, overpowering Ryuuuen-kun and the others. Even though I should have known about Ayanokouji-kun's abilities to some extent, I still found myself surprised many times over.

"So...the reason Ryuuuen-kun stopped meddling with our class was because that happened, huh," I said aloud. "I had no idea."

"Well, now you get it, right?" Ibuki-san huffed. "His strength ain't normal."

"Yes, you're right," I agreed. "He is someone of immeasurable talents... From your perspective, having fought both Ayanokouji-kun and Amasawa-san, who do you think would win if they ever fought?"

"Not sure," said Ibuki-san. "I haven't seen either of them get serious. I don't want to say it's just because like, he's a guy and she's a girl or anything, but overall, I think Ayanokouji is probably better. Probably? Anyway, there's no need for you to stick your nose into this."

If he was strong enough to deal with whatever Amasawa-san might try to do to him, then she might've been right about that.

"But having physical strength doesn't necessarily mean he'll be safe," I pointed out. "It's not as though you can always avoid

expulsion at this school. In fact, his strength could even become a detriment."

On the uninhabited island, Amasawa-san was free to go on a rampage as she pleased. However, at school, that wouldn't be the case.

"Thank you, Ibuki-san," I said. "Your information is more useful than I was expecting it to be."

"You're not going to talk to Ayanokouji about this?" she asked.

"Not yet. This situation is about him in the first place, after all, so I expect he will have already surmised what's going on to some extent."

Considering he had come into contact with her several times now, including before the uninhabited island exam took place, he must have some ideas about her.

"Then there's the problem of that slip of paper..." I muttered.

"Paper?" Ibuki-san repeated.

"Besides Amasawa-san, there was one other thing about the uninhabited island exam that's been bothering me."

I told her about the single piece of paper that had been slipped into my tent. Ibuki-san now seemed to understand why I had been in the northeast part of the island on the final day of the exam.

"I see," she said. "So somebody other than Amasawa gave you a message with that note implying that Ayanokouji was in trouble."

"So, you even know words like 'implying,' huh?"

"Can you stop treating me like I'm stupid?"

Although Ibuki-san had a low level of academic ability in OAA, she was surprisingly easy to converse with. I didn't feel as uncomfortable talking with her as I would when trying to have a conversation with someone who was clearly at a lower level than me.

"At that time, Amasawa-san looked at the paper and then proceeded to tear it into tiny pieces," I said. "That has been bothering me for quite some time now, but I think it was because she didn't want to leave any evidence behind of the handwriting on the note. At any rate, I clearly remember that the script was quite beautiful."

"Beautiful?"

"Yes. It was such neat handwriting that I couldn't imagine there are many people who could have written so nicely."

"I see. So, that means it's possible there's someone out there who can write really well who might be plotting something. But it'd be difficult to find them with just that information alone, right? And the evidence got destroyed too," said Ibuki-san.

"I'm sure it won't be easy, no," I agreed. "I can't exactly go around asking every person I see to write something for me. And another thing—this is still only a rather tenuous theory, with no firm evidence, but it's highly likely that whoever wrote this note may be highly physically capable. Whether we're comparing this person to Ayanokouji-kun or Amasawa-san, it's possible that this person might possess exceptional strength. Furthermore, it's probable that this person is a first-year student."

"Okay, sure, considering that this involves Ayanokouji and Amasawa, this person probably is tough," said Ibuki-san. "But what's the basis for saying it's a first-year?"

"Because it's someone who Amasawa-san knows by their handwriting," I said. "That makes it unlikely that it's a second-year or third-year student."

"I see."

Ayanokouji-kun, Amasawa-san, and now this third party. As for the question of what kind of connection there was between each of them, I still couldn't see the whole picture at this moment in time. Even so, I couldn't just leave things be.

"I intend to proceed in such a way that will keep you out of harm's way. But if I am defeated, I cannot guarantee what will

happen next. If Amasawa-san does exhibit strange behavior, do not hesitate to contact the scho—”

Clack. A light, dull sound resounded throughout the deck. Ibuki-san had aggressively knocked her cup of tea on the railing. Her cup was still more than half full, so the contents spilled out from the top of the cup and onto her hand.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“If you’re *defeated?*” she snapped. “I already told you that I’m going to be the one to take you down, didn’t I?”

“I’m not intending to let myself fall in combat so easily. But we don’t know what unseen enemies, Amasawa-included, might do, which is why—”

“They’ve got two people, so we should do this with two people too.”

“Wait, are...”

“I’m the strongest out of the second-years,” Ibuki-san continued. “If you add me to the mix, then it’ll be a different story. If you insist, and I mean *reeaaaaaaallllly* insist, then I guess I’d be fine with lending you a hand. Got it?”

Then, she put the cup in her other hand and licked the lemon tea that had spilled onto the back of her palm.

“What are you playing at?” I demanded. “I can’t believe that you’ve agreed to help me twice.”

“I hate the idea of just leaving things like this, with that first-year having gotten the better of us. I hate that even more than the idea of losing to you. Besides...you actually came to talk to me today because you wanted to come to me for help, didn’t you?” asked Ibuki-san, looking me straight in the eye.

“Except, no, I didn’t?” I replied.

“Huh? Can’t you at least be honest about this one thing? Just say it. Say, ‘Ibuki-san, I need your help.’”

“I’ve never once thought such a thing, though.”

“Well...fine! Never come asking for my help ever again! Bye!” she shouted.

She was about to storm off in a huff, but then I grabbed hold of her left wrist.

"What?!" she snarled.

"I'm going to have you work to pay off the cost of the drink that I just bought for you."

She blinked. "Say what? You just told me that you were treating me, and now you want to ask for money?!"

"There's no such thing as a free lunch," I replied.

"Then I'll just pay you back right now," she snapped, taking out her phone.

"In that case, I'll take three million points as payment," I told her.

She raised an eyebrow and cocked her head to the side, unable to understand what I meant.

"It's something I treated you to," I said. "Don't you think it would add about that much in value?"

"Uh, no, I wouldn't! It was only 700 points!"

"If you don't have the ability to pay that fee, I'll write off your debt if you lend me a hand."

"Look, you... I'm gonna ask you once more. Are you incapable of being honest?"

"If I need to be honest, then I can be," I replied.

For some reason, I was embarrassed to honestly ask Ibuki-san for help, so this was how it was turning out. But I kept on acting as I normally did and continued being high-handed.

"You seriously have a nasty personality," said Ibuki-san.

"I would say we're the same then, Ibuki-san," I replied.

We exchanged glances, and then Ibuki-san, though exasperated, gulped down the rest of her tea.

"This lemon tea was expensive as hell," she grumbled.

Something about her complaining was amusing to me, so I cracked a little smile.

5.6

IT WAS NOW DUSK, with the sun slowly setting just beyond the horizon. Ichinose was waiting for me at the appointed place, staring out at the ocean. When I saw her somewhat fragile-looking expression from the side, I hesitated just a little in calling out her name.

"Ichinose."

"Ayanokouji-kun. Hello."

We exchanged brief, casual greetings, and now I was standing directly in front of her. With the kind of mood that was hanging in the air, I didn't feel like cutting straight to the chase, so I decided to make a little small talk first.

"Are you still using that strategy? With you being a bank for everyone's Private Points?" I asked.

It was a question unrelated to the main topic of what we were going to talk about, but Ichinose didn't show even a hint of displeasure.

"Yes," she replied. "We decided that there wasn't any harm in sticking with it. It's easy. We can save up as much as we can, and if they're no longer needed, I can just return everyone's points to them."

She had said it was easy, but it was a strategy that could only continue to work because Ichinose was a trustworthy person. Like she herself had said, it wasn't a bad idea to just keep the points saved as long as they were able to. If students' balances were automatically diminishing, then it might cause some inconvenience, but as long as she promised they'd get back what they gave, it was a good plan. Their class would be able to move large sums when the need arose. The fact that it was the one and only unique advantage given to Ichinose was another major factor.

"But the strategy of pooling your points is just something so you're prepared for emergencies," I said. "That alone can't be enough, can it?"

"If it was something that we only just started, that would be a different story. But in this case, it's just a continuation of what we were doing already."

Meaning that they weren't readying any new strategies, they were only maintaining the status quo.

"What do you think we're lacking in, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

"What your class is lacking in, Ichinose?" I repeated.

"Yes. I feel like we can't really see that ourselves, so... I was wondering how our class appears from your perspective, Ayanokouji-kun."

"I talked to some of your classmates during the uninhabited island exam," I said. "Based on what I heard, and from being at the post-exam party, my impression is that there are many students in your class with good-natured personalities."

That was something she likely understood without me needing to say it aloud, but it was an integral part of the issue. Since they essentially didn't like conflict, they couldn't aggressively go for Class Points.

"I think it might be important for you to be a little more assertive. I'm not telling you to break the rules or engage in foul play or anything, but I think it's important to stand strong in the face of other people playing rough."

"Playing rough... Okay. Yes, you're right. We must get it together more, or we won't be able to fight," said Ichinose.

She didn't have any concrete solutions in mind just yet. The only thing I could tell now, which was painfully clear, was that she was desperately trying her hardest to forge ahead into the darkness of uncertainty.

"About the uninhabited island exam before. I mean, about my answer..."

"Y-yes... Yes, that's right, that is why we got together to talk, isn't it?" she replied.

I quietly brought my face close to Ichinose's ear. Though I knew that no one else was around, as I opened my mouth, I spoke in such a quiet voice that it would be difficult for anyone to hear without really concentrating on listening to us.

And that's when it happened.

"Oh, ho, what are you and Honami talking about, all alone in a place like this?"

Ichinose was surprised by the sight of the newcomer. It was none other than the student council president, Nagumo.

In a panic, she hurriedly tried to pull away from me, but he had most definitely seen what was happening moments earlier when Ichinose and I were so close to one another.

Had I been followed? No, I wouldn't have done something so stupid as allow myself to be trailed without noticing. In that case, had he been tracking Ichinose since the very beginning? Perhaps not. It was more likely the result of the surveillance Nagumo had me under, with countless eyes watching me. No matter how much I moved around to avoid being seen, it was virtually impossible to completely escape the eyes of all the third-years on this cruise ship. It was reasonable to assume that several of them must have seen me while I was on my way here.

However, there hadn't been any signs that Nagumo was trying to contact me over the past few days. Then, he had appeared before me at the time I had hoped to avoid him most, almost as if by design.

"Great work on the exam, Student Council President," said Ichinose.

The mood had been immediately disrupted, so Ichinose hurriedly struggled to return to normal mode. Still, it wasn't like she was able to completely dispel how shaken and bewildered she felt. But even if she had managed to perfectly smooth things over, it would've been meaningless to Nagumo right now anyway.

"It seemed like you two had a meeting on the final day on the island too," he asked. "Are you having yet another secret rendezvous here?"

"U-um..."

Ichinose suddenly found herself again having to deal with what happened during the exam and was at a loss for words. Back then, she had inadvertently confessed her romantic feelings for me. It wouldn't be so easy for her to just talk her way out of this. I was about to interject, but Nagumo kept me silent with a wave of his hand. He was strongly pressuring me not to interrupt him right now.

"Well, whatever, it's no big deal," he said. "However...if Honami, a fellow member of my student council, might be reduced to tears, then as the student council president, I can't just let that be, can I?"

I knew it. So that was what this was all about. I had been able to guess this would've happened since I had fully understood that Kiriyama was on Nagumo's side. As Nagumo came even closer to us, he went over to stand next to Ichinose.

"Reduced...to tears?" asked Ichinose.

"This might just be a misunderstanding on my part, but this is about Karuizawa, no?"

He was deliberate and used few words, speaking slowly so that she would understand him well. He wanted to make sure that what he was saying wouldn't be misunderstood.

She blinked. "Karuizawa-san?"

Naturally, Ichinose wouldn't be able to understand why Kei's name had been brought up at a time like this.

"It seems you might have only told your closest friends about this, but word is that you've been dating Karuizawa for a long while now. Isn't that true, Ayanokouji?" said Nagumo.

"Dating Karuizawa." Even though Ichinose heard those words, she might not have understood what they meant right away.

"Oh, is this the first you've heard of it?" said Nagumo. "It seemed like you and Ayanokouji are so close, I had thought you would've already known."

There was a slight pause, and then Nagumo continued speaking.

"Heavens, don't tell me you were thinking of two-timing. Were you?"

I didn't respond to Nagumo's one-sided attacks. There was no longer any point in me trying to tell Ichinose that I was dating Kei at this point. If anything, it was obvious that doing so would just be rubbing salt on the wound.

"Is that...true?" asked Ichinose.

"Hey, Ayanokouji, since Honami is asking, how about you answer her?" Nagumo said. "Or perhaps I'm misunderstanding something, and you and Karuizawa have nothing going on? In that case, you can deny it, and I'll give you a heartfelt apology. How does that sound?"

Kiriyama had seen Kei and me together, but that alone wasn't enough to give a clear indication that we were dating. In other words, that meant there wasn't a zero percent chance that he just made an assumption about my relationship with Kei and was trying to trick me into revealing the truth. But right now, I didn't have the option of responding with "*No, that's not true.*"

If I were to say that and then later it came out that I really was dating her, my lie would be exposed. Besides, it would be better for me to assume that Nagumo would have gotten more evidence for his assumptions before he mentioned it in the first place.

"Actually, I haven't officially told *anyone* yet," I said. "How in the world did you get that information?"

".....!" Ichinose squeaked.

I could see Ichinose's obvious shock at my admission. Without a doubt, Nagumo must have realized that Ichinose's feelings were for me.

"Seems like you realize I wasn't just jumping on mere gossip and speculation, eh?"

Nagumo flashed me a happy, toothy grin as he said that, but he wasn't revealing the source of his information nor how he had

verified it. What Kiryuuin had said to me before, about how Nagumo might be the type of opponent I wasn't good at dealing with, sat fresh in my mind.

"I don't intend to comment on your love life," he added. "However, as I had said before, Honami is a member of the student council. And it's quite possible she might be president in the future. I have to protect her."

"I can understand quite well that the relationship Ichinose and I have might appear unnatural in your eyes, Student Council President. However, don't you think it was premature for you to step in at this stage?" I asked.

"You certainly might be right," said Nagumo. "It would be one thing if you were going out with Honami and pulling the wool over her eyes, but that doesn't seem to be the case here from what I can see. I guess you two might have been having a totally unrelated discussion. Still, with the two of you secretly meeting up in a deserted place like this just before dinner, it's kind of hard *not* to suspect as much, dontcha think? And I'm sure your girlfriend would be saddened if she saw this situation too."

"You're right, it might create unnecessary misunderstandings," I replied.

"I did what came naturally, as president of...no, actually, simply as another person on the student council."

Nagumo shot Ichinose one final look, giving her a knowing wink, before approaching me.

"Introduce your girlfriend to me sometime. I'd like to see her face at least once," he said.

Then, Nagumo patted me on the shoulder, and whispered something directly into my ear. "You're free to think whatever you want about my methods. But I haven't even gotten started yet, y'know?"

"Haven't started what?" I asked.

"You can slip a single lie amongst a hundred truths and no one will notice. You need to make a decision before it's too late. If you want to fight me, then come find me. I'll welcome you

anytime. If you get down on your knees before me, I'll be your opponent."

This meant that unless I agreed to fight Nagumo, this relentless surveillance and harassment would continue indefinitely. He meant to drag me out into the arena by force.

"See ya later," said Nagumo.

He left, leaving only those words behind. It still hadn't started yet, huh? Only Nagumo possessed this kind of overwhelming surveillance and information network. All of the third-year students were at his beck and call, operating as his eyes and ears. For the students who lived on the school campus, that was as good as saying that everything about their lives was exposed.

Then, there was that other thing he said, about a hundred truths and one lie.

Right now, he was only saying things that were true, but that likely meant he was going to start mixing in lies. To an outside observer, what Nagumo was doing was simply a form of harassment. I couldn't help but call his behavior childish. However, he had inflicted more psychological damage on me than anyone else I had fought so far. He didn't care one bit that he was antagonizing his classmates in his own grade level by fixating on me like this.

Did he think he wouldn't lose the trust of his followers for something like this? Or did he not care about that from the beginning, as long as they were bound by his rules? At any rate, it was clear that Nagumo was prepared to do whatever it took.

Now that he had left, though, all that was left was silence. That somewhat lighthearted atmosphere from when Ichinose and I had met up was gone. The air was heavy, and everything was quiet.

"A-ah ha ha. I guess we, um, got interrupted there for a minute," Ichinose said.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Um, well... Why did you invite me out here, again?" she asked.

"It's about the uninhabited island, when—"

"Ahhh! Oh, uh, yeah, that, huh? That's, um... Well, I mean... So..." She started speaking in such a loud voice, but gradually, it withered, growing quieter and quieter.

"Could you...maybe just forget about it?" she asked, struggling to get the words out. She was trying her best to keep a smile on her face the whole time. "I'm sorry for not knowing anything. I just got all excited and carried away and selfishly said, um, something pretty weird, and..."

"Like Nagumo himself said earlier, I hadn't told anyone about it," I said. "There was no way for you to know."

"Y-yes, I suppose so. Right? Yes, that's true, but...I really was an idiot though! I, I mean, Ayanokouji-kun, you're so kind... You're amazing, you're cool... There's no way you wouldn't have a girlfriend..." she said quietly.

Despite Ichinose's firm determination to never let her smile falter, her eyes were clearly growing misty, beginning to fill with an abundance of tears. She was trying her absolute hardest to keep the tears from flowing while struggling to maintain her composure, pretending like nothing was wrong.



What did a person feel inside when they fell in love with someone who has feelings for someone else? That wasn't something that you could understand through television, books, or hearing about it from other people. It was something I was able to personally experience, though, right here and now, today.

"...Goodbye," said Ichinose, managing to squeak out just that one word, before leaving.

As she walked away, I didn't say a word, nor did I reach out my hand to her. I silently watched her back as she walked.

"Nagumo, huh," I muttered. "I might have made a much more troublesome enemy than I thought."

Things had turned out a little differently than I planned, but the path I was on remained the same. Although I was annoyed by what was happening with all these unfavorable situations piling up one after another, I couldn't help but feel a strange sensation welling up from deep within me.

Chapter 6: A Treasure Hunt of Girl Troubles

THERE WERE NOW only three days of vacation remaining on the cruise ship. The days were too much, passing by too fast. Early that morning, just around the time that everyone was beginning to lament how little time they had left on the ship, the school sent out an email to all students simultaneously. Hondou, who was the first to turn his phone on, read the message aloud.

"They're holding a game, a treasure hunt starting today at ten in the morning..." he said. "What's this about?"

We all saw the unfamiliar word "game" in the email, and at the same time, we each proceeded to carefully read through the message.

Treasure Hunt

This is a bonus game that anyone may freely participate in

Participation Requirements: Available to men and women. 10,000 Private Points required for participation, per person.

Date: Today, August 8.

For more information, come to the venue. You must arrive on the fifth floor by 10 a.m. You are free to choose whether or not to participate after hearing the instructions.

"For a minute there, I thought this was gonna be another special exam. That part about how anyone can participate sounds interesting though, doesn't it?" said Hondou.

So, we were able to freely choose whether we'd like to participate, and the only risk that individuals had to bear was paying the 10,000-point fee, huh? The exact details were unknown at this point in time, but considering that it was called a treasure

hunt, it was probably safe to assume that the payoff was greater than the fee. I was expecting it to be something simple, like getting Private Points.

Personally, I thought it would be a good idea to be proactive and participate if there was a chance to earn a temporary bonus since I was constantly short on funds. The fact that it only cost 10,000 points to participate also sounded reasonable. Miyamoto and Hondou naturally seemed inclined to participate, and after they had finished eating, they started talking about entering together. I was thinking of inviting Akito to join me too, but...

"Don't worry about me," said Akito, exhaling sluggishly as he lay on the bed. "You go have fun..."

Akito was sick in bed with a fever. Perhaps he overdid it at the private pool yesterday.

"If they hadn't forbidden us from bringing personal belongings onboard, I would've lent you my game console," said Hondou.

"I really don't think I could even play a game, how I feel right now..."

Akito buried his face in his pillow, sounding somewhat exasperated. We let him sleep in bed. After finishing our meals, we relaxed in our room, killing time until about 9:50 in the morning. Then, the three of us decided to make our way to the venue without Akito, though we felt somewhat sorry for him.

6.1

A LARGE CROWD OF STUDENTS was packed into the designated venue. I wondered how many people were going to participate, and it looked like roughly half the entire student body was here. I expected even a few more, but I supposed that the students who weren't interested in treasure hunts might take this opportunity to enjoy the pool or other places since there wouldn't be as many people in those spots right now. Since this event was open to everyone, the students could spend this day however they wished.

Shortly after the cutoff time came, a great deal of commotion came from the stage in the front. From the looks of things, Takatou-sensei, the homeroom instructor in charge of Class 3-A, was going to explain how this game worked. It looked as though almost all the faculty had assembled here, but I couldn't see Acting Director Tsukishiro, nor Shiba, the homeroom instructor for Class 1-D. If Shiba were also employed by *him*, then it wouldn't be surprising if he had resigned after what happened. In fact, I imagined his appearance and his role might have become known to both Mashima-sensei and Chabashira now.

"Good morning, everyone," said Takatou-sensei. "As it is now 10 a.m., we will no longer be accepting any more students beyond those who have gathered right now."

One of the other teachers, who had been standing near the entrance, slowly closed the doors. I supposed that even though this was a game where participation was voluntary, rules were rules. They weren't going to allow any latecomers, even if they were only a second late.

"Before I begin explaining the rules, I would like to tell you exactly how this treasure hunt game came to be," Takatou-sensei said. "This event came as a result of a suggestion from Student Council President Nagumo-kun, who thought that we should offer students an interesting and enjoyable recreational activity as a way to deepen ties of friendship, especially after competing against one

another by grade level while living on such a harsh uninhabited island. Please say a few words, Nagumo-kun, if you would."

After his name was called by Takatou-sensei, Nagumo got up and stood in front of everyone who had come to participate.

"I am pleased to announce that we are hosting this bonus game with the school's full support," he said. "This proposal stemmed from the student council's *raison d'être*, its commitment to enriching and improving our lives at this school. During the uninhabited island exam, each grade level was locked in fierce competition with the others, but in this treasure hunt, it is possible for you to team up regardless of grade level. I urge you all to take advantage of this and participate in the game."

He concluded his remarks with a short statement that sounded typical of a student council president. That reminded me of what happened yesterday, when Nagumo appeared before Ichinose and me. Ichinose was also a member of the student council, and she was sitting by the faculty, listening to the proceedings. From what I could see from where I was standing, she didn't seem any different from normal, but...I still remembered the tears that Ichinose had unexpectedly shed yesterday. The wounds inflicted upon her heart surely hadn't been trivial. I'm sure she was trying to act natural, but it would take some time for her to heal. When that time came, the love she felt for me might disappear, or she might even become hostile toward me. Whatever kind of changes she underwent, I was sure this was going to be a major turning point for the future for her.

After Nagumo finished speaking, he handed the microphone back to Takatou-sensei.

"Members of the student council will not be eligible to participate in the treasure hunt as they will be managing operations for the event, meaning that they are giving up their holiday to handle clerical work. I ask that you please treat them kindly," said Takatou-sensei.

Several student council members, including Horikita and Ichinose, were called over to assemble next to Nagumo.

"Now then, I will provide you with an overview of how the treasure hunt game will work," Takatou-sensei said. "The rules are not complex at all. In fact, they're exceedingly simple."

He raised his right hand. He was holding a square-shaped piece of paper between his thumb and forefinger. It looked to be roughly five centimeters in size. There was a QR code printed on the paper.

"There are one hundred of these stickers with QR codes on them placed all throughout the ship," he explained. "Those of you participating in this treasure hunt game will be tasked with finding these stickers. You will be awarded Private Points as a reward for scanning the codes via a dedicated app. However, you can only scan once per device. Please note that the results will be reflected immediately, and the points will be paid out to you right away once you've accessed the site. Of course, once a QR code has been scanned, it will be rendered invalid from that point on. Even if someone were to scan it using another device, they would not be given any rewards from it. Also, we ask that you please refrain from any illicit activities during this event, such as removing stickers without permission or using a pen to make the code unreadable. Engaging in such behavior will warrant severe punishment, even though this is just a game."

I see. The rules were exceedingly simple, and luck was an important part of this game.

"The lowest number of Private Points you can be awarded is 5,000 points," Takatou-sensei continued. "There are fifty of these stickers available, exactly half of the total amount. The second most common prize is worth 10,000 points. There are thirty of these stickers available."

Unfortunately, this meant that if you got one of those fifty low-level stickers, you would be losing money. Even if we were to find one of the 10,000-point stickers, which were only 30 percent of the stickers out there, we'd only be breaking even.

"As for the remaining twenty stickers, there are ten stickers worth 50,000 points, five stickers worth 100,000 points, and three stickers worth 300,000 points. The final two stickers are the highest, at 500,000 points and one million points respectively. It

would be safe for you to assume that the more difficult it is to find the hidden code, the more Private Points you will receive from it."

With roughly two hundred people participating, that meant that one in every two people would receive nothing. But if you were to find the sticker that was most difficult to track down, you'd end up with a million points. That was an amount that you couldn't easily obtain, even in a special exam. In that case, I wouldn't be surprised if people felt it was worth the risk, even though half of the people here would get nothing, but...

"There are one hundred stickers, but there are two hundred or more students here," Takatou-sensei said. "So, it is inevitable that some students will not get prizes. However, we have implemented a way for you to avoid that risk. Participants may pair up with another student from any grade level. If any person in a pair scans a QR code using their phone, the reward for that code will be paid out to both members. So, for instance, if the reward is 30,000 points, both of those students will be awarded that amount."

If everyone were to pair up and scan all 100 QR codes, then 200 people would be able to receive rewards. The possibility of taking a loss, without even getting a single point for your efforts, would be greatly reduced. The only disadvantage was that if both members of a pair were to find QR codes, they might have a dispute over which one to scan. Despite the fact that handling that disadvantage would require some coordination, it seemed that pairing up was highly advantageous.

"Also, please note that the areas where the QR codes have been placed were determined in advance," he added.

Even though he said earlier the codes were placed all throughout the ship, there were still some areas that were naturally inaccessible to us. Takatou-sensei continued his explanation, using the screen. To briefly summarize, stickers with QR codes would obviously not be found in the restrooms or in guest rooms. Also, employee-only floors and guest rooms were also excluded from the treasure hunt, as expected. The stickers were not hidden on levels that were off-limits to students. Takatou-sensei had strongly emphasized that placement of stickers was

limited to public spaces and areas that students were allowed to go to.

"And also...we will be providing you with these as well," said Takatou-sensei.

Just after he told us that, faculty members began handing something out to us. Not too long after they started, I received one myself: a piece of paper folded in two. It was a map of the ship that had been slightly modified. The areas where stickers were placed had been highlighted in color. There were also some unfamiliar-looking text and figures on the document.

"Essentially, this game is mostly about luck. However, we have incorporated a few elements where a little bit of skill will be involved."

Takatou-sensei was likely referring to the text and figures on the map that had just been handed out to us.

"There are three riddles on the maps you've been given. If you solve them, you'll be able to find the hidden locations of a total of three QR codes. Please assume that you likely won't be able to find these locations without solving these riddles."

So, by the sounds of it, out of a hundred total QR code stickers, there were three that had been specially prepared. I skimmed through the three riddles and put the piece of paper in my pocket.

"Registration is open now, and will remain open for the next thirty minutes," Takatou-sensei said. "Please indicate whether you will participate via your phone. Also, if anyone is unable to turn on their phone because their device is out of power, please notify the nearest teacher as soon as possible."

Students took out their phones one after another and began registering. There were several students who left the room, but it was a certainty that almost everyone here was going to sign up. The treasure hunt game would be over by five o'clock in the afternoon, and we'd need to scan a QR code by that time. I wasn't going to be left out, so like many of the other students, I took out my phone and decided to register.

However, with this many people here, there was also the highest number of stares yet to be directed at me over these past several days. When it was on as large a scale as this, the fact that they were looking at me was naturally going to be noticed by students from other grades. I wasn't sure if they were all coordinated or if they had been given certain instructions in advance, but the stares directed at me now temporarily diminished, and the third-years began to avert their eyes as the other students started to follow their gazes. Apparently, at this current stage, they weren't going to let it be known that they were monitoring me yet.

They seemed to be waiting for a more effective, more damaging moment. As long as I didn't know what their ultimate goal was, I needed to be well-positioned as well. I had to act while under the assumption that everything about me was being secretly reported. My girlfriend Kei was also among the participants here, but we didn't even exchange glances—since we hadn't announced our relationship publicly yet, we decided to refrain from making explicit eye contact. Of course, even though we were told that we *could* pair up, she and I wouldn't. It would normally be unthinkable for Ayanokouji Kiyotaka and Karuizawa Kei to pair up in this situation since people knew us.

Just then, Horikita appeared before us all, microphone in hand.

"I am Horikita, from the student council," she announced. "I have a request for all students who will be participating. In the interest of curbing fraud, participants will be asked to enter their own names in a register, which will be divided by grade level. Your 10,000-point payment will then be processed, and you can leave the room. No substitutions will be allowed. Students are not allowed to have others sign their names in or write down someone else's name. Please understand that this is a measure to prevent unauthorized participation by way of using a third party's cell phone. Once you have received your reward, please make sure to return here to report in before the end of the event. Failure to do so may result in the invalidation of your reward."

If we simply settled payments via our phones, then there wouldn't be any way for the school to connect which student was associated with which mobile device. That would allow students to use another person's phone to participate in the game. Putting aside how problematic such an action would be in and of itself, doing so would deviate from the game's original mission of having us follow the rules and play along. However, by forcing students to enter their names into a register at the time they make their payments, it was possible to connect phones to their respective users. If I were to get a reward using someone else's device, that final check would allow the school to detect that I violated the rules, and even if I sent the phone's owner to go check in, it wouldn't work because that person's name wouldn't be on the list. It was also possible that people who hadn't paid the participation fee might secretly download the app, or something along those lines.

At any rate, people would be leaving the venue in order after they finished installing the app. Amongst all the hustle and bustle, I queued up, and eventually I reached Horikita, who was performing clerical duties.

"Enter your name here," she said, in a very businesslike manner. "Once you've done that, I will collect the 10,000 points."

I proceeded to enter my name in the register. Then, I took out my phone and ran it across the payment terminal, paying the required points. Now that I'd taken care of that, I had officially become a participant of the treasure hunt game.

"Next," announced Horikita.

Since I didn't have anything in particular to talk with Horikita about, I went with the flow and exited the room.

6.2

Now then, the treasure hunt game had begun, and it would last until the evening. There were a few rules that we needed to observe, but those were essentially only things related to violations. All that was left now was pray that I caught a lucky break and play the game, I supposed, but... The immediate area was incredibly crowded because we were within range of a QR code that had been posted near the starting point. The search was on, and at a furiously fast pace too, like a swarm of locusts devouring crops.

Now that I officially joined the search too, there likely wasn't room for me to join though. And, similarly, some students would likely decide to start searching elsewhere after seeing so many people, like another plague of insects. What's more was that many students were also using their phones to stay connected with each other. Perhaps they were simultaneously looking for a partner to team up with while searching for a QR code. Because we could form a pair via the app without having to meet up in person, it was possible for us to split up.

"Hey, Mori-san, why don't we start from the top?" said Kei. She came out of the room shortly after I did, walking along happily with our fellow classmate Mori Nene.

Apparently, Kei had immediately gotten hold of a classmate and they had formed a pair right away. I, being on my own of course, had decided to head down to the lowest level for the time being. If I went up to the top level like Kei was, that would mean we'd be in the same area. Even so... I hadn't gotten a single message on my phone. *In a situation like this, wouldn't it be fine for me to invite at least one person to join me? No, don't think about this too deeply. If I think about it, I'll feel like I'm losing.*

Besides, there weren't many people with whom I exchanged contact information in the first place, either email or chat. Out of everyone in the Ayanokouji Group, Keisei was available, but he had announced that he wouldn't be participating, probably because he

wasn't interested in these kinds of games. Akitō wasn't feeling well, and Haruka and Airi seemed to have partnered up right from the start.

"Ah..."

As I started to move while thinking about those things, I suddenly bumped into Satou. I casually gave her a wave and said hello, and then tried to move past her, but then...

"Ah, w-wait a minute!" she exclaimed, in a panic, grabbing my arm. "Um, excuse me, but...have you partnered up with anyone yet, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"No, I'm alone," I replied.

I didn't say "for now," because I didn't have any plans to partner up with anyone in the future either. It was one thing to make more friends, but having allies alongside me, with whom I could tackle these kinds of events, was another problem. It felt a little futile to say that aloud, though, so I kept quiet.

"W-well, um, would you...mind partnering up with me?" she asked.

I was at a loss as to how to respond to this completely unexpected proposal. Last year, Satou was the first person in my life to ever confess romantic feelings to me. I couldn't reciprocate her feelings though, so I turned her down, and then later on, I started going out with Kei. Considering it would only be natural for her to hate me for that, I never expected that she would have asked to be my partner.

I didn't have any particular reason to refuse her, but to be honest, I didn't have a reason to accept either. I had just seen with my own two eyes that Kei had partnered up with Mori, but that was just to keep up appearances since we were keeping our relationship a secret. Still, whether partnering up with Satou was okay was another question.

"Are you worried about Kei-chan...?" she asked.

It was difficult for me to ask, but Satou seemed to immediately sense what I was feeling.

"I've heard that you two are going to let everyone know that you're going out, officially," she added.

"That so?" I asked.

From the sounds of things, Kei had gone ahead and told Satou that she and I were going to come out in the open about our relationship in the second semester. I had known from past conversations with Matsushita that Satou was already aware that Kei and I were in a relationship.

"We've been going out for a while now," I said. "It's not something we can keep secret forever."

"Well, there are some couples out there who date in secret, but I think only a very limited number of people would notice you and Kei-chan are together, Ayanokouji-kun," she replied.

Satou had talked with some girls that she was close with about how she suspected Kei and I were in a relationship. I didn't hear her say that directly, obviously, but I didn't have any doubt that had happened since I heard it from Matsushita when I bumped into her. Of course, Satou hadn't done anything wrong. She hadn't known anything for certain. All she had done was offer her own speculations.

"Oh, but hey, you know, the reason I suggested partnering is, um, I guess, I was thinking that you'd be really dependable, a good partner," she went on. "I'm just saying that there's no other meaning behind it. So...would that be okay?"

She emphatically stressed that she wasn't asking me for any strange reason.

"How many Private Points do you have on hand?" I asked her.

"Um, well, it's a little embarrassing to tell you, but...about 180,000," said Satou.

Looking at my own financial situation, I didn't exactly have room to talk about other people's affairs, but considering the fact that the school had deposited Private Points into our accounts for the month, that was by no means a high number. She must have had a fair amount of determination then to participate in this

game. Even though it was low risk, she was still willing to part with 10,000 precious Private Points. In that case, she likely wanted to partner up with someone so she could find one of the more well-hidden QR codes.

"I understand. If you're all right going with me, I'll partner up with you, Satou. I can't guarantee we'll get results, though," I told her.

"Really?! Yay!" she exclaimed.

The way Satou was able to express genuine joy about the things that made her happy made me feel good about partnering up with her. We each took out our phones, put in the request to become a pair via the app, and accepted. And so we officially became a pair for this event, and now we'd each receive the reward when either one of us scanned a QR code. Now all we had to do was get a code that was worth at least 30,000 points.

"Oh, yeah, come to think of it, the teachers handed us these weird pieces of paper, right?" said Satou, taking out the crumpled paper from her pocket.

"Ah?!"

She sheepishly thrust it back into her pocket immediately after taking it out and looking at the state of it, perhaps because she had forgotten that had crumpled it up before.

"A-a-anyway, it's uh... No matter how much I looked at it, I couldn't understand it at all... A *ha ha*. You have one too, right, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

It sounded like if she had thought she could've solved the riddles, then she would've folded the paper up neatly. I took out my own paper, which I had folded into quarters, and unfolded it in front of Satou.

"So, we'd be able to figure out three places where QR codes are hidden with these, right?" she asked.

"Seems that way," I replied.

"Then, if we solve them, it's possible we could get a million points, right?"

I felt bad about dashing her hopes, but I answered immediately. "Nah, probably not," I replied.

"Huh? Really?" she blinked.

Only three codes out of a total of a hundred were provided to us in the form of these questions. So, while it was tempting to get our hopes up that we'd be able to get a head start on finding those codes by solving the questions on this slip of paper...

"These three riddles all seem to be around the same difficulty level," I pointed out. "Meaning, I can't imagine there's any difference in the reward you'd get from solving any of these. There are a fair number of codes worth 100,000 points... Or it's even possible these might just be worth 50,000 points."

"Huh? But wait, if there's three, then what are the chances these are for the three codes worth 300,000 points?"

"Well, it's certainly true that it would be a nice fit, since there are only three of those 300,000-point codes available, but chances of that are slim," I answered.

The pieces of paper weren't likely going to lead us to high-value Private Point rewards.

"Huh? We wouldn't get much even for solving problems that are this difficult?" she asked.

"Treasure hunts are completely centered around luck. On top of that, this is being positioned as a bonus game. If the quick-witted students or the students who managed to solve these problems get the rarer, high-level rewards, like one million, 500,000, or even the 300,000-point reward like you mentioned, Satou, chances are that many students wouldn't accept it. Don't you think so?"

If all three of the riddles were for the codes with 300,000, then there wouldn't be any of them left in a game that was supposed to be a treasure hunt based on luck. In that sense, it would basically mean the game was a failure. So, this paper was only a modest bailout at best, and should be seen as providing only modest rewards.

"I-I see. I guess it is true that if they were all high-level codes, then I probably would've been frustrated by it myself..." She thought about how it might feel to someone who couldn't solve the riddles. It seemed like she readily accepted my argument.

"There's nothing wrong with going ahead and looking for the QR codes based on these clues, but we won't know the results until we find a code and scan it," I said. "If we act carelessly, there's a chance we'll miss out."

Though this treasure hunt game would be going on for hours, the important part of the game would likely be decided within the first hour or two.

"Is it okay if we just ignore them, then?" said Satou.

"If we do use this hint paper, it'll likely be sometime close to the end of the game, like if we haven't found any QR codes. I know what direction they're pointing in," I replied.

Well, in that case, by the time I did try to rely on it, other students would probably have already found those codes.

"Have you...already solved the riddles on the paper, by any chance, Ayanokouji-kun?" Satou asked.

"More or less, yeah," I replied.

"That's awesome...!" she exclaimed.

The clues weren't made to be that difficult. Since all students, from first-years to third-years, were allowed to participate, these hints were closer to solving simple riddles rather than a real challenge to tackle. While Satou and I had been talking, other students participating in the treasure hunt were searching for QR codes in the area around us haphazardly. They told us that there was a somewhat limited number of areas where QR codes had been posted. If all 200 participants were searching all at once, most of them would be found pretty quickly. It was also possible that some of the higher-value QR codes might have been hidden somewhere further away from the starting point too.

"Anyway, I think we should start searching the lower floors," I suggested.

"Okay. I'll leave it to you to decide where to start, Ayanokouji-kun," she replied.

Satou and I walked side by side and headed down to the lowest levels of the designated searchable area. We spent the next five minutes each looking for QR codes, and found only two stickers, which were out in the open. Were we just in a bad location? Or were there more stickers hidden in more difficult-to-find spots? We weren't having much luck, and the number of students around us began to increase little by little.

"Um, Ayanokouji-kun...?"

"What's up? Did you find something?" I asked.

"N-no, that's not it..." Satou sounded extremely embarrassed. "U-um, is it okay if I go to the restroom for a minute? I think I drank too much this morning... To tell you the truth, I was planning on stopping earlier, but..."

"I see. And that's when you ran into me?" I asked.

She nodded, her face turning red.

"Sorry. I know we're supposed to be in kind of a hurry," she said apologetically.

There was no way I would tell her not to go to the bathroom. I gladly gave Satou the okay to go ahead.

"I-I'll be right back!" she exclaimed.

"No need to rush."

Anyway, after letting Satou head off to the bathroom, I resumed my search of the nearby area on my own. As I was peeking under the sofa, I heard a voice call out to me from behind.

"You're participating in the treasure hunt game too, Ayanokouji-kun?"

I had wondered if someone had walked over, and it turned out to be my classmate Matsushita. Today seemed to be one of those days where I was getting called on by classmates I rarely associated with. At the same time that Matsushita approached, a third-year student named Tatara, who I thought might've been talking with Matsushita earlier, was eyeing me up suspiciously.

"...Ayanokouji, huh?" said Tatara.

"You know about Ayanokouji-kun?" said Matsushita.

Matsushita curiously looked at Tatara, examining his face. When she did so, Tatara got embarrassed and turned away. Matsushita had no way of knowing this, but it was clear that Nagumo had disseminated some kind of orders regarding me out to the entirety of the third year.

"We're in the middle of the treasure hunt right now, so talk to him later," Tatara said. "Time's wasting. Why don't we just go?"

"Well, if you put it that way, that means time's wasting for you too, right, Tatara-senpai?" Matsushita replied. "Don't mind me. Please go ahead and partner up with someone else."

The fact that Tatara, a third-year student, had showed up here might be a good chance for me to probe Nagumo's strategy.

"You're participating in the treasure hunt too, senpai?" I asked.

However, when I tried to insert myself into the situation and speak to him, Tatara made an openly disgusted face, and turned to ignore me. Hearing Tatara softly clicking his tongue, Matsushita also sensed the change in Tatara's demeanor.

"Is something the matter, Tatara-senpai?" I said.

When I tried calling out to him once more, it became apparent that he was hoping to flee. I could also tell from my first impressions that Tatara had some sort of fondness for Matsushita. The fact that he disliked the idea of dealing with me more than he wanted to pair up with Matsushita was a clear indication that he had received instructions not to carelessly engage me in conversation.

"See you later, Matsushita," said Tatara.

"Ah, okay." Though Matsushita didn't quite understand what was happening, she answered with a casual smile, and waved Tatara goodbye.

Tatara looked over at Matsushita with an air of lingering regret but shot me a glare before he left.

"Phew. I don't really know what that was all about, but thanks," said Matsushita. "Did something happen between you and Tatara-senpai, Ayanokouji-kun?"

Even though she didn't know about Nagumo's orders, I supposed anyone would've been suspicious after seeing how Tatara had been acting.

"No, nothing," I replied. "I've never talked to him before."

"Huh, really?"

Though Matsushita didn't seem too convinced by what I said, she patted her chest with a sigh, like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"Hey, are you also on your own by any chance, Ayanokouji-kun? If you are, do you want to pair up?"

"Well, actually—"

Just as Matsushita was about to invite me to join her treasure hunting, I heard footsteps rushing up from behind.

"Hold on, Matsushita-san! Ayanokouji-kun is already partnered up with me!"

Having come back from the restroom, Satou made a mad dash over to where Matsushita was, grabbing her by the shoulders.

"Huh? O-oh, is that so?" sputtered Matsushita.

Matsushita turned back, though she was surprised by the unusual speed and pressure of what Satou was doing.

"Er, I mean, I just saw Tatara-senpai a little bit ago. Wasn't he with you, Matsushita-san?" asked Satou.

"Well, I'd say it was more like I was being followed than we were together, actually..."

Apparently, Satou also knew about this third-year student named Tatara. He had generally slightly above average scores in OAA overall, ranging between B and C. He also had long hair in an unusual hairstyle for a boy. I wondered what that kind of hairstyle was called... I didn't really know very much about those kinds of things.

"He was too excited, and it made me recoil a bit. I was trying to turn him down in a roundabout way," said Matsushita.

"Ah, okay, I get what you're saying," said Satou.

I didn't get it, though. I went back to investigating underneath the sofa for the time being, which I had been in the middle of doing before.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun, don't you think a code probably wouldn't be in a place like that?" Satou said. "Even if there is one, I think it probably wouldn't be a big one."

It was true that somewhere underneath a sofa could have easily been chosen as a stereotypical hiding place for a QR code. In fact, you could see a QR code peeking out underneath the sofa, if you crouched down and looked at a slight angle. Of course, I was not going to be scanning this code.

"The important thing here is the school's pattern," I replied.

"Pattern?" she repeated.

"When they decided to run this game, the way they decided upon the values for the codes was important," I elaborated.

"Um...?" She cocked her head to the side, not quite understanding me.

However, Matsushita responded right away, without even giving it much thought.

"Naturally, they'd be putting high-value QR codes in difficult-to-find locations," she said.

"That's right. Then, the next question is, who would determine what constitutes 'difficult-to-find' in this case?" I asked.

This time, it was Satou who got the answer in before Matsushita.

"The teachers!" exclaimed Satou.

However, Matsushita stepped in afterward, to append her answer with additional context.

"I'm sure it would be a lot of work to put up a hundred stickers with QR codes, right?" she said. "I don't doubt that it was

the teachers who put them up, but it's hard to imagine that only one or two people could do it. Even if they split up the work and did it during the dead of night last night, they must have sent out several people to do the job..."

"So, did they carefully decide on where to place the QR codes throughout the ship while the students were engaged in the uninhabited island exam?" I pondered. "Or did they suddenly entrust the job to the teachers in charge of this task? Once we know the answer to that question, it'll probably be easier for us to guess where the stickers might have been placed."

"I'm sorry, I'm not following a single word you two are saying..." said Satou, sheepishly.

"The layout of the pathways and the decorations that have been put up are all fundamentally the same, right?" remarked Matsushita.

"Did you understand what Matsushita-san means by that?" asked Satou, turning to me.

"Well, yeah," I answered.

"That's amazing, Ayanokouji-kun!" Satou exclaimed.

"Anyway, I think it's an interesting perspective to take, but considering this is meant to be a treasure hunt, it's probably fine to be a little more casual about it, right?" I said.

"...I suppose, yeah," said Matsushita-san.

Once that had been said, she wouldn't be able to continue this conversation any longer. Anyway, she likely just figured it was better to try and reason things out a little so that we wouldn't regret it later.

"Anyway, too bad for me," she sighed. "Guess someone beat me to it."

"T-too bad?" repeated Satou.

"I think I'll go search around for a dependable partner myself. Anyway, see ya!" said Matsushita.

Standing around here talking would only result in all of us missing out on opportunities anyway.

6.3

LESS THAN AN HOUR had passed since the treasure hunt began. By now, many of the participants had scattered, and there were no longer people clustered around in groups of dozens of more. However, I did see students passing by constantly, searching intensely in the same locations. Speaking psychologically, it would be difficult for someone to just go ahead and scan the very first QR code they found. Even if you considered that QR code you discovered to have been difficult to find, you wouldn't have any frame of reference to compare it too. There was probably a certain percentage of students, me and Satou included, who could have actually discovered the 500,000- or one-million-point codes already but refrained from scanning them or decided to ignore them for now.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-senpai."

"Hm? Oh, morning, Nanase," I replied.

I had thought I sensed a presence approach me from behind, and it turned out to be none other than Nanase. I guess, once again, that we were setting yet another new record for consecutive run-ins since the vacation began, huh.

"...Who's she?" asked Satou.

For some reason, Satou seemed visibly cautious of Nanase, shooting her a glare. For Nanase's part, though, she didn't interpret the look Satou was giving her as anything offensive and simply bowed her head respectfully.

"My name is Nanase Tsubasa, from Class 1-D," she announced.

"Hmm... It's hard to believe that you're a first-year," remarked Satou, eyeing a particular area of Nanase's body.

Nanase simply cocked her head to the side, puzzled.

"You think so? I don't think I look nearly mature enough to be mistaken for someone older, though," she said.

"H-huh? Who says you're not mature?" Satou exclaimed.
"You certainly look *mature* no matter who you ask!"

"Really? Hearing you compliment me like that makes me quite happy," said Nanase. "I'll do my utmost every day so that I may become more mature."

"There's no point in trying to become even more mature, is there? Err, I mean, how exactly are you going to do that?" Satou leaned forward a bit; it sounded as though she wanted to become more mature herself.

"It's difficult to explain in concrete terms, but... Yes, I believe that mental growth is essential."

"M-mental?" Satou repeated in surprise. "So, not like, drinking milk or getting a massage every day?"

"It's certainly true that such actions that promote physical growth are connected to becoming mature, but in my case, I think it's coming from the mind," said Nanase.

"Hm... This is the first I've heard of that. But it's strangely convincing."

It's nice that you're so impressed, Satou, but I don't think you and Nanase are on the same page here...

"Are you treasure-hunting too, Nanase?" I asked.

"Huh? Oh, um, no, I'm not," she replied. "For some reason, I just felt like taking it easy today."

It sounded like she wasn't taking part in the event. But in that case, why did she come here?

"I'm glad to see that you're looking well again today, Ayanokouji-senpai. Well, I think it's time I were going now."

Not long after I parted ways with Nanase, I happened to walk past Nakaizumi as well.

"Nakaizumi?" I muttered aloud.

"Hm? Is something up with Nakaizumi-kun?" Satou asked.

I was trying not to pay it much mind over the past few days, but it didn't seem to be a coincidence after all. It wasn't merely by

chance that I was running into Nanase every day.

First and foremost, Nanase was deliberately making contact with me so that she could check how I was doing each day. It was only on the third day that I was the one who found Nanase instead, when she was having lunch out on the deck. But even if I hadn't gone over to talk to her then, it was safe to assume she would've come to me.

And then there was Nakaizumi, who was following after Nanase. He might not have been following Nanase every time she was out, but he was certainly up to something. In all likelihood, it was Ryuuen's shadow looming behind Nakaizumi. I wondered if Nakaizumi was investigating my relationship with Nanase, but so far, he hadn't seemed to be paying me any mind. In that case, it was better for me to assume that that he was only keeping tabs on Nanase.

I wanted to try to deduce what reason they could have for tracking her. Ryuuen was looking for the perpetrator who had injured Komiya and Kinoshita. If that was what this was about though, Nanase was completely innocent. Simply getting testimony from Sudou and Ike would make that clear. In that case, why would Ryuuen be keeping an eye on her? Both Nanase and I knew that she saw Amasawa that day, but if Nanase knew more and was keeping that information to herself, it would be a different story.

Even if I pondered the matter further right now, I wouldn't find anything out. I decided to just file that away in the back of my mind for now.

"I-I found one, Ayanokouji-kun!" Satou exclaimed happily, pointing. "In a kind of hard-to-find spot!"

It was on the other side of a standing lamp, in a place that was almost completely out of sight. Hidden under the shade was a sticker with a QR code. Fortunately, there didn't seem to be anyone else but us here at the moment.

"But we won't know how many points it's worth until we scan it, right?" Satou added.

"That's the hard part," I replied.

I had a feeling that this wasn't the most commonly found QR code, as it seemed somewhat difficult to find, but was hard to judge since it wasn't actually *that* difficult.

"What should we do?" asked Satou.

"Let's see..."

Nonetheless, I had no doubt that this QR code was too good to simply throw out. I took out my phone, turned on the camera, and pointed it at the code.

"Huh? W-wait, is that okay? To go ahead and scan it?"

"Actually, I'm not scanning it."

Satou blinked. "Huh?"

I pressed the button to take a picture, saving a zoomed-in photograph of the QR code.

"What are you doing?" asked Satou.

"I'm keeping pictures of QR codes that seem like they might be worth a lot of Private Points, like this one," I explained. "That way, if we can't find a better code later, then we can just have you scan the QR code from the photo I saved, Satou."

"Huh? R-really? Will that still work, scanning it from a photo?" she asked.

"As long as it's a clear shot, it should work without any issues."

It would be inefficient to come all the way back here looking for a QR code we found before. Besides, our rivals might beat us to it anyway. However, if we found multiple codes and saved them, we could just scan any of the ones we had if we needed to. If we got a hit with one of those codes, we'd be in luck.

Even with just one phone, it was possible to point the camera at the QR code and display the URL. However, our phones weren't capable of copying the URL if we didn't access it first, which meant that if we wanted to keep the URL, we'd have to manually type it in later. And if you accidentally touched the URL, you'd start the process of redeeming the code, and then the points would be transferred into your account.

"The school said that there were benefits to pairing up, but they weren't just talking about the fact that you share points," I added. "Using two phones means we can use time-saving techniques, and we can prevent accidents from happening."

I figured some students who were panicking and made a mad dash for codes may have overlooked this fact. I was sure that many other students were probably employing these techniques though. Now, we just had to hope that no one else found this QR code. If anyone spotted us standing here looking at this standing lamp, this hiding spot would be immediately exposed.

"Let's move," I said aloud.

"Okay," replied Satou.

We headed to a different floor and began searching for QR codes once again. I was groping around underneath a sofa, and something caught my attention.

"Looks like there's one here too," I remarked.

"That's kind of an easy pattern, isn't it?" she pointed out. "I mean, that there's one under this sofa here, like the others."

"Satou, would you stand watch for a minute?" I asked.

"Sure, but what's up?"

I sat in front of the couch and lowered my face down to take a peek.

"I thought we couldn't expect much from these kinds of QR codes though?" she asked.

"For the QR code here, yeah," I replied.

I started to run my hand not against the floor underneath the sofa, but rather, along the bottom of the sofa itself. Usually, I looked at the floor underneath, but I hadn't looked at the underside of the sofa before. I supposed it might have been more correct to say that I *couldn't* look at it, rather than I *wasn't* looking at it. But when you touched it with your hands, you'd notice that something felt different.

The underside of the sofa should be fabric and even, so something wasn't right. Here, there was something that caught

your fingers if you ran your hand along it. It was a five-centimeter square. There was a sticker placed here. I took my phone in my hands, held it underneath the sofa, and took a picture. By using the light from my phone camera's flash, I was able to get a picture of the QR code in the dark.

"Wow, there really was something there!" Satou said. "It's a QR code! You normally wouldn't find one there, for sure!"

If I had been participating in this treasure hunt game alone, it wouldn't have been easy for me to scan this QR code. Sure, I could have still saved a photograph of the QR code by taking a picture with the flash on, but I wouldn't have been able to scan it from my own phone. And even if I tried to flip the sofa over, I'd basically be committing to scanning the QR code without delay as doing something like that would be a big deal and rather conspicuous. However, since I was paired up with someone, I could just have Satou scan it from the photo, and everything would work out smoothly.

"It seems like you really think of everything, and so does the school," observed Satou.

After finding a new potential code to scan, we decided to keep moving.

6.4

EVEN THOUGH THIS SHIP was quite expansive, students couldn't just freely go wherever they wanted. Inevitably, students were concentrated in the places where they could hang out, so unexpected encounters were common here. One young man headed toward the outdoor café, while another walked back to his own cabin. Two people who had completely unrelated destinations happened to encounter one another in the corridor.

Both were walking down the middle of the hall, and neither showed any sign of backing down. They noticed each other's presence almost simultaneously and stopped just about a meter apart.

"Yo, Ryuuen. Thank you *so much* for what you did the other day."

The first to open his mouth to speak was Housen Kazuomi, from Class 1-D.

"You sure it's okay for you to be up and about? I mean, you may as well stay in bed for another week or so, I figure."

And the person to respond was none other than Ryuuen Kakeru.

"Don't worry 'bout it," Housen said. "Besides, even if I beat you half to death right here... Nah, even if I actually kill you, it ain't even gonna make me feel any better. I've got two targets to kill now rather than one, so looks like I'm gonna be busy."

"Man, you'd sure look lame if you lost to the same opponent twice," Ryuuen replied. "Don't push your luck."

They were each repeatedly trying to provoke the other, but neither one was ready to start throwing punches.

"Heh," Housen scoffed. "Anyway, loser, I heard you've been secretly buyin' out Free Ride cardholders from the first-years. You bet on that third-year Nagumo, if I remember. Didn't you make quite a bit from that?"

"Ku ku. What, someone pissed themselves and told, huh? Who? I made sure to put a clause in the contract that they'd have to keep their mouths shut."

Before the uninhabited island exam started, Ryuuuen approached first-year students who had the Free Ride card and had them sign contracts. Those students were apparently supposed to give up all the points they earned from whatever group they had designated if that group won anything. If the group they picked only gotten into the top fifty percent, they would have only earned 30,000 points. In other words, if you were going to get even more value out of that, then some people were going to have to give up their claim to it.

In the end, Ryuuuen had designated Nagumo's group, and had gotten 280,000 points across all the students he had contracts with. Most of Ryuuuen's classmates were unaware of this fact, and only the people he used to execute his plan knew about it.

"If you lick my shoes, then I'll give you a little bit of my leftovers. How's that sound, gorilla?" mocked Ryuuuen, with a smile.

He continued on his way, never even taking his hands out of his pockets. Housen could have stood his ground, but he took a step aside, making way for Ryuuuen to pass. Ishizaki followed right after Ryuuuen. Though he was wary of Housen, he continued hurrying after Ryuuuen. Housen, too, strode confidently down the middle of the hallway afterward, never once looking back.

"Man, that guy's as crazy as ever, dude, geez," said Ishizaki. "But he got all scared and made way for you."

"Dude's got balls," said Ryuuuen.

"But, uh..."

"It's a sign of his determination. He's sayin' that if I do somethin' to him again, he's gonna let me have it next time," said Ryuuuen. He had sensed Housen's killing intent and violent nature in that brief moment when he walked past him.

"He's trouble, huh?" remarked Ishizaki.

"Drop it. I know he's gonna be a difficult guy to deal with, but first we gotta find the culprit."

"Yeah. I'm gonna have Nishino help keep 'er in check," said Ishizaki.

Ishizaki took out his phone to check something. Then, he guided Ryuuен ahead, leading the way. Shortly thereafter, Ryuuен and Ishizaki arrived at their intended destination. Before Ishizaki could announce anything though, Ryuuен approached the lone female student there.

"You Nanase Tsubasa?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Do you need something from me?"

Though Nanase had been called, being compelled to stay where she was, she didn't seem in the least bit panicked as she looked at Ryuuен. She didn't understand why she had drawn the attention of one of her senpai, after all.

"Sorry, but I'm gonna need a minute of your time," Ryuuен said.

Normally, Ryuuен himself would've been enough for the job, or himself and Ishizaki. But they had a girl from their class, Nishino, accompany them as well to help keep Nanase there. Ryuuен knew that if they created a situation where an underclassman girl was surrounded only by guys, it could be a disadvantage to them, not a benefit.

"I wanted to ask you about something that happened during the uninhabited island exam," Ryuuен went on.

"Something during the exam?" she asked.

Nanase still didn't quite know what was going on, but she quickly understood after what Ryuuен said next.

"Komiya got hurt. I'm lookin' for the person who did it."

"Why are you coming to me?" asked Nanase.

"The five people who rushed to the scene were Sudou, Ayanokouji, Ike, Hondou, and you. Ain't no way we're gettin' any leads talkin' to Sudou, Ike, or Hondou."

"In that case, why not ask Ayanokouji-senpai, as he is also in your grade level?"

"Yeah, I'm gonna have a chat with him too, of course," Ryuuen said. "Depending on how things go, at least. But let's start with you. Seemed like you were stuck to Ayanokouji like glue during the exam. Why?"

"I don't think that has anything to do with the incident," said Nanase.

"Let's wait until I hear what you have to say before we decide whether it's unrelated or not."

Most people readily confessed anything when they were confronted by Ryuuen, bearing down on them with his coercive behavior. Nanase, however, wasn't flustered at all.

"I am sorry, but I have nothing to tell you," she said, refusing him calmly.

She bowed and tried to leave, but Ryuuen thrust his leg out, slamming the bottom of his foot against the wall.

"You ain't got the right to decide to talk or not," he said.

"You are quite a violent person, aren't you? I think if anyone were to see this situation, it would likely create problems for you," Nanase warned him.

"Don't worry. I got a few other people on hand to make sure that doesn't happen."

"I understand that Komiya-senpai is a classmate of yours, Ryuuen-senpai. However, I do not think I can be of any help to you. I do not have any leads."

"That so?" Ryuuen said. "You've sure been makin' the rounds a lot these past several days, goin' all over the place."

"What are you talking about?" asked Nanase. She didn't avert her eyes and simply told him that she didn't understand what he meant. Unfortunately, that provided an opening for Ryuuen to exploit.

"You've been keepin' tabs on Kurachi from Class 1-C, all day long, while everyone else is playin' around and havin' fun. Haven't you?"

For the first time since their conversation began, Nanase's eyes widened, and she appeared visibly shaken. "H..."

"Once I heard about what happened with Komiya, I had people keepin' tabs on Sudou, Ike, Hondou, and you, just to be safe," Ryuuuen continued. "Those three guys have been playin' around like a buncha idiots, but that's pretty normal here on this boat. You, on the other hand, you haven't been havin' any fun at all. You've been followin' around a particular first-year. That don't seem normal."

"It's just a coincidence," said Nanase.

"Coincidence, huh. Lots of people are havin' fun, like with that treasure hunt thing goin' on today. Kurachi's participatin'. But you're not. And yet you were following him all this time until Nishino caught up with you. So that's just a coincidence too, that you were doing all that today?"

If you were playing the game, then you'd have to go around looking for QR codes. But if you weren't taking part, you could save yourself that hassle. Nanase had been so focused on watching Kurachi that she hadn't noticed she herself was being watched.

"I suppose I still have much to learn too," she said. "To think that I hadn't realized that I've been followed day after day. I'm quite surprised."

"Be thankful I reached out to you first," sneered Ryuuuen.

"Excellent work, Ryuuuen-senpai. However, the matter of Kurachi-kun has nothing to do with what happened to Komiya-senpai."

"Huh, that so? In that case, guess I'll go have a little chat with Kurachi directly then."

"That would be a problem," said Nanase.

"Then tell me what you know. Or are you not able to say anything unless *someone* gives you instructions?"

"Nothing of the sort. However, the fact remains that what's irrelevant is irrelevant."

"Don't make me repeat myself. You ain't the one who decides that. I am."

Ryuuuen had a smile on his face during this entire exchange and he continued wearing it, never letting it fade. But the air he gave off changed over time. Ishizaki, who had been watching by Ryuuuen's side, had felt his intimidation many times over now, but he still hadn't gotten used to it. He wasn't even the one being questioned, but he almost wanted to roll over and start talking himself.

However, despite all that, Nanase looked Ryuuuen straight in the eye, without showing any hint of unease.

"You're mistaken," she insisted. "You do not have the authority to make those kinds of judgments, Ryuuuen-senpai."

"What are you hemmin' and hawin' for?" Ryuuuen snapped. "Why don't you just hurry up and get on with whatever this is?"

It was certainly true that Nanase Tsubasa was feeling hesitant and full of doubt. The seed of these anxieties came from what happened during the mid-point of the uninhabited island exam. It went back to the day when Nanase took her repressed anger out on Ayanokouji, using him as an outlet for her frustrations, after Amasawa had appeared before her and Ayanokouji with a deadly weapon. That was when Ayanokouji had surmised that there was someone else out there other than Amasawa.

At the time, Ayanokouji had declined to use the GPS search. However, Nanase had secretly conducted a search in her own tent. Still, she proceeded to slip into Ayanokouji's tent, without looking through all the details. That was because she knew that if she thoughtlessly investigated more deeply and found something out, he would see right through her and notice her shock and unrest. But thanks to her secret GPS search, Nanase had discovered that other than Amasawa, Ayanokouji and herself, there were two more people nearby at that time.

Those people were Kushida Kikyou, a second-year student, and Kurachi Naohiro, a first-year student. Normally, she would've investigated both people, but since Kushida was a second-year

student and one of Ayanokouji's classmates, she decided to put that on hold. Apart from that incident, Nanase had been contacting Ayanokouji on a regular basis to see if there was anything unusual going on with him—and, depending on how things were going, to protect him if necessary. It seemed that had gone unnoticed.

"This is a waste of time," Ryuuuen decided. "Come on, let's go have a chat with him."

Nanase hung her head low, as if she had given up. However, she suddenly looked back up.

"Unfortunately, he's out searching for QR codes throughout the ship, so I do not know where he is," she said.

Ryuuuen let out a small chuckle and took out his phone.

"Where's Kurachi at?" he said into the phone. "Fourth floor, where the guest cabins are... All right. Headin' there now."

It seemed as though Ryuuuen had predicted how this entire conversation with Nanase was going to go. After his brief call, he slipped his phone back into his pocket.

"After you pulled me away from Kurachi-kun, you were still having people keep watch on him, hm?" remarked Nanase.

"Unlike you, I've got lots of people at my disposal, at my beck and call, to be my eyes and ears," said Ryuuuen.

"Kurachi-kun might really have nothing to do with this, though," said Nanase.

"I don't need you to tell me that. I've just gotta cross things off the list, one by one."

The only lead that both Nanase and Ryuuuen could follow right now was Kurachi.

"So? You comin' or not?" Ryuuuen said. "Hurry up and decide."

Nanase didn't need to bother imagining that if she refused Ryuuuen's offer, he was going to press Kurachi by himself. She nodded, deciding to go with him to see Kurachi.

Before too long, she could see Kurachi searching for QR codes, together with Taguri, who she presumed to be his partner.

"Please allow me to speak to Kurachi-kun alone first, just the two of us," she said.

"Why?" replied Ryuuen.

"Because I'll be able to extract information from him skillfully."

"What guarantee do I got that you'll get the information I want out of him?" Ryuuen demanded.

"You will just have to trust me."

"Sorry, but I don't."

"Even so, you have no choice but to trust me," said Nanase. "I will most definitely report back everything I hear."

"Ugh, fine, whatever," Ryuuen huffed. "But I ain't gonna show you any mercy if you screw up, even if you're a chick. Got it?"

"I was assuming as much," Nanase replied.

Ryuuen gestured with his chin, instructing Nishino and Ishizaki to get Taguri away from Kurachi. Being called out by second-year students like Ishizaki and Nishino, Taguri could only do as he was told obediently.

"Could I have a minute of your time, Kurachi-kun?" asked Nanase.

"Huh? Wait, you're... If I remember correctly, you're Nanase from Class D, right?" Kurachi said.

Seeing his partner, Taguri, get summoned by their senpai had shaken Kurachi somewhat, and he found himself feeling quite restless.

"I would just like to ask you a few questions," said Nanase.

"Sorry, but I'm doing the treasure hunt right now, so I don't have time f—"

"Please tell me the reason why you were targeting Ayanokouji-senpai during the uninhabited island exam," she said sternly, cutting him off.

"Huh? Wh-what are you talking about?"

If Nanase took her time, there was no telling when Ryuuuen might suddenly butt in. She needed to get answers out of Kurachi while they were alone.

"It's pointless to try and hide it," she told him. "On the seventh day of the exam, during that big downpour, I used the GPS Search feature to see who was in the vicinity. Amasawa-san was there. Aside from her, there was another person there. You. And, not far from the area, there were tools meant for assaulting people. You cannot talk your way out of this."

"I don't have a clue what you're on about!" Kurachi shouted in a loud voice, denying that he knew anything. He tried to get away, but Nanase clasped onto his arm.

"Do you see those second-year students back there?" she said. "They're frantically searching for whoever tried to attack Ayanokouji-senpai. Depending on how their search goes, they might even resort to violence."

"H-huh? Hey, don't mess with me! What the hell is this, anyway?!"

"*Shh!*" Nanase hushed him. "It's better if you don't antagonize them by shouting too loudly."

"B... B-but, I... I only...!" he wailed.

"Only?"

"I was told that...if I attacked Ayanokouji-senpai, I'd be paid..."

"Someone was going to pay you if you attacked him?" asked Nanase.

"Normally, I wouldn't have accepted an offer like that," Kurachi said. "But I spent all my Private Points, and..."

"And?" she prompted him.

"I was told that it was fine to just 'pretend' to attack him, that it wouldn't be a big deal. I didn't really do anything wrong. You get that, right?"

It was certainly true that simply pretending to attack someone could be dismissed as just a joke.

"Who ordered you to pretend to attack him and offered you money for it?" Nanase asked. "And when?"

"That's... Well, it was before the exam..."

"B-before the exam?" Nanase was surprised to hear that. She didn't expect that it would've happened that early. "Meaning, in other words...it was planned from the beginning?"

"And I don't even know who gave the orders," Kurachi went on. "The Private Points were just transferred into my account with me having to do anything."

"...You're lying, aren't you?" Nanase said.

"Buh?! I-I'm not lying!"

"You clearly know something, and you're hiding it. That's how this looks to me."

"I don't—" Kurachi didn't finish his thought.

"I don't know how deeply you're aware of this, Kurachi-kun," Nanase said, "but your actions at that time meant that Ryuuen-senpai had to change his plans. And not only that, but Housen-kun's plans were changed, as well."

Kurachi furrowed his brow in unease after hearing this abrupt change in topic.

"Right now, he's frantically searching for the culprit. I wonder, what would happen if I reported this...? I'm sure that Housen-kun would bring his fists against you quite mercilessly, Kurachi-kun. Wouldn't you agree?"

The second-year Ryuuen and the first-year Housen. Both of those skilled martial artists were threatening to go after him.

"W-w-w-wait!" Kurachi cried. He had been whispering before, but now he frantically raised his voice. "Wait, I said! I get it, I'll talk! I'll talk, so just give me a break!"

Housen was the most despised and feared person among all the first-years. After trying it out for herself, Nanase had found that the power of his name was even more potent than she had imagined.

"...It was my classmate," said Kurachi. "Utomiya."

"Utomiya-kun?"

"Yeah. He said that he wanted me to attack Ayanokouji-senpai, and that he'd pay me after the special exam was over."

"Is that true?" Nanase pressed.

"Seriously, yes! It's the truth!" he wailed.

Nanase looked into Kurachi's eyes, and then nodded once.

"I believe you, Kurachi-kun," she said. "I have one final question for you. Do you know anything about the incident during which Komiya-senpai and Kinoshita-senpai were injured?"

"Komiya?" Kurachi echoed. "No, I don't know a thing. Seriously, not a clue. Anyway, please don't tell Housen that I had anything to do with Ayanokouji, okay? Okay?"

"I understand. I promise," said Nanase.

Nanase told Kurachi that he could go, and Taguri was released at the same time. Ryuuen immediately went over and approached Nanase, demanding that she speak. Nanase told him honestly that Kurachi didn't seem to know anything about what happened to Komiya, but Ryuuen didn't believe her. Even though he had been watching from a distance, he could tell that Kurachi had told Nanase something.

"According to what he said...Utomiya-kun might know something," said Nanase.

"Utomiya?"

"Utomiya-kun," Nanase repeated. "He's a member of Class 1-C, alongside Kurachi-kun."

Ryuuen immediately took out his phone and looked up Utomiya's face and abilities in OAA.

"Don't recall ever seein' his mug before," he muttered. "Still, an A for Physical Ability, huh."

"If it were Utomiya-kun, he might very well be capable enough to shove Komiya-kun down without being spotted," Nanase said. "However, we do not have any definite proof yet."

"You're startin' to connect some dots, aren't ya?"

"...What are you planning to do?" asked Nanase.

"Ain't it obvious?" Ryuuuen said. "I'm gonna track this little punk Utomiya down and make him tell me what's up."

"Please wait. I do not approve."

If Utomiya were a White Room student, then he would be a difficult opponent to face, even for Ryuuuen. More importantly, though, Nanase knew that Ayanokouji wouldn't exactly be grateful if things started moving ahead without his permission.

"A case with no conclusive evidence... No, this is a problem," she said. "Even supposing Utomiya-kun were the culprit, if he were cleared of all allegations, then that would be the end of it, no?"

"That all depends on how you threaten 'im, just like how you got Kurachi to spill his guts," said Ryuuuen.

"I was able to get the truth out of him because I had been tailing him for the past several days and had done some preliminary research," Nanase said. "Also, considering Kurachi-kun's personality, I figured that I could get what I needed if I pushed him. But as for Utomiya-kun, he's an unknown quantity."

"Whaddaya want me to do then?" asked Ryuuuen.

"Please give me some time. I'm not saying for free, of course."

"Oh? Keep going."

"I've kept quiet about this for quite some time now, but there's another witness to Komiya-senpai's case that you are not aware of, Ryuuuen-senpai. I do not mind telling you who that person is."

"Who?" barked Ryuuuen.

"I can't tell you now," Nanase replied. "Not until you tell me that you will refrain from contacting Utomiya-kun. If you agree, I'll tell you."

"You drive a hard bargain, girly," Ryuuuen scoffed. "Well fine, whatever. I'll accept your terms."

"Thank you very much. I will follow up with the details."

"But you know, if you're lyin' to me, you better be prepared for the consequences. Got it?"

"It's not a lie."

"*Ku ku*, all right. All right. Get back to me before I lose my patience," said Ryuuuen.

Nanase responded with a brief acknowledgement, nodded, and then walked away.

6.5

WE HAD FOUND several QR codes so far, but there was still just the one that seemed like it might be worth a lot of points. There were several students in sight who were searching for codes, so the competition was most definitely fierce. Since we were prohibited from employing non-participants to engage human wave tactics—that is, throwing large numbers of non-participants into the game to help us—it was unlikely that many students were going to do anything openly dishonest. But with over 200 students participating in this game, it was inevitable that some of them would cheat.

I noticed that Satou had suddenly stopped in her tracks and turned around.

"What should I give my all in?" she said aloud. "What can I work at so that I don't make trouble for the class?"

"What's this all about, all of a sudden?" I asked.

"Sorry for asking a weird question out of nowhere like that," she said. "But this isn't something that just randomly popped up into my head, y'know? I've been thinking about it since before the uninhabited island exam. I've been thinking about how I can be useful to our class."

She looked down, looking at the palms of her hands.

"I wish I could go back and talk to my old, excited self, before I started school here. Back when I was all fired up and all I could think about was just having fun doing whatever in high school, and that I could get a job anywhere. I'd tell her that this place isn't a normal school. That it's a totally ridiculous place."

To put it a little less kindly, Satou was, overall, less capable than the average high school student. Still, she was on the higher end of the class's social hierarchy, and her voice carried a good deal of weight. Although improving academic ability, physical ability, and communication skills each came with varying degrees of difficulty, many people could improve with some effort. If you

wanted a clear example, Sudou's name would be the first to come to mind. He had been at the bottom of the class in academic ability but showed remarkable growth and quickly improved his academic abilities by leaps and bounds. As you could see from that example, the important thing was promise, room for growth.

"If you want to work hard for your classmates, then studying is probably essential," I replied.

"Ugh... Yeah, you're right." Satou sheepishly hung her head low and scratched her cheek, as if to say, "*I figured as much.*" "Oh, Ayanokouji-kun, I don't suppose...you would tutor me, would you?"

"Me?" I asked.

As soon as answered, though, Satou immediately thrust out her hands, waving them in a flustered panic.

"Oh, sorry, sorry! Forget what I said just now! Karuizawa-san would get mad at me...!"

"Wouldn't it be okay to just have Horikita tutor you?" I asked.

"Horikita-san? But, um, she and I don't really get along too well, y'know?"

That was putting it quite mildly. Satou hadn't really made any effort to make friends with Horikita in the past year and a half.

"Putting aside the fact that you two would need to get along, I think she has a strong reputation when it comes to tutoring," I replied. "After all, she helped whip Sudou into shape."

There was absolutely no need for me to go into detail about Horikita's nature or her teaching methods. It was just true that she had been able to develop Sudou, the biggest problem child in our class.

"Well, Sudou-kun certainly did overtake me in a flash... That's for sure," Satou agreed.

"You don't want the dishonor of being given the title of worst student in the worst class in our grade, do you?" I asked.

"A-absolutely not."

Satou was one of the students near the bottom of the rankings in our class, so she felt a powerful sense of urgency on that point.

"Then...could I ask you to be a mediator between me and Horikita-san, Ayanokouji-kun?" she asked.

"If that's all, then sure, that's no problem."

If there was some hope that this would improve our class's academic performance, there was no way Horikita would turn Satou down. Sudou might have some conflicting feelings about having more people around Horikita regardless of whether they were the same sex or not, but he wasn't going to refuse either.

6.6

“HORIKITA-SENPAI, it’s time for a shift change,” Yagami-kun said. “Please take a break.”

It had been about two hours since the treasure hunt game had started, and it was just about noon. Yagami-kun approached me because it was his turn to take over checking the reward payouts. I closed the register of first-year students and slowly looked up at him.

“I’m not particularly tired, and I don’t mind continuing the task of verifying rewards on my own,” I replied.

I wanted to cherish this time I had right now, to be able to freely look through the roster of students with just a small group of people.

“That will not do,” said Yagami-kun. “I also have a job that I’ve been given. If I just let you handle everything, Horikita-senpai, then I couldn’t call myself a member of the student council.”

“...Yes, I suppose you’re exactly right. That’s true.”

It was unlikely that someone who subscribed to the idea, “*If I can take it easy, then I will*,” would join the student council. I decided not to fight it, and instead, backed off.

“Thank you. In that case, I suppose I’ll take you up on your offer and take a break,” I added.

“Of course. Go ahead,” said Yagami-kun.

That meant that I would be helping verify rewards again later, starting at two o’clock, and then my role would be over. I supposed it wasn’t much of a burden if I looked at it as a time for work, but...

“Horikita-senpai, how many people have received rewards thus far?” asked Yagami-kun as he looked down at the register of names.

“If we’re including those in pairs, about forty students, I believe,” I replied. “There was a student who actually got the

500,000-point code, but I get the impression that a surprisingly large number of students have misjudged the codes they found and ended up with only 5,000 points."

"They likely don't want other students to find the QR codes they found, thinking that they were the only ones who saw them," Yagami-kun said. "They probably wanted to hurry up and scan them. I can understand that, more or less."

I supposed that if they passed over a QR code they found, there was no guarantee that they'd be able to find it again later. What I was more concerned about right now was the other person who Yagami-kun had come here together with. Yagami-kun turned toward that person with a smile on his face.

"Well then, I will see you later, Kushida-senpai," he said.

I had heard that she and Yagami-kun were close during their junior high days, but from the looks of things, their relationship had continued in this school too.

"Yes, see you later, Yagami-kun," she replied.

I couldn't help but notice that the friendly way she sent him off made it seem like they had transcended the boundary of mere friends. I supposed I would describe their apparent relationship as something more than friends, but less than lovers. It seemed fitting way to describe it that way.

"If anything happens, call me, and I'll come running," I urged him.

"I understand. Thank you very much," he replied.

Yagami-kun had only been involved in student council affairs for a brief time, but he had strong communication skills and the ability to handle obvious work that needed to be done. He was a dependable junior in the sense that I could trust him with the job, and there was no doubt that he was much more capable than the other two first-year students who joined the student council at the same time he did. And although such a discussion was a long way off, I felt that I could say he was the best candidate for student council president for the generation after us.

When I had left my post, I saw that Kushida-san had also left instead of staying by Yagami-kun's side. It was only natural that she'd do that, though, since she wouldn't want to get in the way of the work that he needed to do. I had to assume that the fact she was walking next to me, side-by-side, meant something.

"You were with Yagami-kun earlier, weren't you? Why aren't you participating in the treasure hunt game, Kushida-san?" I asked.

"Hmm. I suppose I just didn't feel like participating for some reason. There are quite a few people like that, you know?"

"It's true that the participation rates for the second-year and third-year students wasn't as high as I thought they would be," I conceded.

It meant that people prioritized their vacation days over the chance to earn a high number of Private Points. I supposed that the time we could spend here on this ship was precious, even if it was just a vacation.

"You're going on break right now, right, Horikita-san?" said Kushida-san. "If you wouldn't mind, would you like to have lunch together?"

"With me?" I couldn't hide my suspicions about Kushida-san's unusual proposal.

"Is it strange that I'm inviting you out? Well, actually, I suppose it is, isn't it?" said Kushida-san, smiling in amusement.

She didn't let that smile she showed to everyone crack. This wasn't a situation where she even needed to think about it.

"All right," I agreed. "I have some other student council work to do later, so I suppose I should put something in my stomach. But it's possible I could get called away on short notice, so is it all right if we just buy something from the kiosk?"

"Of course," she replied.

I knew there weren't many opportunities for Kushida-san to call on me like this. This might also be a good opportunity for me to ask some questions that had been smoldering deep down inside me.

"May I ask you a potentially insensitive question?" I asked as soon as we started moving, not wanting to waste any time.

"About the reason I invited you out, Horikita-san?" she asked.

"Well, yes, there's that, but—"

"The reason why I'm close with Yagami-kun?"

It seemed as though Kushida-san already knew what I wanted to ask her, as if it were entirely obvious.

"I'd be lying if I said it wasn't on my mind," I admitted.

Kushida-san herself was bothered by the fact that her behavior would be incomprehensible under normal circumstances.

"You're trying to hide your past, about what happened in junior high," I said. "That's why you've made me, someone who attended the same school as you, and Ayanokouji-kun, who found out about your past, your enemies... That much makes sense."

Kushida-san continued facing forward, listening without looking in my direction.

"Even if Yagami-kun doesn't know anything, I have the impression that you avoid getting involved with certain kinds of boys. Putting it somewhat harshly, it seems like you're 'everybody's friend,' a scheming people pleaser. Or, if I were to put it more nicely, someone who treats everyone impartially."

"There wasn't any need for you to give me the harsh version, was there?" she asked.

"...I suppose not. I'm sorry if I've offended you."

"A *ha ha*. You can relax, I'm not mad."

I didn't intentionally mean to speak harshly—I just gave my personal impressions. While I thought it was careless of me, I supposed there was no taking it back.

"Why do you think that I'm close to Yagami-kun?" she asked, turning the question around.

"Do you...have *that* kind of relationship with Yagami-kun, by any chance?"

I was hesitant to come out and say it directly, so I asked my question in a somewhat vague manner.

"By *that* kind of relationship, you mean if we're dating?" she asked.

"...Yes."

"Unfortunately, no, nothing of the sort. I'm not planning on dating anyone in particular while I'm in school."

That's exactly what it meant to be everyone's friend, I supposed. I knew that Kushida-san was well-liked by the boys, even though I didn't normally pay much attention to that kind of thing. There was no avoiding the fact that her popularity would be affected if she had a lover, whether it was a junior or not. I didn't think such a thing would suit Kushida-san, a person who wanted to be seen as better than everyone else.

"In that case, why are you so close with Yagami-kun, then?" I asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" she replied, covering her mouth and giggling. "What a funny thing to ask. It's because the best way to get rid of someone is to get onto their side first."

"...I see."

I thought that might have been the case, but I felt overwhelmed by the fact she was smiling, and that she had answered me straight out, as I had imagined she would. In other words, this meant Yagami-kun was a target for elimination, just like Ayanokouji-kun and I were. Still, this didn't mean that all my questions had been answered yet.

"What are the chances that he knows about your past?" I asked. "You can't say anything for certain, can you?"

"I suppose you're right. There's no proof that he knows for sure."

"In that case—"

"But there's no proof that he *doesn't* know for sure, is there?" she continued, still smiling. "Yagami-kun seems to have some feelings for me that go beyond a normal junior-senior

relationship, so sticking close to him is much easier than you might think. That's why I'm waiting by his side until I find an opening."

Even if was only a one or two percent chance that he knew, as long as it wasn't zero, he had to be eliminated. That was Kushida-san's fundamental stance. *So not even a junior like Yagami-kun is an exception...*

"The number of obstacles in your way just keeps increasing, doesn't it?" I mused. "You still haven't gotten Ayanokouji-kun or I expelled yet, and now you're intending to make even more enemies for yourself?"

"You must think it's stupid, don't you, Horikita-san?" she asked.

Well, I didn't think it was a wise move at the very least.

"Essentially, I do not think there's any need for us to be enemies," I said. "If you were dealing with someone who loved to talk, that would be one thing. But Ayanokouji-kun and I don't let anything slip."

I'd been wondering why she couldn't seem to understand that part, so I thought I'd press the matter, venturing into territory that I hadn't touched on before.

"And where's your proof?" Kushida replied. "Can you say that with 100 percent certainty?"

"Well, I could say it's as close to 100 percent as you could possibly get... But I suppose that's not going to convince you, is it?"

"Knowing that I have a past I have to protect... That alone is like I'm exposing my heart, rendering it defenseless. Eventually, you're bound to come grab hold of that heart, Horikita-san."

"I can't understand what you're saying," I said. "There's no need for me to do something like that."

"Sure, if there's no need, you won't. But what if the need arises?" said Kushida-san.

"...What do you mean?"

"What if I took one of our class's secrets and tried to leak it to another class? What if I betrayed you and tried to move to another class? Can you state with absolute certainty that you and others would never come to me with a warning, telling me something like, 'If you don't want your past getting out, do not betray us?'"

"That's—"

It was certainly true that I couldn't guarantee Kushida-san's past wouldn't come up if a situation came up where she needed to be controlled. I couldn't rule out the possibility that I might need to use that as a secret weapon for the sake of protecting my classmates... That was definitely true. Of course, Kushida-san would try and get out of most things by saying that they were fabrications. However, some slight cracks had started to show in Kushida-san's credibility recently. A strategic error in the In-Class Voting event resulted in her needlessly drawing attention to herself.

"It's up to me, right?" she said. "You know, I'm feeling incredibly frustrated about this situation and that I have to have these conversations and talk about this. It makes me feel nauseated, and to be honest, I'm feeling very distressed."

Despite her words, she had a smile on her face, and her tone of voice remained calm throughout. She was able to control much of her anger and was masking what she was feeling on the surface.

"I kind of understand what you're trying to say, more or less... But I still feel like you're overthinking this. I'm worried about you," I told her.

"Heh, is that so? You're worried about me?"

"I would like to ease some of your emotional burden, if at all possible."

"*A ha ha ha*, you don't need to worry, Horikita-san. I'm fine," Kushida-san insisted.

"You're fine?" I repeated.

"I've also had enough of this. I've been thinking that I need to get this nasty business over and done with."

"Meaning...?"

"Meaning, I'm thinking of a way that I can get rid of that burden in my own way."

In that case, did that mean Kushida-san approached me today having thought of some kind of solution?

"I've been thinking about it a lot," she went on. "If things continue as they are, with the situation gradually getting worse and worse, the number of people who know too much will only increase. Which is why... I'm going to ask you, first, Horikita-san. Won't you drop out of school?"

Naturally, the most logical way for her emotional burden to be lightened would be for me to be removed from school. But I couldn't consent to this, of course. More importantly, it wouldn't resolve everything, anyway.

"It doesn't seem like that's connected to our conversation," I replied. "What about Ayanokouji-kun's presence? What about Yagami-kun? Even if I am expelled or drop out, there will still be people who know about you."

I couldn't imagine that me leaving would completely ease her emotional burden.

"I'm well aware of the fact that Ayanokouji-kun is someone who cannot be taken lightly," said Kushida-san. "But you know what? He's actually supporting me with Private Points."

"Supporting you...?" I blinked.

That was something I had heard about from Ayanokouji-kun himself earlier, but I decided to respond to Kushida by pretending that I didn't know.

"I think he called it a defensive tactic, so that he wouldn't be expelled," she said. "That means it's proof he understands that I'm an enemy, and, at the same time, tells me that he's afraid of me. If I show him that I can have you removed, Horikita-san, then even Ayanokouji-kun will have no choice but to keep quiet, right? And, if he slips up at all, he could be expelled himself."

Kushida-san flashed me an unsettling grin and brought her face a little closer to mine.



"At any rate, even if I'm only able to get you alone removed from school, Horikita-san, that would bring me a certain degree of peace of mind. And that would give me time to think of another way to get rid of Ayanokouji-kun. As for Yagami-kun, I'm sure I can handle him at any time. He's a serious little boy who likes me."

Her large eyes seemed to have color in them, but at the same time, they didn't. It was possible to read a person's emotions from their eyes, but Kushida-san was most definitely an exception. Her strong determination to have me expelled never wavered.

"The reason I want you to disappear first, Horikita-san, is because you attended the same junior high school that I did," she said. "If other people investigated it, they might be able to arrive at that fact too. But Ayanokouji-kun met me here in high school, so even if he were to try and expose me, I could just get out of it by saying that he was lying, right?"

True enough, what Kushida-san was saying was correct. If someone were to ask which one of us, between and or Ayanokouji-kun, would create more trouble for Kushida-san by exposing her past, then the answer would most definitely be me by a huge margin, as the person who went to the same junior high.

"Do you think that a person can't simply get someone else expelled so easily, even if they say they're going to? That's what you're thinking, right? After all, I haven't been able to do anything to you over the past year and a half, Horikita-san. That's a fact. Therefore, I won't be able to get you expelled, even in the days to come... But is that *really* true, though?"

"If we were enemies from different classes, then that might have been a possibility," I said. "But that's not the case. It's no simple task to expel an ally from your same class."

"I will definitely prove to you that it's possible," said Kushida-san.

"Can't we come to understand one another?" I said. "I am striving to graduate from Class A together with all my classmates. That includes you too, Kushida-san. And to do that, your help is essential."

"Mo~ron." She cursed at me in such a quiet voice that the tail end of the word seemed to disappear into nothing. "I am not going to help you. Stop saying things that make me want to vomit."

"Kushida-san..."

"I'm looking forward to the second semester this year. I think we're definitely going to have a fun time together."

She slowly moved her face back away from mine, and the wickedness in her expression faded as she did. Even so, it was clear that there was a mixture of hatred and anger behind that smile.

"Whatever I try, it's impossible, isn't it...?" I sighed.

Kushida-san began to walk away from me, as if to tell me she'd had enough of our conversation.

"But, I believe... I'm sure that one day, I'll get you to understand," I muttered.

What I had just said should have reached Kushida-san's ears, but she didn't stop walking.

6.7

IT WAS JUST AFTER two o'clock in the afternoon. There was still plenty of time left before the treasure hunt was over, but it was probably safe to conclude that we had searched most of the ship by now. I had taken pictures of a total of six QR codes. I had objectively determined three of those codes to be a four-out-of-five in terms of how difficult they were to find. Therefore, I figured it would be promising to first choose from those three.

"Can you open your camera?" I asked.

"Which one are you going to scan?" said Satou.

"You can pick whichever one you instinctively think is a good one," I replied.

"H-huh? Whichever one I think? Wh-what if I pick a bad one though?"

"We selected these QR codes carefully," I said. "Besides, there's a chance that they've already been scanned, so we might need to end up trying them all in the end."

We'd have a better chance if we made a quick decision here rather than taking our time to think about it.

"O-okay, I got it," she answered.

I took out my phone, and had Satou proceeded to swipe through the pictures on it. She seemed to agonize over the decision for a few seconds, but then she steeled herself and pointed her own phone's camera at one of the pictures. It was the QR code that I found when I held my phone out underneath the couch. However...

"Ah, seems like this one's no good," she said. "It's already been scanned."

Although that code had been quite a challenge to find, it seemed like other students had been able to find it too.

"Don't worry about it," I told her. "Pick another one."

She nodded, and without hesitation, scrolled through the pictures, selected another, and scanned it. But apparently the second code had also been scanned already, and Satou stomped her foot on the ground in frustration.

"Ugh, and after we went through all the trouble of finding that one too!" she huffed. "Darn it!"

Satou hurriedly scanned a third code. She stared at the screen for a while, but then, delighted, she made a great leap into the air.

"It scanned! Look! Something like a treasure chest popped out!"

It was a simple illustration of a treasure chest, with the word *TAP* next to it.

"I wonder how many points we'll get..." she whispered.

She brought her hand to the screen to tap on the treasure chest with her pointer finger, but she stopped just before she made contact.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun, you press it!" she cried.

Apparently, she was scared to see the results, so she handed the phone over to me. I supposed that from Satou's point of view, she spent 10,000 precious Private Points to participate in this game, so it was scary to see the results. I took the phone from her and touched the treasure chest on the screen.

"A-Ayanokouji-kun, you're so bold!" she exclaimed.

I didn't really do anything so significant that it could be described that way, though. The treasure chest glowed, and then a blue light began to surge out from inside the box. And then...

"Ah!!! ...Oh..."

For a moment, Satou had been intensely surprised, but she quickly realized the truth, and her joy faded. The reason being was that what came out of the treasure chest was...not the one-million-point prize, but rather, the 100,000-point prize. She had been dreaming of getting the 300,000-, 500,000-, or one-million-point prizes, so she was slightly let down.

"Apparently, that QR code wasn't as difficult to find as we thought it was, from the looks of it," I observed.

"Yeah, seems that way... That's too bad," she sighed. "Still, though! Even after subtracting the participation fee, we're still getting 90,000 points, so that's plenty!"

Needless to say, with a result like that, I felt like I could proudly say that I was glad I had taken part in this game.

"Thank you, Ayanokouji-kun," said Satou.

"I should be the one thanking you," I replied. "You were the one who found the code that hadn't been scanned yet, Satou."

"...Hehe."

Satou was acting bashful, the expression on her face seeming both happy and embarrassed.



6.8

STUDENTS WHO SCANNED a QR code in the treasure hunt had a responsibility to report it to the school.

Satou and I returned to the starting point, and we headed over toward Horikita, who was waiting by the reception desk.

"Thank you. With that, the procedure is complete," said Horikita.

Hearing the news, Satou expressed her genuine joy.

"Anyway, Ayanokouji-kun, thank you again for everything today," she said. "Let's hang out again sometime, okay?"

With that, she waved goodbye and walked away happily. Now that we had gotten a bit of extra income, it probably wasn't a bad idea to spend some time enjoying ourselves a little more lavishly.

"Excluding the participation fees, you two have earned a combined total of 180,000 points," said Horikita. "Great work."

"Thanks," I replied.

At this time, it looked like most of the participants had reported back, and only a few more students were still coming in.

"Looks like you've been hard at work too," I remarked. "Have you taken any breaks?"

"Yes, for about an hour," she said. "But I can't complain. It was my own idea to take on this job. I appealed to the school directly for this, for the sake of fraud prevention."

"A direct appeal, huh. It's small, but it's a step toward becoming student council president, right?"

Making a good impression with things like this would be appreciated by both the student council and the school.

"It's not like that," said Horikita. "Even if I hadn't suggested this, there likely wouldn't have been many instances of cheating

anyway. It's just... Well, I just wanted to be at least of some help, even if only a little."

I didn't really understand why, but it seemed like Horikita's attention was elsewhere as she was looking off in another direction.

"So, who got the highest number of Private Points in our class?" I asked.

When I did though, she turned my question back around.

"Who do you think?"

"I'm hoping it's not me and Satou," I replied.

"Well, good news for you, you're correct. It's not you. One pair got the 500,000-point code. Kouenji-kun and Wang-san."

"Kouenji? I'm surprised he participated in the first place, but the fact he partnered up with someone is even more so."

I didn't notice Kouenji earlier when the school was explaining the rules to us because there were so many people there.

"I'm of the same opinion," said Horikita. "I don't know what kind of circumstances led to him participating and partnering with someone, but he's made a considerable amount of money in just the past two weeks."

"No matter what Kouenji does, he certainly breaks the mold."

I never imagined that on top of possessing astounding physical abilities, Kouenji had luck on his side too. Or, I supposed, it might have been a QR code that his partner had found.

"Not being able to use Kouenji-kun in the future is going to be a huge drawback for our class," said Horikita.

"He was never the sort of person who'd work with us in the first place," I said. "Can't you just be satisfied with the fact that he took first place this time?"

"There's no way I could be satisfied, is there?" she replied. "It's far too much of a waste not making use of his talents if we're going to be striving for Class A. Don't you have any ideas?"

A way to make effective use of Kouenji? I felt it was a waste of resources even just thinking about it.

"It's impossible," I said.

"That was a fast response."

I was confident that I could control other people, at least to a certain extent, but it was safe to say that the sole exception to this was Kouenji. I had run many simulations in my head on how to control all my classmates, and Kouenji was the only one who, no matter how many times I tried, evaded my control.

"Even if you give up, I won't," said Horikita. "His strength is essential."

Trying to control what couldn't be controlled was, simply put, a contradiction.

"Even if it's a waste of time?" I asked.

"You're saying we don't need Kouenji-kun?"

"I think that as long as he doesn't cause any harm, the best course of action is to leave him be," I replied. "And now that Kouenji has been given a Protect Point, it's become even more possible for us to do just that."

"That certainly is a rational line of thinking, I suppose," she conceded.

"If our class couldn't win without Kouenji, then I could understand why you'd be so worked up about it. However, your class has already grown to be capable of competing against the other classes. And it will continue to grow from here onward."

"That's certainly true. Compared to a year ago, the class has become much more dependable," said Horikita. "While striving for Class A is my priority and my ultimate goal, I want to keep the class together as one. I want to lead the class in such a way that everyone works together."

That meant she didn't want anyone to be left out, not even Kouenji, huh. Horikita was looking straight at me when she spoke. Her gaze was so piercing that it almost made me choke on my words. If Horikita could reel in the man known as Kouenji to her

side, he certainly would make an irreplaceable and dependable ally. However, clearing that hurdle was probably going to be more difficult than reaching Class A.

In the past, I wouldn't have taken her statement seriously and I would've just dismissed what she said as nonsense, ramblings about something beyond her means. Horikita's growth was slow, but she was progressing step by step. Well...despite that, I still couldn't say for certain that even Horikita would be able to move Kouenji someday. Honestly, Kouenji was the only guy who just wouldn't fit into my calculations.

"What's up?" asked Horikita.

"Hm?"

"You just looked like you were thinking about something."

"Nah, not really," I said. "I was just wondering how I should use these Private Points I've gotten."

"...I see. Well, considering you've been giving half of your earnings to Kushida-san, you should cherish the Private Points you've received today and not spend them recklessly," she warned.

"That's true. I'll plan to do just that."

I decided to walk away quietly, since hanging around here any longer would only mean getting in the way of Horikita's work.

6.9

IT WAS NOW AFTER five o'clock. I was getting together with a certain someone that I had been planning to meet before the dinner hour started at six. Just after I left my guest cabin to make my way to the fifth-floor deck, I happened across Sudou. He had just come out of his own guest cabin two doors down.

"It's almost time to eat. Where ya off to?" he asked, presumably thinking that I was on my way back to my room.

"Just going for a little walk before dinner," I replied.

"Dude, you kinda sound like an old grandpa," Sudou said. "Welp, I'll see ya at the restaurant then."

We exchanged a few words and were about to go our separate ways, but Sudou must have remembered something because he called back over to me.

"Oh, sorry, dude! Actually, to tell you the truth, something kinda surprising happened!"

"You mean how Ike and Shinohara are going out now?" I asked.

"H-how the heck did ya know already?!"

"I just happened to hear, by coincidence."

"Still man, that sure was a surprise for me," said Sudou. "He beat me to it... Anyway, more importantly, he said he wants to study together. He wants to join Suzune's study group."

That was unexpected. Or I suppose I should say that was quicker than I imagined.

"Low academic ability is fatal here in this school, after all," I reasoned.

Many students were in danger of being expelled because of that. A student's main responsibility was to their studies.

"It's a precious time for me, since I can be all alone with Suzune," said Sudou. "But if he's motivated, I ain't got no choice

but to support 'im, right? So, Kanji's gonna hit the books hard, starting in the summer term lead-up."

From what Sudou was saying, he really was planning to start his studies right after our trip was over. Whether or not Ike demonstrated immediate results depended on his efforts, but he might show some growth early in the second semester. Both Sudou and Ike could undergo a profound change thanks to their respective romances.

"You might have another person joining your study group too," I replied.

"Huh? Seriously?"

"Ike's not the only student who's started thinking that they'd like to be tutored by Horikita."

Sudou came over and grabbed hold of my shoulders, with a serious look on his face. "It ain't a guy, is it?"

"No... It's not. It's Satou. Just Satou." I hadn't intended to say her name, but I felt like I had been forced into revealing the truth against my wishes because of the intense pressure.

"A girl, huh," said Sudou. "Well, in that case... Wait, Satou, huh? But if it's not just me there, but Ike too, she probably ain't gonna join the study group then, will she?"

"Don't you think you're making some assumptions here? Besides, she sounded determined."

"Hmm. Well, all right then, that's good. I ain't gonna lose though, no matter who joins," he said with a forceful snort, showing off his strong resolve to continue his studies.

"Isn't it pretty tough for you though, with your club activities going on at the same time?" I asked.

"Well yeah, it's not easy," he admitted. "But hey, I've always had enough stamina to brag about it. The first time I really tried stretching my brain, I got super sleepy in just a minute. But now, I can go on and on and... Well, actually, I can only concentrate for about an hour or so, but still."

Still, if you could concentrate and study for that long, you wouldn't have any problems. Studying for an hour, taking a break, and then studying for another hour... If you repeated that process, that would be more than enough.

"But, y'know... Damn, dude. I can't accept the fact that Kanji got a girlfriend before me," said Sudou. He was smirking, but he sounded frustrated too, like he was deeply lamenting that fact. "I'm gonna hold a grudge about that and give him some *thorough* training. Gonna put that Spartan training from the basketball club to use."

They were partners in crime with a love-hate relationship between them. From the sounds of it, Sudou was going to take good care of him (or rather, torment him).

"In moderation though, right?" I said. "I mean, it's not exactly easy to start liking studying, when you used to hate it."

"Yeah, I know, man. I mean, I was super against studying myself," said Sudou, sticking out his tongue like he had just swallowed something bitter.

After Sudou and I parted ways, I reached my intended destination. I saw Kushida up ahead on the deck and hid myself from view. It was already about five minutes after the time we were scheduled to meet, which naturally meant that she had been waiting for me for at least that long. I took out my phone and called her. She picked up after about two rings.

"Hello?"

After I confirmed that I had heard her voice, I walked out onto the deck where Kushida was. Mobile phones were designed to prioritize phone calls because of their intended use. Even if Kushida had turned on the recording function on her phone, once I called her, it would have automatically shut off. Since I called her, that meant that the conversation we were about to have right now would be between me and Kushida alone.

"Sorry I'm late, Kushida," I said over the phone. "I'm on my way there right now. Are you already there waiting?"

"Yes. Um... Oh, over here!" Kushida looked to her left and right, and, spotting me, waved me over. I didn't end the call on my phone but proceeded to run over to where she was. We then each hung up, at about the exact same time.

"Sorry to have made you wait. I got a little lost," I told her.

"Huh, even you make mistakes too, Ayanokouji-kun. Anyway, what's up? You said that you wanted to talk."

"I've been wondering about what I should do over the past couple years, but in the end, I decided that I should just come out with it and lay it all out," I said.

"Hm? Lay it all out? What?"

"Did you know that I participated in the treasure hunt?" I asked.

"Yes. You partnered up with Satou-san, right?"

She gave me a puzzled look, as if to say, "*What about it?*", not understanding what this conversation was leading to.

"The QR code I scanned earned me a reward of 100,000 points," I said. "Meaning that I came away with 90,000 points after subtracting the participation fee. If you divide that by two, you get 45,000 points. I thought that giving you half would be the right thing to do, Kushida."

After telling her all that, I held out my phone, showing her a record of deposits and withdrawals into my account. It clearly showed that 100,000 points had just been deposited into my account a little while ago.

"Wait, what? It was just a game though. I don't think you need to worry that much about it," said Kushida. She was surprised about the unexpected turn this conversation had taken and held her hands out in front of her to show that she was refusing to accept the points.

"To be honest, I thought so too, at first. Well, I tried to think that was the correct answer, but I couldn't help but feeling like it was a dishonest, unfair way of thinking. I figured there was a possibility that you'd say you didn't need the points, or that if I kept quiet, you wouldn't find out about it. It's because I felt

ashamed about my own way of thinking that I decided to give you half."

"But..."

No matter how much I tried to reason with her, it would probably be difficult for Kushida to accept them.

"To tell you the honest truth, though... I want you to take these points as a token of my good faith," I said.

"Good faith...?" she repeated.

"I'm giving you half of the Private Points I earn so that I can buy my safety from you, Kushida. If I demonstrate that to you here, then I think that you'll show me the same."

I appealed to her with my eyes, as if to add, "*Am I wrong?*"

"Besides, it never hurts to have more Private Points, even if only a little. Right?" I added.

"That's true, but isn't this quite distressing for you, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"It's fine. It's nothing compared to fighting with you, Kushida."

"Somehow...the opposite seems a little scary," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, Ayanokouji-kun, lately I've been hearing about how you're such an amazing student. Are you really giving me half of your Private Points because you want to make a truce with me?"

"In my opinion, it's more dangerous for me to make an enemy of you, Kushida. I interact with you every day, compared to students like Sakayanagi or Ryuuken. I only fight with them during special exams," I replied.

Although she was somewhat wary, Kushida nodded her head, seemingly satisfied.

"I understand. Still, are you sure you're okay with this?" she asked.

"Of course."

Using my phone, I transferred half of the Private Points I had received from my account to hers, just like I had done time and time again.

"I hate to say this after giving you points, but if I do ever have money-related troubles, I might come to you for help," I told her.

She giggled, as if she found my pathetic comment amusing. "Oh? That's kind of uncool, Ayanokouji-kun," she teased.

"Still, I think what you're doing is much, much smarter than what Horikita-san is doing," she went on. "I can't say I dislike your approach."

"That so?" I asked.

"Honestly, from my perspective, you're the only person I don't want to make an enemy of either, Ayanokouji-kun. I hope we continue to get along."

"Yes. I'd like to keep this relationship going. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours."

And with that, Kushida and I went our separate ways, as if nothing had happened.

Chapter 7: **A Connection to the Past**

THAT NIGHT, my friends in my room were having fun chatting about silly nonsense. I had been worried about Akito's health, but his fever had gone down in only a day, and he was on the mend. He didn't seem to have any problems chatting as he lay down in bed. I was basically just spending the evening fiddling around on my phone, sitting out on the sidelines, and occasionally chiming in with an interjection to show I was listening, or a quip. While I was surfing the internet, waiting for drowsiness to overtake me, I received a chat message.

"I wanna talk to you on the phone for a sec. Is that okay?"

It was a message from Kei. It had been a while since the ban on exchanging chat messages had been lifted, but Kei and I generally only messaged each other once a day. She didn't use any emojis or stickers in this message, which suggested that the talk she wanted to have was a serious one.

"I'm in my room right now, so give me three minutes."

It wasn't time for curfew yet, so it wouldn't be difficult for me to sneak out of the room. After I sent my reply, I nimbly slipped out of bed.

"I'm gonna go buy a drink," I announced.

After uttering that oh-so-convenient excuse that I could use at any time, I slipped out of the room and went into the hall. Since it was around nine o'clock at night, I didn't see any other students coming and going. Then, I went out to the deck and checked my surroundings, just to be safe. After I had made sure that no one else was around, I called Kei.

"Hello?" I asked.

"Sorry about suddenly springing this on you. But for some reason, I really wanted to talk to you on the phone today," Kei replied cutely, talking the way you'd expect a girlfriend to. I

wondered if this was one of those "I just wanted to hear your voice" requests from a lover.

"So, um..."

There was a slight pause. Shortly afterward, Kei spoke up once more.

"I've been hearing some not-so-great rumors about you, y'know? Do you mind explaining to me what that's all about?"

"Rumors?"

Huh? That wasn't what I expected to hear. If anything, Kei seemed like she was in a bad mood. I didn't get an immediate response from her. There was a prolonged period of silence.

"Not-so-great rumors?" I repeated.

I couldn't take it anymore, so I tried asking the question a second time. But Kei wasn't answering. I was just getting the sense that she was feeling annoyed. When I repeated the same question word-for-word, it only seemed to make her suspicious.

"Does anything come to mind?"

"Nothing comes to mind."

I responded without hesitation, though there were several things that came to mind. First, and the most likely issue here, was the Ichinose situation. Since Nagumo had seen me and Ichinose talking earlier, he must have guessed that what happened then wasn't nothing. And on top of that, considering that he knew that Kei and I were in a relationship, it wouldn't have been surprising if he went around spreading the truth. Aside from that, a few other things, like the fact that I had paired up with Satou, someone who had once expressed romantic interest in me, in the treasure hunt, or my chat with Matsushita, came to mind.

"Nothing really comes to mind?" There was a pause after she asked that, like she was making one final check before passing down judgment.

"Nothing," I answered.

Despite all that, I continued to feign ignorance. If I had a clear idea of what exactly Kei was referring to when she asked me

if anything came to mind, then I would have confessed, whether it was about Ichinose or Satou. However, since I hadn't identified exactly what she was implying, if I were to carelessly throw something out there, then I might end up digging myself into more of a hole. Lose a battle to win the war, as they say.

...Anyway, why was something like this happening instead of a sweet phone call?

"Kei?"

When I prompted her to speak by calling her name, she finally responded. I got the sense that her lips were trembling.

"You— I mean, it's, you know, THAT rumor! The one about how you've seduced a younger student!"

I blinked. "...Huh?"

Though I heard what Kei was telling me, about this supposed rumor, I cocked my head to the side after hearing it, unable to comprehend. Every single one of the assumptions that came to mind were off the mark? I guess I made the right choice, then, by not speaking up thoughtlessly before.

"Okay, where and when did you even hear a rumor like that?" I asked.

"I don't know! I've just been hearing people say things like they've seen you repeatedly meeting with a first-year girl!"

A first-year girl. The person who immediately sprang to mind was Nanase, but... Well, it was certainly true that I talked with Nanase quite a lot, many days consecutively, during the break. It wasn't like we met in secret either, so there must have been eyewitnesses. Now that I understood the situation, this conversation would be over quickly.

"She's simply an underclassman," I replied.

"I know that! I mean, anyone who isn't 'simply an underclassman' is definitely off-limits!"

That was true.

"Oh, and! What's this I heard about you partnering up with Satou-san for the treasure hunt?!"

So Kei had picked up on one of the things that had come to mind after all.

"Well, sure, I didn't report that to you, but I figured you would've known right away anyway, Kei. Right?"

Since Satou and I had been walking around together for the treasure hunt, there were a lot of people who saw us. Even Matsushita knew.

"W-well, yes, I did know about that right away... I knew that, but..."

She seemed to be complaining incessantly and was mumbling something that I couldn't make out.

"And here the person I really wanted to pair up with was you, Kiyotaka..."

"I understand how you feel, but it would've been too early, wouldn't it?"

"Ugh."

"By the way, what were your results, after partnering up with Mori?" I asked.

"...You're really asking me that now?"

"Never mind, it's fine."

The mood was getting worse and worse, so it was better that I didn't delve into that matter too deeply. I didn't mind just standing here listening to her complain, but since the subject of Satou had come up, I decided to go ahead and ask her about it.

"You already talked to Satou about what we're planning to do, right?" I asked.

"Huh? O-oh, yes, I did. I wanted to tell Satou-san first, after all, when it was just me and her."

"Well, I suppose that was a safe choice. By the way, how did you have the conversation? Did you do it over the phone or via chat?"

"No way. You have to have those kinds of conversations in-person, face-to-face. We talked at the café."

"At the café, huh. Do you think anyone overheard?"

"Hey, even I can at least be that careful. At the very least, we can rest easy that no one in our grade level heard anything."

It made sense that the people Kei would've been most cautious about were the second-year students. First-years and third-years generally wouldn't show a strong interest in romantic affairs of students from another grade level, especially so if the person in question were me. However, I supposed that the truth was it was the opposite for the third-years now, so it wouldn't have been surprising if they latched onto any conversations that were about me specifically.

"Oh, but you know, there were some third-year girls that came by and sat near us, so it was kinda hard to talk."

Kei thought back to what happened during her chat with Satou, as though she were checking over her answers on her homework. I supposed that for Kei, as someone who didn't know about the various things going on, there was no way she could have assumed that she was being monitored by third-year students.

"Well, if Satou understands, then I'm glad," I replied.

"Yeah," she said. *"But are you really sure this is okay? To be open about the fact we're dating, I mean."*

"Of course. There's no problem."

Actually, it was undeniable that was something we would need to do anyway, eventually. The further we pushed it back, the more troublesome it would be to deal with later.

"Well, even though we're calling it being open, it's not like we're going to make a big announcement in front of our classmates or anything," I added. "It'll spread naturally to other people from your friends, and people will find out at different times."

I figured that people would be reacting to the news for a few days after word got out, but it wouldn't be that big of a problem.

"But you know... You're popular, Kiyotaka."

"Really?"

"Ugh, the fact that you don't seem to pick up on this stuff is honestly super irritating."

"In that case, we don't have to talk about it."

"Well, yeah, I guess so, but even though I know, I can't help but want to ask you about it, because I'm worried!"

It wasn't like I didn't know what she was trying to say, but there were some contradictory points.

"Aren't we making this whole declaration about our relationship so that we can keep unnecessary insects away?" I asked.

As long as someone thought that the person that they had a crush on didn't have a boyfriend or girlfriend, they might try and go on the offensive. So, to avoid that happening, we were going to make a big deal about the fact that we were dating. If we did that, most people would probably give up and stop going after either of us. Of course, I was fully aware of the fact that there were a few exceptions...

"I'm still gonna worry..."

Which meant that Kei was frightened of those few exceptions, enemies that were yet unseen.

"You might not be aware of this yet, but there are girls out there who fall for guys that have girlfriends, and there are girls who will passionately try and steal a boyfriend away from someone else."

"I see," I replied.

"Understand? I will never, ever forgive you if you cheat on me."

Kei was the dependent type, so she would consider things like her boyfriend cheating on her to be absolutely unforgiveable. I was aware of that before I started dating her.

"Relax," I told her. "I wouldn't do anything like that."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Really, really?"

"Really."

We went back and forth repeatedly in what seemed to be an entirely pointless exchange. However, this seemingly meaningless action was one of the ways in which people expressed their affection, part of the process of falling in love.

"Do you...love me?"

I checked my surroundings once more, just to be safe. Of course, it wasn't like I thought any students would willingly come out to the deck at this hour, though. Once I saw that there wasn't anyone else around, I could answer her without hesitation.

"Yeah, I love you."

"...Mm, fu fu fu."

"What's up with that creepy laugh?"

I had thought she surely would've been overjoyed, or she would've responded in kind, but I never imagined that she would've laughed at me.

"It's just...it's funny, thinking of you saying something like that after carefully checking your surroundings, Kiyotaka."

Apparently, she knew exactly what I had done.

"I'm hanging up."

"Ah, wait, wait! Say it one more time."

"Mmph."

When she demanded to hear me say that I loved her again, the words ended up getting stuck in my throat.

"I told the guys I was going out to buy something to drink, so it's about time I should be getting back."

"Hold on! Tell me you love me!"

"I already said it, didn't I?"

"I wanna hear it one more time!"

How selfish. Well even though they were the same words, they seemed to have a different weight to them now.

"...I love you."

"...Pfft."

"Hey."

It sounded like Kei had tried to keep herself from laughing, but it ended up slipping out in the end, so I heard it anyway.

"Yeah, you really are the best, after all... I'm never going to give you to another girl."

I had just told her that she didn't have to worry about that, but her anxiety seemed to be mounting.

"You sure you're fine not asking me to say it back?"

"If I did, would you?" I asked.

"Hmm, I wonder?"

"All right, then, talk to you tomorrow."

"Wait! This is obviously the part where you ask me!"

I wasn't sure how to say this, but it felt like, even though it sounded like I was being given a choice here, I actually wasn't.

"All right. Say it."

*"You just threw that out there! Like you don't even care!
Ugh, I can't stand that!"*

"...Please say it."

"Hm? Oh nooo, what should I doooo?"

I refrained from saying what I wanted to say back to her and waited for Kei to keep speaking.

"...I love you."

It was short, and she laughed a little when she said it. Well, no, actually, she sounded bashful.

"Goodnight, Kiyotaka."

"Yeah, goodnight."

After I hung back, the words Kei spoke, "*I love you*," reverberated in my ears.

"It's not bad, huh," I muttered to myself.

This thing called romantic love was really interesting. That was what I thought to myself during that moment, that night.

7.1

THE DATE HAD CHANGED. It was now August 9th, and we had little time remaining on the ship. It was after one in the morning, and most of the students were fast asleep. Three people were getting together at the late-night bar, which was only available to adults.

"Ugh, I'm beat," grumbled Hoshinomiya, slumped over the bar counter. "Why do we teachers have to work so late every single day, anyway? My skin's gonna get all rough. I wish we had a summer vacation too."

"You got plenty of rest, didn't you?" replied Chabashira. "You should have been able to get enough of a break on the fifth and sixth days."

"That's just two days, though, y'know?" Hoshinomiya said. "And we were so busy yesterday and today. And seriously, what's that whole treasure hunt bonus game thing? Sheesh, I wish we got a bonus!"

"I understand how you feel, but we're working adults, Chie," Chabashira said, sitting on Hoshinomiya's right. "We're not getting a long summer vacation like the kids."

Sitting to the left of Hoshinomiya, Mashima urged her to hang in there. "What we're going through isn't that big of a deal, at least not when you think about all the effort the students put in for two weeks on the island."

"Don't force reality onto me... I don't wanna hear it, I don't wanna hear it!" whined Hoshinomiya, covering both her ears with her hands and shaking her head. "Anyway, at least let us have a little vacation while we're on this boat. I mean, it's not fair that the students can access everything, the pool, the movie theater, anything, while we can't. Isn't that right?"

Hoshinomiya couldn't accept the situation. She and the other teachers could only look on in envy, day after day.

"That's the job," said Mashima.

"When you're a working adult, that's how things normally are, Chie," added Chabashira.

"Ah! No way! I just can't even with you workaholics!" huffed Hoshinomiya, now holding her hands over her ears more forcefully than before.

However, a moment later, she raised her right hand, and spoke to the bartender.

"I'd like a stiff drink." She slapped the countertop with her left hand repeatedly. "Something strong enough to let me escape from reality. Bartender's choice, please."

"Good grief... You never change, do you?" said Chabashira with an exasperated sigh.

"Because my goal is to stay young and beautiful forever?" teased Hoshinomiya.

"That's not what I mean," said Chabashira.

"Then what?" asked Hoshinomiya.

"...Nothing, never mind. It would be pointless to try and explain it," said Chabashira.

Shortly after Hoshinomiya ordered her drink, Mashima and Chabashira ordered beers for themselves. When they had all gotten their drinks, they raised their glasses for a toast.

"Anyway, though, about this special exam," Chabashira said. "It's really been a series of strange and rough developments. Way too many unplanned things happened."

"Some students were seriously injured, and there were watch malfunctions that were clearly the result of students doing whatever they wanted," Hoshinomiya agreed. "And then there was the fact that only third-years ended up getting expelled. Totally unexpected."

She took a sip of the cocktail that had been brought to her, and then let out a sigh.

"Just as we thought, the problem is that we gave our students too much freedom," she said. "Also, even though we didn't get any reports about it, don't you get the feeling that boys

and girls were definitely doing *you know what* in places where we couldn't see them?"

"I'd like to think that, at the very least, *that* line wasn't crossed," replied Mashima.

"You're being naïve, Mashima-kun," Hoshinomiya said. "You can't stop a young girl's intense passion just by shooting them some glares on occasion."

"Only according to you," snapped Chabashira.

After Chabashira flatly shot her down, Hoshinomiya immediately requested a refill.

"We're going to get busy again once the summer vacation ends," said Chabashira.

"Ugh. I can't take it anymore," said Hoshinomiya. "I don't want to be a teacher who works herself into the ground for a low monthly salary. I wanna be able to *buy* something."

"All you've been doing is grumbling since we got here," said Chabashira.

"Well, yeah, of course. I wanted to complain, that's exactly why I set up this meeting," said Hoshinomiya, without a hint of shame in her voice. She then proceeded to start on her second drink.

"You never change, Chie," Chabashira said. "Though that's one of the good things about you."

Chabashira then requested some nuts as a light snack.

"Anyway though, I am relieved about how this uninhabited island exam turned out. That the second-years didn't lose," said Hoshinomiya.

"The fact that it was only third-years who got expelled was unexpected, though, and eerie," said Chabashira.

Mashima was now stuck in the middle as the others changed seats, quietly listening to Hoshinomiya and Chabashira's conversation. However, just as they were about to move onto another topic, he brought his half-full glass of beer down on the countertop, somewhat forcefully.

"The second-years are doing well," he said. "However, on the other hand, that could end up inviting trouble."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hoshinomiya asked. "That it's a bad thing that they're trying their best?"

"It's not as though the school wishes for anyone to be expelled," said Mashima, "but technically, hardly anyone has been expelled from the second-year grade level through the special exams so far."

"Technically,' yeah, I guess. Still, the school half-forced students to choose one of their own to be expelled before. Doesn't that still count as an expulsion?" argued Hoshinomiya.

The three of them all clearly remembered what happened during the In-Class Vote.

"I'd like to hope there won't be any more special exams like that in the future, where students don't have any way out," said Chabashira.

Even Chabashira, who usually treated the students in her classes coldly, felt a bit of heartache. She couldn't agree with the idea of forcing students who hadn't made any mistakes into a corner. That was her position. Both she and Hoshinomiya were of the same opinion on that point. However, Mashima's face remained grim. When Chabashira noticed that, she looked into his eyes, as if she were trying to peer into his thoughts.

"Wait, don't tell me they actually *are* preparing another special exam that will force students to be expelled... Are they?"

"Something like the In-Class Vote that we held last year isn't something the school administrators could put together just like that," said Mashima.

"In that case, there's no problem then," said Chabashira. "If there's no system in place that will force students into expulsion, then my class will make it through."

"Oh, what's this?" Hoshinomiya reached over Mashima's back to poke Chabashira in the side. "You're sure talking a big game now, Sae-chan."

"Knock it off," said Chabashira, somewhat angrily, as she grabbed hold of Hoshinomiya's hand. Hoshinomiya shot her a sharp look.

"You're not thinking that you'll actually make it to Class A, are you?" she asked.

"...No one's saying anything like that," Chabashira replied. "All I'm trying to say is that the class I have this year is superior to ones from past years."

"Hmm?" replied Hoshinomiya.

The mood was tense, like everyone was on pins and needles. Mashima chugged the remaining half of his beer.

"It's true that there won't be any forced expulsions," he said. "However..."

Chabashira and Hoshinomiya both directed their gazes at Mashima, who was struggling to find the right words.

"The outline for the next special exam was released the other day," he said. "To tell you the truth, it's the first time in eleven years this special exam has been implemented."

"Eleven years... We're twenty-nine this year, so... It's from back when we were in our third year of high school?" said Hoshinomiya. "That's unusual, isn't it? For such an old special exam to be adopted again, I mean."

Many of her memories from her high school days had faded away, long buried in the back of her mind. If someone were to ask her to immediately recall what kinds of conversations she had or what sorts of special exams she had back then, she wouldn't be able to answer.

"The school implements special exams according to a year-long schedule," said Mashima. "If we take that a step further, it's based on a four-year rotation. You understand as much, right?"

"That's so that the contents of the special exams aren't leaked to the children who are currently here, right?" replied Hoshinomiya.

Throughout its history, the Advanced Nurturing High School had carried out numerous special exams. The exams were varied in cadence, ranging from those that had been conducted only once ever to those that were so versatile that they were implemented on a quadrennial basis.

"Of course, there are instances where the same special exams are intentionally brought back repeatedly over a brief period of time," Mashima added, "and there are also some special exams implemented for the purpose of information sharing, but essentially, they are on a pre-determined rotation. However, depending on the year-to-year trends, the school will sometimes implement a special exam from further back than four years."

"So, you're saying that it's not that unusual for an old special exam to be re-run?" asked Chabashira.

"That's right. As long as it's not a particularly 'problematic' special exam, that is," he replied.

Though Mashima had phrased that in a very suggestive way that was clearly implying something, neither Chabashira nor Hoshinomiya dwelled on it too deeply. If anything, they were more eager for a special exam that was set to begin anew.

"Maybe Sae-chan and I will end up fighting one another," remarked Hoshinomiya.

"You sound like you're hoping that's what's going to happen," said Chabashira. "Do you think you can beat us if we fight?"

"It's not like that. But it's probably better than fighting against Ryuu-en-kun's class or Sakayanagi-san's class, right?" said Hoshinomiya, grinning. She exhaled, her breath smelling of alcohol.

"My class has grown quite a bit," Chabashira said. "Don't go thinking it'll be that easy."

"Oh? Wow, to think you'd say something like that, Sae-chan," said Hoshinomiya. "You're acting all tough because you've got that special boy in your class, aren't you? Ayanokouji-kun?"

"It's certainly true that Ayanokouji is a gem," Chabashira replied. "But there are many students in my class that I feel have

potential too."

"Oh? But aren't you relying on Ayanokouji-kun too heavily, Sae-chan?" asked Hoshinomiya.

"What in the world is that supposed to mean? When did I start relying on him?"

Their conversation might have seemed like it was a typical exchange for the two of them, but for Mashima, it left him struck with terror as he sat between them. If he continued listening to their conversation in silence, an argument was going to break out within minutes.

"Let's leave it at that," he cut in. "There's no point in arguing about this now."

"You're right. I might've gotten a little heated there," Hoshinomiya admitted, apologetically.

She then proceeded to gulp down the rest of her alcohol, her glass now empty.

"You're going too fast," said Mashima.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," she insisted. "I'm not such a lightweight that this much would do me in so easily."

"That's not what I mean," he said. "I'm saying that it's going to affect your work tomorrow... I mean, today."

"Don't worry. It's not going to affect me." Hoshinomiya showed no signs that she was going to stop drinking and ordered a third.

"In that case, let's talk about this before you get too far gone... Here, take a look at the outline for the upcoming special exam."

Mashima proceeded to navigate to the page on his phone before sitting it down on the countertop.

"The important bit is the name of the special exam," he said. "You'll understand right away once you see it."

"The name?" asked Hoshinomiya.

"Read it," said Mashima.

Hoshinomiya and Chabashira exchanged looks and then peered down at the phone, almost in sync. The instant Chabashira saw it, she gasped. Hoshinomiya did too. It was the name of a special exam that Chabashira and Hoshinomiya had experienced firsthand when they were students. The notification stated that it had been decided that the special exam would commence at the start of the second semester.

"The special exam from eleven years ago... Even though it was a while back, you should remember it well," said Mashima.

Chabashira looked at the name of the special exam over and over again and found herself at a loss for words. Hoshinomiya turned away from the phone and held the third drink that she had ordered in her hand, after it had been delivered to her. She looked at her reflection in the glass, and then suddenly wore a self-deprecating smile.

"I never imagined that this special exam would be implemented again..." she said softly.

Chabashira was unable to respond. She simply cast her eyes downward, silently.

"I had thought for sure that the In-Class Vote from last year was... I thought that was supposed to have been a substitute for *this*?" Hoshinomiya's eyes were on Mashima, looking for confirmation.

"In the end, the school had no other choice but to use it, and for a similar purpose," he said. "From the sounds of it, if any of the second-year students had been expelled as a result of the uninhabited island exam, the next exam would have been something different."

"Well, I suppose there's nothing we can do about it, then," said Hoshinomiya. "The school can't purposefully design written exams to be so difficult that they'll get students expelled. So instead, this hugely problematic, nasty special exam is coming up because Sae-chan's class is just too good?" She strongly emphasized that last point, as if she was finding fault with Chabashira.

"It's too early to decide that it's hugely problematic," Mashima said. "Depending on how you look at it, it's nothing more than a trifling exam."

"But if we make one wrong choice, it could turn into a thorny issue. Isn't that right, Sae-chan?" said Hoshinomiya, turning to Chabashira.

Chabashira had her eyes closed and wouldn't answer with a yes or no.

"That's right... You two suffered quite a bit with this particular special exam, didn't you?" said Mashima.

"It was in our third semester of our third year of school," Hoshinomiya said. "I've never forgotten about what happened that day."

Her words were directed at herself and at Chabashira, as though she were being nostalgic for the olden days.

"Come on, how long are you planning to stay silent?" she said. "Don't you have anything you want to say?"

Even after that question, Chabashira couldn't utter a word. It was as if she couldn't wrap her mind around what was happening.

"Pathetic," spat Hoshinomiya.

After letting out a grumble of complaint, Hoshinomiya ignored the nonresponsive Chabashira and turned her attention back to Mashima.

"What do you think, Mashima-kun?" she asked. "Will there be...any students who get expelled in the next special exam?"

"Though you could say that Class A is head and shoulders above the competition, there is still a chance there could be an upset from any of the classes below, meaning B through D," he replied. "If a class is determined to win it, there's a good chance that they could end up on the same path that we are."

"I have a feeling that...we're going to find ourselves in a dire situation," muttered Hoshinomiya.

She requested a fourth drink from the bartender. The pace she was drinking at was getting faster and faster.

"Well, I think that my class will probably be *okay*, but in a bad sense. What about Sae-chan's class? Right now, they're flying high, and they're shooting up from the bottom at an incredible pace. If they increase the amount of Class Points they have, they could jump up to Class B in one go. If it were me—"

"I'm going back to my room," announced Chabashira, after being completely silent for so long. She still hadn't even finished her first drink.

"Just when I thought you were finally going to talk, you say you're leaving. What a party pooper," said Hoshinomiya.

"Sorry, but you two continue on without me."

Chabashira turned her back to them, but then Hoshinomiya's expression completely changed. Before, she was laid-back, like she usually was, but she was different now.

"Hey!" She slammed her now-empty glass down forcefully. Then, she shot up to her feet.

Perhaps it was because Hoshinomiya's actions had surprised not only Chabashira, but Mashima too, but Chabashira looked somewhat shaken, unable to say anything. It was probably fortunate that they were the only three customers in the bar.

"How long are you going to chase after that boring love of yours?!" Hoshinomiya yelled.

"...What are you talking about?" asked Chabashira.

"Do you know how old we are now? We're twenty-nine now, you understand? That romance was years ago!"

"Hey, I think you drank too m—"

"You be quiet, Mashima-kun!" snapped Hoshinomiya.

"..."

The bartender had been wiping glasses nearby but sensed that this was no trifling matter. He stepped out to use the restroom.

"It's like the clock stopped for you when you were a third-year in high-school. You've stayed there in your head all this time, but yet the years keep coming—we're just getting older and older.

And now you're just selfishly putting all that baggage on the kids you've got? Seriously? Are you an idiot?" shouted Hoshinomiya.

Chabashira simply left without saying a word, not responding to the barrage of abuse. There was a period of silence, and Hoshinomiya and Mashima were left alone at the bar.

"Well, guess she's gone," said Hoshinomiya, as if she found it to be an anticlimax.

Disappointed, she grabbed Chabashira's unfinished drink and sat back down.

"You're a mean one too, Hoshinomiya," said Mashima.

"Well, I don't have a choice. I mean, it's bad enough that we're going to have this special exam, of all things."

"Because this is the exam that led to that divisive thing between you two."

"You know that if Sae-chan had chosen the right answer, we would've graduated from Class A?"

"...You're still bearing a grudge, even after all this time?" he asked.

"Of course I am," she replied. "We failed, and now I'm a teacher at this school. If things had gone the way they were supposed to, we should have been going on to a more glittering world..."

"I'm sure that life in the dorms must have been very difficult for you and Chabashira, since you two were rooming together," said Mashima.

"Well, sure, there was no way we could've lived together after what happened," sighed Hoshinomiya. "We might've ended up killing each other."

"You know, the fact that I can't say for certain that you're exaggerating...makes me terrified of you two," said Mashima.

Hoshinomiya grabbed a single strand of her hair and plucked it out.

"I thought you fixed that habit?" asked Mashima.

"Oh, sorry, I shouldn't have done that," she said. "I just did it without thinking... A strand of my precious hair... Want it?"

"No."

Mashima ignored the offering and instead turned his attention back to the bartender to request a second drink. Seeing this, Hoshinomiya requested a fourth for herself.

"Besides, sharing a room isn't a good idea," she added. "As long as things are going well, then it's fine. But if there's trouble, then a relationship can change dramatically. Like when romance or the future are involved."

In the blink of an eye, Hoshinomiya went back to wearing her usual facetious, bubbly expression. "Sheesh, even though the second-years all managed to make it through the island exam too. This school really does horrible stuff."

"Normally, a few students would get expelled each year," Mashima pointed out. "That's the policy that the school was built on. There are too many second-year students still here. However, the school fully recognized their efforts, and hence, we have this special exam. We still don't know what the result will be, though."

"That's true, I suppose, but...this exam brings out ugliness and weakness in people," said Hoshinomiya. "At the very least, the silver lining is that this is coming now for the second-years, after the first semester ended. Come to think of it, I'm guessing that the school recognizing their efforts has something to do with it, doesn't it?"

"The less time that students have left at school, the more value Class Points have, and the more difficult the special exams become," said Mashima. "I suppose that if you compare their situation to ours there's at least some relief there, since we went through this exam in the third semester of our third year."

"I am definitely not at fault... It's Sae-chan who was to blame..." muttered Hoshinomiya.

"That depends on your way of thinking. Both you and Chabashira made the right decision."

"I wonder about that." Hoshinomiya reached for her new drink, as it just was brought out to her, but her hand suddenly stopped.

"What's wrong?" asked Mashima.

"At the very least...my class won't make it to A," she said.

"What are you saying?"

"I already know it. I don't feel we can reach Sakayanagi-san's class. But... But, even still, I will never let Sae-chan's class graduate from A. For Sae-chan and me, graduating from Class A was our dearest wish. So, the girl who destroyed that dream has no right to have her own class graduate from A. Isn't that right, Mashima-kun?"

"...Aren't those separate issues?" he asked.

"They're not separate. Absolutely not."

"Besides, Ichinose's class is excellent," Mashima added. "There's still a path ahead for them to get to Class A. Actually, Ichinose's class may pass the upcoming special exam quite easily."

"That's not good enough. No matter how unjust a future awaits, you have to become a demon if you're going to win and reach Class A. Just like I tried to be."

"Even if it means people get expelled?" he asked.

"Even if it means people get expelled." Hoshinomiya paused to let out a sigh. "At any rate," she said, "Hirata, Kushida, Horikita, Kouenji, Ayanokouji... No matter how many times you think it over, it all seems so unfair, doesn't it?"

"As with previous years, it's a class filled with problem children," Mashima agreed. "But a strange sense of solidarity has developed there. It's as though they're eliminating their flaws, one by one."

"It'd be nice if the next special exam smashed that solidarity into pieces." Hoshinomiya was resting her head on Mashima's shoulder now. "I think I might've gotten too carried away, drunk... I want to rest for a little while. In your room, Mashima-kun."

"If you're going to sleep, go back to your own room," he replied.

"Grouch. Surely there was a slightly nicer way for you to say that?"

Mashima tried phrasing it more politely. "If you're going to rest, I think it would be better if you returned to your own room."

"You basically said the same exact thing!"

She grabbed hold of his large left arm and held it close to her body. However, Mashima forcefully pulled himself away.

"Are you bothered?" she asked.

"I'm not," he replied.

"I see. In that case, at least walk me back to my room. And then maybe we can drink more there? Until the morning."

"Sorry, but I'm going back to my room now. Don't drink too much, okay?" said Mashima.

"Don't you think this is a once-in-a-lifetime chance?" she asked.

"I'm sorry, but I have no intention of getting deeply involved with you nor Chabashira. It'll only lead to trouble."

"Such a stickler," sighed Hoshinomiya.

She quietly sipped her drink at the bar counter, where there was no one else around.

7.2

IT WAS THE SAME DAY that the teachers had gotten together to drink. The students, who didn't know anything about that, did things together with their friends to make memories during the remaining time they had left on the luxury cruise ship.

However, I, Horikita Suzune, had decided to use what little time I had left of my vacation for something else entirely.

There was a counter located in front of the entrance to the private pool, for the employees and the receptionists. If the pool was available for use, visitors were supposed to visit the reception and pay before using the pool. However, the private pool was apparently quite popular with students, so it was likely almost fully booked. Of course, that was convenient for me.

"Excuse me. I'm thinking of making a reservation for the private pool," I announced, speaking to the clerk at the reception counter.

The worker began giving a simple explanation of how things worked, and it sounded like they were quite familiar with giving it, perhaps because they had this same exact conversation with many other students over and over.

"Please enter your preferred time slot. If that time is already booked, you can join a waiting list," they added, handing me a clipboard.

I hadn't come here to enjoy the private pool. I actually came all the way here to get my hands on the clipboard that was now right before my eyes.

"Thank you, I'll borrow this," I announced.

The cafes and other areas throughout the ship all had reservation systems with tablets or machines. However, the private swimming pool had reservation times at fixed one-hour intervals, and reservations could be made several days in advance. As a result, all reservations were entered by filling out paper forms. I

pretended to search for a time to enter my reservation, paying attention to the handwriting of every entry written on the form.

If you had multiple people in a party use the private pool, you could have just one person fill out the form as a representative for the group. In truth, I had intended to settle my investigation via the treasure hunt yesterday. About half of the students in school had participated in that game, and the participation rate for first-year students had been over 66 percent.

I checked the names and handwriting of all the first-year students who had participated in the treasure hunt before it was over, but none of the candidates' handwriting matched the handwriting that I remembered. Did that mean that the person who gave me that note on the island just so happened to be among the 34 percent who didn't participate? Or, wait, did they perhaps decide *not* to participate in the event in order to avoid letting me match up their name and handwriting?

At any rate, I was continuing my search among the remaining 34 percent of first-year students. Still, though, what surprised me was the reservation rate for this private pool. Nearly all the time slots had been booked, including spots during the last day. It didn't cost anything to cancel a reservation as long as it was done one day before, so it was possible that some students might have put down times to hold them, just in case. But still, the private pool was quite popular.

There were spaces to write down the name of your group's representative and how many people were in your party, but there wasn't any need to write down your grade level. The handwriting that the note had been written in was truly beautiful. As I flipped through the papers on the clipboard, checking everyone's entries, however, I couldn't find any handwriting that was on that same level. I had a feeling that it wasn't going to be easy to find the owner, and things seemed to have turned out just as I imagined. You didn't often get the opportunity to check students' names and handwriting.

Since I hadn't found anything yet, this was going to be the start of a rather laborious process. I was going to need to look through every single name once again while checking them

against information in OAA. It wasn't like there were hundreds upon hundreds of reservations on this list or anything, but still, just the act of checking them all was going to be a time-consuming process. It would be easy for me to rule out students who had blatantly messy handwriting or who had distinct quirks, but I wanted to be clear and methodical about who could be excluded here.

I could exclude Kibayashi-kun from Class 1-B and Mochizuki-san from Class 1-D. And Etou-san could also be excluded, since I had already checked her handwriting before, when she participated in the treasure hunt game yesterday...

Thankfully, the person at the reception counter must have had a lot of duties to address, because they didn't seem to be observing me at all as I looked at the list of names with my phone in hand. Even so, this really wasn't easy to browse.

Just to be safe, I also checked through the list of names in the register for second-years and third-years who had participated in the treasure hunt game, but I couldn't find anyone who seemed to fit what I remembered. Who in the world had written that note...? By the time I had excluded the ninth person from my search, several minutes had already passed.

Just around the time that I felt like the receptionist was likely going to start feeling suspicious, someone unexpectedly called out to me from behind.

"Um, excuse me, are you going to be much longer?"

"Huh?! O-oh, yes, I'm sorry. I'm having a little trouble finding a time that will work for me and my friends."

I was so focused on the register that I hadn't noticed a student standing behind me. I had assumed that hardly anyone else would come by to make a reservation, but I wasn't so lucky... Anyway, making him wait for minutes longer while I continued to look through the list making exclusions from my search would be difficult. In that case, I decided that it would be better if I let this boy go ahead and make his reservation first. It didn't look like he was an upperclassman. He looked like a first-year.

"It seems like it will take a while yet for my group to come to a decision, so you can go ahead," I told him.

"Really? All right, if you don't mind. Thank you," he replied, taking the clipboard from me.

The student was tall—about as tall as Sudou-kun, maybe a little bit shorter. I waited for this visitor to finish writing down his reservation on the form while I fiddled around on my phone, acting as though I were messaging my friends. He decided on a time sooner than I expected, perhaps because there were limited times left that we could reserve. He must have finished entering this reservation quickly because he looked back to me.

"Thank you very much. Please excuse me," he said.

I took the register back from him, like we were switching places, and immediately proceeded to check the name of this first-year student who had entered his information.

"...There it is," I muttered to myself.

Representative name: Ishigami Kyou. Number of people who will be using the pool: five. He hadn't participated in the treasure hunt, so this was the first time I had seen his name. I looked him up on OAA as I already had the app open, and found out that he was in Class 1-A. His handwriting was so refined that if someone told me that he had been practicing his penmanship for many years, I would easily believe them. However, you often saw personal quirks in handwriting, as it was easy to develop those. The handwriting here didn't look as exemplary as what I saw on the uninhabited island. What I saw there was so perfect that it could have been printed by a machine.

Even so, the truth was that this handwriting came closest to it out of everything I had seen thus far. If I still had the original note on hand, I could have compared them in detail, but since Amasawa-san had ripped it to shreds, sadly I wasn't going to be able to do that. I couldn't say with absolute certainty that Ishigami-kun's handwriting was different from the writing on the note in my memory.

As I stared at the letters, my mind started to go blank, the characters in front of me ceasing to make any sense to my eyes. I

had been doing nothing but looking at people's writing since the other day, and it seemed like it was taking a toll on my brain.

"I'm sorry, could you wait for a minute?" I called out to Ishigami-kun as he walked away. I raised my voice somewhat, stopping him in his tracks.

He turned back to look at me, puzzled. I continued speaking.

"To tell you the truth, I finished discussing it with my friends, and it turns out that the time they settled on seems to be the same time you put down. Would you mind discussing this with me for a little while?"

No matter what topic of conversation we got into, I would like to find some kind of hint that would help me to determine whether or not he was the one who suggested Ayanokouji-kun would be expelled.

"Well, it's not like I *can't* discuss it with you, but I just told my group that I reserved that time, just now," he replied, holding up his phone face level, with the back facing me.

I had successfully managed to stop him for the time being so I could take this opportunity to connect with him. If the young man standing before me really was the person who had written that note on the uninhabited island, then there was a good chance that he knew me, even if I didn't know whether he had personally delivered the note to my tent.

"Would you please let me see the register once again?" he asked.

"Of course," I said. "I'm sorry for the trouble."

"Oh, no, I don't mind at all, Horikita-senpai."

When I heard him say my name, my heart rate shot up a little.

"...It seems you know my name," I remarked. "I don't remember ever talking to you before, though."

"I memorized most of the names and faces of the academically gifted second-year students, more or less, during the

first special exam that was held shortly after I started school," he explained.

The convenient OAA app was useful to us in that it allowed us to memorize names of older and younger students that we didn't normally encounter.

"You have a good memory," I said. "I also have intended to commit academically gifted students to memory, at least to some degree, but I didn't recognize you, Ishigami-kun."

"That's because I'm not one to stand out," he replied.

The discussion was proceeding smoothly, without any trouble or any suspicions being cast my way. I wasn't getting anything definitive, but I got the feeling that there was something off about his handwriting after all. Still, I would feel bad if I kept him any longer, so I decided to let him go.

"May I ask you one question, Horikita-senpai?"

This time, however, I was the one on the receiving end, with Ishigami-kun asking me something.

"Just earlier, you mentioned that you also intended to commit more academically gifted students to memory, but you said that you didn't recognize me. Is that right?"

"Yes, what of it?"

I didn't remember saying anything strange, but...

"You really don't remember me?" he asked, looking for confirmation, as if he were making doubly sure.

"I really don't, no."

The truth was that I had no memory of Ishigami-kun.

"Well then, when did you find out that I had a high level of academic ability?" he asked. "If you were discussing reservation times with your friends, I would think that it would've taken you a bit of time for you to have booted up the OAA app and checked there."

That was a sharp observation that I hadn't thought of. I couldn't respond to it immediately. There wasn't anything strange about looking up his name on the register. However, there was

surely something strange about me knowing that he was academically gifted, as Ishigami-kun himself had pointed out. He should have pointed that out much earlier in the conversation, but he waited to bring it up now. It was as though he was watching for the right moment to strike, for when I was feeling relieved that the conversation seemed to have gone by without incident.

"I just so happened to have had the OAA app already open, and it was running in the background," I replied. "Your name was in the time slot that I wanted to reserve, Ishigami-kun, so I quickly looked up your name and face to make sure it was you."

As far as excuses went, it was a little weak, but it wasn't like it was entirely impossible. Ishigami-kun finished checking things over with his friends over the phone, and nonchalantly changed his reservation time.

"I see. I humbly apologize for being suspicious of you," he said.

"It's all right," I told him. "I'm sure you must have been a little surprised, so it's understandable that you'd suspect something."

"Well then, if you'd please excuse me."

"Oh, um... By the way, Ishigami-kun, thank you, really. About the reservation."

"I don't mind. But..."

He was about to say something else, but he seemed to hesitate a bit just before getting the words out.

"But what?" I asked.

"Nothing. See you again sometime, Horikita-senpai."

"All right. Another time."

The situation didn't turn out the way I expected, and Ishigami-kun turned his back to me and walked away. I didn't get the sense that he was the one, judging from his handwriting, but I was strangely curious about him. For the time being, it was probably best to say he was somewhere in a gray area. He was possibly the person in question, but he was leaning toward being

innocent. I looked at him go, watching his back until he disappeared from view. Afterward, I stood completely still, clutching the register.

Now that I had made a reservation, it would look unnatural for me to sit here and carefully pore over the list. I needed to make sure I didn't forget to contact the reception desk to cancel my reservation after a little time had passed. Moreover, since I didn't gain any clues, I would need to think about what my next move would be.

"You've got quite a serious look on your face there, Horikita-san."

Hoshinomiya-sensei appeared, and she called out to me, which was unusual. She seemed to be here with Kanzaki-kun, a student in her class. Our eyes met.

"Really? I don't think I look any different than normal, though," I answered.

"That so? Well, you might be right."

What I found more concerning was the fact that Hoshinomiya-sensei had her hand against the wall.

"Um, are you not feeling well?" I asked.

"Oh, this? Don't worry," she replied. "It's just a disease that's specific to adults."

A disease that was specific to adults? What kind of disease could that possibly be...?

"Anyway, that cool customer back there... Um, who was that again?" Hoshimoniya-sensei asked. "I feel like I've seen him before."

The one she had just passed moments ago could be none other than Ishigami-kun.

Kanzaki-kun, standing beside Hoshinomiya-sensei, answered before I could. "Ishigami, from Class 1-A."

"Huh? A first-year?" Hoshinomiya-sensei said. "Hm, well, I suppose if he were a second-year or third-year, it'd be natural that you know him, but..."

For some reason, she cocked her head to the side, puzzled.

"Is something the matter?" I asked. "Do you have any thoughts regarding him?" I figured I would give it a try, if I could get any clues this way, no matter what they might be.

"Yes, well, I feel like I saw him once before at school quite some time ago...but perhaps I'm wrong. Actually, sorry Horikita-san, but I can't hold it anymore!"

Unsteady on her feet, Hoshinomiya-sensei made a mad dash for the deck. I followed her, wondering what was going on.

"Agh! Blargh! Hic!"

I didn't really follow what was happening, but she cried out in a pained voice. It was followed up by an especially loud gurgling sound from her throat. She grabbed hold of the deck railing, trying to keep her mouth shut.

"Blarrrrrgh!!!"

Then, glistening (but not exactly in a beautiful way or anything, of course) vomit flew from her mouth, carried away by the sea breeze. I simply stood there and stared, along with Kanzaki-kun, who arrived a little later. What in the world was I being shown right now...?

"Sensei... I think there are various problems with what you just did," I told her, speaking from the standpoints of both hygiene and morality.

"Ugh, it's a combination of a hangover and seasickness. Sorry, Horikita-s—blarggh!"

I supposed at least the silver lining here was that there was an ocean beneath us...

"Sorry, I'm going to head back to my room and sleep after all... I know we were in the middle of talking, Kanzaki-kun. I'm sorry," said Hoshinomiya-sensei.

"Please don't worry about it," he told her. "I'll come speak with you another time."

"Also, sorry for showing you that spectacle... Urp!"

She waved to us gently, but then quickly brought her hand back to her mouth and then retreated inside the ship.

"She sure seems...busy," I observed.

"I'm sure it must be perplexing if you're not used to seeing it," answered Kanzaki-kun.

"How many times have you seen something like that?" I asked.

"We've seen things like that about three times now, in morning homeroom."

That was... All I could say was that her class had my condolences.

Now that Hoshinomiya-sensei was out of sight, I gently bowed to Kanzaki-kun, and started to leave.

"Horikita, what kind of connection do you have with Ishigami?" he asked, bringing up something unexpected the moment I was about to go.

"What do you mean?"

That was the only way I could respond, as the meaning behind his words was unclear.

"You were talking to him earlier, weren't you?" he asked.

"Judging from what you're saying, it seems like you're familiar with him too, and in no small way," I said. "You knew his name."

"That's because I had a lot of opportunities to make contact with the first-years. It was because of the special exam that was held shortly after we started our second year," he replied.

Many of the best first-year students had been taken in by Sakayanagi-san's and Ryuuen-kun's classes. I supposed it wasn't strange if Kanzaki-kun had come to know Ishigami-kun through that process, but... I was a little surprised that Kanzaki-kun, who normally didn't talk to me, suddenly jumped into a conversation with me on this topic.

"We just had a little scheduling conflict while making reservations for the private pool," I told him. "That was all."

Though I offered a simple explanation of what had happened, Kanzaki-kun looked like he wasn't quite convinced.

"By the way, from your perspective, does he strike you as a trustworthy underclassman?" I asked.

I still wasn't sure exactly how substantial this clue was and how much he was worth, as a witness. That was exactly why I wanted to get as much information on him from as many people as possible.

"His academic skills are nothing to scoff at," replied Kanzaki-kun. "You can tell as much from OAA."

"That's true. He has an A rating, so no objections there." In contrast, his physical abilities were a little poor, with a rating of only D-. "However, being academically capable is not the same as being trustworthy."

"What's your reason for wanting to know if you can trust Ishigami? I would imagine that's entirely irrelevant to your reservation conversation."

Right now, we were smack-dab in the middle of our summer vacation. No special exams were being held. It made sense for Kanzaki-kun to find my question odd. I asked because I thought he seemed interested, but I supposed I'd just drop it.

"It's all right, don't worry about it," I said. "I just wanted to ask for some reason. That's all."

I decided to change the flow of the conversation so as not to give away anything about the handwriting issue. However, he didn't let it slide, and kept pursuing that point.

"It's not as though *don't* have any information as to whether you can trust that young man though," he said.

He phrased that in a strangely roundabout way, but it meant Kanzaki-kun did know something about Ishigami-kun.

"If you answer my questions," he continued, "I don't mind telling you about Ishigami."

I had decided earlier that Ishigami-kun was in a gray area, leaning more toward being innocent, so it wasn't necessary for me

to force it and pursue the matter further. However, I couldn't help but notice that Kanzaki-kun had a certain look on his face, different from the calm expression he usually wore.

"Questions? What questions?" I asked.

"I've been contemplating your class for quite a while now, Horikita," he replied.

"...My class?"

"Among those in your class, I would particularly like to know...about Ayanokouji's true abilities."

"I couldn't give you an answer, not even if you ask me something like that," I told him. "Can't you ask him directly?"

Though I was inwardly surprised to hear Ayanokouji-kun's name brought up, I tried to sidestep the conversation.

"He likely wouldn't be honest with me even if I did ask him, would he?" said Kanzaki-kun.

"Probably not. However, it's not like you can trust the words coming out of my mouth either, right?"

"Even if I can only get a single piece of information to use as reference, that'd be fine," said Kanzaki-kun.

"We've been around each other for a long time now, but I barely know a thing about him," I insisted.

"Saying that you don't know a thing sounds like a huge exaggeration," he said. "If you're styling yourself as a leader who brings the class together, you should be at least somewhat familiar with your classmates' situations."

"I haven't earned the trust of all my classmates yet," I admitted. "And that includes Ayanokouji-kun."

I did not yet have the qualifications necessary to proudly call myself a leader. At the very least, I had yet to reach the levels of Sakayanagi-san, Ichinose-san, and Ryuu-en-kun.

"So, you can't give me a straightforward answer," Kanzaki-kun said. "He's a valuable asset to your class after all then."

"Well, I suppose the fact that he makes you feel so wary should at least provide some idea of how valuable he is."

Regardless of whether Ayanokouji-kun had any abilities or not, if Kanzaki-kun was using up some of his focus on contemplating that matter, then I was grateful for the reprieve.

"Is there anything else you'd like to ask me?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "That's all that concerned me at the moment."

If that was the case, then I supposed I had no choice but to accept that he wasn't going to tell me anything about Ishigami-kun. But just as I was thinking that I shouldn't press the matter too strongly...

"The student named Ishigami is brilliant, compassionate, and highly competent," Kanzaki-kun said. "He has already been recognized as the leader of Class 1-A, and his peers have no doubt placed their full confidence in him. Saying that he is the ideal combination of Ichinose and Sakayanagi would probably be the best way to describe him."

"I'm sure that means to his classmates, he's quite dependable," I remarked.

"However, that extends only to his allies," Kanzaki-kun went on. "It does not apply to anyone who might threaten his friends. He's the type of person who would bare his fangs without mercy."

It was difficult for me to picture this because he looked like such a mild-mannered student.

"In that case, I wonder what kind of attitude he'd have with someone who is neither friend nor foe," I mused.

"If they were neither friend nor foe, he would be indifferent."

"Indifferent?"

Kanzaki-kun, who had been standing in front of me and speaking, stopped moving.

"...Yes," he said. "He wouldn't care about anyone who is meaningless to him."

"He just told me, 'See you again sometime.' Would he make a comment like that, implying he'd be seeing them again, to someone he was indifferent to?" I asked.

"Ishigami? No, he's not the sort of guy who would casually make a comment like that. Did he really say that to you?"

"As long as I didn't hear him incorrectly, then yes, said he did. At any rate, you seem to know a great deal about him."

I wondered if there was something between Kanzaki-kun and Ishigami-kun, something totally unrelated to the case I was pursuing.

"I don't know a great deal, no. He's never addressed me before," Kanzaki-kun mumbled, mostly to himself. "The truth of the matter is that guy only shows an interest in those who are either friend or foe. So, in other words, he has already classified you as one or the other, Horikita."

"Even if you're saying that, I don't really understand," I said.

Today was the first time I had ever made contact with Ishigami-kun. Before today, we had never met directly, nor had we even exchanged a casual greeting. Any ordinary analysis would show that I was neither clearly a friend nor clearly a foe.

"It's always possible that you could unknowingly have some kind of relationship," Kanzaki-kun pointed out.

"Are you suggesting that my actions are indirectly impacting him somehow?" I asked.

"That possibility cannot be ruled out."

There was something about what Kanzaki-kun was telling me that I couldn't quite wrap my mind around. He seemed lost in thought for a bit before finally muttering something else to me quietly.

"I'll give you just one piece of advice. Don't get involved with Ishigami any further."

"I wasn't planning to get involved with him in the first place," I said. "While you're handing out advice, are there any other first-year students that I should be wary of?"

"Any others?" he repeated.

So far, there wasn't anyone I could identify as a clear suspect in my case. I wanted a lead. If he mentioned Amasawa-san or some other student, then it would give his statement more depth. That's what I had thought, anyway, but...

"The only first-year student you should be concerned about is Ishigami," said Kanzaki-kun, before turning his back to me and walking away.

While he was leaving, he passed by Ibuki-san. She was looking over at me and she didn't even bother making eye contact with him.

"You close buddies with Kanzaki?" she asked.

"Um, no, not at all?" I replied. "We just so happened to have something in common to talk about today. What's up?"

"I hate the way his face looks all clever. Like yours."

It was pointless to take to Ibuki-san seriously.

"What were you talking about?" she asked me.

"About a first-year student, Ishigami-kun. He's a student whose handwriting looks somewhat similar to the handwriting that we're looking for."

I brought up Ishigami-kun's profile in OAA.

1-A Ishigami Kyou

Academic Ability: A (95)

Physical Ability: D- (25)

Adaptability: B+ (77)

Societal Contribution: D (31)

Overall Ability: B- (61)

"Moreover, with the way he spoke and how he acted, it was like I couldn't see what he was really like," I added. "It was a little unsettling."

"Hm? So, what, does that mean you find him suspicious?" said Ibuki-san.

"I'm not so sure. I was thinking that he was in a gray area, and that he was probably innocent, but... If his Physical Ability assessment score doesn't actually reflect his true abilities, then I would start to suspect him in a heartbeat."

That being said, there was no way I could ascertain the truth at this point in time.

"This Ishigami kid isn't your guy," Ibuki-san declared suddenly, as if to reject my reasoning.

"How can you say that for sure?" I asked.

"The day before yesterday, I was doing some people watching, looking down at folks having fun in the pool from the floor up above," she said.

"By yourself? That's sad," I remarked.

"Huh? What, I should stop talking now?"

"It was a joke. Keep going."

"For the love of... Well, he's tall, so he kinda stood out when he came into view," Ibuki-san went on. "He's got a regular bod. He doesn't do any upper or lower body training. He definitely does not work out. I mean, you're expecting whoever you're looking for to be strong like Amasawa and Ayanokouji, right?"

"Is it possible that the reason you went to the pool was...so that you could find people who worked out?" I asked.

Ibuki-san shrugged her shoulders, as if to say, "*You just finally realized that?*" She then continued speaking.

"Strength's always proportional to the body. If someone can really move, then they're definitely gonna be toned, and if they're strong, their muscles are gonna be jacked."

If this were a layperson's assessment, that would be one thing, but though she was lacking in some ways, Ibuki-san was a martial artist. If she saw Ishigami-kun's bare upper body, then this data was highly credible.

"I see that you placed yourself in a good spot to make observations, then," I said.

If Ibuki-san's information was correct, then Ishigami-kun's Physical Ability rating was unmistakably somewhere around D-. Of course, the person I was after might not necessarily be as physically strong as I had first guessed they might be, but... At any rate, it felt safe to conclude that Ishigami-kun was completely innocent.

"Anyway, our holiday is almost over," I said, "so we'll continue once the second semester begins."

"How long is this gonna take?" Ibuki-san sighed.

It wasn't like I didn't understand that she felt exasperated, but we had no conclusive evidence right now. We were just going to have to keep chipping away at this for a while.

7.3

RIIGHT NOW, many students were heading to the various facilities around the ship. Amasawa Ichika from Class 1-A, however, was heading over to a guest cabin where a lone student was waiting for her.

"What excuse are you gonna give if one of your roommates happens to come back this time?" Amasawa asked. "Well, that's what I'd normally want to know, but considering it's *you* of all people, I bet you've already planned everything so meticulously so that they're definitely not going to be coming back now, huh?"

Despite Amasawa's questioning, the other student didn't answer, only responding with a thin smile.

Amasawa went on, "You understand the current situation, right? Nanase-chan, Horikita-senpai, even Ryuuen-senpai... Everybody who is anybody is looking for you out there in a frenzy right now. You're okay with just leaving things be?"

"It's fine. An interesting plan is playing out."

"In that case... Takuya, please share the details of the plan with me."

Yagami Takuya, a student from Class 1-B, quietly got off his bed and stood up.

"You never learn either, do you, Ichika?" he replied.

Amasawa, wary of Yagami as he approached her, stared at him intensely. She didn't even blink as she watched him move, alert to the possibility that she'd get hit with some kind of intense attack the moment her eyes were closed.

"I wouldn't raise my fist in a place like this," said Yagami.

"I'd like to believe that too," replied Amasawa.

"It's certainly true that you are no longer on the White Room's side. That means to me, you're an enemy." Yagami reached out with his left arm and gently touched Amasawa's bangs. "I'm

sure that's what you think, anyway... But actually, I don't even recognize you as that much."

"Oh, wow, you're really letting me have it."

"Just a joke," said Yagami. "It's just that now that you're a civilian, I can't afford to do anything careless."

"I might be recording this conversation we're having right now," teased Amasawa.

"If that's all you're doing, then go ahead, it's fine."

Yagami knew there wouldn't be any problems for him even if she were to be making a recording. If Amasawa were on Ayanokouji's side, all she needed to do was talk to him directly about Yagami. Even if what she said wasn't substantial enough for the second-year to believe it as the truth, it would still make him as wary of Yagami as possible.

"I called you here because I wanted to find out your true intentions," he said. "Have you been getting in the way of my plans again and again because you really want to protect Ayanokouji-senpai? With all your heart?"

"I ain't got a clue what you're talkin' about right meow."

Yagami smiled at Amasawa as she joked around, playing the fool. Then, he pulled his fingers back from her hair.

"There are too many things for me to mention, so let me ask about one thing you did that forced me to change my plans," he told her. "Why did you sabotage Kushida and Kurachi when I sent them after Ayanokouji during the uninhabited island exam?"

"You already know without me even having to explain, don't you?" said Amasawa. "Because it was a painful strategy for Ayanokouji-senpai. I didn't want anyone to film a scene where Ayanokouji-senpai was fighting with Nanase-chan and Kurachi-kun, two completely irrelevant people. I mean, since it's Ayanokouji-senpai we're talking about, I'm sure he would've made it through regardless. But even so, there was no avoiding the fact it would've been disturbing footage."

"You're right about that," he conceded. "It is true that he would've dealt with the matter without any issues, whether it was

Nanase or Kurachi. But still, if Kushida had gotten a recording of Ayanokouji handling the situation, we could've used that as one of our bargaining chips. Even if Ayanokouji had forcefully snatched the tablet away from Kushida, he wouldn't have been able to get past the password lock, and if he were to physically destroy her tablet, which would've led to other problems."

Amasawa had anticipated all of this and thwarted his plans.

"Are you mad?" she asked.

"Heavens no," said Yagami. "I think we actually were able to come up with a more interesting production as a result. I also learned a lot about his personality and how well he reads things. He specifically *didn't* choose to do a GPS search when he sensed that he was about to be attacked. He figured out exactly what was going on and decided that searching would've only been a hindrance. A normal person would have done a GPS search like Nanase did and gone after Kurachi or Kushida. That's just standard practice."

Even after they returned to the ship, there had been no change in Ayanokouji's behavior regarding that point.

"And as a result, Nanase-chan and Ryuuuen-senpai have set foot in the forest and gotten themselves lost, huh," said Amasawa. "It seems like neither of them have made contact yet, but even if they do try and question Utomiya-kun, it wouldn't do them any good. He has nothing to do with this anyway. But what about Horikita-senpai? It seems like she got a clue from you, Takuya, from that piece of paper you wrote for her. She's trying to track you down based on what she saw on it. It was kind of a bright idea for her to have everyone sign their names by hand on a register for the treasure hunt."

"I'm sure that if I give her a few more hints, she'll reach me eventually," said Yagami.

He didn't seem to be feeling hurried at all. If anything, it seemed like he simply was waiting for just the right moment to arrive.

"You planted that piece of paper on purpose?" asked Amasawa.

"Of course, that was also part of my production. I want her to try her best to reach me."

Yagami was going to continue to throw out hints here and there in the future for that purpose. Amasawa could understand that quite well without even needing to ask him directly.

"And what comes after?" she asked. "If she matches your handwriting to what was on the note, that information is going to reach Ayanokouji-senpai's ears too, y'know."

If that happened, Yagami would come under suspicion as a potential White Room student.

"He doesn't trust me to begin with, and I assume that he's already aware of some of the lies I've spread around. I engaged in this with a roundabout way of doing things because originally, Tsukishiro was in the way. Now that he'd retreated, the need for me to do that has diminished. There's no point in beating Ayanokouji into the ground in a situation where I already have the upper hand."

"Does that mean you don't care if he finds out? Whenever that happens?"

"That's exactly what it means," Yagami replied. "Actually, I think I wouldn't even mind if I revealed myself to him directly."

Yagami had been intending to go head-to-head with Ayanokouji from the very beginning. However, if he had done anything careless in the preliminary stages, there was a chance that Tsukishiro might've gotten in the way. Yagami had followed Tsukishiro's orders and put together all sorts of plans, but all of them were simply to buy time.

"But now that the uninhabited island exam's over, you're not going to have the chance to play with the second-years for a while, will you?" Amasawa teased. "I think you'd better get back to the White Room as soon as possible, for your own good."

For Amasawa, who had no intention of going back, being excommunicated was a wish come true. However, for Yagami, the White Room was the only place to which he could return.

"I need to take him down completely, in a perfect way," he said. "Besides, I can always catch up on my studies later, at any time." He flashed an awkward, toothy grin, which bore absolutely no resemblance to his usual dazzling smile.

"Wow," Amasawa whistled, "the real you has quite a twisted personality, Takuya, but in a different way from me."

Though she was feeling exasperated, she continued speaking.

"And man, poor Utomiya-kun. He's the sorta guy who's always thinking about his friends, but I still can't believe he'd do something like work with *you* to protect Tsubaki-chan. I bet he'd be pissed if he found out that you were the one who got his classmate from Class C expelled, huh?"

"I knew from the beginning that he was an awkward guy, and the sort who always put friends first," Yagami said. "I figured that after one of his classmates got expelled, he'd want to do everything he could to stop it from happening again. The quickest way to get someone from another class who originally didn't want to join up with you on your side would be to create a common enemy. I did that by making Housen that enemy. I inserted myself between Tsubaki and Utomiya, getting into their inner circle, got them to deploy a strategy that was never going to succeed, and I got to check what cards Ayanokouji had in his hand. Thanks to that, I also learned he had a connection with the leader of Class 2-A, Sakayanagi."

"Ah, the girlie who came to see me. Arisu-senpai, yeah," said Amasawa.

"There is a possibility that she'll try to get in the way of my fight with Ayanokouji in the future, so I'll need to think of a way to deal with her."

"Yeah, yeah. Go ahead and do whatever you want."

Amasawa was starting to get tired of watching Yagami drone on and on. She let out a bored sigh. When Yagami was in a good mood, he could just keep on talking and talking forever, even if you didn't jump in the conversation and let him go, like she was doing now. He was enjoying this situation more than anyone else,

even though he was putting himself at risk of being discovered for who he really was.

"So, you satisfied now that you've made your speech?" Amasawa said. "Can I go back now?"

"Before that, Ichika, there's one thing I wanted to confirm. I wanted to so much that it warranted me calling you here," said Yagami. "Your intentions."

"Hmm? My intentions?"

Yagami, smiling like a child, suddenly grabbed hold of both of Amasawa's forearms.

"H—?!"

Amasawa had been on high alert, intending never to allow herself to be caught, but she had dropped her guard and failed to react in time.

"Utonomiya, or me?" Yagami asked her. "Everyone is going to know in the not-too-distant future. That's where it's all going to begin."

"...So you're going to have the serious showdown that you've been wishing for, Takuya?"

"We will recognize each other as enemies and then compete in a contest of our true abilities."

"Why don't you settle this like a man, like with your fists, instead of going about it in such a roundabout way?" Amasawa sighed. "I mean, with your level of combat ability, you could probably even go toe-to-toe against someone like Ayanokouji, right, Takuya?"

"I don't use violence any more than I absolutely have to."

"That's rich."

The force that Yagami was applying to keep Amasawa bound was extraordinary. Not even she was strong enough to shake him off. Of course, she wasn't in top form at the moment; even if he'd tried something else, Amasawa probably wouldn't be a match for him anyway.

"Can't you understand that what I'm doing now *is* the minimum amount of violence that's necessary?"

Amasawa smiled back at him, but she had already pictured in her mind what was going to happen from here many times over. However, no matter how many times she ran through the situation in her head, she couldn't find a scenario where she could break free.

"To tell you the truth, Ichika," he went on, "I called you here today because I was thinking of breaking you beyond all hope of recovery. You know about me, and you're only going to be a hindrance to me in the days to come no matter how much effort I put in. Did you realize that?"

"A *ha ha*, guess this isn't a laughing matter then!"

Amasawa started mentally preparing herself as the approaching Yagami brought his face close, right in front of hers. But then...he relaxed his grip, the pressure on Amasawa's forearms went away, and she was freed.

"Just kidding," he said with his usual gentle smile. He then placed his hand on the door behind Amasawa's back.

"Wow, what an intense joke, meow."

"Sorry, sorry," said Yagami. "I was really thinking of crushing you today, you know. But I stopped."

"Whoa, really?" Taken aback, Amasawa pulled herself away from him.

"I heard that you received a punishment from Shiba," he said. "You were right not to fight back."

"If you try to drive him away once, he'll just come back at you twice as hard later," she said. "I learned that when I was really little. But are you *sure* you're okay leaving me be?"

"I know that you'll keep on watching closely and quietly. If you had made the decision to completely go to Ayanokouji's side, I would have ended it already."

"Well, it's a little difficult to weigh the senpai I admire against the friendship I have with a colleague."

"Then you can rest easy," Yagami said. "When I face Ayanokouji, it will be a battle of wits. I shouldn't be using violence. The outcome will be either one of two things: either I'll get expelled, or he will."

With that, Yagami opened the door to his room, and saw Amasawa out, like a gentleman.

7.4

IT WAS NOW just after two in the morning in the concert hall. I opened the heavy door quietly. There was one person seated in the spacious area, with their back to me. There was such a still silence there that it felt like my footsteps were going to echo throughout the space as I walked along on the carpeted floor.

"Students are forbidden from leaving their rooms at this hour, you know," I remarked as I approached the person seated there.

"Don't say that," the person replied. "We wouldn't have any opportunity to meet unless it was at this hour."

"If anyone does happen to see us, you'll be taking responsibility for it," I said. "Right, Chabashira-sensei?"

She didn't even turn to look at me.

"Don't worry," she replied. "The teachers only make their rounds until midnight."

"If that's how things are, then it's fine, I suppose. With that said, what's bothering you so much that you'd go to the trouble of calling me here?"

"When the summer vacation is over, the second semester will begin," Chabashira said. "And then the next special exam will begin."

"Yes, I suppose it will. Last year, we had the sports festival right afterward."

"That's right," she said, "but this year is different. There is going to be one special exam held before that."

"Are you sure it's all right for you to give me this kind of 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?" I added.

"No... That's not what I mean."

In that case, my being called here to have this conversation with her was probably Chabashira's own decision. That was surprising to me simply because I didn't think she was the kind of homeroom teacher who was especially supportive of her own class. I didn't know what she was thinking about, but I noticed that she was suddenly silent. There wasn't any point in me just standing there next to her, so I randomly decided to hop up onto the stage.

Normally, this concert hall was a place where people could enjoy live music. There was a large, high-quality grand piano just sitting there. Perhaps there had been a performance held in the hall earlier today, because there wasn't a single speck of dust or anything on it.

"Acting Director Tsukishiro was willing to go as far as to put his own career on the line trying to have you removed, back on the uninhabited island," Chabashira told me. "Even if your father is famous, that kind of tenacity is extraordinary."

"You can say that again," I agreed. "However, if I could correct you on one thing, Tsukishiro was never interested in the Chairman's position to begin with. He was only using that position to get rid of me, nothing more."

"So, you're saying that's just how powerful a force is at work here?" Chabashira crossed her arms at that. She was basically telling me that she didn't understand all this at all.

"Do you feel like talking now?" I asked.

"...Yes," she replied.

Chabashira paused and took a breath. She then quietly spoke up once more.

"How would you analyze your class?" she asked.

"How?"

"Do you think they have the ability to move up to Class A?"

"You're really asking a student from your own class that question?"

"I want to hear what you think," she insisted.

Well, that was unusual. Well, actually, no, it probably wasn't. I supposed this just showed much this issue had been on Chabashira's mind.

"All right," I said. "I think that, without a doubt, they have the highest potential among all the second-year classes. That said, it's not like we can leave things as they are and expect to move up to Class A. Catching up to Sakayanagi's class, which is by far in the lead right now as Class A, is going to be a Herculean task."

The teachers should know matters at this school quite well.

"I think that the minimum to the class would need to do would be being united as one," I added. "And that includes you too, Chabashira-sensei."

At that, she turned to me with a look of surprise on her face. It was a look that told me she already knew that.

"I... What kind of teacher do I look like to you?" she asked.

If I had to say, it would be that Chabashira had always been rather coldhearted to my classmates. Actually, she spent her days like she was trying to detach herself from them, or even desert them.

"A teacher who believes we can't win, but can't throw away her hopes of doing so regardless," I replied. "If I had to sum it up, that's how I'd describe you."

"That's some harsh criticism," she said.

"The fact that you tried to take advantage of me before hasn't changed, and neither has my impression of you, even now."

"That's true. You have a point."

Unless she sincerely corrected those mistakes, Chabashira was never going to change.

"You shouldn't make your students work hard because you want to reach Class A yourself," I said. "You should work hard yourself for the sake of your students, as they wish to reach Class A themselves."

"Ayanokouji..."

"If you do that, the answers will come to you in due time.
That's what I think."

"...You said that the class needs to be united as one, right?"

"Yes."

"That naturally includes you too, then," she pointed out.

"Of course."

Our gazes met, and Chabashira gulped loudly.

"What if I said that I was throwing my past self away?" she asked me, with eyes that felt like she was questioning my resolve.

I decided it would be best for me to assume that she would see through any lies I might tell here.

"If you say that you're going to throw it away, then I'll plan to throw away my old way of thinking too," I said. "If you're seriously going to shoot for Class A, then I won't hold back any longer in the days to come."

"...I see," said Chabashira.

As she said that, I wondered what was going to change within her, and what wasn't? Right now, that still remained to be seen, but...

"When the time comes that you're able to look forward, the class will surely begin to change, in a real sense," I told her.

"...I suppose so."

Chabashira looked up at the high ceiling and closed both of her eyes. It certainly seemed like a deep shadow had been cast over her heart. I should have just walked away without delay, but for some reason, I was starting to feel a little bit different now. I still had a low opinion of Chabashira as a homeroom teacher. However, when I looked at her as a human being, my evaluation of her began to shift, albeit only slightly. She was much more fragile than I had thought, and it was like she was someone who had grown up to be an adult in appearance only. I sat down on the bench and opened the grand piano's lid.



"...What are you doing?" she asked. "Don't tell me that you can play the piano too. Can you?"

Instead of answering her questions, I simply ran my fingers across the keys, playing a classical tune. When my performance was over, Chabashira applauded, which was rather unlike her.

"I'm not well versed in music or anything, but that was superb. I don't think I'd ever be able to play on that level in my entire lifetime, even if I practiced every day. If I'm not mistaken, that song just now was—"

Suddenly, in that silent concert hall, I heard a small sound come from the back. Chabashira shot up and turned around in a panic.

The smiling figure who emerged from the darkness was none other than Tsukishiro.

"That was Beethoven's 'Für Elise,' wasn't it?" he said. "Though not a difficult piece to play in itself, being able to play it so flawlessly is an impressive display of skill. It's truly a shame that only Chabashira-sensei and I were the ones to listen to it. However, students are forbidden from going out at this hour without permission. Do you know what punishment awaits you for breaking that rule so casually?"

"Acting Director Tsukishiro, this is..."

Chabashira hurriedly tried to come up with an excuse, but Tsukishiro gently stopped her.

"Please, do not worry. As of today, I have been dismissed from my position as Acting Director," he assured her. "Now that it has been decided that Chairman Sakayanagi will be reinstated, I am just a simple, irrelevant civilian. I will not be reporting this to the school."

"Can we trust you...?" asked Chabashira.

"You do not need to. You know, from the moment I appeared here, I knew that you were aware of my presence, Ayanokouji-kun. If someone is experiencing emotional unrest, those feelings are easily transmitted through their musical performance. And yet,

you showed not even the faintest hint of agitation in your playing... Why was that?"

"It's simple," I replied. "Even if I were to be punished, I wouldn't be expelled for something like this. And the fight between you and me is only about getting me expelled. There's no point for you to go through the trouble of getting me penalized for something like going out without permission."

"Though you know that, people normally panic when they're seen doing something that they don't want others to see. I suppose you get that pluckiness from your father," said Tsukishiro.

"Unfortunately, I don't remember being raised like that," I answered.

I closed the lid and moved away from the piano.

"Anyway, once the morning comes, I will no longer be able to speak with you anymore," Tsukishiro said. "With that in mind, I thought that I'd try one last time."

There were several surveillance cameras throughout the ship. Was he constantly watching the feed from the hallway outside my guest cabin? He really needed a vacation.

"If you would prefer that I leave my seat, I'll go," said Chabashira.

"No, I don't mind if you stay where you are," said Tsukishiro. "I imagine it would be more inconvenient for Ayanokouji-kun if he were left all alone with me. It's better for you to remain here, in the role of someone protecting her student."

Tsukishiro walked over to us and sat down two seats away from Chabashira.

"Is the concert over already?" he asked.

"If there's something you want to say, please come out and say it as soon as possible."

I knew that he was messing with me, so I urged him to come out with it quickly.

"I figured I'd give this one more try, since it can't hurt anything. I've got nothing to lose," he said. "Anyway, I came here

to try and negotiate with you one last time. Are you willing to report your willingness to withdraw from school and return home?"

"Tsukishiro...-san. What in the world do you think you're doing?" Chabashira interjected, her voice containing a hint of anger after hearing the words "withdraw from school."

"What do you mean?" asked Tsukishiro.

"You interfered in a special exam without authorization and tried to get Ayanokouji expelled," she snapped. "That on its own would normally be entirely unacceptable."

"The same goes for you too, Chabashira-sensei," Tsukishiro pointed out. "Weren't you about to bring your own personal feelings into the matter and discuss the next special exam with him?"

Although the details were unclear, it sounded like Tsukishiro had somehow discovered Chabashira's objective.

"It's certainly true that it's not praiseworthy," she admitted. "But I wasn't going to discuss the details of the exam and give him an advantage."

"You might see it that way in your mind, but you can't prove it. It just so happened that my being here prevented you from engaging in such dishonesty before it could happen."

"That's..."

"You haven't only committed just one sin," Tsukishiro said. "You understand, yes?"

At this point in time, Chabashira's sins included meeting a student at a time when students were forbidden from leaving their rooms. And even though we had a teacher-student relationship, the fact that we were a man and a woman was another point that shouldn't be overlooked. Tsukishiro could relentlessly exploit that slight opening.

"It won't be me who will be in trouble if you make a fuss, Chabashira-sensei. It'll be you. And Ayanokouji-kun too."

If there was a report that a teacher and student engaged in sexual misconduct, it wouldn't be resolved with only a warning.

Tsukishiro was threatening Chabashira, implying, "If you understand, then keep your mouth shut."

"Ugh..."

Chabashira, having forgotten about that part, now understood the position she had been placed in and backed down.

"Well then, that's good," said Tsukishiro.

He started to approach me, the smile never leaving his face, until he was only about two meters away from me.

"There aren't any traps lying in wait for you here," he said. "Please rest easy."

"No matter the situation, you act when it's in your best interest," I replied. "That's what my analysis tells me, what kind of person you are."

"I suppose that means you have a high opinion of me then, at least to some extent."

Up until this point, I had somehow managed to keep evading Tsukishiro's traps. However, that was only because he had employed methods that couldn't exactly be classified as unorthodox strategy, by any stretch. Rigging exams, violence, taking captives...the list went on. Perhaps, if this man had had his way, it wouldn't have been so easy for me.

"I will not be dropping out," I told him.

"That's unfortunate, but I suppose there's nothing to be done. You're saying that you will remain here at this school until you graduate, then?"

"That's the plan. As long as I follow school rules and don't do anything that would get me expelled, that is."

"No matter how much you want to stay in this world, you won't be able to resist," he warned me.

Neither Tsukishiro nor I named it explicitly, but the shadows of the White Room students still flickered around me.

"You're clever," he went on. "And strong. You are so exceptional that anyone who knows about your abilities would think so."

At last, Tsukishiro was standing right in front of me.

"However, no matter how exceptional you may be, you are but a child in the end. You should understand that *he* sent me here with that strength of yours already taken into consideration."

Then, did that mean that *he* foresaw a future in which I drove Tsukishiro away like this...?

"If you wish to stay at this school for even one day longer, think good and hard about that."

"I will bear that in mind," I said.

Tsukishiro wore a thin smile. He must have been thinking about something else because he briefly chuckled softly to himself.

"I must say, this school is surprisingly fascinating, deeply so," he remarked. "It is likely that it's the only school in the entire world that could hold a special exam on an uninhabited island. It reminded me of my childhood, back to when I was thrilled to be a Boy Scout."

With that, Tsukishiro held out his left hand and offered it to me.

"And so, this is where we say farewell, Ayanokouji-kun. Will you shake my hand?"

I couldn't imagine that his outstretched left hand was meant for a simple farewell. I held out my left hand in similar fashion, meeting his for a handshake. Tsukishiro nodded, seemingly satisfied.

"Well, then... Let's meet again someday, shall we?" he said.

Finally, he tapped me on the left shoulder with his right palm and turned on his heel.

"Oh, and also, make sure you disperse within the next five minutes," he added. "If you don't, I'll have to report you."

Chabashira and I watched Tsukishiro leave, gazing in his direction until we couldn't see him anymore.

"I suppose there's no point worrying about the details," said Chabashira, "but still, to think he'd ask for a handshake with his

left hand. I suppose that means he held onto his animosity toward you until the very end."

Generally, most people shook hands with their right hand. Well, nowadays, people didn't care about things like that, and they might not even know that it could be seen as a slight.

"I didn't think of it that way," I replied.

"What do you mean?"

Tsukishiro, rather suddenly and without any lead up, mentioned that he was once in the Boy Scouts. Normally, it was rude to shake hands with your left, but the exception to this was for Boy Scouts. In that organization, it meant...

"Please just forget it," Chabashira said. "It's probably a waste of time thinking about that man's thought process."

I supposed it was entirely possible that even though it had meaning, it was, at the same time, meaningless.

"I'll be heading on back first," I told her.

"All right. That's good," said Chabashira.

Now that Tsukishiro had discovered us here, ignoring his warning would only bring risk.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Calling you out here to meet so irresponsibly gave Acting Director Tsukishiro an opening to exploit."

"I don't really mind," I replied. "I'm starting to understand some things now, more or less."

As I approached the doorway, I decided to leave a few parting words for Chabashira, but I didn't turn around.

"I said this earlier, but whether your class floats or sinks in the future isn't something that's totally irrelevant to you, sensei. It would be best for you to understand that."

No matter what kind of special exams lay in store for us, the students could only face forward and keep moving. And the only ones who could lead the way and pull them along were the respective homeroom teachers for each class.

Chapter 8: When Hearts Touch

WHEN OUR HOLIDAY aboard the luxury cruise ship was over, we got on a bus that brought us back to the Advanced Nurturing High School. Afterward, I spent my days going back and forth between the dorms and Keyaki Mall. I felt like I was spending my time in such a carefree way that even I would say I was being lazy and self-indulgent.

Since I had arrived at this school, the number of people I spent time with had increased to a level that couldn't even begin to compare to what I'd had last year. I had things going on now that, if you'd told me about it last year, I wouldn't have believed you. Besides the members of the Ayanokouji Group and Sudou and Ike—the guys I made friends with from my early days at school—there were now people outside of my own class, like Ishizaki and Hiyori, that I spoke to. And, eventually, I'd even started having conversations with some people from Ichinose's class too.

And also...

"*Sigh, I guess summer vacation really ends today, huh?*" muttered Kei with a melancholy air. She sat down on the bed, falling into it with a *poof* as she hit the mattress.

My girlfriend, Karuizawa Kei, and I were regularly having secret dates for the time being, since we were planning to make our relationship public once the second semester started. That meant that today was the last secret date before we were going to do so. Even though the time we were spending together right now was kind of dull, it was by no means unpleasant. If we were just friends who had known each other for a brief time, then we might have felt rushed into having a conversation, or we might have been feeling a little awkward about this situation.

"So, starting tomorrow, it'll be okay for me to tell people about my relationship with you... I'm kinda nervous," said Kei.

"There's no need to force yourself to tell people," I said. "I'm not going to take responsibility even if you lose status though."

"I'm definitely telling people. Besides, if something happens, you'll protect me, Kiyotaka, so I'll be fine. Right?"

She said it jokingly, but those were unmistakably her true feelings. By attaching itself to a strong host, a parasite was able to protect itself. I took the last sip of my coffee and then sat down next to Kei. I took her delicate hand in mine, and she gently squeezed mine back. She looked over at me shyly.

"Kei."

At that moment, I pressed my mouth against her soft lips.

"K-Kiyotaka..."

"Surprised?"

"Y-yeah, I was surprised. C-couldn't you have given me...like, a little advance warning or something?"

Rather than words, I answered her question with action. I grabbed her shoulder gently and pulled her in close.

"Mm...!"

A second kiss. The instant our lips met, Kei's shoulders jerked up slightly, and I could tell she was surprised. I quickly pulled away from her lips, and though she looked relieved, I could also see in her eyes that she seemed reluctant to have stopped.



"...You got me with another sneak attack," she said.

"Really? I thought it was relatively normal," I replied.

The only way for me to learn the correct timing was to repeat it over and over again.

"At least, I still hadn't gotten my feelings ready for it..."

"In that case, do you feel ready for it this time?" I asked.

"Huh? ...Yeah..." Kei nodded.

She closed her eyes and gestured like she was ready, so I kissed her again. The previous two kisses only lasted for about a second, but this time was different. It was longer, about five, ten seconds. Little by little, we began to move our lips, kissing repeatedly, like little birds pecking. As time flowed around us, it felt like everything had stopped except Kei and me... It was our final day of summer vacation as second-year high school students. Kei and I learned more about kissing and we had taken things one step higher—together.



The first half of the curriculum of romantic love was over, and we were now entering into the second half. From now on, we were going to spend our days at school with our heads held high as lovers. By doing so, though, we might find ourselves wrapped up in no small amount of trouble. Nevertheless, the two of us would take each other's hand and face the difficulties ahead. Slowly but surely, we'd take it step by step, just as the seasons changed from summer to fall and from fall to winter.

The relationship between us would, eventually, feel indispensable to us; in time, as it was colored by our emotions, we would come to feel we could not do without it. Even as I tasted Kei's lips over and over, my thoughts automatically drifted to what was to come. Before long, when the season of farewells approached, this romance would enter its final phase—it was obvious that an extremely difficult ordeal lay ahead.

When Karuizawa Kei was cut off from her host, she would have to stand up and face forward on her own. And that was the most important part of this curriculum about romantic love.

Postscript

HELLO THERE, it's Kinugasa—and it's really tough for me right now as we've entered an extremely hot season. I am trembling with fear, because this is basically an omen signaling the coming of my most despised season. However, I'm fortunate in the sense that there's a recent trend toward self-restraint, so I can stay home without people getting angry at me. Still, having said that, I'm sure that my kids would love to play outside, so I wish there was a way to let them play without bothering other people. I guess that's where my DIY skills and stuff can come in...

Well, anyway, I started this off by mentioning trivial stuff, but yeah, Volume 4.5 was a summer story. My summer vacations from back when I was a student were so awfully long ago now, but...while people often say that they wish they could go back to the past and redo their school days, I've never once thought that. It's not like there was anything particularly bad about it, I did have fun at school. But I absolutely do NOT have the patience or the confidence to repeatedly go through the cycle of waking up in the morning, studying, working a part-time job, and then going home. This is decline.

My eyesight is getting worse day by day, and even thinking about what it'll be like after another ten years is terrifying... The future is scary too! Unlike last year, this is a story about a vacation on a cruise ship where there were no special exams. It's also a story about changes in Ayanokouji and Kei's relationship and changes in their classmates. Changes in the new first-year students, and in Nagumo and the other third-years. I think that the students have shown tremendous growth, compared to summer vacation last year. And in contrast to the students who are growing, the adults supervising them...

Now then, this is a little bit of a spoiler, but were you able to guess who the White Room students are? Yes, I'm sure you've got a good idea. I know. The story begins from here, right? Staring in Volume 5, the year-two arc of the story will enter its second act,

and I think it's going to be a major turning point. The next volume will be the start of the second semester, and there will be a special exam separated by grade level. I was surprised when I realized that this was going to be the first time in a while (at least in several volumes) that there was a special exam that was only about the second-years. I would really be happy if you enjoyed the upcoming volume as well.

There are various difficulties out there in the world right now, but let's all do our best to get through it, everyone. Well, then, I hope can we meet again soon!



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