

# Classroom of The Elite

## Year 2 Volume 4.5





## Prologue - The Start of A Fun Summer Vacation

I'm sure many students were happy to see their cell phones back in their hands after a two-week absence.

Cell phones have become an indispensable tool for people living in the modern world, with the penetration rate of smartphones among teens expected to exceed 99% by 2020. There is no doubt about this fact when you look back on the world.

Before becoming a high school student, I didn't have a cell phone, so it's not a high priority in my life, but it's only a matter of time before I do.

The luxury cruise ship sails gracefully across the ocean, providing students with a summer vacation for a while to come.

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

I didn't have any friends or loved ones.

The number of students I could call by name, even if they were only acquaintances.

That number is incomparable to that of last year, showing a great leap forward.

The time spent on the cruise ship will be an unforgettable memory for me and other students.

You can enjoy the swimming pools, indulge in a sumptuous meal, or talk with your loved ones on the deck overlooking the sea. But that doesn't mean you can do whatever you want. You need to enjoy yourself within the rules that have been established.

For example, you are not allowed to leave your room after 10 p.m. unless there are special circumstances.

It seems that the rules are much stricter than the rules that were set on board last year.

These "special circumstances" include sudden illness during the night. In such cases, the students are required to go to the infirmary, which is open 24 hours a day.

It is unlikely that any student will break the rules, as there are strict penalties in place, so it should not be a problem.

In addition to that, there are certain levels that students are not allowed to enter, not just at night, so they can't just walk around anywhere on the ship. Even within the permitted levels, there are areas that are off-limits.

So, let's enjoy a week of cruising with moderation and morals.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Intro**

It was the morning of August 4, the day after the completion of the special test for uninhabited islands. For seven days, from today until the end of August 10, the students will spend their holidays on a luxury cruise ship.

It is promised that there will be no special exams at all, like the zodiac exams held last year.

The ship has a swimming pool, fitness gym, movie theater, concert hall, bathhouse with a view, shopping area, cafeteria, and various other entertainment facilities.

In other words, from today, I had the right to enjoy all of them.

On this long-awaited first day, where am I?

I'm relaxing in a four-person room assigned to one of the students, cell phone in hand.

There's no need to rush out and play just because it's a day off.

In fact, it's not a bad idea to leave all entertainment behind and spend some time resting.

In contrast to the hard comfort of the dormitory, a first-class bed gently envelops your body.

And after living in a tent on a deserted island, the feeling is even better.

That's about all I can say about my first day.

Based on the results of the desert island test, the class points for August were determined and announced.

Normally, the announcement is made on the first day of the month, but this time, the beginning of the month was during the desert island examinations, so the announcement was made irregularly late after the results of the special examinations were reflected.

For the students in the school, the beginning of the month starts with checking their class points. As well as their individual rankings, class points are directly related to their private points, which in turn is directly related to their monthly allowance.

If we don't have enough money to spend freely, our holiday on the luxury cruise ship will be a treasure trove.

2nd grade August class points

A class led by Sakayanagi

1206 points

B class led by Ichinose Ichinose

578 points

C Class led by Horikita

571 points

D-class led by Ryuen

551 points

As a result, our class stopped at C class by a small margin.

There was a chance that we could have risen to B class at one point, but Unfortunately we couldn't get there.

However, there was nothing to be pessimistic about, and the result was rather good.

Kouenji earned 300 class points for his first place finish.

I'm reminded of the destructive power of this overwhelming score.

Kouenji had been perceived as a hindrance by many in the class, but people around him had to change their view of him. However, I'm skeptical about how long that view will last.

In exchange for the huge amount of class points he has earned, he has been given a "no cooperation" card until he graduates. If this fact were to be made public, there would be fewer people who could be honestly happy. However, I think this is a good thing.

If it weren't for Kouenji's 300 points, we would have had to fight for a while against the uncertainty of whether we would be able to catch up with the higher classes.

But now that the three classes are side by side, it will be a big help mentally.

Now we can move on to the next step, which is to get a head start and move up to B class by ourselves, and then close the gap by winning the direct competition with Sakayanagi's class.

This upward trend also applies to Ryuuen's class, which dropped to D class.

The addition of Katsuragi to the class will raise the level of the class' low academic performance and give the class a sense of stability. Ryuuen had some kind of dealings with Sakayanagi. Whether it was related to private points, class points, or something else I hadn't thought of, it's hard to say at this point, but it could be something that changes the course of the battle.

There are some uncertainties, but the momentum is not declining, but it will continue to increase, so it is safe to say that it is the scariest class right now.

The fact that they have fallen to D class is just a formality, and I'm sure they don't care one bit about it.

On the other hand, Ichinose's class, which was re-instated to B class, did not do too badly if you only look at the results.

Thanks to Sakayanagi's lead, Ichinose was able to gain some points for her class.

The difference between class B and class D was only 27 points.

With only 27 points, it won't be surprising if the rankings changed on September 1st due to minor behavioral issues during the period when the special exam was not held. Depending on the results of the uninhabited island exam, Ichinose's anxiety must have been quite strong

because she could have fallen into D class. No, she must be worried. This is where the real moment of truth will come, Ichinose.

In my heart, I sent her some words.

I don't think there will be a series of tests like the uninhabited island test, where all the classes in all the grades participate.

If that's the case, then the next special exam will most likely be a battle of grades.

If she easily falls behind the C and D classes, the future of Ichinose class will be bleak.

In other words, the next round may decide the future of .....

The situation of the three classes in the side-by-side line is pretty simple, but that's about it.

Last but not least is Class A, led by Sakayanagi, who is still not letting us close the gap easily. Their stability is outstanding, and they were able to slip into third place in the uninhabited island exam this time, accumulating a lot of class points.

There are many excellent students, and Sakayanagi's ability to control them is perfect.

In addition, Sakayanagi's strategy is not limited to righteous or evil ways. She is adept at using both.

Sakayanagi is the leader of the A-Class, and she deserves it.

At first glance, there seems to be no gap between the two, but if Horikita's class gains momentum from here on out, it's not impossible for them to catch up. That's right, there's no room for error. Of course, in order to do so, they need to break down the A class, which continues to run alone, in some way.

The shortest route is to get rid of Sakayanagi, but it's extremely difficult to get rid of her, and even if she didn't have protection points, it wouldn't be easy.

Rather than crushing the head, it would be wiser to crush the limbs.

It would be wise to eliminate not just one or two, but many more. If Kamuro, Hashimoto, and Kitou are absent or dysfunctional, Sakayanagi will be limited in what she can do. There are many unanswered questions about Kitou, but the first two seem to be people with a lot of problems.

Well, well. I'll leave you with my analysis of the other classes for now.

With the official start of the summer vacation, all the grades have temporarily stopped fighting and are in a state of truce.

From now on, it's my turn to be a student and have as much fun as I can.

Until the other day, our pockets were cold, but with the announcement of class points and the payment of private points for August, our wallets were suddenly flush with cash. Our class received 571 class points, or the equivalent of 57,100 yen in private points for each of us. I didn't get any extra bonus because I couldn't rank high enough in the special exam to get extra rewards, but it was still a good amount. In order to spend quality time on this luxury cruise ship, private points are indispensable. This is because the system requires a minimum number of private points to enjoy a movie or a meal of your choice. The rules have become stricter in terms of money as well, since last year all the facilities on the ship were free to use. Of course, it doesn't cost anything if you spend a week locked up in your cabin, but it's no different than being locked up in a dorm on holiday.

PNNG . There was a short pinging sound and a text message arrived.

It was a text message from my returned cell phone, informing me that the detailed results of the special uninhabited island examinations would be released in the resting area by the fitness gym on the ship for two days starting today. Since only the top few groups had been announced, many students would be interested in the results.

As for me, I'll be sure to check it out so that I can keep an eye on things in the future.

However, it would have been easier to send the list to student's cell phones, but since they didn't do that, I wonder if they don't want the students to take the exam results with them and analyze them for a long time. Since Tsukishiro was in the dark behind the scenes this time, it could be considered as a measure to avoid leaving unnecessary evidence.

There's a part of me that wants to go see the results right away, but there's also the possibility that the students will come in groups, so it's probably safer to give them some time.

I decided to forget about the exam results for the time being, and finish my other business. On my cell phone, I sent a message to Ichinose, simply asking if we could meet in the evening in three days' time. Of course, she could easily imagine that this was in response to her spontaneous confession on the uninhabited island.

You might think that you should meet and reply immediately, but not after the harsh uninhabited island test is over.

First of all, she needed to regain her strength, and then she could spend some time with her good friends.

It seems that it has not been read yet, so turn off the screen of the mobile phone for the time being.

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

"Hey Ryoutarou, I heard that the exam results have been announced. Wanna go check it out?"

"Hmm, ..... I will pass. I'm a wreck and can't walk. Now I just want to surrender myself to the bed. ...."

Not only was it about being tired, but this bed was also taking away the energy to move.

We were all tempted by the bed, including me.

Hondo, who was particularly exhausted, weakly turned to his left and turned away.

"You've been like that since yesterday, haven't you?"

"I worked myself to death on the last day, you know, and I really wanted to eat some food, but I couldn't even get it down my throat."

He turned his back and rolled himself up, pulling the covers over his head.

For now, it seemed, he just wanted to lie down and sleep.

The trip on the luxury liner would last a week. It would be wise to wait for him to regain his strength without panicking.

"What about Miyake and Ayanokoji? Aren't you a little concerned about the rankings?"

Akito only turned his gaze to Miyamoto as he played with his phone.

"I'm good. I can kind of see where we're ranked. Honestly, I think just avoiding expulsion is enough for now. Just like Hondo, I'd like to take it easy for the rest of the day."

It wasn't hard to imagine that Akito, who was working with both Haruka and Airi, must have had a lot of trouble following up as the only boy. He must have been hit more on the mental side than the physical.

"Miyake, you were in the same group as Sakura and Hasebe, weren't you?"

Miyamoto asks Akito this as he sits on the bed.

"Yeah, so?"

"I was in a group of three bastards, so it was a hell of a sweaty time all the time, but you must have been in heaven surrounded by girls, right?"

"What's heaven? If you ask me, it was hell because there was so much to take care of. It's definitely better to be with a bunch of guys."

Both of them were in different shades of the group, so each claimed their own heaven and hell.

From what I heard, I was honestly glad I didn't join either group.

It's better to be alone in that kind of test, unless you have a good friend.

Anyway, now that the two of them had refused, Miyamoto's gaze turned towards me as well.

Unlike Hondo and Akito, I had regained a lot of the energy I had lost on the uninhabited island by sleeping well in bed.

It's not perfect, but it's enough to get around the ship.

However, there was no need to panic, we could check the test results later.

And even if Akito didn't go to see the results, other members of the Ayanokouji group could take his place.

"I'll take it easy today. I'm sure everyone is worried about the ranking, and I don't like crowds..."

Don, Don, Don!

When I tried to say no as well as the former two, the door of the guest room was slammed multiple times.

The momentum of the banging was unbelievably strong, as if an abnormal situation had occurred.

Akito jumped up and hurriedly opened the door to see Ishizaki coming out of it.

The air was almost tense as we wondered what was going on...

"Ayanokouji! Let's go see the test results together!"

They were all taken aback by his smile and the content of his words.

Akito turned around and looked at me, losing his voice.

"No, I'm ....."

"What the hell, you're bored anyway, right? Let's go, shall we?"

He strode into the room and grabbed my arm forcefully as I sat on the bed.

"When did you guys become such good friends?"

The one who was most surprised by the situation was Akito, who spends a lot of time with me on a daily basis. Ishizaki, who was in my rival class, was also a problem child, so it was understandable that Akito would show caution.

In fact, the other two were also somewhat stiff, having been taken aback by Ishizaki's appearance.

"Well, it just happened."

There was nothing more to answer than that, but it wouldn't be satisfactory to Akito.

The pressure of Ishizaki's smile is so strong that I decided to decline, pulling back a bit.

"I'm a little tired today."

"What do you mean you're tired? I'm sure you'll be fine. Let's go, shall we?"

He doesn't seem to give up, as if he's trying to drag me out of the house without understanding my feelings.

"..... Okay. Let me change my clothes for now."

"Oh, I'll wait for you in the hallway then!"

Ishizaki walked out of the guest room, as if he was satisfied with my answer to go.

"You've caught the attention of a troublesome person, too. Let me know if you need any help, okay?"

"Thanks, Akito. Well, Ishizaki's not a bad guy, so I'm fine."

"Not a bad guy, huh? I don't have a good impression of him. It's possible that Ryuuen is behind this. You'd better be careful."

We've had repeated clashes with the delinquents led by Ryuuen. It was natural for those who didn't know the inner workings of the other class to think that way.

Ishizaki is not a person who can hide things or play games. However, if he is not aware of this and is being manipulated behind the scenes, he can be a nuisance.

However, now that we are not in the middle of a special exam, I can assure that there is no such case.

After changing into my uniform, I raised my hand to Akito and left the room.

Ishizaki seemed to be the only one waiting in the hallway, and there was no sign of the other students.

"Come on, let's go~"

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

"Eh? Why not?"

"There's no need to rush, the exam results are open for two days, it's something we can look at later, right?"

"Why don't you want to see it sooner? I'm the type of person who can't wait to see a new movie and go see it right away."

Even if he explained that he was that type of person, there was no way I would understand.

I have a hard time imagining Ishizaki going to the cinema with enthusiasm on the day of release.

"I went to see 'World Domination 16' the other day, too."

I've never heard of this title before, but it sounds like a title where guns and fists are flying. It's also a very long movie, 16 in the series. However, I don't know why the title doesn't attract me at all.

"I'm wondering, what was the ranking of Ryuuen-san's group?"

But then again, Ishizaki shouldn't not be the type of student with few friends in the class.

He probably wouldn't have bothered to invite me from another class.

"Are you sure you didn't invite Ryuuen and the others who are concerned about the ranking?"

I asked, trying to find out the truth behind it.

"That guy will call on me when he needs to. If he's not calling on me now, it means he doesn't need me."

"That's easy to understand."

"Right? Other than that, most of them are just tired of being on an uninhabited island, or they're just passing."

It meant that many of the students, like Akito and the others, wanted to rest for now.

"You are fine Ishizaki, Aren't you tired?"

"Me? I recovered after I slept."

"I see."

The answer was surprisingly simple, so easy to understand. It's not that I'm particularly athletic, but maybe my resilience is better than others. However, the fact that he came to talk to me as a result of the process of elimination seemed to make sense.

"Ayanokouji is easy to talk to."

"..... Is that so?"

I'm not really good at socializing, so that's a little surprising.

"You're a lot easier to talk to than the weird Kaneda."

I didn't know much about Kaneda, but it somehow complicated the subject of comparison.

On the way, We passed by a store.

"Wow, they're selling flags!"

Ishizaki's eyes lit up with excitement as he picked up the flags from all over the world that were in the store. When I looked at him curiously, Ishizaki rubbed the bridge of his nose with his index finger and replied.

"Well, you know, when I went to Albert's room before, he had a collection of flags. Maybe it was because I was inspired by that, but I started collecting them too."

So one person's hobby influenced another person, and then it spread.

So they have a common interest in flag collecting, which seems to be a bit rare nowadays.

"I don't know Albert that well, but he seems like a nice guy."

"Yeah. Yeah, he is. We had a lot of conflicts when we first started school, but now we're best friends."

It's true that Ishizaki and Albert are seen together relatively often.

"So it's been smooth sailing as far as friendships go."

I said with honest admiration, but Ishizaki's face hardened slightly as he walked beside me.

"Not really. It's not like I'm the most popular guy in class."

"Is it because you're under Ryuuken's thumb?"

"I don't know if that's a good reason, it happened right after I started school. But after the fight with Ayanokouji on the rooftop, I was supposed to have defeated Ryuuken-san and taken back the class. I got to hang out with a lot of people I hadn't really gotten to know before."

He spoke up and choked on his words. Indeed, Ishizaki's position may be complicated.

There were more than a few students who had hoped that Ryuuken would be defeated, and they thanked Ishizaki.

But now that he had fallen into Ryuuken's arms again, it was inevitable that he would face opposition.

"I guess that means I'm part of the cause."

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply that Ayanokouji was responsible for anything. It was a fight we started. It's true that many of my friends have left me, but I don't mind because I've become friends with you in return."

Ishizaki turned to me and smiled powerfully.

The only thing was that the smile seemed to be somewhat fragile and not genuine.

"Don't think that you can solve the problems of the class by yourself."

"I know. I'll solve the class problems with the class members, and Ryuuen-san is ready to come back."

Ishizaki believes in it and will follow him with all his might.

## Part 1

"Whoa, you're an amazing person."

Sure enough, the rest area near the fitness gym where the test results were being disclosed was crowded with students.

There was a large sign next to the monitor that read "Photography is strictly prohibited," and two adults who seemed to be related to Tsukishiro were keeping a close eye on the students.

The rankings and scores were displayed on the monitor, which seemed to be scrolling automatically.

Right now it's showing the 50th to 60th place group members and their scores.

"Nn.....?"

An inexplicable feeling of discomfort that I suddenly felt all over my body. What is it?

The cause of this feeling is not immediately clear, and I feel a kind of unspeakable weirdness.

"I was going to look at the results carefully, but I don't think I can concentrate at all with this."

Ishizaki doesn't notice this uncomfortable feeling, so he looks at the monitor and mutters in disgust.

"It can't be helped. I'm sure a lot of people would have liked to know the detailed results of the uninhabited island test."

Clicking his tongue in frustration, Ishizaki had no choice but to stare at the results from his spot.

Although he had a bold personality, he couldn't seem to push his seniors to the front.

One of the third-year students reached out and started to operate the monitor, which was an auto-scrolling monitor, but could be fixed by touching it with his hand and viewing any rank.

One of the third-year students reached out and began to move it, so it was unlikely that Ishizaki would be able to see the top results he wanted to see any time soon.

"What do we do now?"

Even if we waited like this, it would probably be a while before our turn will come.

"I'm curious, but let's not overdo it. It's something we can look at later."

That's what I said a few minutes ago... Well, as long as he understood, I guess.

"By the way, do you notice anything?"

"Huh? What?"

Ishizaki didn't seem to notice anything as he tried to turn back.

This strange atmosphere. The number of gazes directed at me. It's not something that can be dismissed as a mere imagination.

It's not that Ishizaki, who is standing next to me, is dull and unaware.

It's not Ishizaki or the other students, it's just that they're looking at me.

They were watching me without hiding, sure to catch my every move.

All of the students watching us had one thing in common: they were all third-year students.

I don't know the details yet, but I'm pretty sure Nagumo is involved in this.

I guess the case I put off for the uninhabited island exam started working today.

"What's wrong?"

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

"No, it's nothing. It looks like a lot of other students are coming to see it, so let's head back."

"Oh, yeah."

I had imagined that he would eventually set something up, but this is a bit tricky.

It would have been much easier if Nagumo had come directly to me and set something in motion.

He did something I didn't like to be hit with from the very beginning.

"Hey, you haven't had lunch yet, right? Let's eat together."

"Huh? Yeah, I haven't eaten yet. ...."

I started to walk away, but the third-year students didn't seem to be following me.

It seems that they were only looking at me.

It's not a good feeling to be watched relentlessly.

"What's wrong with you? Don't you want to have dinner with me? You're so rude."

"No, I'm not. I was just thinking about something unrelated."

I knew I couldn't involve Ishizaki in a bad way, but if they didn't follow me, I guess it was okay.

"It's also rude to be thinking about unrelated things."

Indeed it was. Let's just forget about the third year for now.

"Are you sure it's okay with me?"

"It's fine or nothing, we're just going to have dinner together."

I can't deny that I feel the pressure, but it's not that I feel bad.

I just can't get over the fact that Ishizaki is treating me as a friend.

"I don't know if I've said this before, but I'm not asking you out like this because I want to bring you into my class. It's because I like you as a friend."

Without hesitation, Ishizaki said a line that made my teeth stand on end.

But then he turned around as if he had realized something.

"..... are you bothered by any chance?"

"No, not at all."

"Right!"

For a moment, Ishizaki looked as if he suspected that his actions were selfish, but he soon laughed with a happy face. Well, I knew that he had this kind of personality.

It's not that I feel bad about it, so I think I'll go along with Ishizaki.

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

"Ayanokoji-senpai!"

The owner of the footsteps was Nanase, who had been working with me throughout the first half of the uninhabited island exam.

"So senpai came to see the test results too?"

"Yeah. But I don't think I'll be able to look at them slowly, so I gave up."

"I see. The third-year students are all working on the monitors now, and it was going to be a while before we juniors could freely view them."

It seems that Nanase also wanted to know the details of the results, but decided against it.

Ishizaki was looking at our exchange curiously.

Oh, Ishizaki didn't know Nanase directly, did he?

"Hey Ayanokouji, when did you get to know such a cute girl?"

"There's a lot going on."

It's very troublesome to explain everything from scratch, so I will tell him so in summary.

"Hey, you're not going to tell me you're going out with your junior..., are you?"

"That's too much of a leap, it's just a relationship between a senior and a junior."

It was a rare occasion when I was confronted with this kind of thing.

I thought Ishizaki wasn't deeply interested in heterosexual issues, but apparently not so much.

"Do you want something from me?"

"No, I just felt like talking to you when I saw you."

Her straight eyes shine, and she says without hesitation something that might make me feel somewhat embarrassed.

"I'm sorry to bother you. Excuse me!"

Just as I thought she was approaching me at a small run, she was going somewhere at a small run again. The inside of the ship is the same as the corridor, and I don't think it's a good place to run, but I guess she's just barely running.

"That was a cute girl. And that thing was pretty cool too."

I'm sorry, but I'll let the "thing" part go.

"You're not really going out with her, are you?"

"No, we're not dating."

I don't want to cause a misunderstanding and expand the conversation.

That's why I once again firmly denied it to Ishizaki in the form of a reminder.

## **Part 2**

When I came back to my room after dinner with Ishizaki, I found Ike standing in front of my room.

He was looking at his cell phone restlessly, but when he looked up and looked left and right, our eyes met.

"Oh, Ayanokoji, thank God, I've been waiting for you!"

Ike? That's another unexpected thing I've seen.

"Actually, I'm thinking of going to visit Komiya now, and I was wondering if you could join me."

"Me?"

Ike said as he approached me and leaned in as if to lend me an ear.

"What the heck .....? I'm just a little uncomfortable going to see him alone."

"Why?"

"Why?... I mean, you know. I've been going out with... Shinohara. We were on our way back to the ship after exams, and there was a moment when we were alone, and..."

It seems that he confessed his feelings to Shinohara, and Shinohara gave him the okay.

I had thought that things might progress, but this was more than I had expected.

"Well, congratulations."

I congratulated him honestly, and he looked away embarrassed.

"Oh, thank you. But from .....Komiya's point of view, I think I might have been cheating."

"I don't think so, though."

"No, I don't think it's fair. It's like... sneaking a head start."

It is true that Komiya was injured and had to retire from the uninhabited island test early.

It's not that he couldn't be described as a loose cannon, but that could be said of anyone.

Komiya was planning to confess her feelings to Shinohara at the uninhabited island test.

"I was actually thinking of waiting until after Komiya's injury was healed, you know? But when I was relieved that the uninhabited island test was over, and Shinohara was beside me..., I felt like I didn't want to give her to Komiya...."

So he confessed his feelings to her without thinking.

Of course, there was the risk of being rejected. It would have made things even more awkward after Komiya and Shinohara got together.

"That's why I thought I had to report it to Komiya. If he was planning to confess to Shinohara too, it would have been complicated, right?"

"If I don't make the first move, I'll be in trouble if Shinohara decides to go for Komiya."

"...! Why are you doing that .....?"

Ike exaggerated and got upset.

Half of him wanted to give a report, and the other half wanted to stop him from confessing.

"You're prepared to get hit at least once, aren't you?"

"What? I'm going to get hit?"

"Wouldn't you do that if the person you love was snatched from your side?"

"... Gulp."

Ike looked frightened, as if the thought of it scared him.

Komiya is not a big guy, but he doesn't play basketball just to show off.

Ike, on the other hand, is small for a boy, so it's safe to say there's a good size difference.

"Well, he has an injured leg right now, so he can't step on it. It shouldn't hurt that much."

"Yeah, that ain't the problem, but ..... I'll be ready."

He seemed to have made up his mind to some extent, so I had no reason to oppose him.

I had been wondering about Komiya's condition, and this seemed like a good opportunity.

"I heard that Komiya is still sleeping in the infirmary."

"I'm sure he's having a hard time in the guest room."

It was no wonder that I would be spending most of my days off in the infirmary.

Ike and I arrived in front of the infirmary.

Ike took a deep breath and went in  
to calm himself down.

There was no point in rushing him, so I waited quietly, and then a loud laugh came from inside.

"Hey, what's that? Let's go in."

Surprised by the unexpected laughter, Ike opened the door and entered the doctor's office, unprepared. He was surrounded by Komiya, who was sitting upright, and several of his classmates, including Ryuuen.

Albert, Kaneda, Kondo, and Yamawaki.

Ryuuen stood up without a second glance as someone outside of the class showed up.

"Sorry to interrupt, Komiya."

As if the conversation was already over, Ryuuen left the infirmary with his friends.

I looked at Ryuuen lightly, but he didn't look at me in particular.

"He's still as scary as ever, Ryuuen..... I mean, what did he want?"

Ike, on the other hand, couldn't look directly at Ryuuen and muttered to himself.

Komiya, who overheard him, nodded in understanding and replied.

"Well, he's powerful, isn't he? He looks like he's visiting me."

Then, on a small table placed near the head of the bed, there were some sweets and juice that seemed to have been brought in.

"Oh, so he's visiting you. ..... He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would do something like that."

Komiya agreed with Ike, who said what he honestly felt.

"If it was this time last year, well, it would be unthinkable."

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

"But something has changed, Ryuuen-san. It's not the same ..... he's become amicable."

Komiya said, somewhat confused but happy.

Ryuuen had taken control of the class as soon as they entered the school and treated everyone as if he were going to use them without mercy. It was no wonder that most of his classmates had a strong rejection in their hearts.

"I feel like I can honestly follow that guy now, you know?"

"You want to follow Ryuuen? ..... I don't get it."

Ike's body shook exaggeratedly as he didn't seem to understand at all when he heard.

"Well, Ike and Ayanokouji, don't just stand there, sit down."

Komiya gently welcomed the rest of the class and encouraged them to sit down without hesitation.

We took him at his word and sat down together in the chairs.

"You're looking good."

Looking at the fixed leg, I checked Komiya's condition.

"As you can see, I'm fine except for my legs. But it's frustrating to think that everyone else is playing behind the door, so I hope it gets better soon."

"When will you be able to go out?"

"I'm just asking for permission to walk out on crutches."

Although they were rivals in love, they were surprisingly able to talk on their own.

I guess my presence was a bit superfluous.

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

"Worried? What for?"

Ike, who was sitting in the chair, put his arm on the backrest and asked Komiya.

"No, Ryuuen-san, it's like he's trying to figure out who pushed me down. Like I told Ayanokouji, I don't even remember being attacked or anything."

There didn't seem to be any difference in his memory since then.

Now Ryuuen's class is gaining momentum day by day, and it's time to focus on the second-years' battle to get to Class A. Of course, that's what our class is doing as well, but we shouldn't go too deep into this.

If Amasawa, another White Room student, or anyone else from Tsukishiro is involved, there's no guarantee that even Ryuuen will be safe.

"Ryuuen-san, I hope he won't overdo it."

"It looks like he's going to beat the culprit half to death, right?"

There was no way the two of them could envision a vision of Ryuuen being beaten.

Instead, it was natural for them to worry more about the culprit.

"So? It's not like you're just here to visit me, right?"

Komiya asked Ike, as if he had sensed something.

At that moment, Ike stiffened as if surprised.

"Oh.... no....., that is....."

He choked on his words, as if he wasn't ready yet.

Perhaps seeing this, Komiya waited for his words with a serious face without prompting.

The atmosphere of a place changed in an instant.

There was no trace of the relaxed atmosphere of earlier.

"... me ...what can I say ... so ...."

Ike's former talkative demeanor faded, and he was unable to articulate well.

"Ike. I don't know what you're going to say, but if it's important, look me in the eye and say it."

He must have guessed what he was about to say.

Still, Komiya pretended not to know, and only urged Ike to speak clearly.

It was hard to believe that Ike had noticed Komiya's intuition, but he must have felt something as a fellow man.

He felt that it was not something to be reported lazily.

He slapped himself on both cheeks, forcing himself to wake up.

"I confessed to Shinohara!"

Ike told him in a simple but loud voice, having made up his mind.  
Shin..., and the silence that immediately follows.

I found Ike swallowing heavily next to me.

"So? What's Satsuki's response?"

"She gave me the okay. We're going out now."

"I see..."

Ike continued to stare at Komiya's face without averting his gaze as he answered shortly. As he had mentioned earlier, he couldn't help but complain about the fact that he had been left out.

He could even pop out a surprise shot, or so he thought.

"Did you think I was going to hit you?"

"Huh?"

"It's written all over your face that you think I might hit you."

"No, it doesn't ..... well, not for a second."

"Well, then you're ready. I can't move right now, so why don't you come over here?"

The look on Komiya's face as he demanded he come over did not reveal his true intentions.

But from the power of his words, Ike seemed to have made up his mind.

Scared, he stood right next to Komiya.

Immediately after, Komiya's right arm reached out and grabbed Ike's shoulder.

"Ah!"

Komiya raised his aching body to the limit and looked into Ike's eyes.

"If you make Satsuki cry, I won't forgive you."

He said as he lightly pressed his left fist against Ike's chest with a thump.

"Ko, Komiya.....?"

Komiya's devilish expression changed to a smile.

"Nah, don't act so sullen. Satsuki chose you, that's all, isn't it?"

"But... if you hadn't gotten hurt, it might have been the other way around...."

"Sorry, but I don't think so. Satsuki has had her eye on you for a while. That's why she said ok. Don't think you won because you were the first one. It's just..."

"Just?"

"If you hadn't faced Satsuki and stayed away, I might have had a chance."

Komiya is right. I don't think it really mattered whether he confessed first or later.

He had an accident where he was seriously injured, and Ike happened to be nearby, which created a connection and gave me a big boost, and he was able to face Shinohara.

Without a doubt, this was the most important factor in his relationship.

If Komiya hadn't been injured, if Ike hadn't been by her side at that time, if either of their fates had been different, it might have been Komiya who would have been next to Shinohara.

"In that sense, this injury was a bad thing."

Komiya looked radiant, even though his love life had not been fulfilled.

"Thanks, Komiya."

"Study hard, okay? Satsuki..... No, Shinohara was worried about that too."

"..... Yeah, I know. I can't just be expelled from school, you know."

This love affair may have been a pivotal turning point for Ike, giving him the opportunity to struggle for himself and for the person he loves, just like Sudou.

At first, the report from Ike and the exchange with Komiya in response settled down.

"I'm sorry, Ike, but can Ayanokouji and I talk alone for a moment? There's something I need to go over with him about my injury."

"Okay, I'll see you later, Komiya, and Ayanokoji."

Ike said goodbye to us and left the room without hesitation.

Once we were alone, Komiya spoke up.

"Sorry about that. Didn't Ike bring you here as support?"

"No, I was wondering about Komiya's condition too. It was more like I interfered."

"Is that so? I mean, I don't know what to say.....?"

"Hmm?"

"Me and you guys are in different classes and we're fighting each other, but we've started talking normally. It's like that kind of thing is fading away. Last year, things were pretty bleak."

If you're in a different class, you're supposed to be the one to beat, the one to kick down.

There are not many advantages to getting along with them, except for strategy.

"The uninhabited island exam was a competition between different grades, and we've been in the same school for a long time, isn't that how it is?"

"Hmm, maybe."

"So? What do you mean, the injury thing?"

It was obvious that this conversation was preliminary chit-chat, and there should be a main topic beyond that.

"I mentioned a bit earlier that it was about Ryuuuen-san."

"You said it sounded like he was trying to find the culprit."

"I'm against it. To be honest, I'd rather just say this was an accident caused by my own mistake."

"But Shinohara actually saw the person who attacked her."

"I know. But I have a bad feeling about this, and I don't think it's going to end well."

Maybe it was because he had been attacked that he felt the danger firsthand.

"Would you mind keeping an eye out for that, Ayanokouji?"

"I don't think there's anything I can do about it."

"I'm not expecting you to do anything directly. Just let me know if you start to feel uncomfortable."

Komiya asked me with a strong look in his eyes.

We'll exchange contact information formally, and I'll be able to contact him anytime.

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

Resting was the only shortcut to a full recovery, you know.

"Thanks, man. Yeah, let me thank you sometime if you want. And give a shout out to the other guys who helped me."

"I think they'll be glad to hear it. Ike might even let Shinohara be there."

"I don't want that. I'd cry if I had to see the two of them making out with each other."

Komiya smiled bitterly, but he was more heartbroken than he looked.

It was a mistake to include a teasing phrase in his speech.

Anyway, it wasn't a good thing that he got hurt, but I think I'm getting closer to Komiya, if only a little.

"See you around, Ayanokouji."

"Yeah."

After saying goodbye and leaving the doctor's office, I suddenly had a strange feeling.

My classmates Sudou and Ike, and the rest of the class, Ishizaki and Komiya.

Little by little, the number of people around me that I can call my friends is starting to increase.

It's not that I was trying to make friends, but that's what I'm doing.

"How to make friends is not something you can put in a textbook."

I thought, stupidly serious.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Intro**

For many of the students, each day on the uninhabited island seemed like a long time.

In contrast, a day spent on a luxury cruise ship is like a flash of light, passing by in an instant.

How can the flow of time be so different when it's the same 24 hours time period?

I suppose the most important factor is that for most of the day, we don't think much about time. During normal school life and special exams, we often think about time.

On the other hand, on a day off, you don't think about time as much and the difference is noticeable.

This was the second day of such a festive holiday.

The number of students passing each other in the ship's corridors had increased dramatically, as if the fatigue of many students had finally worn off and they were beginning to enjoy their vacation to the fullest. I, who had been spending most of my time quietly by myself, received an email from someone unexpectedly inviting me to hang out.

It was from Kiriyama, the vice president of the 3rd year B class. It was an invitation to meet at the pool, and I wondered if the aim was to deepen our friendship by chatting elegantly on a float or playing beach volleyball together.

In an instant, I kicked all the unpredictable ideas out of my mind.

Although the location of this call is a swimming pool, it is far from hanging out for fun.

Of course, I could refuse. Or I could choose to ignore it. But I'll get called out at some point anyway. Depending on the situation, it could be in a more unpleasant place than now.

I decided that it would be less damaging for me to be called out alone now.

Besides, there was a good chance that he could solve the mystery of the persistent stares I had felt from the third-year students yesterday.

"Kiriyama huh ....."

I was now in the rest area by the fitness gym.

I was in front of a monitor where the results of the special exam were posted.

Many of the students had already finished checking their exam results, and now I was alone.

The number of teachers monitoring the exam results had also been reduced to one.

I had the exam results down to a tee, but when I slid the results of the top students up again, I focused on the results of the Kiriyama group.

The overall ranking was announced in front of the whole group, with Kouenji Rokusuke in first place, the Nagumo group in second place, and the Sakayanagi group in third place, but in fourth place was the Kiriyama group, with a score of 255 points, only six points behind. Which means that Sakayanagi was the last one to finish on the podium.

The difference between third and fourth place was more than just a difference in ranking.

"So, naturally, for a third-year student, it was disappointing."

Nagumo missed out on first place, Kiriyma missed out on the podium, and there was even the unusual circumstance that all the expelled students were third-year students.

Since I still had about 20 minutes before my appointment, I decided to show up at the poolside first. It was also to confirm that the stares were not just me being self-conscious, but that there was some kind of strategy at work.

It was no longer a matter of slow observation and insight, the answer was immediately apparent.

Within tens of seconds of my appearance at the pool, I was being eyed by an unspecified number of third-year students who were standing near the pool.

Students who were engrossed in conversation and third-year students who were swimming were all observing me as soon as they noticed my presence.

It was no mere coincidence that I felt their eyes on me yesterday.

"It's too early to prove anything, isn't it?"

It's such a strong feeling of discomfort that I want to complain about it.

I should just be here as one of the shadowy students, but I stand out more than any of them.

Even if I try not to think about it, I naturally try to find out what's behind it, what's really going on.

It was most likely an order from Nagumo, but at this point I had no idea what it was about. There are many students who are giving me a blatant stare, but I continue to pretend not to notice anything.

It's easier to act like a stupid, insensitive person. However, I can easily imagine Nagumo assuming that I'm aware of the strange crowd of stares. It's not surprising that he's enjoying seeing me as the center of attention.

At any rate, the best thing to do for now was to ignore the stares and pass the time.

I looked around the pool and saw Ichinose and a few of her classmates, wondering who else was there. It just so happened that Ichinose was the only one who noticed my presence and our eyes met.

Her shoulders jerked once, and she ran away to hide in the shadows of the other classmates. Her classmates were asking her what was wrong with her sudden change in behavior.

After Ichinose's confession to me at the uninhabited island exam.

It was understandable that we would feel awkward just looking at each other from a distance like this.

It's not just Ichinose, but her classmates are also there, so I should keep my distance for now.

Even if I leave her alone, I've already arranged to meet her the evening after tomorrow.

I see a few of my classmates here and there, but unfortunately I can't find any students who are particularly close to me.

"Looks like you're starting to get into a lot of trouble, Ayanokouji."



A voice called out to me from slightly in front of me, and I looked over to see Kiryuuin resting on a beach chair on the deck.

"What are you talking about?"

"It's about the third years. It's not as if you haven't noticed, is it?"

"I'm not sure."

I tried to feign ignorance, but Kiryuuin didn't even snicker and continued nonchalantly.

"Even though I'm not complicit, I'm still a third-year student. I've already heard the information."

"Are you referring to the gaze that's being directed at me?"

"You know what I'm talking about."

"And it's not a big problem. I'm being watched, that's all."

"That's it, huh?"

I put forward that I didn't care, but Kiryuuin said that wasn't the case.

"It just seems like one of those terminally horrible strategies to me, doesn't it? It would be nothing short of nasty, especially for a type of person like you."

While chilling, Kiryuuin's point is not wrong.

"That's the student council president. He's played a bizarre but effective card against the perfect you."

"Perfect me is a bit of an overstatement."

"Don't be modest. I've been through the line of death with you at least once, and I understand that you have bottomless capabilities. Isn't that right?"

The eyes that lurked beneath the sunglasses sharply pierced me.

Even if I continue to deny it, there are so many students in the vicinity that I never know when my voice will be heard. I'm sure Kiryuuin has taken into consideration the surrounding environment.

"Okay, I'll accept it for now."

"Huh, that's fine. Now back to the topic at hand, did anything happen with Nagumo at the end of the test? Because at least there were no orders for the third year students until the end of the uninhabited island exam."

"I don't remember anything at all that could be held against me.... It's frustrating that I can't say that."

Kiryuuin had eased into a posture so far, but he sat up slightly.

"In terms of personal power, the man named Nagumo Miyabi is one of the best in this school. Academic ability A, physical ability A, tactful thinking ability A+, social contribution A+. He is impeccable."

"I know; he's by far the number one student in the entire school year when it comes to OAA."

There are a few students, like Sudou and Kiryuuin, who hold an A+ in one ability.

But Nagumo is the only student with an all-A or better, and the number of students with two or more A+s is extremely limited.

"Nagumo, with his original high academic ability, physical ability, charisma to unite the grade, and achievement to the position of student council president, has not been blessed with any enemies among his grade. The only one who was acknowledged as having equal ability within the school was Horikita Manabu, but now that he has graduated, he is absent."

Kiryuuin took a breath and picked up the glass on the table.

"To Nagumo, you were supposed to be just one of his toys. However, something that happened during the uninhabited island test seems to have triggered him to take you seriously."

"It would be best if he just left me alone, though."

"Well, if that's the case, then you've made a bad choice somewhere."

Kiryuuin was relentless with remarks which were painfully true.

"There are probably only a few people who can defeat you one-on-one. I've some confidence in my abilities, but if there's a type that's not my cup of tea, it's probably someone like Ayanokouji. But in Nagumo's case, nature is completely different. I see him as the type you're not good at. What do you think?"

"I can't deny that possibility anymore. I've been misjudging the nature of him."

They just gave me a look. I hadn't realized how stressful and disgusting it could be.

Even in the white room, there were always eyes watching, but this was something else entirely.

In other words, I was being forced into an environment I had never experienced before in my life.

And the only way to escape was to stay indoors, and that was not a practical solution either.

"I suppose so, Nagumo tends to prefer flashy moves, winning ways, and one-on-ones. But when it comes to winning for sure, he will use any strategy."

That's right, even mobilizing the entire third grade. No matter what it takes, he always prioritizes winning in the end."

So the act of making a lot of people look at me was just the beginning.

"Sorry, but I'm not going to be able to help you with this one."

She said and put on the sunglasses she had on her forehead.

"I never said I wanted to rely on you."

Kiryuuin rejected my request for help as if she was anticipating me.

"I've been free to do whatever I want for the past three years, but I've got a few regrets about my... school life. If this school had an original grade retention system, I might have been willing to consider it."

Staying in the same grade without a promotion or a detention.

In layman's terms, it was repeating a grade.

"There you are, Ayanokouji."

As I and Kiryuuin continued to talk, vice president Kiriyama showed up.

Kiryama, with his serious impression, seemed to have arrived much earlier than promised. He took a glance at Kiryuuin, who was relaxing beside me, and then looked at me again.

"We've got a little while before our scheduled time, but you don't mind if we start? This isn't the best place, let's move."

"You mean you don't want me to hear this, Kiriyama?"

Kiryuuin said she couldn't help me, but she was interested in what he had to say.

She lifted the sunglasses she had put on again.

"Simply because it attracts too much attention. I prefer to talk in a quiet place if possible."

The poolside was the most popular place, and many students were staying there.

Well, for some reason, only the seat next to Kiryuuin was empty, but there was no need to pursue that point too deeply. It looked uncomfortable somehow.

"It's a funny thing to say that you attract too much attention, that's a contradiction, Kiriyama."

"What?"

"If you want to talk in a quiet place, it's nonsense to use a pool like this where many people gather as a meeting place. Isn't that right?"

"Then you wanted me to tell you from the start that I didn't want to talk by your side because it would be too depressing?"

Kiryama said as he spat at Kiryuuin for poking him.

His expression at that moment was completely dead, devoid of any color of emotion.

It showed that Kiryuuin had burned his hands many times before.

"I see, so it means I've made you feel better."

Whenever the conversation started, it always revolved around Kiryuuin. Kiriyama didn't like that, so he made a move to escape, but it turned out to be a way to get Kiryuuin to butt in.

"Anyway, why don't you tell me what you're going to say?"

"No. I refuse. It's none of your business."

"Irrelevant? How can you assume it's none of my business?"

"What?"

"Ayanokouji and I are in a relationship. If that's the case, how can you say it's irrelevant?"

Huh?

Kiryama looked at me and Kiryuuin in turn with a surprised look on his face before his reaction  
"What?"

"I'm just kidding, Kiriyama, you're a boring guy, but your reactions are sometimes funny."

Kiryama looks highly offended when he sees Kiryuuin laughing with amusement.

He walked away without uttering a word.

He would have to leave such a woman alone and get on with it.

"I can't ignore him, so I'll have to leave."

"Please give my regards to Kiriyama."

I hope you won't do that. I'm sure he doesn't want to hear Kiryuuin's name,  
even if she's not there.

I followed Kiriyama, who was walking ahead of me, to a deck one floor above, overlooking the pool.

It was a relatively quiet place, with many students sunbathing or taking a nap.

Still, there were a good number of students gathered here, and conversations could be conspicuous.

However, there was not a single third-year student in sight, suggesting that Kiriyama had already gotten rid of them.

In that sense, the freshmen and second-years probably wouldn't mind Kiriyama's conversation with me. The other saving grace was that there was no one waiting for me, and I was having a one-on-one discussion with Kiriyama.

"So, why did you call me all the way here?"

"I'm not going to go around saying it. What did you do to Nagumo on the last day of the uninhabited island test, Ayanokoji?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't be silly. It's obvious that you had something to do with the results of the uninhabited island test."

The last day of the uninhabited island examinations, when Nagumo and I met, I heard over the walkie-talkie that they were in the middle of a strategy to suppress Kouenji.

"I don't mind answering, but can you answer my question first?"

"A question?"

Yes. There was something I wanted to make sure of when I received such a call.

To Kiriyama's dubious look, I continued.

"It's something I've been wondering since I first met Vice President Kiriyama. It seems that you were initially working to defeat Nagumo, but at what point did you give up fighting...?"

If Kiriyama was expecting Nagumo's downfall and defeat, then this incident should be a welcome one.

"Gave up? I don't understand what you mean. My personal battle is still going on."

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

After denying it, Kiriyama seemed to immediately understand what I was trying to do.

"You seem to think that I'm on Nagumo's side, but that's not true; the changes to Nagumo's plans are beginning to have a negative impact on me and the surrounding area. I told you before the uninhabited island test to stay out of the way."

That one word was a series of very ordinary words of denial uttered by Kiriyama.

However, humans are capable of making minor gaffes.

"That's an expansive interpretation. I was simply talking about whether or not you've abandoned the fight, but Kiriyama-senpai seems to be very aware of the aspect of whether or not you're on the student council president's side of the camp."

"..... I suppose it's the same thing."

"What you mean by admitting defeat and turning on the other side is completely different. They are completely dissimilar. I'd think the vice president understands that much?"

People with a lot of pride who categorize themselves as excellent think that they don't make mistakes. That is why if you don't ask them beforehand implying "you know this already right?", they're less likely to accept the mistake.

"What's the point?"

Without admitting or denying, Kiriyma tried to move on.

The easiest option the man could take right now was to go through with it.

"I simply wanted to ask what position you are in. Have you given up on fighting, but are you still an enemy of Nagumo? Or are you under Nagumo's thumb? Just in case, since it was a case that Horikita Manabu entrusted to me."

Kiriyma's expression hardened, as if he hadn't heard Manabu's name in a long time.

"... That's right."

He might have remembered the first time me and Kiriyma met.

"When I think about it, your relationship with me, Nagumo, and Horikita-senpai - in short, you were someone who had no interest in the student council. In that sense, you were the wrong person to involve."

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

"It's true that I was going to defeat Nagumo. If I didn't defeat him, it would be impossible for our class to re-emerge in A class. But by the middle of my second-years year, that spirit was slowly fading away."

The current 3rd year students are allowing Class A to run solo far more than our grade.

At the moment, the class points between the 3rd year A class and the 3rd year B class are over 900 apart. Even at the midway point of last year, there must have been a difference of over 700 points.

We allowed Nagumo to run solo early on and got to the point where we couldn't catch them.

"We, the third years, moved on to the individual competition early on. Class points and school rules were secondary, and we started competing according to our own rules proposed by Nagumo."

So that's a big part of the reason behind the unusual solo run.

Once that happened, it would have been a high hurdle for Kiriyma to confront on his own.

"I was struggling to break through somehow, but as soon as I reached the third year, that wave swallowed me up too."

Frustration? Resignation? Kiriyma shows an indescribable profile.

"What happened to you after you were swallowed by the wave?"

"Huh.... I guess you'll have to hear it clearly from my mouth to make me feel better."

"Because it's important to me."

"Nagumo handed me a ticket to graduate with A class, and I decided to follow the rules that guy made up. This is what you wanted to hear, right?"

In other words, the position he's in now means that not only has he stopped being hostile, but he's become one of Nagumo's friends.

I guess that's how important graduating with an A class is to an ordinary student.

It's also proof that 20 million points is worth it and attractive.

"Whether or not you get this school's biggest privilege will have a big impact on the rest of your life. It's more important to graduate with an A class, no matter how your classmates may ultimately resent you. Three years of high school is just a blink of an eye compared to the decades of life that lie ahead."

It was no surprise that Kiriyma was upset and wanted to know the details, even calling me up.

"It was our proposition and mission for Nagumo to win the first place. However, your involvement caused a disruption in the chain of command, and Kouenji snatched the first place from him, leaving him in second place. As a result, I lost a lot of both class and private points. Do you have any idea how much this means to me?"

As confirmed by the OAA, Nagumo had a trial card and additional cards numbering 7 in his large group, and the amount of money he lost by not taking first place alone amounted to seven million.

In addition, if all 28 of the third-year students' flight cards had been assigned to Nagumo's group, he would have received an additional reward of nearly 15 million private points. However, sinking to second place resulted in almost halving the amount. Of course, it's still a huge amount of money.

If the effects of the class points from the trial cards were included, the loss would be even greater.

"With graduation looming for us third-year students, missing out on first place this time is a huge loss, especially when we need to collect private points without wasting even a single point."

Considering that the Kiriyama group had also concentrated their "extra" cards on their own group with the intention of aiming for second place, more private points than they had just calculated would be lost.

"I guess the fact that Kiriyama-senpai's group didn't win the prize isn't unrelated."

When I pointed that out, he twitched his shoulders slightly.

"..... Ah, we were hurriedly brought in as a backup factor for the Nagumo group. But the slight delay in response had repercussions on all sides until the end. We didn't just lose to Kouenji, the second year group took third place."

The large number of private point rewards that the third-year students would have earned if everything had gone according to plan. Although those were just skin deep calculations, they were exactly the kind of money that could definitely save their friends.

"The ticket we need to move to Class A is 20 million. We're always looking for the best way to generate that. I'd say we've lost one of those tickets in this case."

The uninhabited island test, the top rewards were all very attractive, but when it came to private points, the total effect of the additional cards and the flight cards was much greater.

"Up until now, Nagumo has continued to produce results and has gained the trust of the grade. But by coming here and sticking to your presence, he's lost a lot of money and the trust has been damaged. If it was switched, the problem would still have been minimal, but after the special exam - Nagumo took unbelievable action."

"The unexpected expulsion of the third-year students, is that correct?"

"Yes. Originally, it was planned that the top students would pick up the group that had been deliberately placed in the bottom of the class, prevent them from leaving, and rescue them by replacing them at the end of the exam."

But that was not done, and the third-year students in the lower group were expelled in masses.

"There was no way to resist, and fifteen students were expelled. They didn't even have time to cry it out."

"It's a shuddering situation, isn't it, for the third-year students?"

"Of course it is. A single whim can bring three years to nothing. If it's because of our own actions, we can give up, but if it's because of Nagumo's unreasonable actions, it's a different story."

If all of this is true, it could be the beginning of a wake-up call for the students who have been following him delusionally. No, if anything, it could be said that it was unusual that even after this event, the third-year students still showed no signs of defying Nagumo.

"Isn't that strange? Nagumo not being blamed."

"It's a big blunder, you know. And a lot of people below B class who don't have tickets are keeping quiet."

"Even if I wanted to defy him, I couldn't. Nagumo and the students enrolled in 3rd year A class are protected by an impenetrable fortress."

An impenetrable fortress. It would mean that a system has been created that no other class can ever disobey.

If that's the case, then... the mystery seems to be able to be solved by asking one question.

"Vice President Kiriyma has the ticket in his hand, right?"

Normally, this question would be answered with a resounding "yes".

However, Kiriyma answered in the blink of an eye, without changing his expression.

"If I had that ticket in my possession, I wouldn't have any problem with it."

"I see. If that ticket is in Nagumo's possession, then it's certainly a different story."

It was obvious, but Nagumo was playing a shrewd strategy. If all private points were controlled by Nagumo, no one could stand against Nagumo.

To put it simply, Nagumo has promised to rescue them with 20 million points.

No, even the expression "verbal promise" might be naive.

'If you continue to be loyal to me, I will prepare a ticket for you.'

I think he is using vague expression like that to avoid making a clear statement.

If they were to go against him in this situation, the promise might be violated without a second thought.

"It's also forbidden to accumulate private points by sneaking around. The maximum amount that an individual can have at their disposal is basically 500,000 points. Anything above that will be siphoned off to Nagumo."

"That's harsh."

Unlike cash deposits in a wardrobe, private points that exist in the form of electronic money cannot be hidden. I'm sure they also have rules to monitor each other.

Even if Nagumo were to be kicked out of school by some means, he would be expelled with tens or even hundreds of millions of private points.

This means that even if they wanted to start a rebellion, they would never be able to do so.

"Now you understand why the third-year students are pushing Nagumo to an unusual level and then protecting him, don't you?"

"I understand."

It's a perfect dictatorship, you could say. No one else in the same grade could possibly compete with Nagumo.

"That guy is playing with the entire third grade. He makes the students who don't have tickets compete against each other, and then he pretends to give the winner a ticket and makes them pledge their allegiance."

Of course, for the students in classes D and C, who have no chance of winning, Nagumo's existence would be nothing but a god.

Which is natural as they get to graduate from class A if it goes well.

But we won't know that until we really move classes just before graduation.

"I want to compete and fight to get as many tickets as possible in the little school life we have left. That's why your presence is only a hindrance, Ayanokoji."

Nagumo's attention to me caused him to lose valuable private points.

With the resulting loss, students who should be saved are no longer saved.

This is the situation that the third-year students are in now.

"But do you think I'm in this situation because I want to be?"

"I know."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"Just go back to the beginning. Tell me what happened on the uninhabited island, and then we'll find a solution first."

"I thought Nagumo didn't want that. He hasn't even let the vice president hear what happened, has he?"

"... That's true, but we can't solve the problem by letting it go."

So you want to stop Nagumo's rampage, even if it means risking losing your ticket?

No, he fears what will happen to his own ticket if he doesn't stop it.

"If you're not willing to talk to me, then I want you to meet Nagumo right now and talk to him. I'll even set up the meeting if necessary. No one will benefit from you and Nagumo having a go at each other in the future, is that right?"

"You're absolutely right."

"I'll be sure to advise Nagumo to stop the operation that he is carrying out. I want you to believe me."

The operation he's carrying out. I don't need to ask what it is.

"You mean the way I'm being observed."

Kiryama looked down at the pool and nodded.

"What kind of aim is it, what is it for, and for how long? There's no explanation for any of those things, and there's a growing distrust among the third years about this strange behavior."

Despite their disbelief, they had no choice but to comply with Nagumo, who had every right to do so.

"The Nagumo administration is rock solid, but... still, if they continue with this recklessness, the worst could happen."

Kiriyama and others who have been given tickets will continue to faithfully obey, but many students who have not been given tickets will not. Kiriyama can't let something like a riot happen.

It would not be surprising if they were planning to expel Nagumo if they did not get a ticket anyway.

For Kiriyama and the others, that would be the worst case scenario.

"I don't think this is the end of the story, though, if I say I'll meet with him."

"Then what should I do? You won't tell me the details, but you also don't want to meet Nagumo. Then the situation will only get worse."

"Can you give me some time? I'm sure I'll have an answer for you soon."

Perhaps Nagumo will send more information to Kiriyama's ears instead of me.

"Fine... But you need to make a decision before Nagumo makes his next move."

Kiriyama had been looking around the entire pool and immediately noticed the appearance of a certain someone.

It was, of course, Nagumo, who had been the center of the conversation all along.

"I have to go now. If he finds out I'm meeting with you, I'll be in trouble again."

It was probably wise for Kiriyama, since he took a reasonable risk in making contact with me today.

It was worth the contact just to know the situation of the third-year students.

## **Part 1**

The pool was quickly cleared out as Nagumo and his friends began to increase in number.

If they want to talk to me directly, they don't need to contact me, they can just leave me alone and I know they will send a messenger.

I interpreted the current lack of it as an indication that there was no intention of setting up a way to talk about it.

Anyway, it's not pleasant to be the center of attention.

I went to the locker room to change my clothes so I could escape.

"Ayanokoji-Senpai!"

I ran into Nanase, who spotted me in the aisle and ran up to me with a happy look on her face.

On a ship where you know where you're going, it's not that unusual to see students you know repeatedly outside of your cabin, so it's not that unusual to see them two days in a row.

However, the way she appeared reminded me of a scene I saw yesterday because it was exactly the same.

"Can I have a moment of your time, please?"

She seemed to be checking my surroundings lightly to make sure I wasn't with someone else.

I was with Ishizaki yesterday, so She might not have been able to initiate the conversation.

However, I nodded my head, somewhat confused by the strong pressure or the close proximity.

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

"What's on your mind?"

Nanase nodded, and her cheerfulness disappeared, replaced by a serious expression.

Nanase then spoke in a whisper, paying attention to what was going on around her.

"There's one thing I didn't tell you, senpai. If I tell you, you might get angry. ...."

I will get angry? I don't know what she's talking about.

"That....."

Nanase's voice became more whispery and she tried to tell me what she had been keeping quiet.....

"Huh? Ayanokoji-kun?"

A less familiar voice called out to me, and Nanase hurriedly distanced herself from me.

It was Ichinose's classmate Kobashi Yume.

In all our years at school, we wouldn't have even said hello to each other if we saw each other.

However, in the desert island test, we spent the same time, albeit briefly.

It seems to have brought about a change in the relationship.

"Oh, am I interrupting something? I think I'd better wait."

She said apologetically, as if She had overlooked Nanase, who was hiding behind my body.

"No, I'm fine. I was just asking Ayanokoji-senpai something I didn't understand."

"Are you sure?"

Nanase nodded vigorously twice, as if it wasn't as serious as she thought it was.

"I will call you when I have more time."

The only thing She was sure of was that it was not something that other students Should hear.

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

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realize you were talking to her. She's a freshman, isn't she? Did I offend her?"

"I don't think you need to worry about that. Is there anything you want from me?"

"Actually, the girls in my class are going to have a party this evening to celebrate our good work. I was wondering if you'd like to join us, Ayanokoji-kun. I also wanted to thank you for saving Chihiro."

It was an invitation.

However, the keyword "girls in the class" stuck out strongly.

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

I got scared and tried to check, but Kobashi nodded her head, saying, "Nuh-uh."

"I guess I'm still choosing. Don't worry so much, there aren't any weird students."

It's not that I'm afraid of the odd member joining, but she doesn't seem to understand.

"It's only for students in Kobashi's class, right? Wouldn't it make you feel weird if I, a stranger, joined in?"

"Yeah? I don't think so, do you?"

A fluffy, abstract invitation to a good night party.

To be honest, I wasn't too keen on the idea, as there were not many people in Ichinose's class that I could talk to on a friendly basis.

Especially now, when I meet Ichinose, it's doubtful that I'll be able to have a conversation with her.

It's a little painful, but I'm going to say no.

"No, I'll pass-----"

Seeing that I was about to refuse, Kobashi clasped her hands together as if to sob.

"Please! I just thought it was a good thing we met here, you know?"

It's hard to say no when you say so, but I can't give in so easily.

I can see that if I go with the flow here, it won't be good for me later.

"You mean it's my fault, right?"

"What?"

"No, I can't help it. I'm going to report this to the rest of the class. I asked Ayanokoji-kun out, but he turned me down because I didn't ask him out properly."

"Wait. How can that be?"

"So you'll come?"

"...it's ...."

"You mean you don't like me after all? Oh, if only I could have asked you out a little better. .... I'm sorry."

"I don't want you to get too depressed."

"All you have to do is show up at the party .....! Please, as you see! And Honami is coming too!"

Once again, this time She rubbed her hands together with more worshipful intensity than before.

It was as if there was already no way out of the situation after being taken this far.

"Okay. Are you sure you want me to just show up?"

"Yes, thank you! But don't tell Honami that you are going to the party today, okay?"

She smiles so brightly that it's hard to believe that she was depressed and sad just before.

It's been said that women are born actresses.

But don't tell Ichinose? That part was a little tricky.

Why the secrecy? She need everyone's permission for me to join.

If even one student refuses to participate, feel free to tell me about it.

That way, I can say no again in a dignified manner for a good cause.

"Because, you know, it's better to surprise. Right, Ayanokoji-kun?"

That seemed like a surprise 'in a not' so good way.

I don't want to get into it, but it seems that her classmates have a lot on their minds about me and Ichinose.

"I'll see you in room 5034 at 8:00."

"Room 5034? We're doing this in someone's room?"

I thought we would be using a rest area or a deck somewhere.

Moreover, the room number indicates that it is a room where girls, not boys, are staying.

"Is it not good?"

"It's not that I don't want to, it's just that I find it a little hard to go further."

"That's not true, is it?"

I've been pushed around by Kobashi's offensive.

Hey! I'm sorry, but...

More and more retreats were being taken away.

"I'll be waiting for you! I'll see you soon!"

Satisfied with her promise, Kobashi walked away rather quickly.

"Oh, my God."

It's not even time to talk to Ichinose face to face yet. .....

Well, if you're in a large group at a party, you're okay.

If it's a party for good work, I'm sure there will be more than a few boys there.

## Part 2

After this, I spent a bewildering amount of time in my room, not feeling like spending time freely, and after dinner at six, it was just before eight in the afternoon.

"Let's go."

If I could choose again to go or not to go, I would choose "No" without hesitation.

It was such an unwelcome invitation, But if I really didn't want to go, I should have turned it down without hesitation. It was because of my half-hearted response that I ended up in this situation, so I guess I had to live with it.

Now I was determined to go.

I stood there in front of room 5034 that I had arrived at.

It had already been almost a minute since I arrived at this place.

I tried to knock, but I could only hear the occasional girls talking and laughing from inside the room.

There was no sign of any boys at all at the moment.

I have a bad feeling about this.

For some reason, I also felt like I was starting to break out in a kind of greasy sweat.

All I know for sure is that I'm more nervous than I was when I faced Tsukishiro in the desert island test.

"Wouldn't it be wiser to just turn around?"

The devil's whisper escaped directly down my throat as a voice.

Wouldn't it be less damaging to just say, "I forgot," and apologize?

No, but I don't want to be branded as someone who broke a promise if I can help it.

What the hell am I supposed to do...

When you are stuck as if you were in a golden bind, the spell is broken from an unexpected source.

"Oh, you're here!"

It was Kobashi who appeared from the end of the corridor.

I don't know if it's the timing or what...

Kobashi was holding a large plastic bag in her hand, with snacks and bottled juice peeking out from inside.

Once you've been spotted, the option of escape naturally disappears.

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

"Oh, yeah. ..... I was just about to do that."

There was no longer any escape allowed.

The door that I had felt too difficult to open, Kobashi tried to open it without hesitation.

I have to Prepare myself a little more.

While I was thinking this, the only door separating me from the guest room was being opened.

The first thing that stimulated my senses was not sight, but smell.

It smelled like flowers, honey, or something sweet.

Immediately after that, several eyeballs caught sight of me.

"Ta-da! Ayanokoji-kun, I brought him in!"

The girls were sitting in a not-so-spacious four-person room.

What is this in front of me?

One, two, three. ..... There are ten of them in all, including Kobashi.

This means that half of the girls in Ichinose's class are here.

And there was not the slightest hint of boys, and I almost felt betrayed without my permission.

"Wait, that's not a good way to say you brought him in."

"Yeah? Oh, I bought what you asked for."

She placed the plastic bag on a small table near the bed in the small guest room.

What is this fluffy, light-hearted gathering?

It's definitely a little different from other girls' groups, that's for sure.

Most of the participants were girls I had never spoken to before, but I remembered their names and faces from OAA.

Overwhelmed by the sight and unable to move, Kobashi tapped me lightly on the back.

"Well then, Ayanokoji-kun, where should I put you? Oh, is it okay if you sit next to Honami-chan?"

It's true that Ichinose is the closest person here, but I'm at a loss for words.

I don't think there was any choice because the room was so small to begin with, but the right to choose didn't seem to exist from the beginning.

The only thing that was a little strange was that even though there were 10 people in the room, there was enough space left from the beginning for one boy to sit next to Ichinose without any problem.

In other words, it wasn't a coincidence that there was an opening, but it was most likely predetermined.

I tried to remember and compare what I said when Kobashi asked me out during the day, but it didn't help me in the current situation.

Standing like this would only make me feel uncomfortable as I continued to be stared at by ten people.

I hurriedly excused myself from the girls and went next to Ichinose.

"Can I sit down?"

"O...Of course."

After a quick question, I sat down next to Ichinose, but I was still getting the looks of almost everyone.

Or rather, all seven of them, except for Ichinose, Kobashi and Himeno.

No, I should keep a cool head and keep a straight face here.

And I should be allowed to leave early at the right time.

The tea was poured into a clear cup and handed to me by Kobashi.

When everyone had their drinks, Amikura, who seemed to be the moderator, spoke up.

[Moderator : one who presides over an assembly, meeting, or discussion]

"I'm going to start with the party to thank Ayanokoji for his hard work on the desert island exam and for helping Chihiro when she was lost. Kanpai ! ." [Kanpai : Japanese drinking Toast]

With these words, everyone raises their cups to the top.

"Well, first of all, thank you, Ayanokoji-kun. I really appreciate your help at that time."

Then Shiranami, sitting to the left of Ichinose, thanked him.

I haven't done anything to be awed more than once. .....

For now, I couldn't expand on the conversation, so I gave a small nod.

"Um, Ayanokoji-kun."

Personally, I wanted to say that the party was in full swing, but when I wanted to lament that only about 10 minutes had passed, Shiranami looked at me with a serious face.

"What's ....?"

A can of orange juice was clutched in both hands, and she seemed to be trying to say something.

"I'm grateful for your help, but I haven't admitted it yet."

"..... What?"

Without explaining in detail, Shiranami just said that and squeezed the orange juice down her throat.

"Pfft! I can't say any more!"

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

I was confused, but the people around Shiranami showered me with words of encouragement and praise, saying that I had done well and that I had worked hard.

Shiranami couldn't say it fully, but what is it?

In an away state, you can't ask back like that.

At the beginning of the party, Shiranami mentioned me, but after that, the girls started to talk about whatever they wanted.

I just watched from the sidelines like a borrowed cat.

Of course, if you ask me if I'm comfortable, I'll tell you no.

But still, .....

You get to see how amazing the girls' talk is, coming up with one topic after another.

Regardless of the genre, the topics are as busy as an airplane flying around Japan.

But no matter what the topic, there is one thing in common.

It means that many girls think of Ichinose as the center, trust her, and have delusional faith in her. I'm not saying that's a bad thing.

Honami Ichinose is without a doubt the most trustworthy student among the second-year students.

I can assure you that this is true regardless of friend or foe.

The criteria for what constitutes trustworthy depends on the person, but trust is something that is built up over time.

Just as no one would trust a student who had never spoken before if he or she suddenly said, "Trust me."

But being trustworthy and being delusional are two different things.

Because even if Ichinose is a trustworthy person, she can make wrong choices from time to time.

If we continue to trust such wrong people, the results will not be good.

There will always be a need for students who can say what is wrong is wrong in order to correct the mistakes.

"Can I talk to you for a second?"

While the excitement of the girls was at its peak, one girl, who had so far only shown the occasional gesture, raised her hand.

"What's wrong, Yuki?"

"The usual headache. I'm sorry, but I'm really tired. Can I go back to my room?"

If it had been a mere statement with nothing to say, I would not have paid attention, but I was surprised by the unexpected tone.

This is because everyone in Ichinose's class is basically polite and decent.

Himeno briefly tells Ichinose why she is not feeling well and wishes to leave.

"Sure, why don't I follow you?"

Ichinose, who heard about her friend's illness, and the girls rushed to Himeno's side.

"No, no, no. I'm not a kid..."

Himeno stood up, looking fed up with her overprotective behavior.

There was this type of student in Ichinose's class?

As I recall, Yuki Himeno's group for the desert island test were all from the same class.

Anyway, a change came to the place where I could not leave yet.

If I miss this chance, I don't know when I'll be able to go home again.

Let's take the plunge and follow Himeno's lead here.

"Well, I guess I'd better get going."

"Oh, you're leaving already? You could've stayed longer."

"No, I was originally just going to show up, and I have plans to meet someone later."

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

"I'll see you later, Ayanokoji-kun."

Ichinose, who was sitting, and the girls sent me off and I left the room.

### Part 3

"Whew ... I was about to sweat strangely."

No, it can be said that I was already sweating.

Less than 30 seconds after Himeno left the room, I too escaped from the room 5034.

It may be heaven for some people, but for me, it was a painful place to be.

I still can't say I'm very good at getting close to people.

It would be a different story if I had completely created the role from the beginning, but with the premise of deciding to play an inconspicuous high school student, it's not easy to change it.

However, I think I was able to shorten the amount of distance from Ichinose's class, as I had hardly ever been associated with them before.

With Ichinose at the center, I could vaguely see what kind of students were beside her.

What is lacking and what is missing? At this point, I know the strengths and weaknesses of Ichinose's class.

The presence of students who can speak up is essential no matter who the leader is.

At the moment, the only person I can think of who can do that is Kanzaki, a boy.

But in a class that revolves around Ichinose, the girls seem to be just as outspoken as the boys.

Kanzaki is the type of person who can speak out against Ichinose, but whether he can appeal to the entire class and control the girls is another matter entirely.

"Hmm?"

Himeno complained of a headache and said she would go back to her room, but she walked in a different direction from the guest room.

She went around the corner in an instant, but I must not have been mistaken because she had a distinctive hair color.

Himeno, who had made me feel uncomfortable in the girls' meeting earlier.

She was also a bit tricky, so I decided to follow her.

We arrived at the deck at night, when there was no sign of anyone.

Looking at her profile from a distance, I remembered Yuki Himeno's profile again.

2 years B class Yuki Himeno

Academic ability B- 63

Physical ability C 51

Thinking ability C+ 58

Social contribution C+ 58

Overall C+ 57

Other than a 'high' level of academic ability, She is normal for better or worse, and has no outstanding abilities as far as I can see.

But that's just the way the school sees it. Unseen strengths and weaknesses can be hidden in any student. I'd like to explore this a little more.

The shortcut here would be to try to contact them directly.

"What are you doing?"

"Is .....? What?"

She looked away with a slightly bummed look on her face.

It's not natural for her to be here since she left the room saying she had a headache.

"Are you done with the headache?"

"All right..."

She mumbled a few words that were almost drowned out by the wind, but it sounded like she said "annoying".

There are a certain number of boys and girls who use abusive language, but in Himeno's case, it's not so much abusive as it is a guarded way of speaking to keep people away from her.



However, perhaps concerned about the external situation, she coughed once and turned her gaze to me.

"I just thought I'd stop by to get some air and relax."

"Do you get headaches a lot? You were saying something like that earlier."

I was going to ask her for more details, but she shut up, as if she didn't want to have any more conversations.

Even in the girls' meeting earlier, she hadn't made any remarks except when she was leaving.

In addition to that, the other girls basically never approached Himeno.

It's not like she's being ignored, Ichinose wouldn't tolerate such a thing, and if the relationship was bad, she wouldn't show it to me from another class.

I think she half-heartedly invited Himeno to a party to celebrate her good work.

If we think of it as a classmate's desire to have as much fun as possible, we can see the connection.

"It's because I have migraines."

She replied shortly, in a messy manner.

"If it's a migraine, you're right to cool it down."

It is caused by the dilatation of cerebral blood vessels due to changes in female hormones, fatigue, and lack of sleep. Blood vessels dilate less when cooled and expand when warmed, so exposure to the wind is not bad.

But only if it's really a migraine.

"I'm tired..."

"Isn't a headache just an excuse to get out of an unpleasant space?"

"What? You think I'm lying?"

Himeno had been relatively unconcerned up to this point, but as soon as it was pointed out to her that she was lying, her color changed. She is a rare type for Ichinose's class, which has many mild-mannered classmates.

My gut feeling was right.

"I can see you're pissed."

"It's different. I mean, what is it? My head is starting to hurt again, so I'm going back to my room."

"I'm sorry if I upset you. I just need you to listen to me for a minute."

Holding her forehead, Himeno looked back at me in disgust.

"My headaches are getting worse."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, but... I'm supposed to listen to you?"

"You don't look good."

"I hate that."

I was able to see through her after a few conversations. This one seemed to be more her true self.

"Oh, well, that's just the way it is."

Does she understand me? I shrugged indignantly.

"I guess I'll have to go back to the girls' meeting now and report that Himeno might be faking it."

"Huh? Don't treat me like I'm sick. You're a liar."

"Lies? I think I'm right. That's all. At least that's what I felt, so I had the right to throw a stone. You can prove whether it's true or false in front of everyone later."

"There's no way to prove a headache."

"Maybe."

"What? They were all complimenting you, but you've got a nasty personality."

"At least I wasn't praised for my good nature?"

I'm not saying it myself, but I was just being thanked for helping Shiranami.

"Oh, yeah."

"I'm not sure what to say. You are an odd one. It's not like Ichinose's class."

"Are you crazy? If you ask me, the people in my class are too good-natured. Our class often gets together in large groups to do things. I don't mind that in itself, but the problem is that each meeting is too long and they never leave."

If there was a repeated meeting that I didn't like, I would be fed up with it.

However, Ichinose's classmates are enjoying the gathering.

That's why no one wants to leave after each gathering, and that's why it takes so long.

"If you don't like it, why don't you just not participate?"

"Do you think you can do that? Even if you think it's annoying, it's important to keep in line."

"Well, yeah."

The class as a whole is cohesive, and there is a strong sense of unity, especially among the girls. Even if they were unhappy inside, it would take courage to throw a stone and cause a stir.

Himeno. Maybe the encounter between me and her will be the one that changes the direction of things. Normally, I wouldn't get deeply involved with Himeno, a person of the opposite sex, unless I was in a special situation.

However, it would not be a bad idea to take a step forward here.

Of course, if that ended up being a problem for Himeno, so be it.

"If you want to release stress, isn't screaming the best way?"

"Shouting .....? Even if you don't want to, you'll get pulled over if you scream here."

'Not many students come to the deck, and given the noise of the ship, shouting won't make a difference to the surroundings. It'll just be drowned out and gone in no time."

"But..."

She looked confused, as if she had never shouted that loud before.

"Well, why don't you go ahead and shout it out?"

"Me?"

The unexpected reply made me wince.

"I don't know about you, but you don't strike me as the quiet type... but as the type who would scream. Show me how to do it, and I'll try."

I'm in trouble.

Since I don't remember ever feeling strong stress myself, I don't have enough experience to say that I don't, if you ask me if I actually remember screaming out loud.

"If you can't do it, get the hell out of here."

If I backed down now, it would probably be the end of my relationship with Himeno.

"All right..."

With Himeno watching, I made up my mind and shouted out to the ocean.

"Ah——— Okay, now it's Himeno's turn."

"..... Are you kidding me?"

"Really?"

"You didn't even have a shred of volume."

"Then show me how it's done."

"You can't set a good example, can you?"

I caught Himeno's back with my words as she tried to run away in disgust.

"I thought if I did it, Himeno would do it too?"

"No, no, no, it's just annoying when people think they've done it."

"Whatever the volume of my voice, I responded. But if Himeno's voice was just as low as mine, you have no right to make fun of me at all."

In order to avoid being accused of shouting in the same low voice, I will go ahead and seal it off.

"It's ..... All right, just once, okay? Then you can leave."

After taking a breath, Himeno put her hands up to her mouth as if she had no choice.

"Wa———"

The sound of the ship's engines and the wind drowned out the voice from the rest of the world, so no one but me could hear it.

However, a voice echoed in my ears, twice as loud as I had imagined, and echoed around me.

I felt the ship shake, but that was just a feeling, it couldn't be actual shaking.

Her tone was low and her voice was subdued, but she has a tremendous, awesome voice.

"That's refreshing."

Himeno nodded her head in satisfaction.

"Right? It was worth the screaming."

"No, no, no, you weren't screaming at all."

I get poked and prodded with her eyes.

"Well... in the midst of all the stress, I could have done well."

"Yeah? You didn't look like it."

"You're better than I thought you'd be. You must have been under a lot of stress."

"What? I'm gonna kill you?"

She has a very sharp eye.

Even when she was angry, she never put her hands before her mouth.

"I was a little out of line."

I apologized honestly, but I am not afraid.

Maybe this Himeno has a scary side to her, too.

"I'm going back to my room."

"Yeah, I'm sorry I held you up on all that."

"If you realize it was bad, it's still better."

With that, Himeno returned to the ship.

"I think I'll go back to my room."

I thought the thank you party was a place to go, but I was unusually tired.

I think I'm going to have a deep sleep today.

### **Chapter 3**

Living on this cruise ship comes with the problem of where and what kind of lunch to eat every day.

In the mornings and evenings, the school provides buffet-style meals, which are available free of charge.

You are free to use it or not, but it is not only free but also very tasty, making it very popular with the students, who have three separate entry restrictions from 7:00 to 9:00 in the morning.

This is To avoid congestion.

The service is available for up to 60 minutes, and you can make a reservation from your cell phone for any time you want.

I usually have breakfast at 8:00 a.m., but due to a late reservation, the 8:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. slots were booked on August 6, so I had to eat a little earlier at 7:00 a.m.

This makes me feel strangely hungry at this time of day, which is noon.

Perhaps it was because the caloric intake was minimal during the desert island test, and my body was craving energy.

The café terrace is a popular place to dine, but the food prices are very high.

If you want to have lunch with a drink, you will need at least 2,000 points.

If you're looking for a fun way to eat with friends, that might be a good idea, but unfortunately, I'm alone today.

In this situation, it would be natural to want to save money and spend as little as possible. This is where the shops(stall type) come in handy.

In short, you can buy onigiri (rice balls), sandwiches, and other items as easily as you can at a convenience store.

I immediately went to the store and paid 250 points for a rice ball and a small pack of tea, and with a plastic bag in my hand, I looked for a place to eat.

You can use a suitable resting space, but it's usually occupied by someone else, so there's a strong resistance to sharing a small space.

When it comes to places where you don't mind strangers being near you to some extent, it's usually outside.

After a long search, I arrived at a deck near the bow of the ship on the sixth floor, overlooking the ocean. Of course, there was no charge to use the deck, so it was a good place to buy some food and eat it.

I thought I would have a quick snack and enjoy the magnificent view of the ocean, but the time of day was a little wrong.

There were many students who had come here for the view, and it was hard to settle down.

Although it is a large deck, if there are many people using it, it will eventually be difficult to find space.

I looked around and found one empty bench and Nanase sitting on the bench next to it.

A sandwich that she must have bought at the store and a pack of milk were placed beside her.

It's funny, it's the opposite of yesterday when it was the other way around.

In addition to Nanase, many other second-year students, including classmates Ijuin and Okitani, A classmate Sakayanagi, and Ryuen's classmates Naka Izumi and Suzuki, were having lunch while gazing out at the ocean, just like Nanase.

After all, people usually think the same way.

I didn't move from my spot and looked towards the ocean.

Surely, a meal eaten with this view in front of you must be very tasty.

The problem, however, is that just as there are many of us in the same grade, there are also many third-year students.

The third-year students who noticed me, though still few in number, immediately began to turn their attention to me.

However, if you walk away immediately, it would mean that you did not like the gazes and ran away. It could be judged as effective and encouraged.

Come to think of it, Nanase seemed to have something to talk about yesterday, too.

Remembering that the conversation had been interrupted because Kobashi had approached me, I decided to call out to her.

It was also an excuse to stop by this place to talk to her.

"Nanase."

When I called her name, she looked backwards in surprise.

"Oh, Senpai!"

She had just put a sandwich in her mouth and was looking at me, trying to keep the ingredients from spilling out.

I felt a little bad when I saw her start munching away in a hurry.

I had used it as a way to counter the third-year students, and it seemed to have caused Nanase to panic in an unnecessary way.

"Oh, sorry. Shall I come back later?"

But Nanase's personality would not allow her to do so.

"Wait a minute, I'm not sure."

She couldn't spit it out now that she had it in her mouth, so she started to eat it.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, actually ... I was having a meal."

Her tone was like a secret confession, but I could tell by looking at her that she was eating.

If anything, I knew it from the moment I saw the back of her.

"Um, what can I do for you?"

Nanase still looked somewhat flustered, which made me feel a little strange.

Her gaze was restless, and she seemed to be unable to concentrate on her conversation with me.

"Oh, no, you looked like you needed to talk yesterday. I was wondering what it was about. That time, Kobashi approached me and I had to go."

"Uh-oh."

Her thoughts are slow and words don't come out immediately.

After thinking about it for a moment, Nanase shook her head from side to side.

"I'm sorry, but I've already solved the problem, so can we just forget about it?"

"I see. Then it's okay."

If it was a problem, I was going to talk with Nanase about it because she has helped me in many ways, but if it was solved, I wouldn't pay attention to it. Rather, the main reason was that I sensed an air of unconcern.

"I'm sorry to have called on you so suddenly. I'm going to go back to the ship. There are more people than I thought, and I don't feel comfortable."

"I see. I'll see you later, senpai."

I left the place as if I had finished my business.

I looked back at the deck one more time, Nanase was facing the front and resuming her lunch.

## Part 1

Eventually. To find a place for lunch, I went to the stern (rear end of the boat) of the fifth floor, where there were fewer people.

This was the place where I had talked to Himeno last night, and I had already confirmed that it was a place that not many people usually enter.

For the next few minutes, I forgot my original purpose and stared at the rough waves created by the moving ship.

Then, an unexpected person approaches.

"Are you going to have lunch here all by yourself?"

"Sakayanagi . Did you happen to be here?"

I believe she was on the same floor as Nanase a while ago.

"It's just a coincidence. I'd like to say that, but I've been chasing Ayanokoji-kun."

She was chasing me? But Sakayanagi's legs were not good enough to keep up with my walking speed.

On the other hand, there was no indication that she had anyone following her ahead of her.

"It's a simple deduction. You showed up on the bow deck earlier to have lunch, but gave up when you saw how many people were there, didn't you? With the snacks in your hands and the fact that you wanted a view of the ocean, it shouldn't be too hard to predict where you'll be eating."

It means that she has completely read my pattern of behavior and has arrived here.

"Ayanokoji-kun, you also want to eat with a view, don't you?"

Unlike the one on the bow, the view isn't first-rate, but it's not every day you get to see the ocean like this.

There is no guarantee that there will be another desert island test this time next year.

There are other events planned for the second year, including a school trip, but I don't know the details of that.

This might be the last time I'll be able to see the ocean.

"Like this ocean, I'm sure you'll be able to see many sights you've never seen before. In that sense, I think Ayanokoji-kun made the right choice in choosing this school."

"Yes, I think so. But I've only seen the ocean once before I enrolled in this school."

Sakayanagi looked surprised. No, perhaps it was understandable for her to be surprised. In fact, I had never been outside the facility until I turned 14, which was my third year of junior high school.

If you know the outline of a white room, it should be a common understanding.

The only time I saw the view was when I had a chance to go outside for a short while after I was transferred out of the facility. I have never been in direct contact with seawater, but I have walked along a path with a view of the ocean.

However, the first time I saw the ocean, I was not impressed.

Emotionlessly, I merely went about walking in the outside world.

"Have you ever read Under the Wheel?"

"It's a Hermann Hesse novel."

Of all the novels he has written, this one is particularly well known in Japan.

The hero of that story, Hans, was a gifted genius. He went to an elite school and was expected to have a bright future, but after living only in academia, he began to have doubts. However, his academic life led him to doubt himself, and in his attempt to live up to expectations, he became frustrated and began to decline.

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

"What's wrong with that?"

"I don't think he was a genius. I don't think he was a genius, because true geniuses never fail. It would be foolish for a true genius to fail, much less choose death as the end result."

Sakayanagi seems to have interpreted the death as a suicide, not an accident.

"Do you remember what I said before,'People can know the warmth by touching it. It's very important. The warmth of human skin is not bad at all."

"You said something like that."

It was at the end of the third semester of my first year, right after the special exam.

"Hesse, who wrote under the wheel, was also as worried and frustrated as the main character, Hans, but he was able to look forward without dying because of the existence of his family."

Because it seems that the author, Hesse, and the main character of the book, Hans, had very similar backgrounds.

It can be seen that the story was a projection of myself.

As Sakayanagi stared at the sea, a strong gust of wind blew for a moment.

"That——"

I saw the hat lift off in an instant and immediately reached out to catch it.

"It's dangerous."

If I had been slightly late in my reaction to reach for it, Sakayanagi's hat would have taken off into the ocean.

"Thank you."

"It's not safe to wear it on the deck."

"Hmm, yes, you're right. But it's my trademark."

Sakayanagi holds her hat in her hand and cradles it close to her chest as if it was important.

"I suddenly remembered something I've missed for a while."

"What have you missed?"

"No, it's no big deal. It's just that I have a few fond memories of the sea."

Even though the ocean looks the same, each of us has different memories of it.

"By the way, you never told me why you were coming after me."

"Would it bother you if I came after you for no reason?"

I was wondering what kind of content she would say, but she said something I hadn't thought of.

"Isn't there a reason?"

"I just wanted to talk to Ayanokoji-kun. I could have called out to you earlier, but you don't want much people to see you talking to me, do you?"

Thank you for your consideration.

However, I'm not a good talker, so I don't have any particular topic of conversation that I can bring up to Sakayanagi.

"Do you mind if I make one small talk?"

"Yeah. Can you tell me while I eat?"

"Please don't mind me. Just listen to what I have to say, and that will be enough."

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

"Yesterday, Ichinose came to my place."

"Ichinose?"

"Yes."

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

## Part 2

"Sakayanagi-san . Do you have a minute?"

After lunch, I was taking a break at a cafe on the ship's deck when Ichinose-san, who was visiting me, approached me.

"What can I do for you?"

I knew what she was going to say before she said it, but I tilted my head curiously.

"I felt like I owed you an apology for what happened in the special exam. I did something selfish on the last day, and I'm really sorry!"

Ichinose bowed her head to the utmost of her ability, as if she had made up her mind to some extent that she would not be able to make excuses.

No, I don't think she'd have made a lame excuse.

For her It would be no surprise if I who lead the class A, would get angry and break off our cooperation.

I think she felt she had done things to make me angry.

"Raise your head Ichinose-san, I'm not mad at you for anything."

".....What?"

"In fact, I believe that we have contributed enough as a group. You answered all the questions correctly, and you played a central role in uniting different group of people living on a deserted island. And as a result, we won third place."

"Yes, but..."

"It's true that Ichinose-san acted a bit selfishly on the last day. But the loss She caused the group was only a few points at most. If you compare it to your contribution, it's not something to blame. If we had fallen to a close fourth place, you might have received some blame, but that didn't happen either."

"But that's a consequence."

"Sometimes it's good to be consequential. Things don't always work out the way they are supposed to. In fact, if we fought as hard as we could and came in a close fourth, the psychological damage we suffered must have been great."

I guess Ichinose-san felt sorry for my attitude of not blaming her at all. The feeling of remorse never went away.

"You look like you need to take responsibility for something."

"Well, maybe not that way."

"If that is the case, may I punish you?"

I'm sure you'll be able to understand why.

"Yes. I think that would clear things up for me."

" You're a very unusual person, aren't you? Well, yes. - Sit here."

I urged her to come in front of me and sit down.

She became quiet , and I had the waitress bring the menu list for her.

"Here you go, please order anything you like."

"Uh, what about the ..... punishment?"

"You are now going to have afternoon tea with me for about half an hour."

"What? that's the punishment?"

"Yes, I'm going to take Ichinose-san's precious half an hour, nothing but punishment."

"Well, I wonder if it is ....., but if Sakayanagi-san says so, I'll obey."

Ichinose-san was not sure about this, but she followed my instructions and ordered a drink.

"You're really honest, Ichinose-san, even though you were humiliated by me once, you don't let it affect you in the slightest."

"At the very least, People want to hide their guilty past, the past that they don't want people to know about. Even if it is the fact as Ichinose-san says it

is."

I've seen many good people, both children and adults, up close and personal.

Of course, there are many who have recognized their talents even though they knew they were the best.

On the other hand, I've probably seen dozens of times as many incompetent people who are completely useless.

And regardless of excellence or incompetence, I have never known a single person who could be called pure goodness.

It is the same for my own father, mother, and even Ayanokoji-kun.

"You're hard to describe, aren't you? That's why you seem so scary at times."

"I'm ..... scary?"

I'm sure she had never been told that before in her life.

However, I am sure that there are more than one or two people who have been afraid of this person, Honami Ichinose.

"People who live in this world have a more or less evil side. But I don't sense any of that from you. You're like a lump of goodness."

"That's overbearing. I've done some bad things, like in middle school."

Her shameful past, which she can never boast about, still remains as an undeniable reality.

"Your goodness here has nothing to do with those kinds of things. even if you are temporarily involved in bad things, there is an irreplaceable goodness behind it."

Even if it's evil when it comes to the law, it can also be good depending on how you look at it.

"That goodness is both your strength and your weakness. Be careful not to let it take advantage of you."

"Is that about Ryuen-kun?"

"It's not just him. Me and Horikita-san, will use your goodness to win."

After a breath, I continued to convey the most important thing.

"And so will Ayanokoji-kun."

The former all applied to the leaders of each class, including Ryuen-kun, whom she mentioned.

Ichinose-san was upset to see Ayanokoji's name come out of nowhere.

"On the last day of the desert island test, it was probably thanks to you that Ayanokoji-kun was saved."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Um, what's that about ....?"

"This is just a guess on my part. There are honestly a lot of things that I don't understand, so please just think of it as me talking to myself and don't listen to me."

I could easily imagine that if I pursued the matter here, Ichinose-san would reveal some obscure details, but I avoided it. It's so boring to hear it this way.

"I can tell by looking at you that your feelings for Ayanokoji-kun are different from those you have for other students."

"What? No, no, no, that's not..."

"That's fine, too. It's a human instinct to have special feelings for a particular member of the opposite sex. However, if you are too devoted, you may suffer a painful reprisal. Especially if that person is Ayanokoji-kun."

"I don't really understand what you mean, Sakayanagi-san."

What happened today was a warning. I will not go any further here.

"That's all I'm going to say about that. It's time for afternoon tea."

When she sipped the tea that had been brought to her, she probably couldn't taste it very well. I'm sure she couldn't forget my words and they were stuck in her head.

It was a little mercy and my strategy.

### Chapter 3 Part 3

Sakayanagi finished telling me about the exchange with Ichinose.

I had just finished eating and drinking the 200ml pack of tea.

"You are a sinful person to win the heart of Ichinose-san, who is one of the most popular students in the school year."

It may seem like a flirtatious remark, but I can't take it in the right direction.

"That's harsh, Sakayanagi."

"Fufufu, it's my nature."

Sakayanagi is making preparations to protect Ichinose and make herself available only to her.

"If I do something to hurt Ichinose here, you will become more trusted by her."

"Because if you can gain her trust, it will be easier for you to get around in the future."

While Sakayanagi is an ally, she is also an enemy.

They're two sides of the same coin, and she's making good use of that.

"But why are you telling me this?"

"What you just told me was about Ichinose-san, but that's not what's important right now. It's about the fact that more and more people are gradually learning about Ayanokouji-kun in this school life. And they seem to be very interested in you."

Certainly, if her relationship with Ichinose had remained strong during the uninhabited island test, she wouldn't have rushed to me, to the annoyance of her friends.

"As a addition to that, the third-year students were giving you strange looks, weren't they?"

I see. I guess she was after me for a chat, but that's the main point, isn't it? In that short time, Sakayanagi realized that I was being watched by third-year students. That's impressive.

I guess what she said earlier was just a preparatory step to mentioning this.

"Are you having trouble with the third graders?"

"Well, if you call it trouble, it's trouble. I think I've made an enemy of a troublesome opponent."

"Troublesome opponent ..... is the student body president, isn't it?"

Nagumo was the only one who came to mind as a possible strong opponent among the upperclassmen.

"I had a row with the student council president on the last day of the uninhabited island. It seems that he missed out on first place because of it, and they're looking at me like I'm the enemy."

"So He lost his position by trying to stage a dramatic victory."

"You were aware of that as well?"

"I think the majority of people in the uninhabited island test would agree that Kouenji-kun single-handedly came 1st. However, we knew early on that the student council president was deliberately holding back on scoring points. If he made too big of a difference, it would have blatantly highlighted the picture that the entire third grade was trying to make a particular group win. I was also able to see the strategy by looking at the type of cards in their possession."

I thought I had fully acknowledged Sakayanagi's abilities, but she still went even further in her assessment.

It was proof that she had a perfect grasp of the entirety of the special uninhabited island test, and its flow.

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

"No, don't worry, Nagumo isn't one to make a move lightly. Besides, Sakayanagi took care of me a lot during the uninhabited island test. I can't rely on her any more."

"You don't have to worry about that. I'm glad that you relied on me, and I also took full advantage of Ayanokouji-kun's suggestion."

"Use? What do you mean?"

Chuckling, Sakayanagi narrowed her eyes and stared at the ocean.

"The other day in the uninhabited island exam, as the ending approached, I judged that it would be difficult to take first and second place, since the scoring pace of Kouenji-kun and the student council president's group was faster than the maximum score our group could have obtained."

Well, that's understandable. Those two groups were fighting in a different dimension.

"We were aiming for third place, but one of our rivals at the end was Ryuuuen-kun's group. Because he and Katsuragi-kun were in a small group, but they were showing tremendous persistence. So I asked for his help and decided to pit him against Housen-kun."

"I see, that's how it works."

"No matter what form it takes, if Ryuuuen-kun deviates from the main test, his scoring will be slowed down. As a result, he ended up retiring, which was the best way for us."

She had succeeded in crushing her rival Ryuuuen's existence while helping me.

But even after hearing all this, there are still some things I don't understand.

Ryuuuen had been working hard for two weeks to get on the podium, but he had easily cooperated with Sakayanagi.

It was not hard to imagine that he would not be safe if he ran into Housen. The only thing that was clear was that some kind of promise had been made.....

If he was willing to give up the possibility of third place, it would be more than a small deal.

"Didn't they make you pay a substantial price ....., for example, a high amount of private points?"

If Sakayanagi had successfully used the cards possessed by his classmates, she would have had some income.

No wonder she offered it to Ryuuuen, who was trying to collect a huge amount of private points.

"I haven't paid him a single point, and I don't plan to in the future."

"So you're saying it's not money."

In this school, the exchange of private points is basically a standard part of the transaction.

"I know it sounds like a riddle, but I can't even tell Ayanokoji-kun right now. This is a promise made between him and me. Until he tells me to fulfill the promise in the near future."

"That wish will not be good for him in the near future," Sakayanagi said.

With that in mind, no wonder private points were not a monetary reward.

"Anyway, please be careful Ayanokouji-kun, even if one problem is solved, The White Room students still exist, and the problem of the third years has also come up."

"It's a long list , but I'll try to keep an eye out."

I heard a ringtone coming from Sakayanagi's phone.

Sakayanagi lightly turns me down and receives a call from someone.

"Well... I see. I'll be right there."

After finishing the call on her cell phone without talking more than five seconds, Sakayanagi leaves the railing.

"I have an appointment with someone after this, so I'll be going now."

"I see. See you later."

"It was a pleasure talking to you. See you later."

After watching Sakayanagi slowly walk away, I decided to look at the ocean  
For some time.

#### **Part 4**

On the same day, Amasawa was wandering around the ship by herself.

Sometimes her classmates would talk to her, but she would just smile and be done with the conversation.

Not once did she feel like playing in a crowd with anyone.

"I wish I could see Ayanokoji-senpai!"

Amasawa muttered out on the deck, her voice lightly drowned out by the sound of the wind. For Amasawa, who has no interest in the other students, the only time she feels good is when she is meeting Ayanokoji, the only person she admires. However, due to the position she was in, she is deliberately refrained from contacting Ayanokoji at the moment.

"Uu~, I am super bored~"

"Good day, Amasawa Ichika-san."

Sakayanagi Arisu, class A, year 2, approached Amasawa, who was alone on the deck looking out at the ocean.

Without any special surprise, Amasawa only looked at her.

"Who are you?"

Amasawa tilted her head curiously, as if she was seeing her for the first time.

"I'm Sakayanagi Arisu, class A, second year. Please make my acquaintance."

"Sakayanagi..... senpai? What do you want from me?"

"Fufu, no need for roundabout talks. You're a White Room student, aren't you, Amasawa-san, and I'm sure you know who I am."

White room student, if I hear that word, I have no choice but to understand.

"I see...so it is the Chancellor's daughter that Ayanokouji-senpai turned to. You seems to know a bit about the White Room, so I guess you could say it was inevitable. So?"

Not surprised, Amasawa asks Sakayanagi what she wants.

"It's natural to want to see how good a White Room student he was concerned about is."

"It's good that you're so motivated, but does that mean you have permission from Ayanokoji-senpai?"

"Permission? I don't need anything like that. It's my own personal decision to be here."

"You're a very confident person, Arisu-senpai."

"I'm proud to say that I'm that good."

"Cool!"

Amasawa clapped her hands in praise, but seemed somewhat preoccupied.

"But I'm sorry. I'm feeling a little sentimental right now. Can we do this another time?"

"That's fine. I just wanted to meet you today."

Satisfied with the greeting, Sakayanagi bowed lightly and turned to leave.



"Oh, and Arisu-senpai, you're not going to make them keep an eye on me all the time, are you?"

Sakayanagi had been using some of the A class students to keep track of her position until she found Amasawa.

"I had instructed them not to be found by you, but did you notice?"

"Hahaha, they think they were hiding behind that thing? That's so cute."

"I apologize for any discomfort I may have caused you. But as you can see,

I'm crippled, so it's not easy for me to locate and go see people otherwise.  
Please bear with me."

"Oh, I have one question~. I'm a girl who can hit a disabled person without hesitation, is that okay?"

"Violence is one of the strongest cards, but it's not necessarily the strongest."

With that, Sakayanagi thumped her cane lightly against the deck two or three times.

Perhaps that was the signal for her classmate, Kamuro, to appear in the distance.

"You must be the senior who was following me around. Is it possible that this senpai can compete with me?"

"No, it's not. It's just that barbaric acts can be easily detected."

"You mean you want to have a brainstorming session with me? You're making me laugh."

"That's very short-sighted of you. Please don't draw your own conclusions. After all, even the White Room students, except for Ayanokoji-kun, are probably failures. I'm not expecting too much from you."

At this point, Amasawa's gaze sharpened for the first time, and she looked at Sakayanagi.

"I mean, I'll give you a win or a loss no matter what the method is."

"Really? Even if it's the violence you just mentioned?"

Intrigued by Sakayanagi for the first time, Amasawa licked her thumb.

"Yes, of course. You can use any method you want."

"I'll remember that for you, senpai."

"It will be a pleasure if it is engraved in your brain. Have a good day."

Sakayanagi slowly walked away, leaving Amasawa to catch her breath on the now empty deck.

"Maybe I can have a bit of fun without Ayanokoji-senpai. I guess I'd be in

an exciting mood if I was playing with Kushida-senpai, or enjoying watching Arisu-senpai cry..... If it was any other time, I'd be in an exciting mood."

I put my hand lightly on my aching abdomen and think about what I'm going to do.

"—I guess I'll just stay calm for now."

It'll take a little while until I'm fully recovered.

Besides, I can't make a move until I see what that side does.

Sakayanagi, on the other hand, left with Kamuro and returned to the corridor.

"That first year looks bad, doesn't she?"

"Oh, can you tell?"

"Somehow, I do. I guess I've known you long enough that I've developed some weird senses. Honestly, I don't want to have anything to do with you anymore."

"You should cherish that feeling. Nevertheless, I think she should be monitored to some extent."

She advised not to monitor her, but Sakayanagi had no intention of listening to her.

Amasawa would not be able to ignore her if she knew that she was still relentlessly monitoring her.

And if she did, she might as well try to provoke her.

"She did notice that I was following her, right? Do you want to use Hashimoto?"

"He might be able to get us through it well even if he's been spotted. ...."

Badly contacting the White Room student could be detrimental later on.

"Thank you for your efforts for the moment, Masumi-san."

With her task done, Kamuro quickly left the place.

Sakayanagi then took out her cell phone and made a single call.

"Can you please continue?"

She asked the caller to keep an eye on Amasawa on her phone and added one last thing.

"After all, it seems that you are the only one I can rely on in class, Yamamura-san."



[For reference - The girl on the Left is Yamamura. Looks like She hasn't been spotted by Amasawa.]

## Chapter - 4

### ***How Everyone Grows...***

#### **Intro**

The summer vacation on the luxury cruise ship, which has been a valuable experience for me, has already passed its turn.

The wallets of the students who are enjoying the remaining period to the fullest must be loosening up like never before. It may seem a bit silly to students who are systematically aiming for the top, but there is nothing wrong with spending money on a short break.

At the same time, it gives you a sense of happiness.

This may sound like an excuse, but I'm also using my private points.

I changed into my swimsuit and opened the door to see a large empty pool.

This luxury cruise ship has a large pool facility that is free for everyone to

use, but it also has another pool. For that The fee is not cheap but 20,000 points for 60 minutes, but the time you can spend with your closest friends is more than worth the money. The pool can be used by up to 40 people at a time. If you rent it out to one class, you can use it for 500 points per head.

For this reason, this private pool is unexpectedly popular with students, and is almost always booked up from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. when it is open. It's hard to swim freely in a large pool packed with people, but in a private pool, there's plenty of room to do whatever you want and enjoy it without getting in trouble.

"Whoa, it's huge!"

Akito says excitedly as he shows up at the poolside a little later. It's the same size as the pool that's open to the public for free, but it looks so big that I can't believe how much the scale changes when it's private.

"Where's Keisei?"

"He's going to come after he finishes using the bathroom. The girls aren't ready yet, are they?"

I don't need to confirm now that they won't finish changing in a short time like the boys.

Akito somehow picked up the menu list that was placed by the beach chairs.

"Wow ..... that's more expensive than the other pool."

In the private pool, drinks were more expensive than in the free pool, almost double the price. It may have been natural considering the number of orders they had to make in relation to the number of people to prepare them, but it was harsh. This is another example of unrelenting exploitation. The fact that food and drinks are not allowed is also well thought out. Just then, the door to the locker room opened slightly.

We turned around at the same time, but there was no sign of anyone coming out of the door.

Instead, we heard a voice.

"Hey Airi, what are you doing, hurry up and go."

"B-b-b-, but, but! That's embarrassing, Haruka-chan!"

"What's embarrassing? You've been posting all kinds of embarrassing pictures on the Internet, so you should be fine, right?"

"Well, it's not like I was being watched directly!"

"For me, that's more embarrassing. There, there."

"Wow! Wait, wait, wait!"

Such an indescribable conversation was exchanged between Haruka and Airi.

"What can I say, there's a goodness you can't see, isn't there?"

Akito says such a thing unexpectedly.

"What is it?"

"I wondered if that's what Akito would think."

"You know, ..... that's normal for boys, right? I mean, I don't talk about it lightly on a daily basis like Ike and the others. You wouldn't either, right?"

He looked at me with a somewhat dumbfounded look, but at the same time, there was an air that didn't allow for denial.

I didn't read the air, but I could  
tell that Akito was trying to be brave.  
Since it was not advisable to ignore it, I admitted it honestly.

"Well, I guess so."

Akito laughs a little, as if relieved when I answer that.

"If a girl hears, she'll probably say I'm stupid or something, though."

Normally, Akito has a rather calm poker face, but judging from the amount of words he's saying, it's obvious to the casual observer that he's getting nervous.

However, the two still seem to be arguing, and it's hard for them to come out.

"I'm so embarrassed!"

"You know what! I'm feeling the same way over here!"

"Haha .....Haruka-chan, that's a very bold outfit."

"It's because you promised to wear this in front of everyone!"

"Hyah!"

We were in a kind of life-and-death state as we waited for them to appear.

"Bold, they say."

"Looks like."

A sense of anticipation, accompanied by a feeling of embarrassment.

Where should we look and what words should we say to the then when they both come out?

"Impossible, impossible! I'll at least borrow something to put on!"

"No, you can't! Come on, don't run away!"

"Ugh, I'm still embarrassed in this kind of swimsuit, Haruka-chan!"

"That's what I'm like, too, you know? I have no choice but to go along with you!"

"It's not something I asked you to do!"

We're still waiting for them to show up, but it looks like the wrangling will continue.

"Hey Ayanokoji, what do you think of Airi?"

Akito had been looking at the girls earlier, but now he found himself looking at me.

I'm sure he didn't just say something random.

"What do you mean?"

I immediately understood the flow of the conversation, but I tried to remain ignorant.

"Mixed-gender groups can be a little complicated, right? It's not strange for someone to fall in love with someone else."

It wasn't hard to answer that question, but....

"What about you?"

When I asked that back, Akito showed a somewhat troubled expression.

"Well, I guess so."

After a bit of silence, Akito speaks.

"I guess I'd be lying if I said it doesn't exist at all."

He replied in a way that didn't deny or acknowledge the existence of such a being.

"But if it might destroy this group, I'm not going to force it."

To leave it there, in his heart. Whether that existence is Haruka or Airi, I can't judge right now, but I'm going to ..... I wonder what the right answer would be here.

It's not like math, where you can be sure of the answer if you try to figure it out.

"Kiyotaka, you're..."

"Kyaaaah!"

Just as Akito was about to say something, the half-opened door opened with great force. Then, Airi jumped forward.

She makes eye contact with Akito again as a loud voice comes flying out.

"Oh, you're terrible for pushing me, Haruka-chan!"

"It's because you didn't answer quickly enough!"

Saying that, Haruka also showed up soon after Airi's appearance.

"Oh, come on, ....."

Akito looked shocked, but needless to say, I felt the same way.

What can I say, both of them are wearing incredibly daring swimsuits.



If this wasn't a private pool, they would have attracted a lot of attention from both men and women.

Haruka immediately raised her eyes and looked at us.

I felt like it was a crime to stare at her, so I turned in the right direction at the same time as Akito.

However, something immediately caught my attention, and Akito said, keeping his gaze elsewhere.

"Airi gives a very different impression, doesn't she?"

I wish he didn't have to bring it up to me here, but I guess Akito's in a tough spot too.

"I guess. It looks so much more innocent."

"That's it, that's it."

Haruka blatantly looked disappointed as she expressed her thoughts on Airi.

"It's bland and mundane."

"Don't say that. No, I'm too surprised to say anything."

I'd really like Haruka to catch the part where the vocabulary is rapidly declining.

"..... I'm going to go for a little swim."

Perhaps the two of them were too stimulating, Akito said, turning his back on them and jumping into the pool without any preparation.

Splashing in the water, he swam through the empty pool alone. I know what it feels like to want to run away. It's because it's a private pool, an environment you don't usually get to experience, and when you see the stimulating power of the two people in front of you, you can't escape.

To get rid of all the worries, it was the right thing to do.

However, if the two men suddenly put all their energy into swimming, the atmosphere would obviously turn strange.

I guess I'll just have to shield myself and keep facing them.

What should I do? I took a quick look at the two of them, and saw that Airi was looking uncomfortable and blushing.

Seeing this, Haruka happily walked around to her back and grabbed both her shoulders.

"Hiya!"

"There, there, Kiyopon, how's the reborn Airi?"

With that, she pushed Airi forward. The distance between us was so close that we could almost touch each other. It wasn't like that, it was like she was actually touching me. I retreated to the point where I couldn't tell, and maintained a close distance.

"Wow, ....."

Both of them were wearing swimsuits that exposed a lot of skin, so touching them was a problematic action.

Unable to bear the situation, Airi opened her mouth to escape.

"Wow, maybe I should go inside the pool too!"

"Hey, Airi..."

Haruka reached out to catch her, but failed to grab her arm in time.

Then she jumped into the pool. I thought it was ....., but it was just like Airi to hold the stainless steel railing and enter the water slowly.

"Damn. I'm super embarrassed too. ...."

That's true, I suppose.

Aside from the emphasis on her breasts, the area of her swimsuit on her lower half was clearly smaller than the rest.

Even if it is tied tightly with a string, I'm anxious if something happens.

"Just so you know, Airi is the one who chose this ridiculous swimsuit."

"I couldn't get into it, but what's the story behind it?"

Originally, Haruka was not the kind of student who liked to show skin in public.

However, this emphasis on her breasts and lower body was not normal.

"How did it happen, how did it happen? ...."

She looked confused for a moment, but began to explain, choosing her words carefully.

"Is this, how do you say, like a form of going along with Airi."

"What do you mean?"

She's so choosy, I can't even begin to understand.

"It means that she's desperately trying to change. And me too. If I may say so myself, ..... there are some things that stand out a little more than others, right?"

She said it in a muddled way, but I'm pretty sure she was referring to the thing that was bothering me.

"I know I shouldn't worry about it, but the way you look at me makes me uncomfortable."

The problem is understandable, but it's extremely difficult to ignore, even from a male perspective.

It's inevitable that everyone's eyes will be drawn to them.

"I chose a daring bathing suit to encourage her, and she replied that it was okay if I wore it too."

That was a good response, and I could easily imagine Haruka refusing to wear a flashy swimsuit.

Airi could imagine Haruka refusing to wear a fancy bathing suit, because she could say back that if Haruka won't wear it, then she won't either.

"I can't let this one stumble on the first move of the Airi modification project, either. It's called willpower."

So now that she's accepted the conditions she had set, there's no escape for Airi either.

"Besides, neither me nor Airi can wear something like this in the open pool over there, but if it's here..."

It seems that because the three boys are close friends, they managed to make it happen.

Even so, it was easy for a guy to imagine that there was a lot of shame involved.

"Do you want to look .....?"

Haruka asked, looking embarrassed, or rather, hiding her disgust.

"Well, to be honest, there's something difficult about being told not to look."

It couldn't be helped that they were in my field of vision when we were talking in the first place.

The only way to avoid seeing them is to turn my back to them.

"I see. I think I know the difference between a woman and a man, but I don't know anything about psychology."

The difference in curiosity about breasts, waist, and lower abdomen is not something that men and women can understand.

No, there's no way to know because each human being has their own preferences, strengths and weaknesses, not just men and women.

"Huh? Where's Yukimu by the way?"

"Looks like it'll take a little longer."

I wonder if the stomachache is lingering longer, but he doesn't seem to be coming out at all.

"Hmm?"

Haruka responded, looking in the faraway direction, as if she had confirmed it without much interest.

The conversation stopped once, and silence flowed for a short while.

"..... Oh no, I'm still thinking about things."

"Sorry. I'm trying not to look at it, but..."

I can't help but look at the other person's face as we talk, and I can't help but see them.

"That's not it. There's nothing wrong with you, Kiyopon. In the first place, I know I'm too self-conscious too. I know that you don't like to see."

Well, no, ..... I'm not watching because I want to.

I'll keep that part to myself.

"If something stands out, it attracts attention. It's the same with everything. I just can't feel good when I think it's me."

In Haruka's case, it's not just the gaze of boys. Even if it's a same-sex gazes, she doesn't welcome the attention being drawn to her breasts.

"Sorry, I think it's going to take me a little longer to calm down."

"That's okay. If you don't think you can do it, you can change and come back."

"That's no good, because as long as Airi's trying, I don't want to have to break her."

Did she mention the Airi modification plan? I could tell she had a lot on her mind.

"Let me change the subject. Maybe it's too late, but it looks like Kiyopon was just about fine in the uninhabited island test."

The Ayanokouji group hadn't been able to get together in the past few days, so Haruka had mentioned the topic, albeit late.

It was a completely unrelated topic, which was probably a good thing right now.

"Well, it's not funny because we were the same way."

"Because it was pretty tough, to be honest. We fought as hard as we could and that's what we got. I'm sorry about that."

"Not bad at all. I'm just relieved, I guess."

Letting out a short breath, Haruka looked at Airi, who was clumsily trying to swim.

"Relieved? After the results were such a mess?"

"Look, there were rumors that Kiyopon was a Dangerous person for other classes because of the math exam. I think this will calm that down a bit. You don't want to be under any kind of pressure, do you?"

Apparently, she was thinking about my future.

"After all, Kiyopon is more of a saint than the other guys."

"What did you see that made you think that?"

I wondered, because I thought she was buying too much.

I have the same sex drive and interest in the opposite sex as anyone else.

"Facial expressions, gazes, and so on. I feel like you're less interested in those things than other boys."

I don't know what to say about that, but I don't want to show it here. I'm also grateful that another guy is playing the role of panicking.

"Uo....."

As soon as Keisei, who finished changing late, showed up, he let out a surprised voice.

It is clear to the eye that this is not the impression ..... he had of the private pool we had rented.

I'm sure he saw Haruka standing next to me in all her daring glory.

Haruka greeted Keisei with a dumbfounded look on her face and voice, as if trying to maintain a sense of normalcy.

"Oh, oh ....."

He put back his glasses, which had almost fallen off, and looked over.

I guess it means that Keisei, who usually studies all the time, is a fine boy.

The fact that the reaction of the boys and the way they run away are the same again shows the character of this group.

If it were Ryuuuen or Kouenji, they would probably react differently.

"Well, ....., I guess I'll swim a bit too."

I jumped into the pool as if to escape towards Akito, who continued swimming vigorously.

Airi, who couldn't swim very well and had her feet on the bottom of the pool, waved at Haruka.

"Come here too, Haruka-chan~. It feels so good~?"

"Yes, yes, I'm coming. I'll be right back."

I can't help it, she began to do her preparatory exercises next to me.

"It seems like you've become better friends since we fought the uninhabited island test together."

"That's true, isn't it? We've shared a lot of things from top to bottom."

"Wow, that's a little embarrassing, don't say that!"

Airi, who was waiting at the edge of the pool looking at me, hurriedly made a splash.

Up? Down? Common things?

"I don't know, Airi is basically unreliable, but I can't leave her alone. She's like my best friend and my sister."

A statement that was unthinkable when they first met. It's not just about Haruka.

The same goes for Keisei, and even if there are no major changes, the same goes for Akito.

## Part 1

After that, I took turns playing in the pool with the rest of the group, enjoying it to the fullest.

After a game of two-on-two beach volleyball, we are now in the middle of a five-point, one-on-one beach volleyball game. The first match was between Keisei and Airi, which Keisei won 5-2.

Then came the battle between me and Akito, which Akito won 5-3.

Airi, who had very little energy, was tired after one match, and I called out to her as she sat down by the pool to rest.

"You looked like you were having a lot of fun."

"Ah, Kiyotaka-kun. Yeah, it's a lot of fun. I wasn't much of a partner at all, but ....."

For some reason, she tried to stand up, so I stopped her and sat down next to her.

"I'm still surprised, to be honest. It's the fact that Airi was brave enough to do it."

"That's ..... yeah. I thought I'd take the plunge. ..... I'm still terribly, terribly embarrassed, but..."

"Why did you decide to take the plunge?"

It couldn't have been a mere whim.

"When you do a uninhabited island test, you're with your group almost 24 hours a day, right? So Haruka-chan and I talked about a lot of things. We talked about our childhood, middle school, junior high school, and how we got to know each other in this school."

If you have time, a little chatting won't be enough. So, it was no wonder that they delved into a deeper conversation.

Perhaps the intense time they spent together made them understand each other as if they were old best friends.

"I think I can change now. .... I think now is the only time I can change. ...."

"Change? You don't mean just the way you look, do you?"

"Yes. I can't say for sure yet, but ..... I'm starting to think that I need to change. It's not good enough for me to be bad at studies and sports."

With a blush on her cheeks and feeling embarrassed, Airi expressed her determination.

"So that's the start of your grooming."

"Haruka-chan told me that it's not good to deliberately be inconspicuous."

By nature, Airi didn't like to stand out because of her personality.

That's why she keeps her hairstyle modest and wears unnecessary glasses in her daily life. As for her posture, she often rounds her back and tries not to look up.

As Airi gazed into the pool, she saw that in the new game, the ball had been slammed into the water and Akito had scored from Haruka.

It was now three to one, and Akito had extended his lead.

"I guess it's late ....."

After telling me everything, Airi looked up at me anxiously.

"No, it's not too late."

I wanted to praise her honestly for making that decision.

"I'll back you up."

"Oh, thanks Kiyotaka-kun, I'll do my best."

"Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you something...don't tell anyone about that makeover of Airi's yet...we'll show it off to everyone after the second semester starts."

It would be better if it was in a classroom where everyone was present. If she's going to be nervous anyway, it's better to do it less often.

"So what did you think about it Yukimu? I mean, look at Airi."

Haruka, who was serving, stopped moving and spoke to Keisei, who was watching the match.

"Oh, don't ask me."

"You wouldn't know if I didn't ask, would you? Let me hear your frank opinion, right?"

With that being said, Keisei looked directly at Airi and observed every inch of her body.

Naturally embarrassed, Airi tried to run away.

"Don't run away, Airi."

Haruka did her best to hold her back as she growled and flapped her legs.

And after the observation, Keisei's assessment was .....

"..... Not bad, is it? I mean, no, it's totally fine. ...."

Kesei, who was usually not interested in girls, replied embarrassed.

"Whoa, if Yukimu has this reaction, it seems perfect!"

Haruka jumped high at that moment, as happy as if it was her.

She then slammed her serve into Akito, who had been caught looking at Airi.

"Whoa!"

"1 point! Now it's two against three!"

"That's not fair, Haruka."

"It's probably Miyachi's fault for gawking at the girls. Don't let your guard down. Carelessness is the greatest enemy."

"Don't be reckless. But ....., can a girl change like this just by taking off her glasses and changing her hairstyle a little?"

"It means that the original was top notch. Didn't you even know that?"

"Even if you say something like that ... hey?"

Akito and Keisei looked at each other and nodded at the same time.

"Oh dear. Well, it's because of you are like this that I'm able to treat you without hesitation."

Akito shook off his worries and concentrated on his own serve.  
As the game resumed, Airi blurted out.

"I wonder how I can get better at studying, or rather, how I can get smarter....."

Although Airi and the others prepare for tests on a regular basis, they don't have the kind of fundamental study sessions that Horikita and Sudou do.

That part of the program will be essential for raising the academic level.

Keisei overhears something related to studying and begins to explain it up front.

"Don't you think we should start by figuring out what we can and can't do? Starting from the first grade of elementary school, we all start running side by side at first. But gradually, we start to show our strengths and weaknesses in our studies, and you know why that is?"

"Um, ....."

"Individuals differ in their ability to learn and absorb, and they also differ in their ability to concentrate; some people can't hold out for a minute, while others can flexibly control their concentration and get through an hour of class. That alone starts to make a difference in learning ability, but how much you study outside of class is also a big factor."

"That's true, yeah. It's true that the kids who went to the cram school were smart."

Airi nodded in agreement, though it was obvious.

"Rah!"

The ball bounces off Haruka's catch, scoring a fifth goal. The result was 5-2 in favor of Akito.

"Alright. I guess I've won now."

"I'm sorry. But I was a little distracted by their conversation and couldn't concentrate, so that's why I lost."

With that analysis and excuse, Haruka also came up to the pool side.

"Why don't you teach her how to study, Kiyopon?"

Haruka suggested from the flow of conversation.

"Sorry, but I'm not very good at teaching subjects. Besides, there are specialists around, right?"

The gaze that had been directed at me turned to Keisei as if to prompt him.

"Well, if .....Airi says it's fine, it's fine with me."

"No, but you see, Yukimu, me and Akito are going to be being taken care of by you from now on. Won't it be hard to teach her if we put in a different level of Airi?"

"Ugh, that just means I'm an idiot, doesn't it? ..... Ugh."

"Ah, no, no! That's not what I meant!"

"No, that's the only meaning I got."

She can't defend herself, so Akito mutters with a sigh.

"I'm just saying, so ..... oh my god, I'm sorry, that was a little too wordy!"

She bowed deeply to Airi, and at the same time, those two were big...

And don't look at them. I'm going to lose my concentration.

Then they all burst into laughter, and the atmosphere relaxed.

"Now, let's play a revenge game between Airi and Keisei."

"Eh, I can't win no matter how many times I try~!"

"I'll join you as a helper, so don't worry."

"Wait a minute, Akito. I am at a huge disadvantage then!"

While complaining, Keisei honestly walked into the pool. He's very serious about it.

"I'll do my best!"

Airi, who had gained a reliable companion, Akito, made a small fist pump. Haruka and I watched from the poolside as the two of them engaged in a novel two-on-one battle.

"Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Hmm?"

Haruka asked shortly after the match started, keeping her gaze fixed on the match.

"I hope it's not my imagination, but isn't Kiyopon a little cold towards Airi?"

"I don't mean to be."

"But, you know, you could have taught her one-on-one. You can do that, right?"

If I had to choose between being able to and not being able to, I could do it no problem.

"I feel like it's unfair, you know, to Airi."

"I'm being fair to everyone."

"Really?"

"I've never really favored anyone except for pretense."

"..... Does that mean you're just as fair to your best friend or girlfriend?"

"Yes, it does."

"I don't know, isn't that a little weird? It's like you're too distant. I'm going to take this opportunity to say that Kiyopon has been watching us from a distance for a while now."

Apparently, Haruka could tell that about me.

"I've never seen you smile or anything."

She reached out her right arm and pinched my left cheek.

She plays with it, tugging and pulling with some strength.

"I hope we can at least make Kiyopon laugh, right?"

"It's not like I'm not laughing on purpose, though."

She let go of her fingertips from the cheek she was pinching and crossed her arms in frustration.

"There's still another reason why I don't tell you directly: the distance between Airi and me has been too close from the start."

"What's that?"

"I don't think it's me that's making her grow, I think it's the environment around her."

"Surrounding environment?"

"There's Haruka, there's Akito, and there's Keisei. Growing up surrounded by her best friends is the most important factor for Airi. In fact, right now, Airi is about to change a lot thanks to Haruka."

"I think the most important person for Airi is Kiyopon, though."

"If you're the type who grows by involving romance, that might have been a good idea."

"I've heard before that Kiyopon is aware of Airi's feelings for him, but I don't know how to put it, that's kind of a terrible way to put it: ....."

With Complicated eyes Haruka looked at me, as if she didn't know how to express herself.

"Since our first year, Airi has been thinking about me in no small way. I'm happy about that. It's just..."

She looked at me with anxious eyes, as if she were a girl waiting for a reply to her confession.

Airi's love. It's an undeniable fact that she's her best friend who can pray for her to succeed.

"What Airi needs right now are friends she can trust."

"And, you know what? But it would be nice to have a romantic element in there. It might make her work harder."

"Sure, there could be."

But the trouble is, romance is basically not something that can be done more than one in parallel.

Basically, you can only have one person at the table, and if you want to bring in a second person, you'll have to take action to cut off the first. Of course, it's not impossible to have two or three people at the same time, but in this closed school environment, it's not suitable, and the disadvantages of being exposed are far greater.

I stood up from the poolside.

"From now on, Airi will go through a bit of a psychological shock. At that time, Haruka, I need you more than anyone to be there to cheer her up."

"What's that, what does that mean?"

"Sorry, I can't answer that right now."

Airi is the least valuable person in the class.

Academic ability + physical ability + other factors. Overall, it leads to that decision.

It's not only the OAA, but also my own personal opinion.

However, depending on the changes that Airi is trying to make from here on out, she will grow, albeit slowly.

Maybe in six months, maybe in a year, she'll be able to escape from the bottom of the class.

## Part 2

My time in the private pool was quickly coming to an end, and I began to change my clothes.

There was no way to extend the time, as the employees had to clean the pool before the next reservation was made.

The three of us quickly showered and changed our clothes and left the private pool. We didn't see any of the girls, probably because it takes time to change.

"Looks like the girls aren't here yet."

We hadn't discussed what to do after this, so we waited for them to come out.

"Ayanokouji-senpai!"

"Hmm?"

I suddenly felt a pair of eyes looking at me, and it was Nanase.

Today was another record-breaking day,  
and I was seeing Nanase every day  
on the ship.

"I asked Nanase to help me find a partner for my special written exam. Also, Nanase helped me out a few times on the uninhabited island."

"Huh? So you're a pretty awesome girl."

As if impressed, Akito nodded and lightly raised his hand to greet Nanase.

Keisei followed suit.

Could it be that Nanase was the next one to book the private pool? That's what I thought. .....

"I just happened to be passing by here."

As if to deny it, Nanase interjected that it was just a coincidence.

"I see."

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I'll leave you to it."

The only place in the vicinity where special students could play was the private pool.

In fact, Nanase walked away, but I couldn't see the purpose of why she showed up here.

No, no, no... it's too optimistic to chalk this up to mere coincidence.

Nanase seems to have some grasp of my actions and is checking on me every step of the way.

But there is no malice in it.

If that's the case, then what's the purpose?

Naka Izumi and Suzuki walked past in front of the three of us.

Seeing them, the other two didn't seem to notice anything unusual.

"What's up Ayanokoji, is something wrong with those two?"

"No. ..... I was just wondering where they were going."

"Oh, sure. There's nothing special about this destination, is there? I think they're lost."

There are no special facilities beyond this point. It's not impossible that they got lost, though. In the first place, we don't visit this level for any purpose other than the private pool.

Like Nanase, I'm walking around in places I wouldn't normally think of.

Come to think of it, I saw Nanase, Naka Izumi and the others on the deck near the bow of the ship yesterday.

"But it's tough on Airi, too. There seems to be a lot of strong enemies in many ways."

"What's that?"

Akito muttered behind me, and Keisei butted in.

"No, it's nothing."

Nanase walks away, and not long after, the two girls come out after getting dressed.

"That was fun, Haruka-chan."

"Well, yeah. Maybe it's not so bad to play in the pool with friends."

The two girls seemed to be very satisfied and were smiling the whole time after they finished changing.

Haruka must have been worried about what I said earlier, but she didn't show it.

"Oh, ....."

As we all gathered to leave the private pool, the next person who seemed to have a reservation showed up.

"So Ike is next?"

"Oh, oh. Yeah, that's right. It's the only time I can get an appointment."

"You're not alone, are you? Sudou and the others?"

Akito looked curiously at Ike's back, but there was no one in sight.

"Ah~ no, let's see, ....."

Ike chokes on his words and is restless, but he catches something out of the corner of his eye.

"Sorry, sorry to keep you waiting!"

"How unusual, a combination of Shinohara and Ike, hanging out. What about the other men?"

Akito and Keisei didn't think anything suspicious and asked such a thing in a matter-of-fact manner.

Of course, Haruka and Airi seemed to have guessed right away and pushed the boys back, though they were surprised.

"Here, here, don't worry about that, we'll go on our own."

"What? What's with you all of a sudden?"

"Come on, Satsuki, let's go."

"Yeah."

Taking Shinohara's hand, the two of them took the reception desk of the private pool.

The time was fixed.

"Satsuki?"

Akito finally notices something strange about the two when he calls her by her given name and sees them disappear into their respective changing rooms, hand in hand in a friendly manner.

"Those guys ..... yeah, when did that happen?"

"What the hell does that mean?"

Keisei still didn't understand, but Haruka immediately gave him a straightforward explanation.

"You mean they've started dating, right?"

"What are you talking about? Ike and Shinohara are water and oil, why would they be going out?"

He denied with a straight face that there was no way two people who disliked each other would be dating.

"Yukimu is smart, but also ..... stupid."

"They might have hated each other at first, but I think they've been getting closer little by little. Lately, they've been kind of conscious of each other, you know?"

Airi nodded her head as if she understood, probably because girls are good at this kind of romantic stuff.

"Well, yeah. But I wasn't expecting it, though I was surprised that it seemed like they really started dating."

"..... So, is that right? Ike and Shinohara? ..... No, I still don't understand."

Keisei, having grasped the situation, looked confused and searched for the backs of the two people he could no longer see.

### Part 3

"No~Okay~"

Not long after they finished playing and returned to the guest room, Miyamoto came back, mumbling.

"Did something happen?"

"There's nothing like that. Tokitou was grabbing Katsuragi by the chest in the nearby bathroom. Of course, he's the one who's quick to fight. That was quite a struggle, though."

"You didn't stop him, did you? He can be pretty scary when he gets mad, you know?"

Miyamoto looked a little pissed off at Akito, who acted as if he had abandoned him.

"I'm not going to stop them. It's none of my business, and it would be a disaster if I got involved."

Katsuragi and Hiroya Tokitou. Both were students in Ryuuuen's class.

"Katsuragi just moved from A class. Considering that they were enemies not long ago, it wouldn't be surprising if a trouble or two occurred. Right Kiyotaka."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"I'm a little worried, why don't we go check on him?"

"Leave it alone, Miyake. The enemy class is in trouble, so it's relatively our gain, right? Katsuragi is originally from Class A. It's not surprising that they don't get along."

"But, ....., we're in the same second year."

"If we get involved in this, we might end up as collateral damage, right? What if Ryuuken finds out about it?"

Akito seemed to be dissatisfied with Miyamoto's persuasion, but he listened for the moment.

It was possible that the situation would take a turn for the worse if Akito left.

As I listened to the exchange between the two, I stood up silently.

"Just leave them alone."

"No, I think it's right to remain calm about Katsuragi. I'm thirsty, so I'm just going to the concession stand."

With that, I left the guest room.

I'm pretty sure the two of them were talking about the restroom nearby where they were struggling.

If it's a minor dispute, it's best to leave it alone, as Miyamoto said.

The first thing that comes to mind when I hear the name Tokito is Ichinose's classmate Katsumi Tokito, who was in the same group at last year's joint camp. The person who is in trouble now is someone else, Hiroya Tokito. I remember being surprised when I heard that the relatively rare surname of Tokito was not just a coincidence, but a distant relative. Since then, I have not had any deep friendship with him, but I have shared food, clothing, and shelter with Katsumi Tokito.

I've heard that they don't know each other, but if it's okay for an outsider like me to step in, I'd like to reach out to him.

That's what I wanted to do. .....

Even though I came near the restroom, I couldn't see Katsuragi and others.

There was a bit of a struggle, but it was probably already resolved.

"Ayanokouji-kun."

As I was about to take a look around the area, Hiyori called out to me.

"Have you seen Katsuragi?"

"Just as I thought, others had seen them too. I also heard that Katsuragi-kun

and Tokito-kun were having a dispute, so I came here. That's why I asked them to change the location a while ago."

I see. I'm sure It'll be conspicuous around the restroom.

As I followed Hiyori's lead, I heard a faint voice coming from an unpopulated area.

I was instructed to peer into the shadows and quietly look for the source of the voice. As Miyamoto had reported, it was Katsuragi and Tokito. However, It seemed that another girl, Okabe, had also joined them.

"Katsuragi, are you really following Ryuuen?"

"That's a parallel. This is the third time you've asked that question, though the wording has changed somewhat."

"That's because you won't answer."

"I can't answer that. I've repeatedly asked you what you mean by 'following'."

While Katsuragi was handling the situation calmly, Tokitou was letting his emotions get the better of him.

"I'm talking about becoming his dog and listening to his orders for everything."

"I don't remember being his dog, and I don't think I'm listening to his orders."

"Sorry, but I don't think so. If that's the case, in the uninhabited island test, why did you work with that guy?"

"That's a statement I don't understand. Of course it was for the class to win."

What else could it be, Katsuragi replies as if it were obvious.

"Even though we didn't even get third place?"

"It certainly didn't seem to go as planned. But it's not a bad result."

"What's that, fourth place and below are the same. And the flight card is meaningless now."

"It means that Ryuuen has more things on his mind than you think."

"You're a stranger, you know that? Then tell me what you're thinking."

"I'm not at the stage to tell you yet. I'm sorry, I can't do that."

"What's that? You don't have anything to tell me, do you? Anyway, I hate Ryuuen."

The push-and-pull exchange went on and on.

One thing is for sure, Tokitou really hates Ryuuen.

"If you ask me if I'm a person who can be viewed favorably, I certainly can't give you a straightforward yes."

Katsuragi nodded in agreement, not arguing that point.

But that attitude also didn't sit well with Tokitou, apparently.

"For all that, you teamed up with Ryuuen on the uninhabited island, and you were eating well together today."

"You're going in circles. It seems that there's a misunderstanding..."

Tokitou interrupted Katsuragi, who was trying to deny it, with a biting posture.

"You were so hostile to us, but you were so easily won over. I thought you'd have more backbone than that."

"I've had more than one run-in with Ryuuen, friend or foe. But now I'm fulfilling my role as a member of the class, as Ryuuen's classmate. And if this class is centered around Ryuuen, then it makes sense to follow him."

"I don't think that's coming from the guy who had a run-in with Sakayanagi."

"The process is different; when we started as a first year, we hadn't even decided who would be the leader. And Sakayanagi and I were at odds with each other, so I put my name forward and we had a confrontation. The current class has already established Ryuuen as its leader and is steering the course. Are you going to recognize me as the leader now that I've been transferred in the first place?"

"That's ....."

"Besides, Sakayanagi and Ryuuen have different types. The types of the Students are also different."

Katsuragi responded with a fair warning, but Tokitou didn't seem convinced at all.

"That's why I told you, Tokitou, that Katsuragi-kun is not worth talking to."

Okabe, who had been quiet up to this point, tapped Tokitou on the shoulder and admonished him that there was no point in going any further.

"In the end, Katsuragi-kun, who had no place in A class, was happy to be picked up by Ryuuen, right? In other words, you're his dog."

"I don't think you guys will understand me if I deny it here."

I see, I'm starting to get a rough idea of the basis of this dispute.

Someone tapped my shoulder with their fingertips and when pulled my face back I faced Hiyori.

"It's not yesterday or today that some of your classmates have been complaining."

"I suppose. It's just that the resentment they've been feeling has been building up."

Ryuuen's dictatorial regime would naturally create a strong backlash.

He's probably been forcibly suppressing it until now, but now it's finally starting to bounce back.

"What about Ryuuen? He used to have no mercy for insurgents."

"Before, yes."

"So the fact that that's no longer the case is the reason for things like this?"

Hiyori gave a small nod.

"We're all changing, you know. I didn't have strong feelings about the class in the beginning either. I almost didn't even insist on it, as long as I could spend three years surrounded by books."

Indeed, if you ask me if Hiyori's presence was strong from the beginning, I would say no. In fact, he didn't even take notice of her presence.

"Tokitou-kun has always hated Ryuuen-kun's methods. No, it's not just Tokitou-kun. Even Okabe-san, who is standing beside him right now, is one of them."

"You mean they want to embrace Katsuragi and turn against Ryuuen?"

"That may be so."

In terms of ability, Katsuragi is capable enough to be a substitute leader. And because he was a transferred student, he could cut into Ryuuen without hesitation.

"But Hiroya Tokitou, Ryuuen has also made a troublesome opponent."

Tokitou Hiroya, Akito had said something similar, was known for his winsome personality, rough language, and aggressive nature.

"Do you think so too, Ayanokouji-kun?"

As Hiyori feared, this situation was not in anyone's best interest.

"Certainly, our class is doing well right now. I also think that one of the reasons for this is that Ryuuen-kun, who came back after being out of the frontline for a while, has shown a lot of growth."

Compared to the beginning of the year, Ryuuen, and those around him such as Ishizaki, have also shown great growth.

"But whether or not the rapid progress will continue forever is a different story. It may be true for any class, but if Ryuuen-kun were to be expelled from school in the future, I think our class would collapse at once."

"Ryuuen's fighting style is always fraught with danger."

There will probably be a development in the future where people will take big risks in order to win big.

The "promise" that he made to Sakayanagi is also of great interest.

"When that happens, it's essential to have someone who can be on the receiving end."

A potential leader in an unforeseen situation. Hiyori smiles at me.

"In that case, why don't you come to our class Ayanokouji-kun.....?"

Hiyori, despite her appearance, is not optimistic and spells out a strategy for the class to win.

"How daring of you, again."

"I recruited you last time, but that was just a half-joke to go along with Ishizaki-kun. But this invitation is different from that."

That meant she was serious.

"I don't think it's a weak class at all. But it is also true that we lack someone who can lead us in case of an emergency. What do you think?"

A battle with Hiyori, Katsuragi, and Kaneda backing me up as advisors, huh?

"It's not necessarily a development that would cause Ryuuen to drop out of school. Right?"

"Of course, it's best if it doesn't."

It just seemed like a bit of an outlandish offer for Hiyori.

Even if she had been thinking about it in her gut, it was questionable if it was something she should say now.

"Did you hear some troublesome things?"

I asked boldly, but Hiyori just smiled a little and didn't answer.

While I was talking to Hiyori, Katsuragi and Tokitou continued to argue with each other.

Katsuragi finally broke his rigidity when Tokitou didn't respond in a way that pleased him.

"..... You're wasting your time. I told you because I thought you would understand, but I was wrong."

"I guess you do understand."

"I'm not asking you to keep quiet about this, if you want to report me to Ryuuen, be my guest."

"I'm not going to report it."

"Are you sure? I'm telling you, I'm serious. I don't know what will happen if you leave me alone."

"Don't get me wrong, Tokitou, there's a lot wrong with Ryuuen's methods. I don't think it's wrong to be frustrated like you are. But I don't admire overzealous behavior."

It was obvious that Tokitou had something on his mind.

And there was no doubt that it was his intention to get rid of Ryuuen.

"Shut up."

With that, Tokitou walked away from Katsuragi.

We ducked down and watched Tokitou and Okabe go without noticing us.

After that, I was going to leave quietly, but .....

Hiyori tugged on my arm, causing me to appear in front of Katsuragi.

"What do you want, Ayanokoji?"

It would be strange to run away at this point, so I followed the flow and walked up to Katsuragi.

"I see, a lot of things are going on in Katsuragi's class."

"I guess it's the same for every class. I wish I didn't have to tell you that."

Katsuragi looks once at Hiyori, who is standing next to me.

"I'm not impressed Shiina, you seem to trust Ayanokoji, but it's not the right decision to bring your personal feelings into a class issue."

As harsh as it sounds, Katsuragi is right.

Sending information to the enemy that you don't have to give can be fatal later on.

"That may be so. But who among my classmates can I talk to about this? If one of the parties involved, Ryuu-en-kun, hears about it, he won't leave Tokitou-kun and the others alone, and the same goes for the rest of the students. They might try to score points by selling out the friends who betrayed them."

"It's not something that can be solved by putting Ayanokoji too."

"Isn't this a good opportunity for Katsuragi-kun to sort out his thoughts on what to do?"

"What?"

"Why don't you let out what you're thinking about in order to set your own direction?"

Huh? Hiyori is trying to use me to influence Katsuragi in a positive way.

It's not easy for Katsuragi, who is a solitary thinker, to get along with others.

This behavior must have rubbed off on Katsuragi, because he agrees with her, even though he is taken aback.

"You seem to be thinking more about the class than I thought, Shiina."

"Of course I am. Because I plan to graduate with all my classmates in Class A."

As if encouraged by these words, Katsuragi put his thoughts into words.

"As the only second year who has experienced two classes so far, I feel that there is a definite difference between Sakayanagi's class and Ryuuuen's class.

In both cases, the classmates are often frustrated by their leaders, but Sakayanagi's class still has a certain cohesiveness. On the other hand, there are still many students in Ryuuuen's class who are not satisfied."

That's exactly the kind of students Tokitou and Okabe, who had just crammed into Katsuragi, were.

"This dissatisfaction will continue to accumulate and endure as long as the class is on the rise. ...."

"So you're saying you're afraid of the next time it starts to follow a downward path?"

"Yeah. In some cases, a single mistake will be enough to destroy half the class. I think the man could foresee that, but I also don't think he'd change the ..... current system."

"That's exactly what Katsuragi thinks, isn't it? I'm sure Ryuuuen knows that too."

"But if he does know, then he should step up to Tokitou and the others and make a move."

"Well, there will inevitably be a backlash against Ryuuuen's methods."

Apparently, Katsuragi believed that Ryuuuen should solve this problem.

"In anticipation of that, didn't Ryuuuen pull Katsuragi out of Class A?"

"..... me?"

"If something happened to Ryuuuen himself, Katsuragi would be able to take his place. I think that's why he brought you in."

Katsuragi was exactly what Hiyori was looking for, a candidate for leadership.

"It's hard to believe."

Of course, as I said to Katsuragi, it's my own interpretation.

"In the case of Ryuuen, who is a high-risk, high-return student, he may graduate with an A class, or he may drop out of school after an exam somewhere without a second thought. That's why he need an insurance policy just in case."

It is very possible that the Ryuuen administration will fall apart from the betrayal of one person.

"If that's the case, then I don't like ....."

He thought it was because Katsuragi held him in high esteem, but he made no attempt to hide his displeasure at that.

"Ryuuen and I are enemies because of our different values. That hasn't changed even now that we are classmates. But now that we're friends, I think the least I can do is to graduate with an A grade without missing a single classmate."

Knowing that he is this kind of person, Ryuuen probably didn't tell Katsuragi directly.

In terms of personal growth, Ryuuen's evolution has been remarkable, but his classmates have not been able to keep up with his momentum.

"About earlier, I think you made the right decision to keep Tokitou out of Ryuuen's earshot."

"It would be nice if we could just leave the rebels alone, but if we had to get rid of them, it would be a bigger problem."

It would be a headache to worry about, but at the same time, it would be rewarding for Katsuragi.

At the very least, the situation is very different from when he was in Class A, where he was tamed and ignored without a chance to do anything.

Katsuragi's expression softened slightly, as if he had something new in mind.

"What do you think, Katsuragi-kun?"

"..... I know."

After clearing his throat once, Katsuragi looked at me again.

"Now that you've listened to me, I'm starting to see what I should be doing.

Thank you."

"No, I'm just saying what I think."

"Even if it was you 'just saying' , it wouldn't have mattered, but what you said was on point, and I'm sure Shiina made you listen because she was sure you'd give the right answer."

Hiyori smiled happily.

Although I had been taken advantage of, he hoped that this would bring even the slightest sign to Ryuuuen's class.

"Nevertheless, Ayanokoji; I'm sure some of the students thought the same thing, but it was a bit surprising."

"Surprising?"

"Because the results of this special exam were pretty close."

Matsushita and many of the other students must have become skeptical of my abilities.

In that sense, Tsukishiro's presence turned out to be a good thing.

"Is that your true ability? Or was it something unplanned?"

"Well, I don't know."

I brushed it off, but Katsuragi didn't seem to miss it.

"Shiina, I'm sorry, but Ayanokouji and I need to talk alone for a moment."

"Understood. I guess I'll go back to my room. See you later, Ayanokouji-kun."

I exchanged a quick goodbye with Hiyori, and the two of us stayed here.

"During the uninhabited island test, Ryuuuen told me everything he knows about you."

"Ryuuuen told you honestly?"

"He was a little skittish at first, but I told him to tell me if he had accepted me as a member of his class."

That's some kind of pinching line.

If that's the case, then I stood as the X who was in the dark in Horikita's class.

That would mean that Katsuragi knew about everything, even the incident on the rooftop.

As Sakayanagi said, I can't prevent the number of students who know me from gradually increasing.

"Looks like you've been getting around pretty well so far."

"I didn't think it would make much difference to me whether I was in A class or D class, as long as I could have a quiet school life."

"Is that why you're hiding your abilities? I won't say anything else, but it probably won't take too much longer for it to become known."

I'm sure it will. There was almost no way to contain the information that was beginning to spread.

"I'm just going to be me, and do what I have to do here at the school."

"I don't know when it will be, but I'm looking forward to the day when I can fight you for real."

With that, Katsuragi nodded once and left the place.

#### Part 4

Late afternoon. I was walking to the café terrace with one of my friends.

"It's been a while since we've seen each other like this, Satou-san."

"Yes, it has. Maybe since that time."

Since that time. That was when I told her that I was going out with Kiyotaka.

Since then, Satou-san and I have been good friends ..... and have become much closer than before, to the point where we can now call ourselves best friends.

But our group usually consists of four or five people.

That's how many of us are always hanging out together.

So it's not often that I get to be alone with Satou-san. It's the same on the boat this summer vacation. In fact, since I don't have much privacy, I only have opportunities to play with seven or eight people. I'm still a little reluctant to go to the pool ....., but I can cover my skin with a rash guard so it's not a problem. Anyway, there's a reason why I forced myself to spend some time alone with Satou-san today.

We found an empty seat. Satou-san and I looked around, trying to find a seat before we ordered. Unlike the school, the café terrace was spacious enough that we didn't have to worry about finding a place.

However, based on what we were going to talk about today, we didn't want to be surrounded by people if possible.

If you want to be at some distance away from the other students, it tends to be in a place with poor sunlight.

I don't know what I'll do....

"I don't mind if it's in the back of the room, okay?"

"Oh, you don't mind?"

"Because we have something important to talk about, don't we?"

Satou-san, who had guessed, said and gave me a cute smile.

"Thanks."

We decided to take the unpopular seat with no view of the outside.

After turning over the in-use bill, we went to order.

"Let me buy you a drink, since I called Satou-san."

Pushing past Satou-san's seeming reticence, I ordered two identical coffees before taking a seat.

"So... what's the story?"

Satou-san asked as soon as we sat down.

I didn't mean to drag it out at all either, but .....

"Well, ..... wait a minute."

"What's wrong?"

"Don't you think the atmosphere is a bit strange?"

I felt uncomfortable with the atmosphere of the place, and I confirmed it, but she tilted her head curiously.

"Weird? I don't think there's anything wrong with it. ....."

"I guess so. I'm sorry for saying such a strange thing."

I didn't know why I felt this way at first.

But maybe it's something I've acquired from spending so much time with him .....Kiyotaka. He never overlooks even the slightest change.

Is it someone's facial expression, emotion, or the atmosphere of such a place?

No matter what it is, he can detect and see through the changes. Maybe I've acquired such an eye for picking out the right things.....?

I don't know what it really is, but I've decided to think so for now.

But I don't know. Why do I feel such a bad vibe?

I kept my composure and began to quietly observe my surroundings.

"I wish we could live on a ship like this forever..."

I said as I sipped my cup and looked around.

"Haha, I agree with you. But if we continue like this everyday, we'll run out of money."

"That's true. Pools, movies, and good food, I'm sure I'll run out of money soon."

I noticed that the strange atmosphere had disappeared. Or rather, it had faded.

Was it just a misunderstanding on my part? I was too busy trying to figure out what was going on that I didn't notice the situation changing.

A group of three third-year girls had joined us at the table next to ours, chatting and laughing.

"So, so~, Kisarazu-kun from B class, you know~?"

"Oh my god, seriously? I didn't know that~"

They were laughing out loud, chatting amicably.

Oh, I should have told you ..... earlier.

Even though the ocean side is more popular, it's no wonder people choose this place to avoid the popularity and sunshine. They may not be interested in our conversation, but they are still close enough to hear it if they want to. I could move to get away from them, but I didn't want to make a bad impression on them. They were Senpais.

If it was a first year junior, or a third year senior, there was no way to get rid of the possibility that they might not want to be next to me, and they might hold on to the fact that I moved.

I'm well aware that abuse can start from such a trivial thing.

"Actually, I thought I'd tell Satou-san first."

Let's not worry about the irrelevant third-year students, let's just focus on Satou-san here. It would be rude to worry about anything else.

"I think it's about time I told everyone about me and Kiyotaka."

"..... Yeah."

I knew that Satou-san had almost guessed what I was going to say.

She might have even thought about the possibility that we might have broken up. .....

No, I don't think so. If that were the case, I wouldn't have been able to keep my composure.

I couldn't imagine myself being able to laugh it off and say, "We broke up" without a care in the world.

"That's why I thought I'd tell Satou-san about the ....."

"Wouldn't everyone be very surprised if they knew? That you two are dating."

I simulated it over and over in my head.

I knew that no matter when I said it, it would probably cause a bit of a stir.

I don't mean to speak ill of myself, but I'm not very pretty.

Before I met .....Kiyotaka, I used to act much more bossy than I am now because I didn't want to be bullied. I've even used my flirty eyes on boys who weren't interested.

"So when are you going to tell everyone?"

Satou-san asked me about the timing, to which I immediately replied.

"Well, it's summer vacation right now, so I'm thinking I'll tell everyone when the second semester starts."

"What did Ayanokouji-kun say about that?"

"He said he'll adjust the timing to my liking."

Satou-san takes a sip.

"I see. So you guys are in love?"

"What? Huh?"

"It's nice of you to tell me."

"Uh-huh. Well, it would be weird if we weren't lovey-dovey."

"Did you kiss him or something?"

"Yeah, what?"

"You've been going out for quite a while now, right? How is it going?"

"....., just one surprise."

I answer honestly and Satou-san smirks.

"That's nice, I'd love a surprise kiss."

"Oh, really? I wasn't prepared for it, and it was my first time ....."

Satou-san rolled her eyes a little when she heard such a murmur.

"Karuizawa-san didn't have anything with Hirata-kun? You'd been together for quite a while, hadn't you?"

"Huh?"

"And it's not surprising if Karuizawa-san had a boyfriend in middle school."

As I listened to Satou-san's comments, I felt my blood run cold.

From her perspective Karuizawa Kei was a woman at the top of her caste, who was always moving from one man to another as a popular girl.

To report that such a person had her first kiss was certainly a problem.

"Well, ....., you see, I'm very firm with myself."

She replied, trying her best to look nonchalant.

"Are you sure it's only your special boyfriend that you allow to do that?"

I poured a third of the cup of coffee down my throat in one gulp as I felt my throat grow thirsty rapidly.

"But Hirata-kun was a super cool boyfriend too, right?"

"Well, yeah. But I guess he wasn't exciting enough for me."

Don't worry, I can do it.

Now that I've slipped up, I'll just have to go with the flow and cover it up.

"Hirata-kun is a calm and decent guy, so he didn't come on too strong. It was a little unsatisfying, wasn't it?"

I apologize in my heart, but I sacrificed him for my own sake.

"I see. Well, it's true that I want my boyfriend to take the lead in some ways."

"Right, right?"

"But even Ayanokouji-kun is pretty crazy, even though he looks calm."

When Satou-san said that, I thought she was showing a little bit of regret.

"Satou-san..... me....."

"Oh, sorry Karuizawa-san, that's not what I meant.....!"

Today, I was just going to tell her that I was going to announce that we were dating.

But now I'm just a sarcastic girl bragging about it.

When I first entered this school, I thought it was fine.

I was a sarcastic girl, going around telling everyone what Hirata-kun did and did not do.

But now, I think that's not enough. I should have avoided making unintentional remarks because I consider him to be an important friend. ..... It sounds like a defensive instinct to protect yourself, but it's just a selfish ego.

"It's okay, it's okay. It's normal to fall in love with a boy you like at the same time, it's been happening for a long time. Well, ..... in my case, I always lose."

Satou-san leaked such dissatisfaction by sharpening her lips. But after that, she immediately returned to her usual cheerful state.

"Just to make sure, if Karuizawa-san dumps Ayanokouji-kun, it's okay if I ....., right?"

Okay, that's what you mean by okay, isn't it? I continue without finishing clearing my mind.

"You see, Hirata-kun can also go free and get a new girlfriend, right? So it's the same for Ayanokouji-kun, right?"

"That's well, yes, but ....."

That's absolutely not okay! I mean, I'm not breaking up with him!

I shouted in my mind, but I couldn't bring it to the surface, so it was tough.

"See, I think Karuizawa-san can get a better guy."

"By higher-ranked guy, who?"

"I'm a little confused when you ask me who, but I'm thinking of ..... Tsukasaki-kun and Nagumo-senpai."

"Huh?"

For me, both of them are just out of the question.

Speaking only of looks, Tsukasaki-kun is certainly top class, and maybe even the student council president. I'm sure he's the best in terms of titles and such.

But...yeah I don't feel like they can be Kiyotaka's rivals.

He can be ..... sarcastic, but he is also ..... strong, cool, and mysterious. And yet...he understands me.

"Yes! I'm sorry, that was unnecessary, thank you for the meal!"

"What?"

"Because it's written on Karuizawa-san's face. Ayanokouji-kun is the best."

I'm not sure what to do. My poker face didn't work on Satou-san, who knew the details of my love life.

"Thanks for being the first to tell me. It made me happy."

"I don't know. ..... I'm glad you did."

Then our conversation shifted to other people's love stories.

About the uninhabited island, about completely unrelated things.

It was the first time in a long time that the two of us were able to have a good time together.

## **Part 5**

The same day. It was a little after 2:10 pm in the afternoon.

A little after 2:10 p.m., when most of the students had finished their lunch and were playing around.

I was quietly looking out at the ocean, waiting for the person I had called. I took out my cell phone, clicked on the my name, Horikita Suzune, and opened OAA.

I was expecting to see some changes after the results of the uninhabited island exam, but it looks like there are no changes here. There were only a few occasions when each teacher could see the students, so it's possible that the results were not reflected.

This was also the case when I looked at her OAA as I was waiting for her later.

I quickly closed my phone and stared at the ocean in silence.

It had been a few days since the grueling and somewhat unrealistic uninhabited island test.

My body was no longer tired, but I still felt a sense of everyday life, partly because I was on a luxury cruise ship.

"Gee, you're still here?"

A voice called out to me from some distance away. Before I could turn around, the words continued.

"Can you not call me out using other people? It'll give people the wrong idea that you and I are close."

I called out to Yamaga-san, who was in the same cabin in the class she was staying in.

"I'm sorry, but I didn't have any other way to contact you. Or did you want to be approached at a meal with a lot of people in the same room?"

"I definitely don't want to do that. But I hate it just as much to be approached in a way like today."

"Then can you tell me in advance how I should go about it if I want to talk to you?"

"It's probably best if you don't even think about talking to me."

Ibuki-san, with a disgusted look on her face, arrived about ten minutes late for the meeting.

Without a single word of apology, she only complained earlier.

"You don't seem to be late for some reason. Are you perhaps trying to be Miyamoto Musashi?"

[For reference Miyamoto Musashi was a Japanese swordsman, philosopher and Strategist. In duel he had an undefeated record of 61 duels, The reference here is given when Miyamoto Musashi had a duel with Sasaki Kojiro (another one of the great swordsmen) he intentionally

Showed hours late to the fight to disrespect him and make him angry before the fight which he eventually won. For more info you can look it up]

"What? I don't even know what that means."

It doesn't seem like she's trying to piss me off - or anything.

Well, if that's what she's trying to do, she should make me wait two hours instead of ten minutes late.

"If you're not trying to harass me, I'd like to hear why you're late."

"Huh? As far as I'm concerned, you calling me is harassment."

"Yes. You're right."

I answered back seriously and sighed in exasperation.

"What do you mean, if I don't go through with the call, you're going to pretend I ran away? I'm so pissed off."

"If I call you out normally, you'll just ignore me, right?"

"Of course I would. Who the hell would want to meet you?"

I was prepared for her to ignore me completely, but she came, albeit late. She didn't like the idea of losing to me more than anything, and I was right to call her out on the challenge.

"Oh, I get it now."

If you have something to say, say it now, or so she seems to be hurrying.

I'd like to give her the benefit of the doubt, but there are circumstances that make that unlikely.

"Shall we talk while we walk? It takes a long time to talk standing up, and we'll stand out here."

It's a good place to meet up, but not a good place to talk confidentially.

"Huh? ..... Damn you."

She's irritated, but follows rather obediently.

She's frustrated that she lost to me in the uninhabited island test.

It's no wonder she's contacting me for a chance at revenge.

As I started to move, I was able to blend into the hustle and bustle of my surroundings and started talking.

"It has to do with Amasawa-san, the person we fought in the uninhabited island exam."

"..... Oh, that damn cocky first year."

I can't see Ibuki-san's expression as she is walking somewhat behind me.

"It's a little hard to talk to you, can you walk a little faster?"

"That's too much. It's up to me what pace I walk at, isn't it?"

"It is only when you are alone."

I stoped and looked back at her.

"As for you, I'd like to cut this short. So for my part, I'd like to make this as quick as possible for you. But in order to do that, I'm going to need your help."

"Okay, okay. Just walk fast, right?"

She said and started walking past me. It was like she was walking in a race.

What can I say? She's a child in a bad way. Of course, she's not a child in the good sense, so it can't be a strong point.

As I was watching Ibuki-san's back  
in disgust, she looked back at me with a scared face.

"You're not following me?

"Too fast a pace is also a problem. Can you walk moderately fast?"

"Oh, for God's sake!"

Ibuki-san came back, ruffling her own hair.

"I'll listen to you, but you have to accept my revenge match! Got it?"

"Yes, and I expect that there will be a gymnastics festival in the second semester - depending on the situation, I may be able to make it happen."

"You mean I'll get my revenge, right?"

"That's why I'm saying it. I'll make it happen, depending on the situation."

After sorting out the meaning of her words for a bit, she bit her lip once in frustration.

"So you're saying you won't accept it depending on the situation, is that it?"

"Oh, you can decipher that kind of thing for someone with your mind, I'm impressed."

I clap my hands together, and she slaps them away as if she thinks I'm being ridiculous.

"That's violent."

"Shut up! If you don't promise to take the job, we're done here!"

"That's fine, but you'll never get the revenge match you want."

"No..."

"I can't make any promises here, but depending on your actions, there is still a possibility. Don't you think that's very important? I don't think I've lost to you. I mean, ..... no until you graduate, and even after you graduate, you'll still have regrets that you didn't win."

"Gu.....!"

"So? Don't listen to what I have to say. The choice is yours, Ibuki-san."

"All right, all right! I am supposed to listen to you!"

"It'll be easier if you're honest with me from the start, because you'll be able to make short work of my story, which I hate."

I'll send you some advice for next time, Ibuki-san is hoping for a revenge match, but it really depends on the future. Of course, if it doesn't match the class's policy, I won't be able to deal with her. I don't want to talk about it here, because it would only be negative.

The fact that I gave her room for a revenge match must have lowered her spirits somewhat.

Ibuki-san stopped and began to walk in step with me.

"Well? What's with that cocky yearling?"

"How did it make you feel to put your hands together with her?"

"How did I feel about .....?"

"Stronger than anyone you've ever fought, I guess that's how you felt."

"Well, ..... I have to admit that I'm not perfect at that."

Whether it's me or Ibuki-san, there's a difference in strength that we can't beat even if Amasawa-san stands on her head.

"It's true that Amasawa is a year old with a strange strength. Ah, I don't like to think about that because it makes me sick to my stomach?"

"Don't say that. You're currently the only one who can or needs to have this conversation."

Ibuki-san could understand this because she had confronted her directly. If I were to explain Amasawa-san's strength to someone who didn't know anything about it, they wouldn't be able to comprehend a single millimeter of it.

"I know it's a strange story, but you may have suffered some damage. I thought I'd apologize for that first."

"Damage?"

Ibuki-san raises an eyebrow, as if she didn't understand the meaning.

"I'm planning to investigate Amasawa-san's background in the future."

"You're going to stick your neck out for her? I don't think you should do that. She seems to have a screwed-up mind, and you never know what she might do."

It was the strong image of Amasawa-san that made Ibuki-san say that.

"Yes, she's dangerous. But I have a feeling that if I leave her alone, something bad will happen in the future."

"It doesn't sound like she was interested in you, does it?"

"Not for me, for Ayanokoji-kun."

At the mention of the name, Ibuki-san's gaze turned to the ocean side as if she understood.

"Ayanokoji, huh? I don't know about that, but she sure seemed to know a lot about Ayanokoji."

Yes, Amasawa-san knows about Ayanokouji-kun.

She didn't look like she knew him from this year as a mere junior.

"He's a classmate of mine. If there's anything I can do to help, it's only natural that I'll lend a hand."

I thought to myself that this was a bit of a toothy conversation.

If I had asked him when I first started at this school, he would have given me goosebumps and denied it with all his might.

"But if she finds out that you're looking into it, she'll probably try to set you up. You wouldn't stand a chance then, would you?"

"Her strength is, how should I say, .... different from the world we live in, I feel."

"I'd say don't put "we" in there, but that thing is definitely different."

"So there is no one as good as her in your memory either."

"I'm the strongest out of the second years. It was the same in middle school. There weren't many girls who did martial arts, and I was never beaten by someone who only had a passing interest in it. I mean, I've always been the best as far as I'm concerned."

"Right. I think you're the second strongest second-years after me, I won't deny it."

"And you're denying it so much. Are you saying you don't approve of my strength?"

"No one is saying that. It's just that I don't think I'm weaker than you."

"No, no, I'm definitely stronger than you."

"I wonder where in the world you get such confidence. What's your evidence?"

"A hunch?"

"You can't rely on that at all. You're just analyzing me to make yourself feel better. Neither of us has ever fought in perfect condition. You don't have all the ingredients to make a clear decision on who is stronger."

"Then it's fine if I'm provisionally the best. Why should I be the second best?"

"It's the result of an objective evaluation."

"I don't get it."

We reached the cafeteria, one of our destinations.

"It's going to take a while, let me buy you a drink. What would you like?"

"I don't really care what you want, but I'll have ..... iced lemon tea."

Ibuki-san and I finished our orders and pay with our phones. 1400 points for two drinks, that's expensive.

I get two drinks from the waiter who's ready to serve us.

"Here you go. It's on me."

"It's kind of weird that you're buying me a drink."

"You should accept my thanks."

"Well, okay."

Ibuki-san accepted the cup with her left hand and took a sip while looking in the faraway direction.

Then she moved a little further away and stopped in a less popular area.

"Because I fought her, I know that she shares the same sense of strength as I do. On top of that, did you sense any of her weaknesses, any sort of quirks in her fighting style?"

"She's not an easy opponent to analyze like that."

".....Yes."

It would be best if it didn't take the form of a rematch, but ..... I don't know what would happen if I pushed too hard.

"You alone will end up getting beaten back. I don't think that outcome can be reversed."

Ibuki-san is not trying to bring me down or anything, just stating the facts.

If I re-trained from here, it would only be as she pointed out.

"You're free to think whatever you want, but it's best to just let it go."

"Have you been listening to me? To Ayanokouji-kun..."

"Yes, that's it."

She interrupted, turning the hand that held the cup towards me.

"No matter what Amasawa did, wouldn't that guy be able to handle it on his own?"

"..... What do you mean?"

Indeed, Ayanokouji-kun is a brilliant man.

That's because I've been watching him from the side for a year, and I've had the chance to learn a little about him.

But there are still many mysteries, and not all of his academic and physical abilities have been figured out. Even I, who was in the same class and Ibuki-san, didn't understand what was going on.

From the outside, all they have is the information that he is good at math and not bad at athletics.

"It felt like an assertion, but you must be buying Ayanokouji-kun quite a bit."

"I'm not buying it, anyone can see that considering how strong he is."

Ibuki-san said clearly, "I can see that, considering his strength."

"Maybe you overheard something about him and Housen-kun somewhere?"

"What? Housen? Who's that? ..... Ah, that gorilla-like guy."

The conversation doesn't click, and I'm wrapped up in a bit of frustration.

"Where did you get the information that Ayanokouji-kun is strong?"

"Where.....?"

I was in the middle of choosing my words when I got a look on my face like I had somehow lost it.

"Was that something you were told not to say? Did they not? I forgot....."

Ibuki-san closes her eyes and crosses her arms, as if she is trying to remember something.

"Something happened that I don't know about, didn't it?"

I tried to push a little here.



"So you're the one who doesn't know anything about it?"

"Me..... doesn't know anything, but it doesn't mean you know anything either."

With the two of us in check, I decided to go ahead with the conversation.

"Reconciliation, I think we need it."

"I don't want to, though."

"Not so fast. At this point, I want to hear everything you know. What you know about Ayanokouji-kun that I don't know."

This is sort of a chance in a thousand to gather information.

If Ibuki-san knows a little bit about anything, anything at all, she can go to....

"Well, okay. What don't you know?"

Ibuki-san asks in a troublesome tone, as if she can't decide what to say.

"I'm sure you do, but I'm curious about what you were trying to tell me earlier...."

"What I was going to tell you earlier was about Ryuuen and Ayanokouji's rooftop incident. You know, the time we called Karuizawa and waterboarded her."

"Hmm, what? I kinda have no idea what you're talking about ..... at all."

Ryuuen-kun? Rooftop? And Karuizawa-san? Waterboarding?

Questions kept popping up in my head.

"Ahhh, that's what I mean. That means he hasn't told anyone in the class."

Ibuki-san nodded her head in agreement, as if she understood something first.

Then Ibuki-san started to tell me something about Ayanokouji-kun that I didn't know.

As I listened to her, I tried not to let my emotions get the better of me as I stared out at the shining sea and tried to keep my mind clear: Ryuuen-kun had turned to Karuizawa-san to find out about Ayanokouji-kun, who was hiding in our class. In order to save her, Ayanokouji-kun went to the rooftop alone.

There, he showed his overwhelming power and overpowered Ryuuen-kun and the others.

Even though I should have known him to some extent, I was still surprised more than once.

"So that's what happened when... Ryuuen-kun stopped messing with our class. I had no idea."

"Anyway, now you know. His strength is not normal."

"Yes, it is. He's a man of immeasurable things. .... Having fought both of them, who do you think would win if the two of them fought?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen either of them take themselves seriously. I'm not trying to say they're men or women, but I think Ayanokouji is the better overall fighter. So there's no need for you to get involved."

If he was strong enough to deal with whatever Amasawa-san might do to him, he might be safe.

"But physical strength doesn't necessarily mean you're safe. It doesn't mean you can avoid being expelled from school, especially in school life. In fact, your strength can be your downfall."

On the uninhabited island, Amasawa-san could do whatever she wanted, but on the school grounds, it was not so easy.

"Thank you Ibuki-san, I think your information will be more useful than I thought."

"You're not going to talk to Ayanokouji about this, are you?"

"Not yet, no. I wouldn't be surprised if he has some idea of what's going on."

He had been in contact with Amasawa-san a few times, especially since it was before the uninhabited island test.

"And then there's the matter of the paper. ...."

"Paper?"

"Besides Amasawa-san, there was another thing that bothered me about the uninhabited island test."

I explained that a piece of paper had been placed in my tent.

Ibuki-san seemed to have an idea why I was in the northeast of the island on the last day.

"I see," she said, "someone other than Amasawa sent you a notice suggesting Ayanokoji."

"You know the word 'suggest', don't you?"

"Can you please not make fun of me?"

Ibuki-san's academic ability is low in OAA, but she is surprisingly easy to talk to.

I don't feel uncomfortable as if I'm talking to someone who is obviously of a lower level.

"At that time, Amasawa-san looked at the paper she received from me and tore it into pieces. That action has been bugging me for a long time, but I think it was because she didn't want to leave any evidence of her handwriting. Anyway, I just remember clearly that it had beautiful handwriting."

"Beautiful handwriting?"

"Yes. I don't think there are a lot of people who can write at that level."

"I see. So there's a possibility that the person who can write that good is playing a bad game. But it's going to be difficult to find just that, isn't it? I mean, the evidence has been destroyed."

"It won't be easy, I'm afraid. We can't just go around asking each of them to write a letter. There's also the possibility, though it's still an unsubstantiated theory, that the person who wrote the letters might be physically strong, whether it's Ayanokouji-kun or Amasawa-san, if they have exceptional strength. Furthermore, there is a high possibility that he is a first year student."

"Could be a strong guy like Ayanokouji and Amasawa for sure. But what makes him a first year student?"

"Someone who Amasawa-san knows & his handwriting; it's unlikely that he's a second or third year."

"I see."

Ayanokouji-kun, Amasawa-san, and a third party.

What kind of connection each of them has, we still don't have the full picture.

But we can't just leave it at that.

"I'll try to keep you out of harm's way, but if I fall, I can't guarantee what will happen next. If Amasawa-san starts acting strangely, I won't hesitate to call the school..."

A light clank sounded on the deck. It was because Ibuki-san had pushed the cup of tea hard against the railing. The contents, which were still more than half full, overflowed from the cup and splashed onto her hand.

"What's wrong?"

"What if you fall? I told you I'm the one who's going to take you down."

"I'm not going to let you beat me either. But you never know what the unseen enemy, including Amasawa-san, will do, so..."

"There's two of them, so shouldn't there be two of us?"

"That's ....."

"It'll be a different story if I, the strongest of the second years, join in. If you insist, I'll lend you a hand."

With that, she took the cup back in her other hand and took a lick of the lemon tea on the back of her hand.

"What do you mean? I can't believe you've offered to help me twice."

"I don't want to end up being licked by a first year, and I don't like the idea of you losing to anyone but me. Besides, you brought the story with the intention of relying on me, right?"

Ibuki-san looked me straight in the eye.

"No, not at all?"

"What? Why don't you at least be that honest and say that you need Ibuki-san's help?"

"I've never thought of it that way before."

"Fine then, .....! I'll never ask for your help again! Bye-bye!"

As an angry Ibuki-san was about to walk away, I grabbed her by the left wrist.

"What the hell!"

"I'm going to ask you to work for free to pay for the drink I just bought you."

[T/L Note : Horikita with her dirty food tricks. Some things don't change. Also it's a joke]

"Huh? You said it was a drink from you, and now you're trying to take money from me?"

"There's nothing more expensive than free drinks."

"Then I'll give it back right now."

Ibuki-san takes out her cell phone and I continue.

"In that case, I'll take three million points."

She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head, not understanding what I'm saying.

"It's a treat from me. Don't you think it's worth that much added value?"

"I don't think so at all! It's seven hundred points, right!"

"If you don't have the ability to pay, I'll make it up to you by lending me a hand."

"You know, ...., I'm going to say this one more time, can't you just be honest?"

"If I need to be honest, I will be."

For some reason, I was embarrassed to ask Ibuki-san to be honest, so I ended up like this.

I kept my normal demeanor and continued in a high-handed manner.

"You really have a disgusting personality."

"That's mutual, isn't it, Ibuki-san?"

Our gazes crossed each other and Ibuki-san drank the rest of her cup in disgust.

"A big cup of lemon tea."

I laughed a little, finding such a phrase somewhat amusing.

## **Part 6**

It was dusk, the sun was setting beyond the horizon.

At the promised place, Ichinose was waiting for me, staring at the sea.

Looking at her fragile profile, I felt a little hesitant to call out her name.

"Ichinose."

"Ayanokouji-kun, hello."

I exchanged a quick greeting and stood in front of her. I wasn't in the mood to suddenly cut to the chase, so I decided to talk roundabout.

"Are you still continuing with that method, the strategy of saving up your private points?"

It was irrelevant to the main topic, but Ichinose didn't show a single displeased face.

"Yeah. I've decided that there's no harm in doing it. It's easy to save up as much as you can, and when you don't need it anymore, you can just give back the points you kept then to everyone."

She says it's easy, but it's a strategy that Ichinose can continue to implement because she is a trustworthy person.

As she said, there's nothing wrong with just keeping the points. If the money is automatically depleted, it can be inconvenient, but if the money is guaranteed to be returned, it is a good idea to have a large amount of money ready to move when the time comes.

The fact that it's the one and only advantage given to Ichinose is also a big factor.

"But the strategy of pooling is to be prepared for emergencies. That's not enough, is it?"

"Not if it's something new we've started, but this time it's a continuation."

In other words, she didn't prepare a new strategy, just a continuation of the previous one.

"Ayanokouji-kun, what do you think we are lacking?"

"Things that Ichinose's class is lacking?"

"Yes. We can't really see that on our own....Ayanokouji-kun, I was wondering what our class looks like from your point of view."

"During the uninhabited island exam, I had a chance to talk with some of Ichinose's classmates. The first thing I felt was that there were many students with good character."

This is something you know without even saying it, but it's also an inseparable factor.

However, they don't like to fight, so they can't aggressively go for class points.

"I think it's important to be a little more forceful. I'm not saying you should foul or backstab, but I think it's important to be strong against rough play."

"Rough play ....., huh? Yes, I agree. We need to be more firm to fight, right?"

I don't really have any concrete solutions in mind right now.

It's just painfully clear that she's trying her best to push forward into the darkness of the moment.

"The uninhabited island test the other day. I'm talking about that reply. ...."

"Yeah, ..... that's right, that's what we're here to talk about, isn't it?"

I gently put my face close to Ichinose's ear and tried to speak in a voice that was difficult to hear without concentrating on the fact that there was no one else around - that's when.

"What are you and Honami talking about when you meet up in a place like this?"

Ichinose, startled by the owner of the voice, the student council president Nagumo, hurriedly distanced herself, but he would have definitely seen the scene from almost zero distance.

Was I being followed? No, I'm not stupid enough to be followed without knowing it.

So was Ichinose marked from the start?

No, this was probably due to Nagumo's countless eyes watching me.

No matter how much you move around without being seen, it's almost impossible to completely escape the eyes of all the third-year students on this cruise ship. It would not be surprising if some of them had seen me on my way here.

However, there was no sign of Nagumo's contact in the past few days.

It was as if he had planned it, and the timing was just what he had hoped to avoid the most.

"Thank you for your hard work, student council president Nagumo."

Breaking the flow at once, Ichinose hurriedly worked on returning to normal mode.

It wasn't that she was able to completely dispel her agitation and confusion. But even if she had mended it perfectly, it would have been meaningless to Nagumo now.

"It seems like you two met on the last day of the uninhabited island, are you two sneaking around together again?"

"Eh, let's see: ....."

Ichinose choked on her words as she was suddenly reminded of what happened on the uninhabited island. For herself, she inadvertently confessed to me, and it is not straightforward to deceive him.

I was about to interrupt her, but Nagumo stopped me with his hand.

I was under strong pressure not to interrupt now.

"Well, it doesn't matter what it is. It's just that... if Honami, a fellow student council member, might be brought to tears, the student council president can't just leave her alone, can he?"

So that's what happened after all. I had already guessed this when I fully realized that Kiriyama was on Nagumo's side.

Nagumo moved even closer to us, and stood next to Ichinose.

"Are you ..... being made to cry?"

"I hope I'm wrong, but it's about Karuizawa."

He doesn't dare to say it in a single go, but speaks slowly and in small bursts to make himself understood.

"Karuizawa-san, as in?"

Of course, Ichinose couldn't understand why Kei's name was mentioned at this moment.

"It seems you've only told people close to you yet, but I've overheard you talking about dating Karuizawa for quite some time now. Am I right? Ayanokoji."

I'm dating Karuizawa.

When Ichinose heard those words, she probably didn't immediately understand what they meant.

"What, you've never heard of them? Honami and Ayanokouji seem to be on good terms, so I thought you'd have told her by now."

There was a slight pause before he continued.

"You weren't thinking of two-timing her, were you?"

I didn't reply to Nagumo's one-sided attack.

There was no point in telling him that I was trying to tell her that I was going out with Kei.

In fact, it is obvious that it would only be an act of rubbing salt in the wound.

"Is it really .....?"

"Hey Ayanokouji, Honami's asking, why don't you answer her? Or am I wrong and you have nothing to do with Karuizawa? If that's the case, please deny it, and I apologize profusely."

Kiryama had seen me and Kei together.

But I didn't give him any definitive indication that we were dating.

In other words, it's not impossible that he's trying to trick her into thinking I'm in a relationship with Kei.

But there is no option for me to say, "That's not true".

If I were to say that, and later find out that we were together, my lie would be exposed.

In the first place, it's better to assume that Nagumo has confirmed the story before entering into it.

"I hadn't told anyone about it, but where on earth did you get that information?"

"Ah .....!"

I could see the obvious shock in Ichinose at my admission of it.

First of all, Nagumo must have realized that Ichinose's feelings were directed towards me.

"I see you've realized that I didn't just jump to gossip and speculation, huh?"

He showed his teeth happily, but wouldn't talk about the seed or how to back it up.

I remembered vividly Kiryuuin's words that Nagumo might not be a good match for me.

"I don't want to say anything about people's love lives. But as I said before, Honami is a member of the student council. She has a good chance of becoming the student council president in the future. I have to protect her."

"I understand that the relationship between me and Ichinose is unnatural in the eyes of the student council president Nagumo. However, I think it was premature for you to step in at this stage, wasn't it?"

"That's true, if you're talking about Honami dating you and being cheated on, but from the looks of it, that doesn't seem to be the case. It may have been a completely unrelated discussion. However, if the two of you meet up in a deserted place like this just before dinner, it's understandable that you would think that, right? I'm sure your girlfriend would be saddened to see you in this situation."

"Indeed, it might cause unnecessary misunderstandings."

"As the student council president ....., I did what I had to do as a member of the student council."

Nagumo gives Ichinose one last look before approaching me.

"You should introduce me to your girlfriend sometime. I'd like to see her face at least once."

Nagumo taps me on the shoulder and whispers in my ear.

"You're free to think what you like about my methods. But, you know, it hasn't even started yet."

"It hasn't even begun?"

"You can mix a hundred truths with one lie and no one will notice. You have to make a decision and you can't take it back. If you ever want to fight me, you can always come see me. If you get down on your knees and show me one thing, I'll be your opponent."

In other words, unless I agreed to fight Nagumo, the relentless surveillance and harassment would continue unabated.

He's talking about dragging me out into the arena of competition, even if it's by force.

"See you later."

With that, he left the place.

It hadn't even started yet, had it? The overwhelming surveillance and information network that only Nagumo possessed.

All of the third-year students move as his hands and feet, his eyes and ears.

For the students of this school who live on the premises, it is as if their entire lives are exposed. And then there was the saying,

"One lie for every 100 truths".

For now, he is just letting the truth out, but it means that lies will start to be mixed in with it.

To the casual observer, it is just an extension of harassment, a childish act.

However, he has done more damage to me mentally than anyone else I've fought so far.

Nagumo doesn't care that he's antagonizing his classmates by sticking to me.

Either he doesn't think that he will lose their trust because of something like this, or he doesn't intend to gain their trust from the start and just wants to be bound by the rules.

Regardless, it is clear that Nagumo is prepared to do whatever it takes.

As Nagumo left, all that was left was a moment of silence.

It did not have any of the buoyant air that had been flowing right after we joined.

It was just a heavy, quiet time.

"Ah, haha. What's with the little interruption in the conversation? ....."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Well, that ..... Why did I get called here?"

"It's about the uninhabited island..."

"Oh! That thing, that thing? That's ..... that is ..... so ....."

She shouted loudly, then her voice gradually faltered.

"Can you just forget it ....."?

Ichinose spat out, her smile never faltering the entire time.

"Sorry, I didn't know anything about it. I got carried away and said something selfish and, well, weird ....."

"Like Nagumo said, I didn't tell anyone around me anything. It's no wonder you don't know."

"Yeah, I know, right? Maybe so, but ..... I knew I was being stupid! You see, Ayanokouji-kun, you're kind ..... and you're very, very nice ..... and there's no way you don't have a girlfriend ....."

In spite of Ichinose's strong will to never break her smile, her eyes were clearly moistened and her eyes began to overflow with tears. She was trying her best to keep her tears from overflowing, trying to keep her composure and pretend that nothing was wrong.



What kind of emotions do we feel when we fall in love with someone and they have someone else in mind?

It's something you can't really understand from TV, books, or just from hearing about it. Although it was a little different from what I had planned, I was now able to experience it right in front of my eyes.

"Goodbye..."

Ichinose ran off, leaving me with one word that she had to squeeze out.

I didn't say a word or extend my hand to her back, but just watched her go in silence.

"Nagumo, huh? I guess I've made an enemy that's much more troublesome than I thought."

It was a little different from what I had planned, but it didn't change the path I was on.

Even though I felt the disadvantageous circumstances piling up against me, I couldn't help but feel the curiosity welling up from deep within my chest.

## Chapter 5

### A Treasure hunt filled with Woman Troubles

#### Intro

There were only three days left of my remaining holiday on the ship.

The days were too intense to pass by so quickly.

Early in the morning, when everyone was starting to feel sorry for the days they were going to spend on this cruise ship, a text message was sent to all the students at the school at once. Hondou was the first to open his phone and read out the message.

"Today at 10:00 a.m., a treasure hunt game will be held? What's this?"

All of them opened the email at the same time, which contained the unfamiliar word "game" in it.

"The Treasure Hunt Game."

A free-for-all bonus game.

Participation requirement: 10,000 Private Points for one person, regardless of gender.

Date: Today, August 8

Detailed explanation will be given at the venue (you need to be at the 5th floor by 10:00am).

You can choose not to participate after receiving the explanation.

"For a moment I thought it was a special exam, but it can't be. Free participation sounds interesting, doesn't it?"

In addition to free participation, the only risk the individual will have to bear is the 10,000 points for the participation fee?

The details are unknown at the moment, but since it's called a treasure hunt, it's safe to assume that there will be a big payoff beyond the participation fee. If you find a treasure, you can get private points.

I'm always short on money, so if there's a chance to get an extra bonus, I'm willing to participate.

Miyamoto and Hondou seemed to be participating, and after the meal, they started talking about going together.

"I'm thinking of inviting Akito to join too....."

"Don't worry about me, just have fun. ...."

"I'm sure you'll be able to understand why I'm so excited."

Maybe it was because he had overstretched himself at the private pool yesterday.

"If it wasn't for the prohibition of bringing in personal items, I would've lent you a game console!"

"I can't bring myself to play a game in this state. ...."

Somewhat dumbfounded, Akito nuzzled his face into the pillow.

After finishing the meal with Akito in bed and spending a leisurely time in the room until about 9:50, the three of us decided to leave Akito behind and head for the venue, although it was a bit painful.

## Part 1

At the designated venue, there were many students packed into the hall.

I wondered how many people would be attending the event, but it was roughly half of the entire school.

I imagined that there would be a little more, but I guessed that the students who weren't interested in the treasure hunt would take the opportunity to enjoy themselves in the less crowded pools.

As it was a free event, it was up to the students to decide how to spend the day.

Soon, the stage in front of us started to get noisy, as if the deadline had arrived.

It seemed to be Takatō-sensei, the homeroom teacher of Class 3A, who was explaining the contents of the game.

Almost all the teachers seemed to be there, but I couldn't see Tsukishiro, the acting director, or Shiba, the homeroom teacher of the first year D class. If Shiba had also been hired by that man, it would not be surprising if he stepped down after this incident.

In fact, Mashima-sensei and Chabashira-sensei had already made their appearance and role known.

"Good morning, everyone. It is now 10:00 a.m., so we will close the recruitment with the students who are gathered here at the moment."

The other teacher standing at the entrance slowly closed the door.

Even if it's a voluntary game, rules are rules.

They would not allow the late comers to participate if even a second passed.

"Before I start explaining, let me explain how we came to have this treasure hunt game. This treasure hunt game stems from a suggestion from Nagumo-kun, the student council president, that we should have an interesting and enjoyable recreational activity as a way to deepen our friendship after competing with each other by grade level while living on a harsh uninhabited island... Nagumo-kun, please say hello."

Nagumo stood in front of the participants as Takatō-sensei called his name.

"It is with the full cooperation of the school that I am pleased to announce that the bonus game will be held. We came up with this idea from the student council's study to enrich and improve school life. In the uninhabited island examinations, all grades often competed against each other in a cutthroat manner, but in this treasure hunt, it is possible to make partners beyond the grades. Please take advantage of this and participate."

He concluded his speech with a statement typical of a serious student council president.

It reminded me of Nagumo, who had shown up in front of us yesterday. Ichinose was also a member of the student council, sitting beside the teachers and listening to what they had to say.

As far as I can see from here, there is no sign of any change. .....

I remembered the tears that Ichinose had 'unexpectedly' shed yesterday.

The wounds she had sustained were probably not light. She is behaving naturally now, but it will take some time for her to heal. At that time, her love for me may disappear, or she may even become hostile.

We'll have to wait and see what kind of changes she goes through, but it's sure to be a big turning point for her in the future.

After Nagumo's speech, the microphone was handed over to Takatō-sensei again.

"The members of the student council will not be able to participate in this treasure hunt as they will have to manage the operation. We will be working on administrative tasks on our days off, so please take care of them."

Horikita, Ichinose, and several other student council members were summoned to Nagumo's office.

"Now then, I'll give you an overview of the treasure hunt game, there are no complicated rules, it's very simple."

Takatō-sensei raised his right hand. Between his thumb and forefinger, he holds a square piece of paper. It is probably about five centimeters square in size. The paper had a two-dimensional code printed on it.

"I have placed a total of 100 stickers with this 2D code on them all over the ship. Participants will be asked to play a treasure hunt game to find these stickers. By reading the stickers with a special app, they are rewarded with private points. However, each phone can only be read once. Please note that the results will be reflected immediately upon accessing the site and the reward will be paid. Of course, if you try to read a 2D code that has been used once with another phone, it will be invalid and you will not receive the reward. Also, anyone who removes the sticker without permission or uses a pen to make the code unreadable will be severely punished, even if they are playing the game, so please avoid doing so."

Well, it's a very simple game and luck is very important.

"The lowest private point you can get is 5000 points. There are 50 cards available, which is exactly half of the total. And the next highest is 30 cards with 10,000 points."

Unfortunately, that means that half of the 100 cards will be lost.

Even if you can find one card that is 30% of the total, there's no gain.

"For the remaining 20 cards, 10 cards are worth 50,000 points, 5 cards are worth 100,000 points, and 3 cards are worth 300,000 points. And the rest are 500,000 points and 1,000,000 points. It is safe to assume that the more difficult it is to find the hidden 2 D code, the more private points you will receive."

With about 200 participants, that means that one out of every two people won't get it, but one million points if you find the sticker with the most difficult 2 D code?

This is not an easy amount to get, even for a special exam. I wouldn't be surprised if this was something that half of them would risk losing money on. ....

"There are 100 2 D codes prepared for the number of students participating, compared to more than 200. It is inevitable that there will be some students who will not get them. However, we have prepared a way to avoid the risk. Participants can be paired up regardless of grade, and if one of them uses their cell phone to read the 2D code while paired up, the reward for that 2D code, if it is 30,000 points, will be 30,000 points for each pair."

This means that if only the pair scanned 100 2D codes, 200 people would receive the reward, greatly reducing the possibility of losing out without getting a single point.

The only disadvantage is that if you find more than one 2D code, there may be a dispute over which 2D code to read.

Despite these disadvantages, which require some adjustment, there seems to be a lot of merit in pairing up.

"Also, there is a predetermined range of places where the two-dimensional codes are posted."

When I say all over the ship, there are naturally many places that are considered inviolable areas.

Using a screen, Dr. Takatō explained.

To summarize, toilets and cabins naturally do not have 2D code stickers hidden in them, and employee-only floors and rooms are also naturally excluded.

There are also no stickers hidden in the levels that students are not allowed to enter. It was emphasized that the seal was limited only to public places, to areas of movement where students were allowed to move.

With that, the teachers began to hand out the papers in unison.

Not long after, I received a folded piece of paper.

The map of the ship had been slightly altered, and the areas with stickers had been filled in with color. Then there was an unfamiliar text and graphic description.

"Basically, this game is mostly about luck. However, we have mixed in a few elements that involve a little bit of ability."

Presumably, that was the letter figure on the map that was handed to him.

"There are three riddle questions written here. If you solve them, the system will tell you where all three 2D codes are hidden, and for these three, you should assume that you won't be able to find them unless you solve the problems."

Three exceptional 2D codes out of a total of 100, huh?

I read the three riddles diagonally, and then put the paper in my pocket.

"Registration will take place for 30 minutes from now. Please indicate whether or not you want to participate from your cell phone. If anyone is unable to turn it on due to a dead battery, please notify the nearest teacher immediately."

One after another, students took out their cell phones and began to check in.

There were a few students who left the room, but it was safe to assume that almost everyone present would be participating. The treasure hunt game was scheduled to end at 5:00 pm. The game ends at 5:00 p.m., and the 2 D code must be read by this time.

Like most people, I pull out my cell phone and decide to participate.

But with so many people here, the stares directed at me are the biggest I've seen in the past few days.

When the event is this large, some students from other grades will naturally notice that I'm looking somewhere else.

I'm not sure if they're working together or if they've been instructed to do so beforehand, but when the other grades start following their gazes, the number of gazes on me temporarily increases and disperses.

At this point, they don't intend to make it known that they're watching me.

They are saving it for a more effective or damaging situation.

Since I don't know what their ultimate goal is, I need to be on my toes. I need to be mindful of the fact that all of my information is being stolen.

The participants included my girlfriend Kei, but we didn't even look at each other.

Since we hadn't announced our relationship, we refrained from making explicit eye contact.

Of course, even if we were told that we could pair up, we would not.

It's not normal for Ayanokouji Kiyotaka and Karuizawa Kei to pair up in a place where everyone knows them.

At this point, Horikita appeared in front of the students with a microphone.

"I'm Horikita from the student council. I have a request for all the students who will be participating in this event. In order to ensure the prevention of fraud, participants will be asked to fill in their names on a list by grade level as well as process the payment of 10,000 points when they leave the room. No substitute writing will be allowed. Please understand that this is a measure to prevent unauthorized participation using a third party's cell phone. After you receive your reward, please return here and report it by the end of the test. If you ignore this, your reward may be invalidated."

There was no way to connect the cell phone to the student for simple payment.

This makes it possible for students to use a different phone to participate. I don't know how much of a problem this is in itself, but it certainly takes away from the original purpose of the game, which is to participate by following the rules. However, by forcing the player to fill out a form that includes identification at the time of payment, it is possible to link the phone to the player. Even if I use someone else's phone to get paid, the last check will show that I'm breaking the rules, and even if I send the owner of the phone away, it won't be recognized because there's no name on the list. People from the student council and teachers work together, and a special long desk is set up at the entrance.

There, they would pay the participation fee from their cell phones and write their names by grade before leaving the room.

It's possible that those who haven't paid the fee will secretly download the app.

Those who had finished installing the app left the room in order.

After standing in line, I eventually arrived in front of Horikita at the reception desk.

"Here's your name. Then we'll collect 10,000 points."

She said in a clerical manner and I entered my name in the list.

Then I put my phone on the terminal and paid 10,000 points.

I was now officially a participant in the treasure hunt game.

"Next."

Without any special conversation with Horikita, I went with the flow and left the room.

## Part 2

The treasure hunt game suddenly began, and will last until the evening.

There are a few rules to follow, but they are basically only about violations.

All we had to do was pull out our big luck and join the game.....

The area around the starting point is very crowded because it is within the area where the 2 D code is posted.

Like locusts devouring crops, the research is moving forward at a very fast pace.

If I were to join in now, there would be no room for me to intervene.

Seeing the swarm of students, some students started to change their search points.

What's more, many of the students are using their cell phones to communicate with each other. Perhaps they are looking for a 2D code while simultaneously recruiting a partner to pair up with.

Since pairs can be formed on the app without meeting in person, there is also a way to split into two groups.

"Hey Mori-san, why don't we take a look from the top?"

Kei came out of the hall late and walked in a friendly manner with her classmate Mori Nene.

It seemed that Kei had grabbed her classmates early and paired them up.

I, of course, was single, so I decided to go down to the lowest level for now.

If I go from the top floor like Kei did, we will be sharing the same space. But still...

In this kind of situation, wouldn't it be nice if you could invite one of us to join the other?

No, don't think about it too much. I feel like I'm losing if I think about it. In the first place, there are not many people with whom I have exchanged contact information, either through e-mail or chat.

Keisei was available in the Ayanokouji group, but he had already announced that he would not participate, as if he was not interested in this kind of game. Akito wasn't feeling well, and Haruka and Airi were kind of a pair from the start.

"Ah, ....."

As I started to move for this, I bumped into Satou in front of me.

She raises her hand lightly in greeting and then tries to walk away, but .....

"Oh, wait, wait, wait!"

She grabs my arm and stops me like she's in a panic.

"Hey, .....Ayanokouji-kun, have you partnered up with anyone yet?"

"No, I'm alone."

I didn't add "for now" because I wasn't planning on being paired up with anyone in the future.

It was one thing to have more friends, but it was another to have someone to work with at events like this.

I felt a little vain saying that to myself, but I held on to it.

"So, so what? Will you pair..... with me?"

She made an unexpected suggestion, and I was at a loss as to how to respond.

Satou was the first person to confess her love to me last year. I couldn't reciprocate her feelings, so I turned her down, and then went out with Kei. I never thought that I would be offered a partner after having done something, I deserved to be disliked for. I had no particular reason to refuse, but to be honest, I had no reason to accept.

I had just seen that Kei had already partnered with Mori, as she had kept her relationship with me a secret, but that didn't mean that I should partner with Satou.

"Do you care about Kei-chan.....?"

It was hard for me to answer that I was, but Satou seemed to have guessed right away by my attitude.

"I heard that you're going to tell everyone that the two of you are dating."

"I see."

It seems that Kei had made the first move in opening up about our relationship in the second semester.

I knew that Satou was aware of Kei and my relationship from Matsushita's stories in the past.

"We've been dating for a while now, you know. It's not like we can keep it a secret forever."

"Well, there are some couples that hide behind their relationships, but I think only a very limited number of people would notice the combination of Ayanokouji-kun and Kei-chan."

Satou has told several of the girls she is close to that she suspects a relationship between me and Kei.

Of course, I didn't hear her say it directly, but I'm sure from the way she talked to Matsushita that she contacted her. Of course, Satou did not do anything wrong. Because she was just guessing at what she wanted to say without knowing anything about it.

"Yeah, but you know what? The reason why I suggested that we partner up is because I thought that we could be reliable partners. So there's no different meaning there. .... No?"

She says emphatically, not for any strange reason.

"How many private points do you have?"

"Um, I'm a little embarrassed to tell you, but I have about ..... 180,000 points."

I'm not in a financial position to speak for others, but considering that it's right after the Private Points were transferred, it doesn't seem like a lot. Even though the risk was small, there must have been a certain amount of determination to participate using the precious 10,000 Private Points.

If that was the case, she would want to find a difficult 2D code to win more.

"Okay, if Satou is okay with me, I'll pair you up. I can't promise anything, though."

"Really? Yes!"

Satou's attitude of being honestly happy about something that makes her happy made me feel good as a partner.

We took out each other's phones and applied for and accepted pairing through the app.

We are now officially paired and will be rewarded with a 2 D code scanned by either of our phones.

Now all we have to do is grab the reward of at least 30,000 points.

"Speaking of which, the teachers handed us a strange piece of paper, didn't they?"

Satou pulls out a crumpled piece of paper from her pocket.

"Ah!"

She looks at the state of the paper she took out and forgets that she crumpled it up, and quickly puts it back in her pocket in embarrassment.

"Oh, wait, it's just that I couldn't figure it out when I looked at ...haha, Ayanokouji-kun has one too, right?"

She didn't think she could solve the mystery, so she rolled up a piece of paper randomly.

I took out the paper folded in four and unfolded it in front of Satou.

"This means you can see the three places that show where the 2 D code is, right?"

"Yes, it does."

"So if I can solve this, is there any chance I can get a million points?"

"No, I don't think so."

Sorry to crush your hopes, but I'll answer immediately.

"Huh? Really?"

Only three of the 100 2D codes have the answer in the form of a question.

This makes me want to get my hopes up for the 2D codes at the end of solving this paper problem, but .....

"These three clues are all similar in terms of level. If that's the case, I don't think there's any difference in the reward you get no matter which one you solve. There is a reasonable number of 100,000 points ..... Or it could be 50,000 points."

"Huh? But, you know, if there are three, what are the chances of 300,000 points with only three cards in it?"

"It's true that 300,000 points limited to three cards that are easy to unify are easy to tie together, but the probability is low."

High private point rewards wouldn't be the first to be included.

"Eh? Even if I can solve such a difficult problem, I'll only get that much?"

"This treasure hunt is completely based around luck, and is positioned as a bonus game. Wouldn't Satou think so?"

If all the cards were worth 300,000 points, there would be none left in the game that was supposed to be played by luck. That would make the game unsuccessful.

This paper is only part of the remedy and should be seen as a modest reward.

"Oh, I see. It's true that if these were all expensive 2D codes, I might get annoyed."

She thought about how she would feel if she couldn't solve it, and it seemed to make sense right away.

"There's nothing wrong with finding a 2D code based on this clue, but you won't know the result of the 2D code you find until you read it and get your private points. If you're not good at it, you could miss your chance."

There are hours of this treasure hunt game, but the big game is decided in the first hour or two.

"So I guess that means we can just ignore this."

"If I'm ever going to use this clue paper, it'll be when I don't find a good 2D code until near the end. I know exactly where to go."

Well, by the time I tried to rely on it, another student might already retrieve it, I guess.

"..... Could it be, Ayanokouji-kun, that you solved the clue on this paper?"

"Sort of."

"Wow .....!"

Each clue was not designed to be too difficult, but rather more like a riddle than a straightforward puzzle, with a structure that allowed first through third graders to participate.

While we were talking, around us, students participating in the treasure hunt were searching for two-dimensional codes at random. Even though the area where the 2D codes were posted was limited to some extent, most of them would be found quickly if 200 people searched for them all at once.

It's also possible that the expensive 2D codes are hidden far away from the starting point.

"I think I'll search the lower levels for now."

"Alright, I'll leave it to Ayanokoji-kun to decide where to start looking."

Satou and I walked side by side to the lowest level designated as the search area.

For the next five minutes, the two of us searched for two-dimensional codes, but we only found two blatant stickers. Was it the wrong place, or was it hidden in a more difficult place?

Without a clue, the number of students around us slowly started to increase.

"You know what, Ayanokouji-kun....."

"What's up, did you find it?"

"No, I didn't. ..... Hey, can I go to the bathroom for a minute? I had too much to drink this morning. ..... I was actually going to go earlier. ...."

Satou asked me, looking very embarrassed.

"I see, so that's when you found me, huh?"

She nodded, blushing.

"Sorry, I'm supposed to be in a bit of a hurry."

I'm not going to tell her not to go to the bathroom. I gladly send Satou off.

"I'll be right back!"

"Don't panic."

I send Satou off to the bathroom for now, and resume my search of the area alone.

"Did Ayanokouji-kun participate in the treasure hunt game?"

As I peeked under the couch, someone called out from behind me.

I thought someone had stopped me, but it was my classmate Matsushita.

Today is one of those days when I'm often approached by my classmates.

At the same time, Tatara, a third year student who seems to have been talking to Matsushita, showed a suspicious look.

".....Ayanokouji, huh?"

"You know him? About Ayanokouji-kun."

Matsushita looked into Tatara's face curiously, and he turned away with a bashful look on his face.

Matsushita had no way of knowing, but I was certain that Nagumo had communicated something about me to the entire third year class.

"We're in the middle of a treasure hunt, so let's talk later. Let's go, we're wasting time."

"If you're talking about that, you're the same, Tatara-senpai. Don't be concerned about me, please pair up with someone else."

The presence of third-year student Tatara here might be a good opportunity to explore Nagumo's strategy.

"I see that you are also participating in the treasure hunt, senpai."

When I called out to him to jump in, he turned away his gaze with a blatantly disgusted look on his face.

Hearing a small click of the tongue, Matsushita also sensed that Tatara's presence had changed.

"What's up with you? Tatara-senpai."

When she said that again, Tatara clearly started to show an attitude of escape.

The fact that he harbored some sort of fondness for Matsushita was evident from his initial impression.

The fact that he was more reluctant to make contact with me than wanting to pair up with her meant that he was definitely under instructions not to make inadvertent conversation.

"Matsushita, another time."

"Oh, ok."

Unsure of what to say, Matsushita laughed lightly and waved goodbye to Tatara.

He looked at Matsushita as if he had some regrets, but glared at me and walked away.

"Phew. I don't know what it is, but I'm saved, Ayanokouji-kun."

Even if she didn't know about the order from Nagumo, she would still be suspicious if she saw that attitude.

"Do you two know each other? Did something happen?"

"Nothing, I haven't even talked to him."

"Hmm?"

She didn't seem convinced, but she patted her chest, relieved that a weight had been lifted from her shoulders.

"Hey, could it be that Ayanokouji-kun is alone too? If you're alone, do you want to pair up?"

"Oh no..."

Just as Matsushita was about to ask me to go on a treasure hunt, I heard footsteps running from behind me.

"Hey, Matsushita-san, I'm pairing with Ayanokouji-kun!"

Satou came back from the bathroom and made a mad dash to close the distance between her and Matsushita, grabbing both of our shoulders.

"Huh? Oh, is that so?"

Matsushita turned around, surprised by the unusual speed and pressure.

"I mean, I saw Tatara-senpai just now, but wasn't he with Matsushita-san?"

"I wouldn't say I was with him, I'd say he was just following me around...."

Apparently, not only Matsushita but also Satou knew about a third year student named Tatara, a third year A class student who had an overall grade of B to C on the OAA, slightly higher than average. He has a long and unusual haircut for a boy.

I wonder what kind of hair Those are ..... I don't know about such circumstances.

"I'm a little off by the motion being too strong. I'm turning it down in a roundabout way."

"Oh, I understand!"

I don't understand.

For now, I'll have to reexamine the area under the couch that I was in the middle of checking out.

"I mean, Ayanokouji-kun, it's not there, is it? Even if there is, I think it's a cheap 2 D code." Indeed, under the sofa is easily chosen as a typical hiding place for 2 D codes.

In fact, there was a two-dimensional code on the floor of this sofa that peeked out at me when I crouched down at a slightly different angle. Ofcourse, there is no such thing as reading this 2 D code.

"What's important is the school's pattern."

"Pattern?"

"When they decide to implement this lottery game, it's important to know how they determine the value of the 2 D code."

"Uh, let's see, .....?"

Satou nodded her head, unsure.

To which Matsushita replied without really thinking about it.

"Of course, you'd prepare a high-value 2 D code for a place that's hard to find, right?"

"That's right. Then, the next question is who will be the one to judge the 'hard to find'."

"Sensei!"

Satou said before Matsushita could answer.

But Matsushita added a supplementary note.

"It's quite a task to put up a hundred 2D codes, isn't it? I don't think there's any doubt that the teacher is putting them up, but it's hard to imagine that it's just one or two people. Even if they split up and put them up last night at midnight, several people have been sent out. ...."

"Did they take their time to decide where on the ship to put the 2 D code while we were doing the uninhabited island test, or was it left to the teacher in charge of the task on a moment's notice? Once we know

that, it'll be easier to guess where the stickers might have been placed."

"Sorry, I don't understand what you mean at all ....."

"The way the aisles are made and the decorations that are placed are basically the same, right?"

"Do you know what that means now, Matsushita-san?"

"Well, yeah."

"That's great, Ayanokouji-kun!"

"I think it's an interesting point of view, but I think you should take it a little easier, like a treasure hunt game."

"..... I guess so."

Once I say that, I can't say it back to myself anymore.

I just thought it would be better to do some reasoning in case there were any regrets.

"But that's too bad. I can't believe there was someone else here before me."

"Too bad??"

"I think I'll look for a more reliable partner. See you later."

Standing around talking is just a missed opportunity for everyone in this place.

### Part 3

Less than an hour has passed since the treasure hunt began. Many of the participants have dispersed, and although I don't see dozens of people gathered in one place, I still see them repeatedly passing each other, searching hard for the same spot. Psychologically, it is difficult to read the first 2D code you find.

Even if it is the most difficult 2D code.

There's probably a certain percentage of students, including us, who've found 500,000 point 1 million 2D codes but have withheld or gone through them.

"Good morning, Ayanokouji-senpai!"

"Hmm? Ah, good morning Nanase."

I thought I was being called by a presence approaching from behind, but it was Nanase.

I guess I've broken the record for consecutive encounters since the holidays started today.

"..... who?"

Satou, who for some reason showed blatant caution, glared at Nanase.

Nanase, on the other hand, did not take the stare as unpleasant and bowed her head.

"My name is Nanase Tsubasa, I'm in first year D class."

"Hmmm. ..... I can't believe you're a first year student."

Satou said as if talking about a certain part, but Nanase tilted her head curiously.

"Is that so? I don't think it's splendid to be seen as older than you usually are."

"Huh, huh? I don't see where you're saying it's not splendid. It's splendid no matter how you look at it!"

"Is that so? I'm glad if you praised me. I'll devote myself every day to become more splendid!"

"There's no point in becoming more splendid, I mean, how are you going to become more splendid?"

Satou asks somewhat forwardly, as if she wants to become splendid too.

"It's hard to explain exactly, but ..... hmm, I think it's essential to grow your mind."

"M-, mind? Not like drinking milk or getting a daily massage?"

"Of course, I think that those actions that promote physical growth are also connected to becoming a great person, but in my case, it's still from the heart."

"Wow....., It's the first time I heard it. It has some persuasiveness."

It's nice to be impressed, Satou, but I think you're probably not on the same page with Nanase...

"Nanase is on a treasure hunt too?"

"Huh? Ah no, I'm not. I was just kind of in the mood to relax today."

It seems that she is not participating in the treasure hunt. However, if that's the case, why is she showing up at a place like this?

"I'm glad to see that Ayanokouji-senpai is looking well today too. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go."

As I parted ways with Nanase, I also passed by Naka Izumi shortly after.

"Nakaizumi, huh?"

"Hmm? What about Nakaizumi-kun?"

I've been trying not to pay attention to him for the past few days, but it seems that it's not a coincidence.

It's not just a coincidence that I'm running into Nanase every day.

First of all, Nanase has been trying to make contact with me to check on how I'm doing.

On the third day, I found Nanase having lunch on the deck, but even if I hadn't been there, I'm sure Nanase would have come to see me.

And then there was Nakazumi, who was following Nanase's footsteps.

He may not be following Nanase every time, but he is certainly planning something. And in the background of Nakaizumi, Ryuuuen's shadow is hiding in plain sight.

I wondered if he was investigating the relationship between me and Nanase, but he hadn't shown any signs of paying attention to me. If that's the case, it's probably better to assume that he's genuinely marking Nanase.

I have a theory as to why Nanase is being marked. Ryuuuen is looking for the culprit who injured Komiya and the others. If he is involved in this, Nanase is completely innocent, and this can be confirmed by the testimony of Sudou and Ike. Then why are they watching Nanase? She and I share a common understanding that she saw Amasawa that day, but if Nanase is hiding more information than that, then it's a different story. I put it in the corner of my mind.

"Oh, there it is, Ayanokouji-kun, in a slightly hard to find place!"

Satou exclaimed happily, pointing at it.

It was behind the cover of the stand light, almost out of sight.

It was a sticker with a 2 D code that was hidden there.

Fortunately, there was no one else besides us in sight at the moment.

"But we can't tell how many points this is until we read it, right?"

"That's a tough call."

I have a feeling it's not the most numerous two-dimensional code, but it's hard to judge because the place seems both difficult and not so difficult to find.

"What should we do?"

"Well, I guess I'll just go to ....."

However, it's definitely a two-dimensional code that's too good to throw away.

I took out my phone, turned it to camera mode, and pointed it at the 2 D code.

"What? Is it okay? You want me to read it?"

"No, it won't."

"Huh?"

I pressed the shoot button and took a picture of the enlarged 2 D code.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm taking a picture of a 2D code that seems to be worth a lot of private points. If we can't find any other good 2D codes in the future, Satou can use her phone to read the 2D codes from my saved photos."

"What? Oh, really? Does it react to the pictures we take of it?"

"As long as you take a clear picture, it will work fine."

It would be inefficient to come back here again to look for the 2 D code we had found in the past. Other competitors may beat us to it, but if we find multiple copies and save them, we can read them at random when the time comes. Even with a single phone, it is possible to point the camera at a 2D code and display the URL.

However, with our cell phones, it is not possible to copy the URL if we don't want to access it. In other words, if you want to keep the URL, you'll have to type it in manually later. And if you accidentally touch the URL, it will be loaded and the points will be transferred.

"The school said there were only advantages to pairing up, but nothing but being able to share points. You can also use two cell phones for time-saving techniques and accident prevention."

Although I said so, students who are in a hurry to get started may have overlooked this, but I'm sure many of them will practice this kind of technique.

Now we just have to hope that they don't find this 2 D code anyway.

As soon as they see us looking at the stand light, this place will be exposed.

"Let's move."

"Yep."

Then we change the hierarchy and start searching for the 2 D code again.

I looked under one of the couches.

"There's another one here."

"That's a pretty obvious pattern. Under the same couch."

"Satou, can you keep an eye on the perimeter for a moment?"

"Sure, what's up?"

I sat down in front of the couch and lowered my face to peer in.

"I thought you couldn't expect 2D codes like this?"

"The 2D codes here, yeah."

I tried to feel the bottom of the couch, not below the couch, with my hand.

Normally, one peeks at the floor under the sofa, but won't look at the back of the sofa.

It would be more correct to say that they can't see it.

However, if you touch the back of the sofa with your hand, you will notice that it feels different. Originally, the back of the sofa is made of fabric and it should be flat. However, when I touched the back of the sofa, there was a slight scratch of 5 cm square. This means that there is a sticker on it.

I put the phone in my hand under the sofa and took a picture.

With the light from the flash, I take a picture of the 2 D code in the dark.

"Wow, it's real. It's a two-dimensional code: .....! You can't usually find this!"

If I had participated in this treasure hunt game alone, it would not have been easy to read this 2 D code. If I had the flash on, I could save the picture with the two-dimensional code after taking it, but I couldn't read it with my phone.

Even if I were to turn the couch over, I would have to be prepared to read the 2D code, as it would be quite large and conspicuous, and would be seen by other students.

However, if you're a pair, Satou can just load this picture, which makes the process smoother.

"Looks like school is thinking of a lot of things."

Having found a new candidate to read, we decided to move on.

## Part 4

Despite the spaciousness of the ship, students can't move freely everywhere. Inevitably, they concentrate on places where they can play and relax, and unexpected encounters are common.

One man is on his way to the cafeteria, another to his room.

The two men, who were on their way to completely unrelated places, came face to face in the hallway.

Both of them are walking in the middle of the hallway and do not show any sign of sharing. Noticing each other's presence almost at the same time, the men stopped about a meter in front of each other.

"Hey Ryuuen, thanks for everything you did for me the other day."

Housen Kazuomi, a first year D class student, was the first to speak.

"Are you sure you're okay without sleep? You'll have to sleep in your bed for another week or so anyway."

Ryuuen Kakeru, who received the words, responded.

"Don't worry. Even if I kill half of you here...no, all of you, it won't make me feel any better. The number of targets I have to kill has increased from one to two, and I'm going to be busy."

"It wouldn't be cool to lose to the same opponent twice. Don't overdo it."

Both of them repeatedly provoked each other, but they never showed their fists.

"Haha. I heard that you've been secretly buying the effects of cards from the first years, and you've been making bets on Nagumo and the other 3rd years, but you must have made a lot of money."

"Kuku. Who's the one who pissed his pants? I kept it quiet in the contract, though."

Before the uninhabited island test, Ryuuen approached the freshman with the flight card and signed the contract. If the designated group won a prize, they were to turn in all the points they earned. If they only won the top 50%, they would only get 30,000 points. In other words, if you pay more than that, some people will naturally give up their rights. As a result, Ryuuen guessed Nagumo and got 280,000 points for the number of students who signed up.

Most of Ryuuen's classmates didn't know about this fact, only the people he used to carry out his plan knows about it.

"If you lick my shoes, I'll give you a little extra, okay? Gorilla."

Laughing, Ryuuen walked off without once taking his hands out of his pockets.

Housen could have just taken the chance, but he took a step to the side and made way for him.

Ishizaki was wary of Housen, but hurried to follow him. Housen also walked proudly down the middle of the hallway without looking back.

"You're still a scary guy, aren't you? But he was so scared that he opened the way."

"He's such an idiot."

"But ....."

"It's a sign of determination that if you do it to me, I'll let you have it this time."

The moment they passed each other, Ryuuen sensed the outpouring of murderous energy and violence.

"That's nasty."

"Leave him alone. I know he's a pain in the ass, but first we need to find the culprit."

"Huh. I'm having Nishino hold him down."

Ishizaki took out his cell phone and confirmed it, and then led Ryuuen around.

Not long after that, Ryuen and his friends arrived at their destination.

Before Ishizaki could say his next words, Ryuuen approached one of the girls.

"You're Nanase Tsubasa, right?"

"Yes, I am. Is there something I can do for you?"

Nanase, who had been stopped in her tracks, stared at Ryuuen without any sign of panic.

She didn't understand why she was being eyed by a senior who was one level above her.

"I'm sorry, but I'm going to need some time."

Normally, Ryuuen alone or with Ishizaki would have been enough, but he let Nishino, the girl he was using to hold her back, accompany me. They knew that the situation with only men surrounding a junior girl could be a disadvantage for them, not an advantage.

"I have a question for you about what happened at the uninhabited island exam."

"About the test, you mean?"

Nanase still didn't understand the situation, but the following words made her understand.

"Komiya was injured. I'm trying to find out who the culprit is."

"Why me?"

"Sudou, Ayanokouji, Ike, Hondou, and you were the first five to arrive at the scene of the crime, and it's impossible for Sudou, Ike, and Hondou to get any clues."

"Then why don't you ask Ayanokoji-senpai, who is also a second year student?"

"Of course, I'll talk to him as well, depending on the situation. But let's start with you. It seems that you've been sticking around Ayanokoji during the uninhabited island test, but why?"

"It doesn't seem to have anything to do with the case."

"I won't decide if it's unrelated to the case until I hear what you have to say."

When cornered by Ryuuuen's high-handed attitude, most of them readily confessed.

"I'm sorry, but I have nothing to tell you."

But instead of wincing, Nanase calmly refused.

Nanase bows her head and tries to leave, but Ryuuuen kicks his leg out and slams the bottom of his foot against the wall.

"You don't have the right to decide whether or not I talk to you."

"You're very violent, aren't you? I'm afraid you'll get in trouble if anyone sees you like this."

"Don't worry. We have several other guards to make sure that doesn't happen."

"I understand that Komiya-senpai is Ryuuuen-senpai's classmate. However, I don't think I can help you with anything. I have no clue whatsoever."

"Really? For that, you've been moving around a lot these past few days."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

She replied that she didn't know what he was talking about, but it was an opportunity for Ryuuuen to take advantage of.

"You've been keeping an eye on Kurachi, a first-year C class student, all day while all the others are playing around, right?"

"Ha. ...."

At this point, Nanase's eyes widened for the first time, showing her agitation.

"As soon as I heard from Komiya, I put up guards on you, Sudou, Ike, and Hondou just in case. The other three are playing around like idiots, but that's normal behavior on this ship. You, on the other hand, don't play around at all and stalk a particular Student. That's not normal."

"It's just a coincidence."

"Coincidence? Today, a lot of people are playing a game of treasure hunt. Kurachi guy is participating, but you're not. Yet, you were following Kurachi all the way until Nishino caught you. Is today's action also a coincidence?"

If she participated in the game, she would have to imitate looking for the 2D code.

But if you're not in the game, you can save yourself the trouble. Nanase was so focused on keeping an eye on Kurachi that she didn't notice the presence watching her.

"I'm so inexperienced, I can't believe I didn't realize I was being followed day after day. I'm surprised."

"You should be grateful that I reached out to you first, huh?"

"Nice work Ryuuuen-senpai, but Komiya-senpai's matter has nothing to do with Kurachi-kun."

"I see, then I guess I'll have to talk to Kurachi directly."

"I can't have that."

"Then tell me what you know. Or do you need someone to tell you what to say?"

"No, I don't. But what's irrelevant is irrelevant."

"Don't make me repeat it. It's not you who judges, it's me."

Ryuuuen has been smiling, and continues to do so, but the air he gives off changes.

Ishizaki, who is watching from the side, has felt Ryuuuen's intimidation many times, but he has never gotten used to it. He feels like giving in even though he is not the one being questioned.

"No, Ryuuuen-senpai does not have the authority to make such a decision."

Despite this, Nanase stared straight back into Ryuuuen's eyes without showing any signs of agitation.

"What the hell are you confused about? Why don't you just act quickly?"

Indeed, Nanase Tsubasa was lost and troubled. It was during the middle of the uninhabited island test that the seeds of her troubles were born. It was on a day when she had taken out her anger on Ayanokoji, and after Amasawa had appeared in front of Nanase and the others with a 'weapon'. This was when Ayanokouji predicted that there was someone else in front of Amasawa.

At that time, Ayanokouji denied doing a GPS search, but Nanase was secretly doing a GPS search in the tent she had assembled.

However, she hid in Ayanokouji's tent without looking at the details. She knew that if he looked too hard and found out something, he would be surprised and upset. As a result of the GPS search, there were two people who were close to Nanase and Ayanokouji, not including Amasawa: second-years Kikyou Kushida and freshman Naohiro Kurachi.

Both of them should have been investigated, but the second-year student, Kikyou Kushida, was Ayanokouji's classmate, so she was put off.

And apart from that, she had been in regular contact with Ayanokoji to see if there was something wrong with him, and if so, to protect him, but that seemed to have gone unnoticed.

"This is a waste of time, let's go talk to him."

Nanase looked down as if she had given up, but she quickly looked up.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know where on the ship he went to find the 2D code."

Ryuuuen gives a small laugh and pulls out his cell phone.

"Where's Kurachi, fourth floor, cabin floor, right? Yeah, I'll be right there."

Ryuuuen, who had anticipated all of this, finishes the call briefly and puts it away in his pocket.

"You had someone watching Kurachi-kun after you pulled me away from him, didn't you?"

"Unlike you, I have a lot of people who can be my arms, legs, eyes, and ears."

"Kurachi-kun is really not involved."

"I don't need you to tell me that, I'll just eliminate them one by one."

Whether it's Nanase or Ryuuuen, the only lead they can follow now is Kurachi.

"Decide quickly whether you want to go or not."

If Nanase refused at this point, it was not hard to imagine Ryuuuen closing in on Kurachi alone.

Nanase nodded once and decided to go to Kurachi with Ryuuuen.

Not long after, they saw Kurachi looking for the 2D code and Taguri, who seemed to be the pair.

"First of all, let me and Kurachi-kun have a talk."

"What?"

"I'll get the information out of him well."

"What guarantee do I have that you'll give me the information you've extracted?"

"You'll have to trust me."

"I'm sorry, but I don't believe you."

"You have no choice but to believe me, even if you don't. I'll tell you everything."

"That's okay. But if you do anything wrong, even if you're a woman, I won't spare you."

"I'm aware of that."

Ryuuuen gave instructions to Nishino and Ishizaki with his chin, and pulled Taguri away from Kurachi.

If the second-years, or even Ishizaki and the others, called out to him, he would have to obey quietly.

"Do you have a minute, Kurachi-kun?"

"Huh? You're Nanase..... from class D, right?"

Kurachi, who was upset that Taguri had been summoned by a senior, was restless.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"Sorry, but I'm on a treasure hunt right now, so I don't have time..."

"Please tell me why you were targeting Ayanokouji-senpai during the uninhabited island test."

"What? What, what are you talking about?"

If I took my time, I wouldn't know when Ryuuken would make contact with me.

Nanase had a need to find out while they were still alone.

"There's no point in hiding it. During the heavy rains on the seventh day of the test, I used my GPS search to find out who was in the vicinity. It was just Amasawa-san and one other person, you. And there were tools to hit people near the scene. There's no excuse for that."

"I don't get it!"

Denying it out loud, Kurachi tried to run away, but Nanase grabbed his arm.

"You see the second-year senior behind you, right? He's desperate to find the culprit behind Ayanokouji-senpai's near-assault. In some cases, he may even resort to violence."

"Huh, what? Huh, don't be silly, what the hell is that!"

"Shh. It's better for your own safety if you don't antagonize them by shouting too loudly."

"Sh! But I'm ..... I'm just .....!"

"Just?"

"..... I'd get money if I attacked Ayanokouji-senpai.....That's what they said. ...."

"Money for attacking him?"

"Normally I wouldn't take it. But I used up my private points, and ....."

"And?"

"He said I could just pretend to attack him and it wouldn't be a big deal. I didn't do anything wrong, you know?"

It's true that pretending to attack someone can be treated as a joke.

"Who gave you the order to pretend, offering you money? When in the first place?"

"It was before the ..... uninhabited island exam, ....."

"Sh, before the exam, huh?"

Nanase was surprised by the unexpected timing.

"So it's something that was planned from the beginning ....."

"And I don't know who that is. The private points were transferred without my permission."

"That's a lie, isn't it?"

"What? I'm not lying."

"You obviously know something and are hiding it, that's what it looks like."

"I'm not hiding anything..."

"I don't know if you deeply know this, Kurachi-kun, but because of your actions at that time, there was a change in Housen-kun's plans apart from Ryuuuen-senpai."

Kurachi's eyebrows furrowed as the conversation suddenly switched.

"Right now, he's desperately trying to find the culprit. What would happen if I were to report you? I'm sure Housen-kun will mercilessly raise his fist against Kurachi-kun."

Threatened to be targeted by the two martial artists, Ryuuuen, a second year, and Housen, a first year.

"Wait, wait, wait! Okay, I'll talk! I'll tell you, but please don't do that!"

He whispered, desperately raising his voice.

Housen, the most hated and feared in all of the First year. The potential of the name is more than Nanase could have imagined when she tried it out.

"....., this is my classmate, Utomiya."

"Utomiya-kun, is it?"

"Yeah. He wanted me to attack Ayanokoji-senpai and give money after this special exam."

"Is that true?"

"For real, for real, it's true!"

Seeing that look in Kurachi's eyes, Nanase nodded once.

"I trust you, Kurachi-kun. Let me ask you one last thing, do you know anything about the matter of Komiya-senpai and the others being injured?"

"Komiya? What the hell are you talking about, I don't know. No, I really don't know. Anyway, don't ever tell Housen that I had anything to do with it, okay? See?"

"Okay, I promise."

I instructed Kurachi to go, and Taguri was released at the same time.

Immediately approaching, Ryuuuen demands to speak to Nanase. Kurachi didn't seem to know anything about Komiya's case, but Ryuuuen didn't believe her when she told him honestly. This was because even if he was watching from a distance, he could tell that he was telling Nanase something he knew.

"He said that .....Utomiya-kun might know something."

"Utomiya?"

"It's Utomiya Riku-kun, same as Kurachi-kun, first year C class."

Quickly pulling out his phone, Ryuuuen checked Utomiya's face and abilities on OAA.

"That's a look I don't remember seeing. But his physical ability is an A?"

"He might be capable of pushing off Komiya-kun without him realizing it, but we don't have any proof of that yet."

"You're starting to see things, aren't you?"

"..... What are you going to do?"

"Of course, we're going to hunt down this Utomiya kid and get him to talk to us."

"Wait a minute. I don't agree with that."

If Utomiya was a White Room student, it would be tough to deal with him, no matter how strong Ryuuen was.

Above all, the fact that he had proceeded this far without Ayanokouji's permission was also not something to be praised.

"A case without conclusive evidence...No, it's a case. Even if Utomiya-kun was the culprit, if he was told early, that would be the end of it, wouldn't it?"

"Like Kurachi just threw up, the point is that it's just a matter of how you threaten him."

"I've been sticking with him for the past few days, and I was able to do my research beforehand. Considering his original personality, I thought I could drop him if I pushed him. But as for Utomiya-kun, he's an unknown quantity."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Give me some of your time. Of course, I'm not saying for free."

"Huh? Tell me."

"I've been quiet for a long time, but there is a witness that Ryuuen-senpai doesn't know about during the Komiya-senpai affair. I don't mind telling you who that person is."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you right now, but I can tell you if you refrain from contacting Utomiya-kun."

"You're bargaining too hard with me. Oh well, I'll take your word for it."

"Thank you. I'll get back to you with the details."

"But if you're lying, you'll have to be prepared to pay for it, okay?"

"I'm not lying."

"Kuku, I suppose. Go ahead and call me before I lose my patience."

With a small reply, Nanase nodded and walked away.

## Part 5

I found a few 2D codes, but still only one that seemed to have a high point.

I could see several students searching for codes within my line of sight, so I was sure that the competition was not too low.

Since they don't allow any other people to participate in the event, it's unlikely that any of the students will be cheating openly, but even so, with over two hundred participants, this was inevitable.

I suddenly noticed that Satou had stopped and turned around.

"What should I work on? What do I have to work on so I don't get in trouble with the class?"

"What's wrong, all of a sudden?"

"I'm sorry for asking such a strange question. But it's not just a random thought, you know? I've been thinking about it since before the uninhabited island exam, wondering if I can be of any use to the class."

Satou then looked at the palms of her hands.

"I wish I could tell you what it was like before I entered this school, when I was just floating around thinking I could have a random and interesting high school life and get a job anywhere. This isn't just any high school, it's a hell of a place."

For lack of a better word, Satou is generally less capable than the average high school student.

However, she is still on the higher side of the caste and has a good amount of say in the matter.

Academics, physical ability, and communication are all things that most people can improve with some effort, though with varying degrees of difficulty.

One of the most obvious examples is Sudou.

Sudou, who was at the bottom of his class, made remarkable achievements and improved his academic performance at once.

As you can see, the important thing is to have room to grow.

"If You're going to work hard for your classmates, I guess studying is essential."

"Uu....., right?"

"I knew that",

Satou cheeked as she dropped her head.

"Oh, Ayanokoji-kun won't teach me to study or ....., will he?"

"Me?"

Just as I asked back, Satou hurriedly thrust her hands out in front of her and waved them.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Forget about that! Karuizawa-san will get mad at me.....!"

"Why don't you ask Horikita to teach you?"

"Horikita-san? But I don't get along with her very well, you know?"

I guess "not really" is a very mild way of putting it.

For almost a year and a half, Satou hadn't acted like she could call Horikita a friend.

"Aside from the fact that you need to get along, I think she's pretty good at teaching how to study. After all, she trained up Sudou."

There was no need for me to go into detail about Horikita's personality and teaching methods.

She was able to train Sudou, the most problematic boy in the school.

"Before I knew it, I was overtaken by Sudou-kun. ..... Indeed."

"You don't want to take the disgraceful title of lowest in class and lowest in grade, do you?"

"No, absolutely not."

Satou was also one of the candidates for that lowest rank, so she had a strong sense of urgency in that regard.

"So, can I ask Ayanokouji-kun to be the bridge?"

"If it's that good, it's a small price to pay."

Horikita wouldn't refuse if it would improve the academic performance of the class, and Sudou wouldn't reject it, although it would be complicated to have more people around Horikita, whether of the same or opposite gender.

## Part 6

"Horikita-senpai, it is time for your shift. Please take a break."

Yagami-kun, the next person to check the rewards, approached me and said this as the treasure hunt game started about two hours ago, around noon. I close the first-year list and slowly raise my gaze.

"I'm not particularly tired, and I don't mind if I continue to be in charge of checking rewards."

Now, I want to cherish the time I have to freely look at the roster with so few people like this.

"Not so fast. I have a job to do, a job I've been given. If I leave that to Horikita-senpai, I can't call myself a member of the student council."

"..... Yes, you're right."

If I can make it easy, I'll make it easy. It's unlikely that someone who thinks like that would join the student council.

I don't persist strongly here and pull my chair back.

"Thank you. I'll feel free to take a break."

"Of course."

So, after this, I'll help confirm the reward again at 2:00, and then my role will be over.

It's not much of a burden, though, if you look at it as time to work. .....

"Horikita-senpai, how many of them have received rewards so far?"

Looking down at the list of names, Yagami-kun asked me that.

"I'd say about forty, including the pairs, and while there were some students who got half a million points, I get the impression that a surprisingly large number of students misread and got only five thousand points."

"I guess they don't want other people to take the 2D code that they think only they found, so they want to read it quickly. I kind of understand."

After missing that 2D code, there's no guarantee that you'll be able to find it again.

What I'm more interested in is the existence of another person who came to this place with Yagami-kun.

Yagami-kun turned to that person and gave a smile.

"Well then, Kushida-senpai, see you."

I had heard that he and she had been close in junior high school, but it seemed that their relationship had continued in this school.

"Yeah, see you later Yagami-kun."

The way she sent him off in a friendly manner, it didn't seem like they were more than just friends. I would describe their relationship as more than friends but less than lovers.

"If you need anything, just call me and I'll be right over."

"Okay, thank you."

Even though I've only been involved with Yagami-kun for a little while in student council work, he has a high level of communication skills in addition to his ability to do the obvious things.

He's also a reliable junior in the sense that I can trust him with my next job, and he's definitely much more capable than the two first-year students who joined the student council at the same time.

He still has a long way to go, he seems to be the best candidate for student council president in his generation.

When I left my post, Kushida-san left without staying by Yagami-kun's side.

She didn't want to interfere with his work later on, so it was only natural.

I couldn't help but think that there was some kind of meaning in the fact that she walked alongside me.

"So you were with Yagami-kun. Why didn't you participate in the treasure hunt, Kushida-san?"

"Hmm. I just couldn't bring myself to participate in the game for some reason. There are quite a few kids like that, you know?"

"You're right, the participation rate of second and third year students wasn't as high as I thought it would be."

It meant that they prioritized the holiday over the chance to earn expensive private points.

If it was just a vacation, though, the time they could spend on this ship would be precious.

"You're going to take a break now, aren't you, Horikita-san? Would you like to have lunch with me?"

"With me?"

I couldn't hide my suspicion at Unusual-Kushida-san's suggestion.

"Is it weird that I'm asking you out? I mean, it's weird, right?"

She smiled in an amused way, but never lost the smile she showed to everyone.

This wasn't a scene she needed to think about.

"Okay, I still have a lot of work to do as student council after this, and I've been meaning to get something in my stomach. It's just that I have some urgent calls to make, so I was wondering if I could get something from the concession stand."

"Of course."

I'm sure it's not often that Kushida-san calls out to me like this.

It might be a good opportunity for me to ask the questions that have been smoldering inside me.

"Can I ask you a simple question?"

As if biding my time, I spoke as soon as we started moving.

"Why did I invite Horikita-san?"

"That's part of it, but..."

"The reason why I'm friends with Yagami-kun?"

It seemed that the questions I felt were something that Kushida-san knew as a matter of course.

"I'd be lying if I said it didn't bother me."

It had always bothered her that she herself was acting in a way that was hard to understand under normal circumstances.

"You've been trying to hide your middle school past. That's why you're looking down your nose at me, who's from the same middle school, and Ayanokoji-kun, who has found out about your past. ...."

Kushida-san kept her eyes forward and listened without looking at her.

"Even if Yagami-kun didn't know anything about it, he has the impression that you have avoided getting along with only certain boys. I've always thought of you as a person who, for lack of a better word, is pretty on all sides, and treats everyone equally."

"Well, that didn't need to be worded badly, did it?"

"..... I guess so. I'm sorry if I offended you."

"Haha, don't worry, I'm not mad."

I hadn't intended to say anything bad, but I had mentioned my personal impressions.

I thought it was uncalled for, but I couldn't swallow the spit in my mouth.

"Why do you think I'm so close to Yagami-kun?"

It was the opposite of the question, and it came back to me.

"Could it be that.....you have that kind of relationship with Yagami-kun?"

I was hesitant to express it directly, so I tried to convey it in a slightly muddled way.

"By that kind of relationship, do you mean we're dating or something?"

"..... yeah."

"Unfortunately, nothing like that. I'm not planning on dating anyone in particular while I'm in school, you know."

That's exactly what it means to maintain the eightfold popularity.

Even though I'm not usually interested in such things, I know that Kushida-san is very popular among boys. But if she had a boyfriend, junior or not, it was inevitable that her popularity would wane.

I knew it wouldn't suit Kushida-san, who wanted to be seen as better than anyone else.

"Then what's the reason why you're so close to Yagami-kun?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

Kushida-san pressed her mouth with a laughing hand, "You say the strangest things."

"Because the best way to get rid of someone who gets in your way is to get into their pocket."

"..... I see."

I had imagined it, but I was pressured by her reply and smile, which was exactly what I imagined straight away.

This means that Yagami-kun is a target to be eliminated, just like me and Ayanokouji-kun.

But that doesn't mean that all my questions are answered.

"Is it possible that he knows about your past? You can't be absolutely sure, can you?"

"Yes, there is. There's no guarantee that he knows for sure, is there?"

"Then ....."

"But you can't guarantee that you'll never know, either, right?"

Without cracking a smile the whole time, Kushida-san continued.

"Yagami-kun seems to have feelings for me that are more than just senior and junior, so it's much easier than you think to stick close to him. So I'm just waiting by his side for him to show an opening."

Whether it's 1% or 2%, as long as it's not 0%, eliminate it. That's Kushida-san's basic stance.

So that means even Yagami-kun, her junior, is not an exception...

"For you, it's just more lumps on your eyes. You haven't even gotten me or Ayanokouji-kun expelled, and now you're going to make more enemies?"

"You think that's stupid, don't you, Horikita-san?"

At least, it didn't seem like a smart move.

"Essentially, I don't think we need to antagonize each other. I don't care if it's another girl who talks too much, but me and Ayanokouji-kun don't slip up."

I wondered why she didn't understand this part of my story, and I took a step into territory I hadn't seemed to venture into before.

"What's your guarantee on that? How can you be sure it's one hundred percent?"

"I can say that it's as close to 100% as I can get, but ..... that doesn't convince you, does it?"

"You know the past I have to protect. That alone is already like exposing my heart unprotected. Because sooner or later, Horikita-san is bound to come and grab that heart."

"I don't understand. There's no need for me to do that."

"You don't because there is no need. Then what if a need arises?"

"What do you mean, .....?"

"What if I take the secrets of my class and try to leak them to another class? What if I betray you and try to move to another class? How can you be sure that Horikita-san and the others won't nail me for betraying them if I don't want my past to be revealed?"

"That's..."

It's true that I can't guarantee that when a situation arises where I have to restrain myself, I won't mention Kushida-san's past. If you have to do so in order to protect your classmates, you can't erase the possibility that you'll bring out your family's treasured sword...

Of course, Kushida-san will try to get away with "faking" most of the things.

But there is a slight breakdown in her credibility.

She made a strategic error in the class vote, and it was unnecessarily obvious.

"For me, you know? I'm feeling a strong sense of frustration at the situation we have to talk about these things. I'm still feeling nauseous, and it's a real painful thought."

Despite her words, she really does have a smile on her face and her tone of voice remains much calmer.

She keeps much of her anger under control, masking it on the surface.

"I kind of understand what you're saying, but ..... you're still overthinking it. I'm worried about you."

"Oh, I see. You're worried about me?"

"I'd like to lighten your mental burden if I can."

"Hahaha, don't worry Horikita-san, I'm fine."

"You're okay?"

"I'm also thinking that I need to get this nasty problem over with."

"I mean, ....."

"I'm trying to figure out a way to get rid of this burden in my own way."

So you're saying that you've approached me with some kind of solution?

"I've been thinking a lot about it, and I've been thinking that if we keep on being jilted [cast off], the number of people who know about unnecessary things will only increase. So, ..... first of all, Horikita-san, would you be willing to drop out?"

Naturally, the most reasonable way to lighten her mental burden is for me to drop out of school.

Of course I can't consent to that. Most importantly, it wouldn't solve everything.

"I don't see the connection, what about Ayanokouji-kun's existence? What about Yagami-kun? If I were to leave the school, there would still be someone who knows about you."

Very much so, I don't think that would take away the mental burden.

"I'm well aware that Ayanokouji-kun is a tricky opponent. But you know what? Ayanokouji-kun is contributing private points to me."

"Paying off .....?"

It was a story Ayanokouji-kun had told me before.

I'm going to pretend I don't know here and ask her back.

"I think he said it was a defense to keep me from getting him expelled. If I get rid of Horikita-san, even Ayanokouji-kun will have no choice but to keep quiet, right? And if he did something wrong, he'll be expelled himself."

Her face moved a little closer to mine as she gave me a creepy smile.

"Anyway, even if I can't get everyone except Horikita-san expelled right away, I can still find a certain amount of peace. In the meantime, I can just figure out another way to get rid of Ayanokouji-kun. And as for Yagami-kun, I guess I can always do whatever I want. He's just a guy who serious likes me."

Her large eyes seemed to have color, but they didn't.

People can read emotions in eyes, but Kushida-san is definitely an exception.

Her strong will to absolutely expel me from school has not wavered at all.

"After all, the reason why I want Horikita-san to be the first to disappear is because she's in the same middle school as me. If I look it up, there might be other people who will come across that fact. But Ayanokouji-kun met me in high school, so even if he did expose me, I could get away with saying he was just lying, right?"

It's true what Kushida-san said.

If you were to ask me or Ayanokouji-kun who I would rather have her past exposed to, it would definitely be me, since we went to the same junior high school. And that too, by an overwhelming margin.

"You don't think it's easy to expel someone when you say you're going to get rid of them? You think, don't you? For the past year and a half, I haven't been able to get my hands or feet on Horikita-san. That's a fact, right? That's why I can't expel you in the future. ..... Are you sure about that?"

"If we were enemies in different classes, that might have been a possibility. But we're not. It's not easy to expel a fellow student from the same class."

"I'll prove it to you."

"Can't we just understand each other? I'm trying to graduate from Class A with all my classmates, including Kushida-san. And in order to do that, your help is essential."

"Idi——ot."

She cursed me, so quietly that the end of the word almost disappeared.

"I'm not going to cooperate with you. Stop saying repulsive things."

"Kushida-san, ....."

"I'm looking forward to the second semester. I'm sure we'll have some fun times together."

As the approaching faces slowly separated, the evil faded from her expressions.

Still, it was obvious that there was a mixture of hatred and anger behind the smile.



"You just can't help it, can you ....."?

She pulls away from me, as if she's had enough of talking.

"But I believe ..... that one day you will understand."

The words must have certainly reached her ears, but she didn't stop walking.

## Part 7

It was past two in the afternoon. We had plenty of time before the treasure hunt game was over, but we could safely conclude that we had seen most of the place. There were a total of six 2 D codes that I took pictures of. Three of them were objectively judged to have a difficulty level of 4 out of 5. It would be a good idea to choose one of these to read first.

"Turn on the camera, please."

"Which one do you want to load?"

"Satou can pick the one that Satou intuitively thinks is good."

"What, eh? You're letting me choose? What if I pick the wrong one?"

"I'm going to leave only carefully selected 2 D codes. Besides, there's a possibility that all the codes have been read, so you might end up winning the whole thing."

I would have a better chance if she made a quick decision rather than being able to think it over slowly.

"Wo.., okay."

Pulling out her phone, Satou slides up a picture from me.

She seemed to think about it for a few seconds, but then she decided to point her phone camera at one of the pictures.

It was a 2 D code that I had found by inserting my phone under the couch.

But then....

"Oh, no. It says someone's already received it."

It was quite difficult to find, but it seems that there were other students who found it.

"Never mind, on to the next 2 D code."

She nodded, and this time she didn't hesitate to read the 2 D code I slid in.

However, the second one seemed to have been received as well, and Satou stepped on the ground in frustration.

"I just found it! It's so frustrating!"

She hurriedly read the third 2 D code.

Satou stared at the screen for a while, but then jumped up and down.

"It's loaded! Look! It looks like some kind of treasure chest!"

It was a simple illustration, but a treasure chest and the word TAP.

"I wonder how many points I can get for this: ....."

Satou tried to tap the treasure chest with her index finger, but she stopped just before her finger touched it.

"Oh, Ayanokouji-kun push it!"

Apparently afraid to see the result, she handed the phone to me.

Satou had used her precious 10,000 points to participate in the tournament. She was afraid to see the results.

I took the phone from Satou and touched the treasure chest on the screen.



"Wow, Ayanokouji-kun, that's bold!"

I didn't do anything so bold as to be called bold.

The treasure chest glowed simply, and a blue light spilled out from inside the box.  
And then...

"Ah! ..... Ah~"

For a moment Satou was intensely surprised, but she soon realized the truth and her joy began to wane.

She was expecting to get 300,000, 500,000, or even 1,000,000 points, so she was a little disappointed.

"Apparently, I didn't find the 2D code as difficult as I thought."

"I see~ ..... Too bad. But even if you subtract the entry fee, it's 90,000 points plus, so it's enough!"

Without needing to be confirmed, it was an achievement that I could say with a big smile that I was glad to have participated in.

"Thank you Ayanokouji-kun."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you. It was Satou who found the unapproved 2D code."

"..... hehe."

Satou giggled, looking both pleased and embarrassed.

## Part 8

Students who read the 2 D code in the treasure hunt are still obligated to report it to the school.

We returned to the starting point and headed for Horikita who was waiting at the reception desk.

"Good work, the procedure is now complete."

Receiving such a report, Satou also expressed her joy honestly.

"Well then, Ayanokouji-kun, thank you for today. Let's hang out together sometime."

With that, Satou waved her hand and walked happily away.

With the extra income coming in, it wouldn't be a bad idea to have a somewhat good time.

"A total of 180,000 points for the two of us, excluding the entry fee. That's pretty good."

"I guess so."

At this time of night, most of the participants seemed to have scored their goals, and few were coming.

"You're in a tough spot, aren't you? Did you take a break?"

"Yeah, about an hour. But I can't complain. It was my own idea to appeal directly to the school from the viewpoint of preventing fraud."

"A direct appeal. It's a small thing, but it's one step closer to becoming student council president."

Making a good impression with this kind of thing would be appreciated by the student council and the school.

"That's not what I meant. And it wouldn't be much of an injustice if I didn't advise you. It's just that ..... well, I thought I could be of some help."

Not sure, Horikita removed her gaze to a faraway direction.

"So, who got the highest private points in the class?"

"Who do you think?"

I asked, and she returned with a question of her own.

"I'm hoping it's not us."

"Good for you, you are correct, there is a pair that won 500,000 private points, it's Wan-san and Kouenji-kun."

"Kouenji? I'm surprised to see him paired up with someone, as well as having participated in the game itself."

I hadn't noticed Kouenji's presence in the large crowd at the briefing.

"I'm with you on that. I don't know how he ended up joining or pairing up, but I'm sure he's made quite a lot of money in the last two weeks or so."

"No matter what he does, Kouenji is out of this world."

I didn't know that he had luck in addition to his incredible physical abilities.

Or maybe it was 2 D code that his partner had found.

"Not being able to use that Kouenji-kun in the future would be a big negative for the class."

"It wasn't a working one to begin with, can't you be satisfied with just winning first place this time?"

"How can I be satisfied? It would be a shame not to use his abilities to move up to Class A. Do you have any ideas for me?"

A way to use Kouenji well? It's a waste of resources to even think about it anymore.

"I don't."

"That's a quick answer."

I'm confident that I can control a certain amount of opponents. However, Kouenji is the only exception to this rule.

I had run several control simulations on all of my classmates, but Kouenji was the only one I could not get under control, no matter how many times I tried.

"I won't give up, even if you do. His power is vital to us."

Trying to control the uncontrollable. It's just a contradiction.

"Even if it's a waste of time?"

"Are you saying you don't need Kouenji-kun?"

"I believe that if he is not going to do any harm, the best course of action is to leave him alone, and now that Kouenji has also been given a protection point, he can be left alone more easily."

"I'm sure it's a rational thought, isn't it?"

"If it's a class that can't win without Kouenji, I can understand why they're so eager. But Horikita's class has already developed enough strength to be able to compete with other classes. And it will continue to grow."

"Yes, it's true that we've become much more reliable compared to a year ago."

But - and Horikita continues.

"Aiming for Class A is the top priority and the ultimate goal, but I want to bring the class together. I want to lead the class so that we can all work together."

So you don't want even Kouenji to be left out.

Horikita's eyes were so straight that I couldn't help but choke on my words.

If Horikita could bring Kouenji into the fold, he would be an irreplaceable ally.

But that hurdle is probably more difficult than trying to get to Class A.

In the past, I would not have taken this statement seriously.

I would have dismissed it as rhetoric, an unworthy statement.

Horikita is growing slowly, but one step at a time.

Well, ..... still can't say that Horikita might be able to move Kouenji someday.

"What's wrong?"

"What?"

"You looked like you were having a thought."

"No, I was wondering what to do with the private points I got."

"..... So. You're giving half of your money to Kushida-san, so you should take care of the private points you got today and stop wasting them."

"Right. Let's do that."

I decided to slink away, since staying any longer would only get in the way of the operation.

## Part 9

It's a little after 5:30 p.m., and I have a meeting scheduled with someone before dinner at 6:00.

As I was leaving my room to go to the 5th floor deck, I ran into Sudou, who was in the room two doors down.

"We're almost at dinner, where are you going?"

Sudou asks me, as if he was about to return to his guest room.

"I'm going for a little walk before dinner."

"You're talking like an old man. I'll see you at the restaurant."

We exchanged a few words and were about to part, when Sudou remembered something and spoke up.

"No, sorry, sorry. Yes, actually, I've got a bit of a surprise for you!"

"That Ike and Shinohara started dating?"

"What, you already knew about that?"

"I only heard about it by accident."

"No, of course I was surprised about that too, but you beat me to it... More importantly, he wanted to study with me, and wanted to join Suzune's study group."

That's surprising, or rather, a quicker move than I expected.

"Because poor academic performance is fatal in this school, you know."

The fact that you're often in danger of being expelled from school is still about academics, a student's main concern.

"For me, it's a precious time to be alone with Suzune, but if he's motivated, I have no choice but to support him, right? So Kanji is going to start studying hard from the summer semester."

It seems that he is planning to start studying immediately after this trip is over.

Whether or not the results will show up right away depends on Ike's efforts, but we may see some growth early in the second semester, and both Sudou and Ike may turn out to be big names as a result of their romance.

"There might be more members in the group, you know."

"Oh? Seriously?"

"I guess that means Ike isn't the only student who's starting to want to learn from Horikita."

"It's not a guy, is it?"

He made a serious face and grabbed both my shoulders as he crowded me.

"No, ..... no, it's Satou, Satou."

I wasn't going to tell him her name, but he pressured me to tell him, so I did.

"It's a girl. Well then, it's ..... Satou. If I'm not the only one and Ike's there too, she's not going to join the study group, is she?"

"I think you're expecting that to happen to some extent, aren't you? She seemed to have a strong resolve."

"Hmm. Well, I don't mind. I don't care who's coming, I'm not going to lose."

He sniffed, indicating his continued strong desire to study.

"Isn't it tough to study while doing club activities at the same time?"

"Yeah, it's tough. But I think I've got the stamina to brag about it. The first time I turned my head, I fell asleep within a minute, but now I can concentrate on... for an hour or so."

If you can concentrate and study that long, you're fine.

Study for an hour, take a break, study for an hour, and repeat is more than enough.

"But ..... damn it, I can't understand why Kanji got a girlfriend first."

Sudou lamented, laughing but genuinely frustrated.

"I'm going to train him thoroughly while holding a grudge about that. I'm going to give him a Spartan education at the basketball club."

He seemed to be loving his friend with a mixture of love and hate.

"In moderation. Because it's not easy to fall in love with studying when you hated it."

"I know. I know how much I've hated studying myself."

He stuck out his tongue as if he had bitten into something bitter.

After parting ways with Sudou, I approached my destination. I spotted Kushida at the front of the deck and hid myself once. It was already five minutes past the meeting time, so naturally she was waiting for me.

I took out my cell phone and called Kushida, who picked up after about two calls.

"Hello?"

After hearing her voice, I walked out to the deck where she was standing.

Cell phones, by their very nature, prioritize calls.

Even if I had activated the recording mode, it would automatically turn off once the call started.

In other words, the conversation that was about to take place was only between me and Kushida.

"Sorry Kushida, I'm late. I'm on my way, are you still waiting for me?"

"Yeah, let's see... Ah, it's this way!"

She checked left and right and immediately found me and waved.

I didn't hang up my phone myself, but instead walked straight to Kushida.

At about the same time, we both hung up our phones.

"Sorry for making you wait. I took a wrong turn."

"Ayanokouji-kun makes mistakes too, doesn't he? But what's wrong? You said you wanted to talk to me."

"I've been wondering what to do for the past few hours, but I thought I'd tell you straight out."

"Hmm? Confide in you? Tell you what?"

"You know that I participated in the treasure hunt game, right?"

"Yes, you were paired with Satou-san, right?"

What about it? I wondered, not understanding the flow of the conversation.

"In this treasure hunt, the reward for the two-dimensional code I scanned was 100,000 points. That means 90,000 points after deducting the participation fee. If you divide that by two, you get 45,000 points. I thought it was the right thing to do to give half of that to Kushida."

After saying that, I took out my cell phone and showed her my deposit and withdrawal records.

It clearly stated that 100,000 points had been transferred just moments ago.

"What? That's just a game, you don't have to worry about it that much~"

Kushida, surprised by the unexpected story, shakes her hands and refuses.

"To be honest, I thought so too at first. I tried to think that way, but I couldn't help but feel that it was an evil and cunning way of thinking. There was a possibility that you would tell me you didn't want it, but I thought if I kept quiet, Kushida wouldn't find out. I was ashamed of my thinking like that, so it made sense to give it to you."

"But..."

No matter what kind of logic I put into it, it would be a difficult point for Kushida to accept.

"To tell you the truth, ...., I want you to accept this as my sincerity."

"Sincerity .....?"

"I'm buying safety from Kushida by giving you half of the private points I get. I believe that as long as I am sincere to this, I can be sincere to Kushida."

Am I wrong? I appealed with my eyes.

"There's no harm in having as many private points as you can. Isn't that right?"

"That's true, but isn't Ayanokouji-kun in a lot of pain too?"

"Not really. It's nothing compared to getting in trouble with Kushida."

"Something about ..... is a little scary in reverse."

"What do you mean?"

"Ayanokouji-kun, you see, there's a lot of talk about you being a great student now. Are you really giving me half of your private points just because you want to have a truce with me?"

"As far as I'm concerned, I've decided that it's more dangerous to make an enemy of Kushida, whose private life is also related to mine, than students like Sakayanagi and Ryuuen, who are fighting in special exams."

Somewhat alarmed, Kushida nodded as if she was satisfied with the situation.

"Alright. So you're sure about this, then?"

"Of course I am."

I transferred the private points again, this time through my cell phone to the account Kushida had.

"I don't want to say this after giving them to you, but if I ever get in trouble related to money, I might ask you to help me."

"Huh? That's a little uncool, Ayanokouji-kun."

Kushida laughed a little, as if she was amused by my pettiness.

"But I think you're much, much smarter than Horikita-san, I don't mind that kind of thing."

"Really?"

"I don't want at least Ayanokouji-kun to be my enemy either, so keep up the good work."

"Ah. I hope we can keep things on an even stage."

With that, me and Kushida parted as if nothing had happened.

## Chapter 6

### An Inevitable past

#### Intro

At night, my roommates were having a good time talking about trivial things.

I was worried about Akito's health, but his fever had gone down in a day and he was on the way to recovery, and he seemed to have no problem lying down and talking. I spent the night operating my cell phone while watching from the sidelines, occasionally interjecting a word or two.

While I'm surfing the net, waiting for sleepiness, I receive a chat message.

[I'd like to call you for a minute now, okay?]

Such was the message from Kei.

It's been a while since I lifted the ban on chatting, but we've been exchanging at least once a day.

Today, there were no emoticons or stamps used, suggesting that it was a serious conversation.

[I'm in my room, give me three minutes.]

It's not hard to get out of the guest room since it's not curfew yet.

After sending a reply, I decided to quickly get out of bed.

"I'll get a drink."

I slipped out of the guest room and went to the corridor, using a convenient phrase that could be used at any time.

It was around 9 p.m. and I didn't see any students passing by.

I then walked out onto the deck at night and took a quick look around.

After making sure that no one was around, I decided to call Kei.

"Hello?"

"Sorry for the suddenness. But I really wanted to call you today."

She said something cute and typical of her.

I wondered if this was his lover's way of saying, "I just wanted to hear your voice".

"You know..."

After a slight pause, Kei starts to speak.

"I heard a bad rumor about you. You can explain it to me in detail, right?"

"Bad rumors?"

Mmm? The words I was expecting to hear didn't come out, but rather Kei seemed to be in a bad mood.

The silence was long and there was no immediate reply.

"A bad rumor?"

I couldn't take it anymore and asked her twice, but she just gave a hint of regret and didn't try to answer.

Rather, she seemed to be suspicious of the fact that I repeated the same words word for word.

"Is there anything that comes to mind?"

"No, nothing comes to mind."

I answered without hesitation, but there were a few things that came to mind.

First of all, my main concern was Ichinose.

Nagumo saw the exchange between me and Ichinose and knew that we were in an unusual situation.

And now that he knows that Kei and I are in a relationship, it's not surprising that he would mention this fact. In addition to that, the fact that I was paired up with Satou, who had confessed to me once, and the fact that I had chatted with Matsushita, all went through my mind.

"Are you sure you can't think of anything else?"

There was a pause, as if she was making a final check to pass judgment.

"No."

Still, I kept my ignorance to myself. If I knew for sure what Kei was talking about, I would have confessed, whether it was with Ichinose or Satou.

However, since I haven't identified it yet, if I say something inappropriate, the wound may widen. It's like letting the flesh cut the bone.

Why is ..... I'm in such a mess instead of having a sweet phone call?

"Kei?"

I prompt her by calling her name, and she starts to speak, her lips quivering.

"There's a rumor going around that you're, well, messing around with a junior!"

".....?"

I heard what seemed to be the content of the rumor, but I couldn't catch up and tilted my head.

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I guess I was wrong.

It was a good thing I didn't say anything carelessly, after all.

"Where and how did you hear that rumor?"

"I don't know! But I heard that you've been seen repeatedly meeting with a first year girl...?"

A first-year girl. The only person who comes to mind is Nanase...

It's true that I talked to Nanase repeatedly over the holidays.

It's not like we were meeting in secret, so there are probably witnesses all over the place.

If I knew what was going on, it would be quicker to talk.

"She's just a junior."

"I know that! I mean, even if I say that if it's not just a junior even then it's not good!"

Indeed.

"And also! I didn't hear that you and Satou-san were paired up for the treasure hunt."

Apparently, Kei was aware of the situation that came to my mind.

"Sure, I didn't report it, but since it's Kei, didn't you know about it right away?"

Even Matsushita knew about it, as I and Satou had been walking around on a treasure hunt and there were many witnesses.

"Well, yes, I knew right away, I knew but..., but come on."

She seemed to be dissatisfied and was mumbling something inaudible.

"I really wanted to be paired with Kiyotaka."

"I understand how you feel?"

"Buh..."

"By the way, what was the result of your pairing with Mori?"

"..... Do you want to hear about it?"

"No, thanks."

The air got worse, so I decided not to go deeper into it. I could continue to listen to her complain, but since the topic of Satou had come up, I decided to ask her about it.

"Did you tell Satou about the future?"

"Huh? Ah, yes. I just wanted to tell Satou-san first."

"Well, I guess that's safe. By the way, did you talk about it over the phone or chat?"

"No way. You have to talk about these things in person. It was at the cafe."

"A cafe, huh? Do you remember anyone listening to you?"

"I'm careful, that's how careful I am. At least I don't think any of the second year students heard me, so don't worry."

Indeed, it was the second years that Kei should be most concerned about.

First year students and third year students are generally not interested in the love stories of other grades.

Especially if the subject is me.

The third-year students, however, are the complete opposite, and it's not surprising that they only bite on the subject of me.

"Oh, but it was a little difficult to talk to her when a third-year girl came to sit near me."

As if answering a question, Kei recalled the time she had met Satou. For Kei, who didn't know the circumstances, marking a third year student shouldn't have been an assumption.

"I'm glad to hear that you understand."

"Yeah. But you're sure about this, right? It's okay if we're open about our relationship."

"Of course it's fine."

I knew that sooner or later I would have to do something.

The more we knock them back, the more troublesome the rest of the process will become.

"Well, when I say open up, I don't mean declare it in front of your classmates. It's just going to spread naturally from your friends and you'll know about it over time."

I'm sure there'll be a reaction to my thoughts later, but it's not that big of a deal

"But you see, .....Kiyotaka is very popular."

"Is that so?"

"Wow, you don't seem to know what you're talking about, it's super annoying."

"Then why don't you just stop talking about it?"

"Well, that's true, but you're asking me because you're worried even if you know what I'm talking about!"

It's not that I don't understand what you're saying, but there are contradictions.

"Isn't this a declaration to avoid unnecessary worries?"

As long as the person you like is not supposed to have a boyfriend or girlfriend, you might get a fierce attack. To avoid this, make a big deal about the fact that you are dating someone.

By doing so, most people will give up and stop attacking you.

Of course, I know that there are a few exceptions...

"You should be worried..."

The few exceptions are that Kei is scared of an enemy she has not yet seen.

"You may not know it yet, but there are even girls who are passionate about liking and stealing boys who they know have girlfriends."

"I see."

"Okay? I'll never allow you to cheat on me."

For the dependent Kei, she would never allow her boyfriend to cheat on her.

That was something I knew even before we started dating.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to do that."

"Are you sure?"

"Really."

"Really, really?"

"Really."

We went back and forth, back and forth, back and forth in a seemingly sterile exchange.

However, this seemingly sterile behavior is one of the expressions of affection in the process of love.

"Do you like me ....."?

I look around to make sure.

Of course, at this time of day, no student would want to face a dark deck.

"Yeah, I like you."

Now that I know that no one is around, I can say it without hesitation.

"..... Mm.fufufu"

"What's with the creepy laugh?"

I thought for sure she would be pleased or reply in the same way, but I didn't expect her to laugh at me.

"It's funny to think that Kiyotaka is saying that while worrying about his surroundings."

Apparently Kei could see what I was doing.

"I'm hanging up now."

"Oh, wait, wait. Say it again."

"Mmm."

My words were caught once in my throat when she demanded a second helping of declaration.

"I left when saying I was buying drinks, so I should probably get back."

"Hey! Tell me you like me!"

"I just said that."

"I want to hear it one more time!"

How selfish of her. No, it's still the same word, but it weighs so much differently.

"I like you"

".....fufu..."

"Hey."

Kei tried to hold back her laughter, but in the end she couldn't hold it in and let her voice out.

"Yeah, you're the best. ..... I'm never going to give you to another girl."

I just said that she doesn't have to worry about that right now, but her anxiety seems to be growing.

"Don't you want me to ask for it too?"

"If I ask you, will you tell me?"

"I'm not sure about that."

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow."

"Hey! That's the part where you ask for it!"

I don't know, it seems like I'm being given a choice, but I'm not.

"Then tell me."

"Throw it away! You don't seem to care! I don't like it!"

"Please say ....."

"Huh? I don't know what to do~"

I held back the urge to retort and waited for Kei's response.

"I like you."

Kei replied with a short, slight laugh.

"Good night Kiyotaka."

"Yeah, good night."

As I hung up the call, Kei's words of liking reverberated in the back of my ear.

"Not bad, huh?"

Love is a really interesting thing.

That's what I thought, it was night time.

## Part 1

It was just after August 9th on the ship.

It was after 1:00 a.m., when most of the students were probably already asleep.

The three of them met up in the night bar lounge, which was only open to adults.

"Ugh, I'm so tired. Why do we teachers have to work so late, day in and day out? It's making my skin rough. I wish we could have a summer vacation too."

Hoshinomiya complained as she slumped down on the bar counter.

"You've had enough rest, you could have used the 5th and 6th for rest."

"Only two days, right~? I was busy yesterday and today~. What's with the treasure hunt bonus game, we want the bonus~"

"I understand how you feel, but we're working people, Chie. We don't get a long summer vacation like kids."

Chabashira, sitting to Hoshinomiya's right, admonished.

"It's not a big deal, considering the effort the students put in for two weeks on an uninhabited island."

This time Mashima, sitting to Hoshinomiya's left, urged her to hold her ground.

"Don't force reality on me, ..... I don't want to hear it, I don't want to hear it."

She held her ears with both hands and shook her head in disgust.

"Then at least let me have a vacation on the boat. Isn't it unfair that the students are the only ones who have access to the pool, movies, and everything else and we can't?"

Hoshinomiya couldn't agree more with the situation she watched with her fingers in her mouth every day in front of her.

"That's our job."

"When you're in the workforce, that's what you're supposed to do, Chie."

"Oh, yada yada work people!"

Even harder, she covered both ears with her hands.

But not long after, she let go of her hands and raised her right hand, shouting.

"Please give me a strong drink to escape from reality. Master's choice."

She then banged the counter table with her left hand and demanded a drink.

"You've never changed at all,..."

Chabashira looks at Hoshinomiya and sighs in exasperation.

"Because my goal is to be beautiful and young forever?"

"That's not what I mean."

"Then what~?"

"..... No, don't worry about it. It would be useless to explain."

Late, Mashima and Chabashira also ordered beers, and when they were all here, they tipped their glasses and toasted.

"But this special exam, it's been a strangely rough ride. There were too many unscheduled things."

"There was a serious injury to a student, and a watch malfunction that was obviously the result of the students doing whatever they wanted. And then something unexpected happened when only the third-year students were expelled."

Taking a sip of the cocktail she was served, Hoshinomiya took a breath.

"The problem is that we let the students have too much freedom. It hasn't been reported, but I'm sure there are things going on between boys and girls that we can't see."

"At the very least, I'd like to think that line was kept."

"That's sweet, Mashima-kun. You can't stop a young girl's passion even if you give her a lot of flickers."

"That's only in your mind."

Hoshinomiya quickly demanded a refill when she was told off.

"I'll be busy again after the summer break."

"Ugh, I can't take it anymore. I don't want to be a cheaply paid teacher. Expendable, expendable."

"All you've been doing is complaining."

"Of course. I did set this place up to complain."

Hoshinomiya said without a trace of remorse and sipped from her second glass.

"You never change, Chie. That's one of the good things about you."

Chabashira asks for some nuts as a light snack.

"Anyway, I'm relieved that the second years didn't lose this uninhabited island test."

"It was weird that only the third year students dropped out, though."

Sandwiched between Hoshinomiya and Chabashira, Mashima listened quietly to the conversation.

But just as she was about to move on to another topic, he placed his half-empty glass of beer on the table somewhat forcefully.

"The second-years are doing well. But that can lead to trouble."

"What, you mean it's not good that they're working so hard?"

"It's not that the school wants people to drop out, but after all, the second-year students we take have virtually never dropped out of school in special exams so far."

"Virtually, huh. We've had to choose students who were semi-forcibly expelled from school, but expelled students are expelled students, right?"

All three of them remembered clearly about the in-class vote.

"I'd like to believe that there won't be any more special exams with no way out like that, ever again."

Chabashira, who usually treats her classmates with a cool-headedness, was not without heartache. She couldn't agree with the idea of forcing a student who hadn't made a mistake into a corner.

She agreed with Hoshinomiya on this point. But Mashima's face was grim. Seeing this, Chabashira looked into Mashima's eyes.

"Don't tell me, you're saying that there's another special exam being prepared to force people out of school?"

"A development like last year's in-class vote isn't something the school can do like that."

"That's not a problem then. As long as it's not something with a mandatory expulsion, my class will get through."

"Oh dear? You've come to say a lot of things, haven't you, Sae-chan?"

Over Mashima's back, Hoshinomiya poked Chabashira in the side.

"Stop it!"

Chabashira grabs her hand, somewhat angrily, and Hoshinomiya turns her sharp eyes back on her.

"You don't think you're going to make it up to Class A, do you?"

"..... No one is saying that. I'm just saying that we're better than previous years' classes."

"Hmm?"

The air was tense, and Mashima gulped down the remaining half of his beer.

"There's certainly no forced expulsion. But...."

Chabashira and Hoshinomiya look at Mashima, who chokes on his words.

"The outline for the next special exam was announced the other day. It will be the first time in eleven years that it will be held."

"Eleven years? ..... We're 29 years old this year, so that means it's been since... our junior year of high school? It's rare to see a special exam that old being adopted."

The memories of high school, many of them melted into the back of my brain and disappeared.

What conversations did we have, what special exams did we take? If I were asked to recall all of them immediately, I wouldn't be able to answer.

"The school makes the special exams fit into a year-long schedule. To take it a step further, it's based on a four-year rotation. You get the idea so far, right?"

"It's to make sure that the other kids don't leak the contents of the special exam while they're still in school, right?"

The High School of Advanced Training had administered numerous special exams throughout its history, ranging from those that were administered only once to those that fell into the quadrennial framework due to their versatility.

"Of course, sometimes we intentionally repeat the same special exam in a short period of time, and sometimes we do special exams for information sharing purposes, but basically it's a predetermined rotation. But depending on how the year goes, we may bring in special exams from further back than four years."

"So it's not that uncommon for old special exams to be used, is it?"

"Yes, it is. As long as it's not a 'problematic' special exam."

Mashima said with a hint of implication, but the two didn't think too much about it.

Rather, they were eager for the new special exam to begin.

"Maybe me and Sae-chan's class will have to fight each other~"

"You seem to be expecting that to happen. Do you think you can win if you fight us?"

"No, I don't think so. But it's better than fighting Ryuu-en-kun's class or Sakayanagi-san's?"

Grinning, Hoshinomiya spat out the smell of alcohol from her mouth.

"Our class has grown a lot. Don't expect it to be easy."

"Wow...I never thought Sae-chan would say something like that. Ayanokouji-kun is a very special kid, so she's a bit bossy now, isn't she?"

"Ayanokouji is indeed a gem. But there are a lot of students in my class who show a lot of potential."

"Even? Isn't Sae-chan relying too much on Ayanokouji-kun?"

"What the hell are you talking about, when did I rely on Ayanokouji?"

The two of them seemed to be casually catching each other's words, but for Mashima sitting in between them, their conversation could be chilling.

If he just listened to what they were saying in silence, it would turn into an argument in a matter of minutes.

"Leave it at that. There's no point in arguing right now."

"Yeah, I guess I got a little heated."

Hoshinomiya gulps down the sake until it's empty, expressing her regret.

"You're going too fast."

"I'm fine, I'm not so weak that I'll go under easily."

"No, you're not. I'm saying that today... will affect tomorrow's work."

"Don't worry, it won't affect it."

Hoshinomiya shows no signs of stopping drinking and asks for a third glass.

"If you're ...., let's talk before you get too drunk. You might want to take a look at the outline for the next special exam."

Mashima, having taken control of his phone, places it on the table.

"The important thing is the name of the special exam. You'll understand it as soon as you see it."

"The name of the exam?"

"Read it."

The two of them look at each other and look into the phone almost simultaneously.

Chabashira gasped the moment she saw it. The same goes for Hoshinomiya.

There was a special exam that both Chabashira and Hoshinomiya had experienced in their school days.

The news was that it had been decided that it would be held at the beginning of the second semester.

"I'm sure you remember this special exam well, even if it was 11 years ago... long ago."

Chabashira was speechless as she looked over and over at the name of the special exam that was listed.

Hoshinomiya turns away from her phone and holds the third glass that has been brought to her.

She looked at her reflection in the glass and smiled to herself.

"I never thought I'd see this special exam again, you know. ...."

Chabashira couldn't answer anything and just quietly looked down once more.

"I thought that last year's in-class poll ..... thing was a substitute for this?"

Hoshinomiya looked at Mashima, as if to confirm.

"What it turns out is that the school had no choice but to use it in a similar way. It seems that if any of the second-year students had dropped out of the uninhabited island exam, the next special exam was going to be a different one."

"Well, I guess that's not an option. We can't make the written exam too hard just to get people to drop out. I guess Sae-chan's class is too good, and now there's a special exam that's a big problem."

Hoshinomiya emphasized, as if to fry her.

"It's too early to assume it's a big problem. Depending on how you look at it, it's just a trivial test."

"But if you make the wrong choice, it can turn into a difficult problem. Isn't that right? Sae-chan?"

Closing her eyes, Chabashira didn't answer yes or no.

"Yes. ..... You two were especially tormented by this special exam, you know."

"I remember when we were in the third semester of our junior year. I've never forgotten that day, I guess."

The words were directed to herself and to Chabashira as if she was nostalgic for the past.

"So, how long are you going to keep quiet? Do you have any comments?"

Chabashira couldn't get the words out of her head when asked that.

"What a jerk."

After a short whine, she ignored Chabashira who didn't reply and shifted her gaze towards Mashima.

"What do you think Mashima-kun? Do you think there will be any withdrawals from the next special exam ....."

"Even though Class A is head and shoulders above the rest, there are still chances left for Class B and below to turn things around. If they challenge them with the intention of winning, there's a great chance that they'll follow the same path as you."

"A premonition huh... I guess."

Hoshinomiya muttered and asked the bartender for a fourth round of drinks. The pace of her drink picks up.

"Well, I think my class is probably okay in a bad way, but what about Sae-chan's? Right now, she's crawling up from the bottom, and if she can increase her class points here, she could be in class B all at once. I would..."

"I'm going back to my room."

Chabashira, who had been silent for a long time, said and stood up before downing her first cup.

"Just when I thought you were finally talking, you say you're going home... The mood is spoiled..."

"I'm sorry, but the two of you can handle the rest."

Chabashira turned her back on her, and Hoshinomiya's expression, which had been slow until now, changed drastically.

"Hey!"

Hosinomiya slams her glass down on the table hard.

Then she stood up vigorously.

Not only Chabashira, but also Majima was surprised by her action and showed a slight agitation, unable to speak.

It was fortunate that there were only three people in the audience.

"How long are you going to chase after your boring love, you!"

"..... what are you talking about?"

"Do you know how old we are now? Twenty-nine? How many years old was it?"

"Hey, you drank too much at once..."

"Shut up, Mashima-kun!"

"....."

The bartender, who was wiping glasses nearby, sensed something unusual and excused himself to use the restroom.

"You've been stuck in time for a long time, you're like a senior in high school, and yet you've aged so well. And you are putting the pressure on current children without permission. Isn't that stupid?"

Chabashira left the place in silence, not even bothering to reply to the continuous abuse.

Silence flowed between Hoshinomiya and Mashima, who were left here.

"Oh dear, she's gone."

Feeling a bit out of sorts, Hoshinomiya retrieves the drink Chabashira left behind and sits back down.

"You're a mean one too, Hoshinomiya."

"I don't blame you. It's worse that this special test is coming up than anything else."

"Because it was this special exam that caused the decisive difference between you two."

"If Sae-chan had chosen the right answer, we could have graduated with an A class, you know?"

"..... You're still holding a grudge, aren't you?"

"Of course I'm holding a grudge. I failed and now I'm a teacher in this school. If it were true, I could have gone to a more glamorous world."

"After that exam, you and Chabashira were in the same room, which made dorm life difficult."

"You can't live together after what happened. We could have killed each other."

"The scary thing about you guys is that you can't even say that you're exaggerating ....."

Hoshinomiya grabbed a strand of hair and pulled it out.

"I thought you cured that habit?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I did it unconsciously... Do you want a piece of my precious hair...?"

"No thanks."

He ignored the hair she offered him and demanded a second drink from the bartender who came back.

Seeing this, Hoshinomiya also urged for a fourth drink.

"I told you, sharing a room is not a good idea. It's fine when things are going well, but if there's trouble, the relationship can change drastically. When love and the future come into play."

Before he knew it, Hoshinomiya was back to her usual hilarious expression.

"Even though all the second-year students stayed behind for the uninhabited island exam. The school is so cruel."

"Originally, there would be a few students who dropped out every year, that's the policy this school was built on. But the school acknowledges the hard work of the second-year students. That's why this special exam is being held. Because we still don't know what the results will be."

"That's true, but ..... that exam brings out the ugliness and weakness in people. At least the saving grace is that this is just the end of the first semester of my second-years year. Oh, and that means it has something to do with the fact that the school approves of it, too."

"The shorter the rest of the school year is, the more class points will jump in value and the more difficult the special exams will be, so there's some relief compared to what we did in the third semester of our junior year."

"It's definitely not my fault ..... because it's Sae-chan who's at fault ....."

"It depends on how you think about it. You and Chabashira both made the right decision."

"I don't know..."

Hoshinomiya's hand stopped as she suddenly tried to drink the newly arrived drink.

"What's up?"

"My class won't make ..... at least class A."

"What are you talking about?"

"I already know; I don't think I can reach Sakayanagi-san's class. But... but even if that's the case, I'm not going to let Sae-chan's class graduate with an A grade. For us, graduating with an A class was a long-held dream. The girl who destroyed that has no right to make her own students graduate with A class. Isn't that right, Mashima-kun?"

"..... Isn't that a separate issue from this?"

"It's not separate. Absolutely not."

"Besides, Ichinose's class is excellent. There's still a way to get to A class. Perhaps Ichinose's class will easily get through the next special exam."

"That's not good enough. No matter how outrageous the future may be, you need to become an ogre in order to win A class. Just like I tried to do."

"Even with the dropouts, huh?"

"Even with the dropouts, yes."

He maked a sigh.

"Hirata, Kushida, Horikita, Kouenji, and Ayanokouji..... are too much no matter how many times you think about it."

"As usual, the class is full of students who are considered problematic, but there is a strange sense of solidarity. It's as if every single flaw is being eliminated one by one."

"I hope the next special exam will destroy that."

Hoshinomiya said, resting her head on Majima's shoulder.

"I think I'm getting kind of badly drunk... I'd like to take a break, in Mashima-kun's room."

"If you're going to sleep, you should sleep in your room."

"That's harsh. Isn't there a more gentle way to say that?"

"If you're going to sleep, you'd better go back to your room."

"You haven't changed much!"

She pulled herself closer to hug his large left arm.

But Mashima forcefully pulled her away with force.

"Are you bothered?"

"I'm not bothered."

"Well, then at least take me to my room~. And then we can drink again in my room? Until morning."

"Sorry, but I'm going back to my room too. Don't drink too much either."

"Don't you think this is a chance of a lifetime?"

"I'm sorry, but I'm not going to get involved with you or Chabashira. It'll only lead to trouble."

"Strict~"

At the empty bar counter, Hoshinomiya quietly sipped her drink.

## Part 2

On the day of the drinking party, the teachers were complaining about the situation.

The students, unaware of what is going on, went with their friends to make memories on the luxury cruise ship that is left behind.

However, I, Horikita Suzune, was going to use my last remaining day off for something completely different.

In front of the entrance to the private pool, there is a counter for employees and receptionists.

If the pool was open, they would check in here and pay before using the pool.

But I heard that the private pools are very popular among the students, so I guess they are almost always booked up.

Of course, that's a good thing for me.

"Excuse me, I'm thinking of making a reservation for the private pool."

I speak to the employee at the reception desk. Perhaps having already had the same conversation repeatedly with many students, the employee seemed familiar and began to give a brief explanation.

"Please fill in your preferred time slot. If it's full, you can also waitlist."

With that, the employee held out a board to me.

I hadn't come to this place to enjoy the private pool.

I came all the way here to get the board that I just caught in front of me.

"I'll borrow it."

All the cafes and other reception areas had a reservation system using tablets and machines.

However, when it came to the private pools, which had a fixed time of every hour for each group and could be booked up to a few days in advance, everything was booked on paper.

I pretended to look for the day and time I wanted to make a reservation and paid attention to the font of each letter.

This is a private pool for multiple people, but the representative is supposed to fill out the form.

I had actually planned to settle the score with the treasure hunt game the other day.

Only about half of the school's students participated.

For the first-year students, the participation rate was over 66%.

Before the test ended, I checked the names and handwriting of all the first-year students who participated, but none of the candidates matched the handwriting I remembered.

Did any of the 34% happen to be the person who sent me the letter?

No, or did they not participate in order to prevent me from matching their name to their handwriting?

Anyway, that's what happened, and I'm still trying to find out from the remaining 34% of first-year students.

Still, what amazes me is the reservation rate for the private pool.

Almost all the time slots are booked up, including the last day.

There is no charge for cancelling a reservation up to the day before, so some students may want to hold onto it for now, but it's really popular.

There is a space to write the name of the representative and the number of students, but there is no need to write the grade.

The writing on that paper I saw was really beautiful.

I flipped through the paper to check for everyone, but I couldn't find the same level of handwriting.

I had a feeling it wouldn't be easy to find, but it looks like I was right.

It's not every day that you get the chance to see the names and handwriting of your students.

Since I couldn't find any, I guess it's time to start the hard work.

I would have to look at each name again and check it against the OAA.

Although there are not hundreds of names on the reservation list, it takes a lot of time just to check them. It's easy to skip students with blatantly bad handwriting or different habits, but I want to be sure and clear about who I can exclude here.

Kibayashi, 1st year B class, and Mochizuki, 1st year D class, were excluded. I've already checked the handwriting of Eto-san (.....) after participating in the treasure hunt game yesterday, so he's excluded.

Thankfully, the receptionist didn't pay attention to me looking at the list with my cell phone in hand, as she had a lot of chores to do.

But still, it's really not that easy to find. I looked through the list of 2nd and 3rd year treasure hunters to make sure, but I couldn't find anyone who looked like the same person.

Where the hell is the person who wrote that piece of paper...?

A few minutes passed when I finished eliminating the ninth person.

The receptionist was about to get suspicious of me when she unexpectedly called out to me from behind.

"Um, is it going to take much longer?"

"What? Eh, yeah. I'm sorry. I'm having a little trouble keeping time with my friends."

I was so focused on looking at the list that I didn't notice the presence of the student standing behind me.

I had already assumed that hardly any students would come to the appointment, but I wasn't following...

It would be difficult to keep them waiting for many minutes to make the exclusion list.

I decide that it would be better to let the boy make the reservation first.

From the looks of him, he's not a senior, he's a freshman.

"It's still going to take me a while to decide, so go ahead."

"Is that so? Then I'll leave first."

So said the male student who took the board from me.

He was tall, about the same height as Sudou-kun or a little shorter. I operate my cell phone and wait for the visitor to finish filling out the reservation list while pretending to be chatting with a friend.

Perhaps because there are only a limited number of places where you can make an appointment, I was able to decide faster than I expected.

Not long after, the boy looked back at me as if he had finished writing down his reservation.

"Thank you very much. Excuse me."

I received the list of names as I switched places, and immediately checked the names of the first-year students I had filled out.

"There was ....."

Representative name, Kyo Ishigami. The number of users is five.

He hadn't participated in the treasure hunt game, so this was the first time I'd seen this name.

When I looked up the name in the OAA I had already opened, I also found out that it was class A, first year.

His handwriting was refined, and it was no wonder that he had been doing penmanship for years.

However, handwriting is very prone to habits. It was not the machine-like, model-like handwriting I had seen on the uninhabited island. Still, it was the closest handwriting I've ever seen. If I had a piece of paper in my hand, I would be able to match it up in detail, but since Amasawa-san had torn it up and thrown it away, that would be impossible. I can't be sure that the letters in my memory and the letters written by Ishigami-kun are really different.

As I stared at the letters, I felt like I was having a Gestalt collapse.

[ (Gestalt Collapse) is a term in Japanese which describes the phenomenon of a complex character breaking down into its component parts in one's mind and losing its meaning if one stares at it for a short while. ]

I've been staring at the letters so much since the other day that it seems to be putting a lot of strain on my brain.

"I'm sorry, can you give me a minute?"

I call out somewhat loudly to Ishigami-kun as he moves away from me.

He looked back at me curiously, and I continued.

"Actually, I just finished a discussion with a friend, but it seems to have coincided with the time you wrote about. So I was wondering if I could talk to you about a few things."

Whatever the topic, I want a hint to make sure he's the one who insinuated Ayanokouji-kun's expulsion.

"It's not that I can't consult with you, but I just told my colleagues that I have an appointment at that time."

I lifted the phone up to my face with the back side facing.

I was able to connect with him, as I had succeeded in calling him off at first.

If he was the one in front of me, the one who had put it down on paper on the uninhabited island, there was a good chance he knew me, even if I didn't know if he had delivered it directly to the tent.

"Can I see the list of names again, please?"

"Of course. Sorry about that."

"No, it's fine, Horikita-senpai."

He calls my name, and my heart rate quickens slightly.

"..... You know my name. Although I don't recall ever talking to you."

"I learned most of the names and faces of the academically advanced second-years during the first special exam right after I entered the school."

The handy OAA can also help you remember the names of your seniors and juniors.

"That's a good memory. I thought I remembered some of the more academically advanced students, but I didn't recognize you, Ishigami-kun."

"I'm not the one who stands out."

The discussion went smoothly without any trouble or suspicion on my part.

We didn't get anything definitive, but I still feel that his handwriting is different somehow.

I feel bad about keeping him around any longer, so I decide to let him go.

"Can I ask you one question, Horikita-senpai?"

This time, however, I'm the one who gets a word in edgewise with Ishigami-kun.

"When I stopped you, you said that you thought you remembered the academically advanced students, but you didn't recognize me, right?"

"Yeah, why does that matter?"

I don't remember saying anything crazy, but...

"Are you sure you didn't remember?"

He confirmed as if to make sure I did.

"Of course it's true."

In fact, I didn't have Ishigami-kun in my memory.

"Then at what point did you find out that I'm an academic? If you and your friend were meeting at the time of your appointment, I'm sure it would take you a good amount of time to activate OAA and confirm it."

I couldn't respond quickly enough to the sharp point I hadn't expected him to make.

There was nothing strange about it, up to the point where I found his name in the list. However, as Ishigami said, there was something strange about the fact that I knew that he had high academic ability.

He could have pointed this out earlier, but he threw it in slowly.

It was as if he had timed it to the point where it was relieved that i could finish my response without incident.

"I just happened to have OAA open and running in the background. Ishigami-kun's name was in the time slot I wanted to book, so I hurried to check the to make sure it was you."

It was a bit of a bitter excuse, but it was definitely not an impossible story.

After Ishigami-kun finished confirming with his friend on his cell phone, he nonchalantly changed the appointment time.

"I see. I'm sorry for the strange misunderstanding."

"That's okay. I'm sure you were a little startled, and it's understandable that you would get the wrong idea."

"Well then, I'll leave you to it."

"Oh, ...., yes, Ishigami-kun, thank you so much for the reservation."

"No problem, but..."

He was about to say something, but it seemed like he was hesitating for a bit to say the next word.

"What?"

"No. I'll see you again Horikita-senpai."

"Right. Again."

It didn't turn out the way I thought it would, and Ishigami-kun turned away and walked away.

I don't think it's him from his handwriting, but I'm strangely curious about this student.

I think it's better to position him as gray with a hint of white for now.

[Grey and white referencing if it was him or not. Gray being unsure]

After seeing him off until I couldn't see his back anymore, I stood there holding the list.

It's not natural for me to take my time to look at the list since I made an appointment.

I'll have to remember to call to cancel after I've given myself some time.

And since I didn't get any clues, I'll have to figure out what to do next.

"You look like you're having a very difficult time~ Horikita-san."

Hoshinomiya-sensei, who was unusually present at this moment, called out to me.

Such a teacher seemed to be sitting with Kanzaki-kun, and our eyes met.

"Isn't that so, I guess it's the same as usual."

"Yeah? I guess so."

What bothered me more was the fact that Hoshinomiya-sensei had her hands on the wall.

"Um, you're not feeling well?"

"Oh~ this? Don't worry about this, it's a disease specific to adults."

Adult-specific illness? What the hell kind of illness is that...?

"I mean, who's that cool kid from earlier... uh, who is he~? I think I've seen him somewhere before."

The person Hoshinomiya-sensei had passed just before was none other than Ishigami-kun.

"It's Ishigami from Class A, Year 1."

Before I could answer, Kanzaki-kun, standing next to the teacher, answered.

"Eh? First year? I mean, well, if you're a 2nd or 3rd year student, it's only natural that you know..."

Hoshinomiya-sensei tilted her head curiously for some reason.

"What's wrong with him? Do you have any thoughts about him?"

I ask, hoping to get any clues I can.

"Hmm, I think I saw him at school once quite a while ago... I might be mistaken. I'm sorry, Horikita-san, but I don't think so!"

Wobbling on her feet, Hoshinomiya-sensei ran towards the deck.

I followed her, wondering what was going on.

"Ah, ugh, hiiii!"

I don't know what's going on, but she let out a painful cry and went outside. Then, with a loud gurgle, Hoshinomiya-sensei clutched her mouth and grabbed the deck railing.

"Oro aro uro!!!"

The glistening vomit was blown away by the strong sea breeze. Kanzaki-kun, who arrived a little later, and I just stared at it.

What the hell are we being shown...?

"Sensei ..... , I think that's a lot of problematic behavior."

I point out the hygiene and moral aspects of the situation.

"Ugh, I've got a mix of hangover and seasickness, sorry Horikita-sa—ororooro!"

The least I can say is that it was the ocean down there...

"I'm sorry, I'm going to go back to my room and go to sleep. ..... Sorry, I was in the middle of a conversation, Kanzaki-kun."

"Don't worry about it. I'll call on you again."

"And Horikita-san, I'm sorry for showing you something weird~..... ugh!"

She waved her hand flippantly, but quickly repressed her mouth and ran into the ship.

"... You're a busy man."

"It must be confusing if you're not used to seeing her."

"You've seen her a few times?"

"I've been shown something like that about three times in my morning homeroom."

I'm sorry to hear that,....

With Hoshinomiya-sensei out of sight, I bailed lightly at Kanzaki-kun and turned to leave.

"Horikita, what is your relationship with Ishigami?"

As soon as I stopped, I was asked to talk about something I didn't expect.

"What do you mean?"

Since the true meaning of his words was unclear, I had no choice but to reply.

"You've been talking to him."

"The way you said it, it sounds like you know him in no small way. It seems like you knew his name."

"Well, I had a lot of opportunities to have contact with first-year students during the special examinations right after the second-year promotion."

The best students of the first year, most of them, were taken by the Sakayanagi-san and Ryuuuen-kun classes.

I wouldn't be surprised if Kanzaki-kun knew Ishigami-kun through that process, though...

I was a little surprised that Kanzaki-kun, who doesn't usually talk to me, took a bite out of it.

"I bumped into him at a private pool reservation. So, yeah."

I explained the situation briefly, but Kanzaki-kun seemed a little unconvinced.

"By the way, is he a trustworthy junior in your eyes?"

I still don't know how much of a clue I'm following, and how much of a witness I am as one of those witnesses.

That's why I'd like to get information from as many of them as possible.

"His academic skills are impeccable. That's what the OAA can tell you."

"Yes, it was a qualified A."

In contrast, his physical abilities were not so good, and he received a D-.

"But being able to study doesn't equal trust."

"Why would you want to know if Ishigami is trustworthy? It seems irrelevant to the appointment."

We're in the middle of summer vacation with no special exams going on.

Surely it wouldn't be surprising if that's what you were wondering about.

Kanzaki-kun seemed to be concerned about it, so I asked him about it, but let's leave it at that.

"Don't worry about it. I just thought I'd ask."

I try to let the conversation drift because I can't give him information about his handwriting.

But he didn't turn away from me and continued his words.

"It's not like I don't have the material to know if I can trust the guy or not."

It's a strange way of putting it, but it means that Kanzaki-kun knows about Ishigami-kun.

"If you can answer some questions from me, I don't mind telling you about Ishigami."

I judged him to be gray, closer to white, so I didn't have to force myself to go along with the conversation. However, the expression on Kanzaki-kun's face at this point seemed different from the calm one he usually showed, and it caught me.

"Question? What is it?"

"I've been analyzing Horikita's class for a while now."

"..... my class?"

"Among them, I'd like to know how good...Ayanokoji really is."

"I can't answer that question for you, even if you asked me. Can you ask him directly?"

I digress, inwardly surprised that Ayanokoji-kun's name was mentioned here.

"I don't think he's someone who would answer honestly if you asked him."

"That may be so. But it doesn't mean you can trust a word that comes out of me, does it?"

"If it helps one, that's fine."

"We've known each other a long time, but I don't know anything about him."

"I don't know anything, that's too exaggerated. If you call yourself the leader of the class, you should be somewhat familiar with the inner workings of your classmates."

"I haven't gained the trust of all my classmates yet. That goes for Ayanokoji-kun as well."

I don't have the qualifications yet to proudly call myself a leader.

At the very least, I'm not as good as Sakayanagi-san, Ichinose-san, or Ryuuuen-kun.

"I guess you can't answer me honestly, since he's probably a valuable asset to Horikita's class."

"Well, just being alerted like that gives you some sense of the value of his presence."

Regardless of whether or not he's capable, I'd appreciate it if he'd put in the effort to think about it.

"Is there anything else you'd like to ask me?"

"No, that's all I care about right now."

If that's the case, then it's no wonder you can't tell me about Ishigami-kun.

You can't pursue it strongly from here, though I was thinking that...

"The student named Ishigami is excellent, compassionate, and has the ability to do things. He is already recognized as the leader of Class A in the first year, and his fellow students are sure to have complete confidence in him."

"I'm sure that's a good thing for his friends."

"But that's only for your allies. It doesn't apply to those who threaten them. They're probably the type that would bare their fangs without mercy."

He seemed like a mild-mannered student to me, so it was difficult to picture him with the material I had now.

"Then I wonder what kind of attitude he would have towards someone who is neither an enemy nor a friend."

"If he's neither friend nor foe, then to him it's indifference."

"Indifferent?"

Kanzaki-kun, who had been speaking in front of me, stopped moving.

"..... Ah. You're not supposed to care about beings that don't mean anything to you."

"He told me he'd see me again, I wonder if an indifferent person would leave a note suggesting a reunion."

"Ishigami? No, he's not the kind of man who says things like that easily. Did he really say that?"

"If I didn't mishear it, yes. You seem to know a lot about him, though."

I wonder if there's something going on between Kanzaki-kun and Ishigami-kun that has nothing to do with the case I'm pursuing.

"I don't know much about him. I've never been taken advantage of before."

He muttered to himself, and then continued.

"It's true that the man is only interested in either his friends or his enemies. In other words, Horikita has already been classified as one of them in Ishigami's mind."

"Even if you put it that way, I don't really understand."

Today was the first time I had contact with Ishigami-kun.

Prior to that, we had never met face to face or exchanged greetings.

Neither a clear ally nor a clear enemy, that's the usual analysis.

"Unknowingly having a relationship is always a possibility."

"Are you suggesting that my actions are indirectly influencing him?"

"I can't rule out that possibility."

For the life of me, I can't figure out what Kanzaki-kun is talking about.

Kanzaki-kun pondered for a while, but eventually muttered quietly.

"I'll give you one piece of advice. Don't get any more involved with Ishigami."

"I don't want to get involved in the first place. While I'm advising you, are there any other first years I should be aware of?"

"Other first years?"

So far, there's no one who could be considered a clear suspect. I need a clue.

If Amasawa-san or any other name came up, it would add depth to his statement.

I thought so...

"The only first year you should be concerned about is Ishigami."

Kanzaki-kun replied, then turned away and started walking. On the way, he passed Ibuki-san, who was looking at him, but did not make eye contact with Kanzaki-kun.

"Are you close with Kanzaki?"

"No, not at all. We just happened to have something in common today, what's wrong?"

"I don't like the fact that he looks so smart with you."

It was useless to take her seriously.

"What do you have in common with that guy?"

"A freshman, Ishigami-kun. He was a student who looked a little like the handwriting I'm looking for."

With that, I accessed OAA and brought up Ishigami-kun's profile.

Year 1, Class A, Kyo Ishigami

Academic Ability A (95)

Physical Ability D- (25)

Ability to think tactfully B+ (77)

Ability to contribute to society D (31)

Overall ability B- (61)

"Also, there was something a little creepy about the way he talked and acted, like he couldn't see the bottom."

"Hmm? Does that mean he's suspicious in your mind?"

"I don't know. I think it's more gray than white, but ..... If this physical assessment isn't a true assessment of his abilities, then I might get suspicious all at once."

But there's no way to be sure of that at the moment.

"This Ishigami is not the one you're looking for."

Ibuki-san interjected, as if to deny my deduction.

"How can you be so sure?"

"The day before yesterday, I was on the floor overlooking the pool, and I was kind of watching the guys playing."

"By yourself? That must be lonely."

"What? Do you want me to stop talking?"

"Just kidding, go on."

"Damn,.... This guy, who stood out a bit because he was tall, came into view. He had a normal body with no upper or lower body workouts. It's definitely not that he works out. My guess for the guy you're looking for is someone strong like Amasawa or Ayanokouji, right?"

"Maybe the reason you went to the pool was to look for someone who works out...?"

Did you finally notice? Cowering her shoulders, Ibuki-san continued.

"Strength and body are always proportional. If it's a guy who can move, he definitely has a toned body, and if it's a guy who's strong, his muscles must be well-trained."

If I were an amateur, I'd say that Ibuki-san is a martial artist.

If she had seen Ishigami-kun, whose upper body was naked, then this data had a high degree of credibility.

"That's a good point for you to focus on."

If the information from Ibuki-san was reliable, it meant that his physical ability was undeniably around D-.

Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean he's the necessarily strong person as I initially guessed, but...

I think it's safe to say that he's completely innocent.

"Either way, the holidays are almost over, and we'll have to wait until the second semester starts to continue."

"I don't know how long that's going to take."

I can't help but feel a bit dismayed, but right now I have no conclusive proof of anything.

We'll just have to keep at it for a while.

### Part 3

Time for many of the students to head to the ship's facilities.

Amasawa Ichika, Class A, Year 1, was making her way into the cabin where one student was waiting.

"How are you going to excuse yourself if your roommate comes back at this time? I mean, normally I would say that, but since it's you, you're calculating that you'll never come back, aren't you?"

He smiled thinly and didn't answer either of Amasawa's questions.

"Do you understand what's going on? It seems that Nanase-chan, Horikita-senpai, and Ryuuuen-senpai are all looking for you with their eyes. Can't you just leave it at that?"

"This is fine. The plan is working like a charm."

"Then tell me the details of that plan...Takuya."

Yagami Takuya, who was called Takuya and was enrolled in first year B class, quietly got up from the bed.

"You never learn either, Ichika."

Amasawa, wary of the approaching Yagami, stared at him without blinking at his actions.

The moment she blinked, she could be subjected to some kind of powerful attack.

"I'm not going to raise my hand here."

"As much as I'd like to believe that."

"You're right, you're no longer on the White Room side. That's why you're my enemy."

He reached out his right arm and gently touched Amasawa.

"I know you thought so, but... I don't even recognize you as an enemy."

"Oh my, you're telling me."

"Just kidding. Now that you're a civilian, I just can't take any chances."

"I might be recording this conversation."

"You can do whatever you want with that."

Yagami could tell that recording this conversation would not be detrimental in any way.

If Amasawa was completely on Ayanokoji's side, then all she had to do was speak directly to him.

Even if it is not enough to believe that the story is true, it is enough to keep Yagami on his toes.

"The reason I called you here is because I wanted to find out your true intentions. Did you really want to protect Ayanokoji-senpai and repeatedly interfere with my plans?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Nya~"

Yagami laughed at Amasawa's frightened display and removed his fingers from the tips of her hair.

"There are too many to point out, so let's hear about the one point that forced me to change my plans. Why did you sabotage Kushida and Kurachi? I sent to Ayanokouji for the uninhabited island test?"

"I don't have to explain, you know that. It's because it's a painful strategy for Ayanokoji-senpai. I didn't want them to film a scene of him fighting with Nanase-chan and Kurachi-kun, two unconnected people. I'm sure senpai would have gotten through it just fine, but it was still inevitable that the footage would be disturbing."

"Right. It's true that he would have been able to handle Nanase and Kurachi without difficulty. But if we had recorded the scene of him dealing with it, we could have used it as a bargaining chip. If Ayanokouji forcibly took the tablet from Kushida, he wouldn't be able to unlock the pass, and physical destruction would create other problems."

The plan was thwarted by Amasawa, who had anticipated the action.

"Are you angry?"

"No way. I'm sure it would have made for a more interesting production in the end. I also got to know his character and how well he could read. He didn't choose to do a GPS search even though it looked like he was about to be attacked. He could do that because he knew that it would only be a distraction. Normally, I would have done a GPS search like Nanase did and followed Kurachi or Kushida."

Once back on the ship, there was no change in behavior in that regard.

"As a result, Nanase-chan and Ryuu-en-senpai have stepped into the Lost Forest, haven't they? They don't seem to have made contact yet, but I don't see how questioning the unrelated

Utomiya-kun is going to help. But what about Horikita-senpai? It seems that they are trying to identify him by getting a hint from the paper Takuya wrote. It was a bit of an idea to have the handwriting on the list in a treasure hunt game, wasn't it?"

"I'm sure if I give her a few more hints, she'll eventually get to me."

Yagami didn't seem to be in a hurry, in fact he seemed to be waiting for it.

"You mean that paper was a deliberate act?"

"Of course, that was my direction, too. I just want you to do your best to get there."

Yagami has a lot of hints for this in the future.

Even without asking him about it, Amasawa knew exactly what he was talking about.

"What's beyond that? If it matches Takuya's handwriting, that information will also be in Ayanokoji-senpai's ears."

If that happens, he'll be suspected as a potential White Room student.

"He doesn't trust me to begin with, and I'm assuming he's aware of some of the lies I've spread. This roundabout way of doing things was originally because Tsukishiro was in the way, though. Now that he's retreated, there's less need for it. There's no point in beating up Ayanokouji in a prepared advantageous situation."

"So you're saying you don't care when he found out?"

"That's what I mean. I'm even willing to come out directly to him."

From the beginning, Yagami had intended to go head-to-head with Ayanokoji.

But if he acted carelessly in the preliminary stages, there was a possibility that Tsukishiro would interfere.

While he was making all sorts of plans and following Tsukishiro's lead, they were all just to buy time.

"But now that the uninhabited island exam is over, we won't have a chance to interact with the second-year students for a while, right? I think it'll be better for you if you go back to the White Room soon~"

For Amasawa, who had no intention of returning, being expelled was a blessing in disguise. But for Yagami, it's the only place to return to.

"I have to completely crush him in a perfect way. I can catch up on my studies as much as I want."

His smile, a clumsy toothy grin, was nothing like his usual freshness.

"You really are twisted in a different way from me, aren't you Takuya?"

Amasawa continued her words, though she was dumbfounded.

"I feel sorry for Utomiya-kun too. He's just a fellow student, but he's teaming up with Takuya to protect Tsubaki-chan...I bet he'd be pissed if he knew it was Takuya who got his C classmates expelled."

"We knew from the start that he's a clumsy and companionable person; if he lets one classmate drop out, he'll definitely want to stop it this time. I slipped into Tsubaki and Utomiya's pockets and developed a strategy that would never succeed, and confirmed Ayanokoji's hand. Thanks to that, I also found out that he's connected to Sakayanagi, the leader of the second year A class."

"Oh, she came to me... Arisu-senpai."

"There's a possibility that she'll intervene in the fight between me and Ayanokoji in the future, so we'll have to think about how to deal with her."

"Yes, yes, well, do what you want."

Amasawa sighs in boredom, tired of seeing Yagami start to talk so eloquently.

When he's in a good mood, Yagami will talk forever by himself, like now, even if he's left alone.

He enjoys this situation more than anyone else, even though he has put himself in danger of having his identity discovered.

"Are you satisfied with your speech? Can I go back now?"

"Before that, what I wanted to call you out to confirm is your intentions, Ichika."

"Hmm~?"

Showing a childish smile, Yagami instantly grabbed both of Amasawa's forearms.

"Huh!"

Amasawa, who had been on guard with the intention of avoiding him for sure, was not caught off guard, but she couldn't react.

"It's either Utomiya or me. Everyone will find out about it not too long from now. That's where it all starts."

"...So they're going to play the kind of serious game Takuya wants?"

"We recognize each other as enemies, and then we compete to see who's really good."

"Why don't you decide with your fists like a man, instead of trying to go around? With Takuya's fighting ability, he should be able to compete with Ayanokoji."

"I won't use violence except for the minimum necessary."

"How can you say that?"

The force of the restraining hand was extraordinary, and even Amasawa was no match for it.

But even if she tried to use other means, she would not be able to compete with him now.

"Can't you understand that this is the least violent thing you can do right now?"

Amasawa smiles back at him, but she's already imagining what will happen next in her mind over and over again.

However, no matter how many times she repeats it, she can't find a pattern that can break the situation.

"The reason why I called you here today is because I was actually thinking of putting you out of action again. And Ichika, who knows about me, is only a hindrance to me no matter how I try in the future. Have you noticed that?"

"Haha~, it might not be funny."

With Yagami's looming face in front of her, Amasawa began to prepare herself—.

The pressure was removed from her clenched forearm, and the restraints were released.

"What a surprise."

He laughed softly, as he always did, and put his hand on the door behind Amasawa's back.

"Sorry, sorry. But really, today I was going to crush you. But I stopped."

"Wow, you did?"

Amasawa drew back, slouching at such a response.

"Because I've heard that you were sanctioned by Shiba. You were right not to fight back."

"If you turn him away once, he'll just come back twice as hard. I learned that when I was little. But are you sure you want to leave me alone?"

"Now that I know that Ichika is going to remain calm. If I had made the decision to go completely with Ayanokoji, I would have ended it already."

"It's a little difficult to weigh the senior I admire and the friendliness of my peers."

"Don't worry, it's a head-to-head match that Ayanokoji needs to win. There's no way I'm going to be violent with him. It's one of two things:  
either I get expelled or he does."

With that, Yagami opened the door to the guest room and let Amasawa leave like a gentleman.

#### Part 4

It was around 2 a.m. in the concert hall.

I quietly opened the heavy door.

In the large room, there was only one person sitting in a seat with her back to me.

It was so quiet that even the sound of my footsteps on the carpet could be heard, and I approached the person.

"Students aren't allowed to leave their guest rooms at this time, though."

"Don't say that. If it's not this time of day, there's no chance for us to be alone for sure."

"If someone finds us, you'll take responsibility for us, won't you? Chabashira-sensei."

Chabashira doesn't even turn to look at me.

"Don't worry. The teacher's nightly rounds are supposed to last until midnight."

"That's fine then. So, what were you thinking calling me all the way out here?"

"After the summer break, the second semester will begin. And the next exams will start."

"I'm sure it will. Last year, we went straight to the gym festival, didn't we?"

"Yeah. But not this year, there will be one special exam held before that."

"Are you sure? You can't give me that information."

There was no way that a teacher would be allowed to give out favorable information to a particular student or class.

"Or are you saying that the next special exam has already started?"

"No... it's not like that."

If that's the case, then Chabashira's decision to invite me here and this conversation was all at her own discretion.

This is unexpected, because I thought that the homeroom teacher is usually not particularly supportive of the class.

I don't know what she was thinking, but she suddenly fell silent.

There was no point in standing by her, so I went to the stage. Normally, this concert hall is a place where you can enjoy listening to live music.

The large, high-class grand piano is still in place.

Perhaps because the performance was held in this hall today, it was naturally not covered with any dust.

"Acting Director Tsukishiro even risked his own career to get rid of you on the uninhabited island. Even if your father was a celebrity, his persistence is extraordinary."

"I suppose so. The only thing I have to correct is that Tsukishiro has never been interested in the position of Acting Director from the beginning. He only used the position to get rid of me."

"So that's how powerful a force is at work?"

Chabashira crosses her arms, completely unable to understand.

"Are you ready to talk about it now?"

"..... Ah."

Pausing for a breath, Chabashira speaks up quietly.

"How do you analyze your class?"

"How, what do you mean?"

"Do you think you have what it takes to move up to Class A?"

"Are you going to ask that to the students in your own class?"

"I'd like to ask you."

Unusual, that's not even close.

That's how much Chabashira must have something on her mind.

"Yes, I definitely think that we have the highest potential out of the second years. However, that doesn't mean that we can just leave them like this and move up to Class A. It will be very difficult to catch up with Sakayanagi's class, which is currently leading the A class."

The teacher would know this school better than most.

"The class has to be one, I think that is the minimum requirement. And that includes you, Chabashira-sensei."

When I said that, Chabashira looked at me with a surprised look. She looks like she knows what she's doing.

"I'm ..... What kind of teacher do I look like to you?"

Chabashira has always been rather cold-hearted towards her classmates.

Instead, she had spent her days shunting them down and abandoning them.

"A teacher who thinks she can't win, but can't give up hope. That's it in a nutshell, isn't it?"

"That's harsh."

"The fact and impression that you tried to use me hasn't changed at all."

"Yes, that's right."

Unless she sincerely corrected that mistake, Chabashira would never change.

"You don't make your students work hard because you yourself want to be in Class A. You work hard for the sake of the students who strongly want to be in Class A."

"Ayanokoji....."

"I'm sure you'll be able to find the answer. I think so."

"You said that the ..... class needs to become one."

"Yes."

"That includes you, of course."

"Of course it does."

Their gazes met, and Chabashira gulped heavily.

"What if I told you that I was leaving my past behind?"

Eyes that questioned her resolve.

You'd better believe that any lie here will be seen through.

"If you say you're going to throw away your past, then I'm going to throw away the way I've always thought. If you're serious about getting to Class A, I'm not going to hold out on you."

"..... I see."

What will or will not change about Chabashira with these words?

That remains to be seen at the moment...

"When you can look forward, I'm sure the class will start to change for real."

"..... I guess so."

Looking up at the high ceiling, Chabashira closed both eyes.

It seemed certain that she was casting a deep shadow over her mind.

I should just walk away, but for some reason I feel a little differently at this moment.

Chabashira's reputation as a homeroom teacher remains low.

However, when I looked at her as a person, I began to see a slight change in my opinion of her.

She was much more fragile than I had expected, as if she had only grown up on the outside.

I sat back in my chair and opened the keyboard lid.

"..... What are you doing? Don't tell me you can play the piano?"

Without answering any questions, I ran my fingertips over the keys and began to play a tune.



When I finished playing, Chabashira applauded without seeming to.

"I'm no musical expert, but that's brilliant. Even with practice, I'll never be able to play at that level. As I recall, the song you just played..."

And then, in the silent concert hall, there was a sound slightly behind me.

Chabashira hurriedly stood up and turned around.

Emerging from the darkness was a smiling Tsukishiro.

"Beethoven, Für Elise, isn't it? Even though the difficulty of the piece itself is not high, to play it so perfectly is an impressive feat. It was a shame that Chabashira-sensei and I were the only ones who were watching. However, during this time, students are not allowed to go out unintentionally. You know that there will be penalties waiting for you if you break it easily, don't you?"

[ It's a good song. Try hearing it ]

"Acting Director Tsukishiro, this is ....."

Chabashira hurriedly tried to make an excuse, but Tsukishiro stopped her softly.

"Don't worry. As of today, I have been dismissed from my position as acting Director, and Chancellor Sakayanagi has reinstated, so I am now just an irrelevant civilian. I will not be reporting to the school."

"We can trust ....., are you sure?"

"There is no need to trust me. However, from the moment I showed up here, Ayanokoji-kun was aware of my presence. If your emotions are disturbed, it will be transmitted to your performance. But I didn't see a single millimeter of turbulence in your performance. ..... Why is that?"

"It's simple. I can't be expelled, even if I am to be punished. The only thing you and I have to fight about is whether or not I'll be expelled. There's no point in penalizing me for going out ."

"Even if you knew that, it's normal to panic if you're seen in a place you don't want to be seen. I wonder if that courage comes from your father."

"I'm sorry, but I don't remember being raised that way."

Closing the lid, I stepped away from the piano.

"In the morning, I won't be able to talk to you ever again. When I thought about it, I thought I'd at least try one last time."

The ship is equipped with number of surveillance cameras.

I wonder if he was constantly checking the corridors for images of my cabin.

He's got a lot of time on his hands.

"If you'd prefer me to leave, I'll leave."

"No, it's fine as it is. It would be more inconvenient for Ayanokoji-kun if he were to be left alone with me. It is better for you to stay here to protect the students."

Tsukishiro walked up to us and sat down on a seat two seats away from Chabashira.

"Is the concert over already?"

"If you need to talk, please do so soon."

He knew it was a joke, so he urged Tsukishiro to speak quickly.

"It's a bad idea, but I'm here to negotiate one last time. Don't you have any intention to report your expulsion and leave?"

"Tsukishiro-san. What on earth do you intend to do?"

Hearing the word "expulsion", Chabashira interrupted with a bit of anger.

"What do you mean?"

"You interfered in the special exam without permission and tried to expel Ayanokoji. That alone is an act that would normally be unforgivable."

"That goes for you too Chabashira-sensei, weren't you trying to have a private conversation about the next special exam?"

The details were unclear, but in his own way, Tsukishiro seemed to see through Chabashira's purpose.

"It's certainly not something to be praised. But I'm not going to tell him what the exam is to give him an advantage."

"That may be true in your mind, but you can't prove it. The fact that I happened to show up here prevented the injustice from happening before it happened."

"That's..."

"And you are guilty of more than one. You understand, don't you?"

At the moment, Chabashira's crime was calling out a student at this time when he was grounded.

Even if it is between a teacher and a student, the fact that they are male and female is a point that cannot be overlooked.

Tsukishiro can also persistently exploit that small gap.

"Chabashira-sensei, it's not me who's in trouble for making a fuss, it's you. And Ayanokoji-kun, too."

If it turns into a mess with the teacher, a warning won't be enough.

It was a threat from Tsukishiro, "If you understand, don't interfere".

"Stick to ....."

Chabashira, who had lost track of that part, understood the position she was in and stepped back.

"That's fine."

Without breaking into a smile, Tsukishiro approached me and the distance between us closed to about two meters.

"I won't try to set you up here, don't worry."

"No matter what the situation, you will act if it is in your best interest. That's the kind of person I analyzed you to be."

"I guess that means you're buying it to some extent."

So far, I've managed to evade Tsukishiro's tricks.

But that's only because Tsukishiro has followed what can hardly be called an outrageous strategy.

Manipulation of exams, violence, kidnapping, that's about it.

Perhaps if this man had wanted to, it would not have been as bad as it had been.

"I won't drop out."

"I'm sorry, but it can't be helped. So you're going to stay at this school until you graduate, is that it?"

"That is my intention. As long as I don't get expelled according to the school's rules."

"No matter how much you want to stay in this world, you certainly can't resist it."

They don't speak to each other here, but the shadow of the White Room student still flickers around them.

"You are clever. And strong. It's so good that anyone who knows what you're capable of would agree."

Eventually, Tsukishiro stands in front of me.

"But no matter how good you are, you are still just a child. You should understand that that person has already factored in that strength of yours and is sending me to you."

In other words, that man also foresaw the future where I would evict Tsukishiro like this...?

"If you want to stay in school for even a day longer, you should think twice."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Smiling thinly, Tsukishiro laughed once by himself, wondering what he was thinking.

"However, this school is surprisingly interesting. I'm sure it's the only school in the whole world that can conduct special exams on an uninhabited island. It reminded me of the time when I was a little boy and I was really into Boy Scouts."

With that, Tsukishiro held out his left hand in front of me.

"Now this is goodbye Ayanokouji-kun, can you shake my hand?"

This left hand did not seem like a simple farewell greeting.

When I held out my left hand in the same manner and grasped it back, Tsukishiro nodded as if he was satisfied.

"Well then... I'll see you 'again' sooner or later."

With a final tap on my left shoulder with the palm of his right hand, Tsukishiro turned on his heel.

"Oh, and please disperse within five minutes. If you don't, I will report you."

I and Chabashira looked away until Tsukishiro was out of sight.

"I don't care about the details, but I can't believe he asked for a handshake with his left hand. Does that mean he was hostile to you until the end?"

In general, handshakes are usually done with the right hand.

Well, people nowadays don't care about such things and may not even know what it means.

"It didn't seem that way to me, though."

"What do you mean?"

Tsukishiro said without warning, talking about his passion for Boy Scouts. It is usually considered rude to shake hands with your left hand, but in the case of the Boy Scouts, this is an exception.

What it means is...

"Forget it. It's probably useless to think about that guy's thoughts."

It's also possible to make it mean something.

"I'll go back first."

"Yeah, that's a good idea."

As long as Tsukishiro had already found me, ignoring the warning here would only be a risk.

"I'm sorry. I just summoned you easily and gave Acting Director Tsukishiro an opportunity to take advantage of you."

"That's fine, I don't mind. It's just that I'm starting to see some things."

As I approached the doorway, I decided to leave a few words for Chabashira without looking back.

"As I said before, whether the class will stay afloat or sink in the future is not something on the other side of the river that is irrelevant to the teacher. You'd better understand that."

No matter what special exams awaited them, the students could only move forward.

Only the homeroom teachers of each class can lead the way.

## Chapter 7

When hands are touching one another

After our holiday on the luxury cruise ship, we boarded the bus and returned to the Advanced Nurturing High School.

After that, we spent our days going back and forth between the dormitory life and the mall, and I think I could call it lazy and self-defeating.

During that time, the number of members I hung out with increased incomparably compared to last year.

There were members of the Ayanokouji group, Sudou, Ike, and other students that I had gotten to know in the beginning, and even Ishizaki, Hiyori, and Ichinose class members that I had started chatting with. All these things continued.

And then...

"Ah, the summer vacation is over today..."

As she sat down on her bed, Kei looked up at the ceiling and muttered depressingly.

My girlfriend, Karuizawa Kei, and I have been having regular secret dates since the second semester in order to keep our relationship open. Today would be the last of these dates.

Although we shared a somewhat uncomfortable time, it was not uncomfortable at all.

If we were just friends, we might have felt rushed to say a few words to each other, or we might have felt somewhat muddled.

"You don't mind if I tell others about my relationship with Kiyotaka tomorrow, do you? ..... I'm kind of nervous."

"You don't have to force yourself to tell others, though. I won't take any responsibility if your position in class falls."

"I'm definitely going to tell it. If something happens, Kiyotaka will protect me, so I'm fine. Right?"

Kei says it jokingly, but it's unmistakable that she means it.

She is protecting herself by becoming a parasite on a strong host.

I drank my last sip of coffee and sat down next to Kei.

I took her thin hand in mine and she squeezed it gently back. Kei turned to me, looking embarrassed.



"Kei."

At that moment, I put my own lips on her soft lips.

"Ki, Kiyotaka....."

"Are you surprised?"

"Yes, I was surprised. shouldn't you give a little advance notice?"

I don't answer that question with words, but with actions. I grabbed her shoulder gently and pull her close.

"mmmm....!"

A second kiss. The moment our lips touch, Kei's shoulders bounce upward a little, and I can feel her surprise.

As soon as we parted our lips, she looked at me with eyes that seemed relieved and regretful.

"..... took me by surprise again."

"Really? I thought it was rather normal."

The only way to learn about timing is to start learning it over and over again.

"At least, my feelings weren't ready yet, and ....."

"Then you think you'll be ready this time?"

"Huh? ..... Yeah ....."

Kei nodded her head and closed her eyes, showing a gesture of acceptance, so I kissed her again.



The previous two times I had only touched for about a second, but this time was different.

For five or ten seconds longer.

Then she moved her lips little by little and repeated the kiss like a little bird pecking.

In the flow of time that only Kei and I felt had stopped,...

The second year of high school, the last day of summer vacation. Kei and me climbed one flight of stairs together, knowing that we were kissing.

The first half of the romance curriculum has been completed, and we are now entering the second half.

From now on, we will live our school lives as lovers without hesitation. This may get us into no small amount of trouble.

Even so, the two of us will work hand in hand to face the difficulties.

Slowly but surely, one step at a time, just as the seasons change from summer to autumn and from autumn to winter.

Our relationship with each other becomes something indispensable and deeply stained.

While repeatedly checking the taste of her lips, my thoughts wandered to the future.

As the season of parting approaches, this love affair enters its final phase...

And it's sure to face an extremely difficult ordeal.

When Karuizawa Kei is separated from her host, she must be able to stand alone and look forward.

That is the most important thing in this romance curriculum.

## **Short Stories**

### **Nanase Tsubasa SS - A Double Sided Favour Repayment**

With a sandwich and milk carton in hand, I waited by the cashier trying to calm down my impatience.

That was not due to a slow queue since there weren't that many students checking out the store today even though it was noon.

No, the reason for that is because I was tailing a 1st year student named Kurachi-kun.

He had gone to the store and bought something that looked like lunch and went to pay, and therefore I did the same.

I don't know where he was heading for after, but he hadn't realised he was being tailed, nor was he aware of the person tailing him. Thus I could be more proactive and follow him closely without being noticed.

The reason I was tailing him was because when I used the GPS Search feature to find out who the person trying to attack Ayanokouji-senpai was, his name had appeared.

But according to Ayanokouji-senpai's hypothesis, there was a good chance Kurachi-kun hadn't really planned to attack him for real.

But if we look more closely into it, we may discover the person behind it all.

That's the reason I've kept it a secret from Senpai.

If the one I'm tailing was a formidable opponent however, then maybe I wouldn't be a match for them.

But still—

Even if I had to flee with my tail between my feet, I wouldn't have minded it at all.

Because if I could leave behind at least something for Ayanokouji-senpai, it would have been worth it.

A small advantage would surely help him tip the scales and help him overcome his trials.

Yes, this is my own decision.

I took out my sandwich and began blending in with the students having lunch here.

Just before biting it, I suddenly remembered that moment during the uninhabited island exam.

When Ayanokouji-senpai told me there was no need to leave the school.

Letting him pamper me would have been an easy decision and I would surely have been able to lead a fun school life.

But that doesn't sit well with me.

Tailing Kurachi-kun had led me to the upper deck which seemed to be a perfect spot for a light lunch as a huge amount of students were gathered here.

It looked like they were waiting for someone as they were looking around unrestly.

I wonder who they are waiting for? Naturally, it could be some of their friends who I have no connections with whatsoever...

I took a bite and just as I was about to start chewing—

“Nanase.”

A voice from behind startled me as I was so focused on Kurachi-kun in front of me.

Recognising it as Ayanokouji's voice, I turned around to face him while hiding my surprise.

“Ah, senfai-.”

I started chewing in a hurry in order to calm myself down.

Strange, I couldn't taste anything.

“Ah, my bad. Shall I come back later?”

He said apologetically, but there's no way I would have him do that.

“Phease huht waid a bid.”

I continued to chew faster and swallowed the food in my mouth.

“Ehem....err, I'm sorry, you see, the truth is.... I was eating.”

I couldn't tell him the fact I was tailing Kurachi-kun, nor that I was currently observing him right now.

“Eh well, is there something you wanted from me?”

I lost Kurachi-kun from view for a bit, but I endured it for now.

Anyway, I just had to finish this conversation as quickly as possible in a natural way.

"Ah no, it looked like you wanted to say something to me the other day. I kinda wondered about it. It kinda fizzled out when Ninomiya interrupted, you see."

So that's how it is... that would certainly have made him curious.

"Ah-"

I'm indeed tailing Kurachi-kun right now.

And I was hesitating whether to consult him about it now or not.

I could have just told it as it was, that I had used the GPS Search, notified him about Kurachi-kun, and asked him what to do about it.

That would definitely have been the right answer I think.

"Sorry, That's something I've already taken care of so can I ask you to forget about it?"

But I'd decided to abandon that route.

The words screaming inside me had perhaps been conveyed to him.

"Sorry for calling out to you so suddenly. I'll return back inside then. There are so many people here that I can't relax." He said, not pursuing the topic.

"Is that so? See you later, Senpai."

I couldn't detain him here any longer so I just saw him off.

As I looked at his retreating figure, I apologised to him in my mind.

I'm sorry, Ayanokouji-senpai... I already knew I should have just told you all this upfront.

But since you just would have been that kind Senpai, you would have stopped me saying it was dangerous.

Please give me some time.

I will work hard to leave behind some accomplishments to my name, no matter how small they may be.

**Sato Maya SS - A Bad Girl, But Just a Little bit**

The treasure hunt game with Ayanokouji was about to end.

What was it called again? The climax? Well, anyway, it means the end was near.

“Could you open the camera app?”

I followed his directions and turned on his smartphone.

Looking at the photo gallery, I saw pictures of the QR codes we'd found today along with some other ones as small icons, 15 in total.

My heart started beating faster thinking of how I could take a sneak peek at his everyday life.

But, he only had pictures of food and landscapes.

He didn't have a single photo of Kei-chan in there, which made me happy.

I'm such a bad girl...

“Which should we scan first?” I asked.

I put a lid on my feelings and just showed him some random QR code.

“Just follow your instincts and choose one you think is good.”

“E-eh? You mean I can choose? W-what should I do? What if I choose a bad one?”

The thought of receiving a hefty reward was blown away this very instant.

What if it became my fault we only ended up getting 5000 points?....

Not even covering the participation fee is bad, isn't it?

What shall I do? What shall I do? This pressure is way too heavy!

“The bad ones should have been removed already. And there is a chance every code has been scanned already as well so there is a chance we just have to try them all.”

Hearing that made me so relieved.

“O-okay!”

I prepared myself, took out my own smartphone and opened the app.

Next is to choose which code to scan.

I slided across them all in order to find one as quickly as possible.

Hmm, this one should be the most difficult to find, perhaps?...

The one Ayanokouji-kun found behind that sofa?

I was perhaps exaggerating a bit, but my hands started shivering as I pointed the phone camera towards the code.

After scanning it, the screen suddenly turns black and—.

“Ah, this one is no good. It says it has been claimed already.”

Which means someone had found this code and scanned it already.

And I thought nobody would find it!

“Don’t worry, just scan the next.”

Holding back the frustration, I hurriedly chose another one.

But this one had been claimed as well.

“And after all we did to find it too! This is irritating!”

Now I just want one of them to work.

My thought patterns did a 180-degree turn, forfeiting the jackpot.

This is the 3rd try. And once again, the screen turned black. As I started to get worried again, smoke started to appear on the screen unlike previous attempts.

“It worked! Look! It looks like a treasure chest!”

A screen that begged you to tap on it.

I thought it felt a bit like a game, but this treasure hunt was certainly a game.

“I wonder how many points it contains?...”

I was so excited and was about to tap on it.

But... What if this one only had 5000 points?

My fingers started becoming heavier as my imagination constructed the worst ending result.

“Y-you do it, A-Ayanokouji-kun!”

I gave him both the smartphones at the same time.

I received them without showing any kind of displeasure on his face while he put his own in his pocket and looked at the screen of mine.

Then he tapped on the treasure chest without hesitation.

“Wah, You’re so daring, Ayanokouji-kun!”

The screen started to flash blue and change.

What appeared on the screen was letters saying 100000 points.

“Ah!! ....Ah~”

I thought maybe we’d won 1 million points, but that was wrong.

There were 5 zeros so 100 000 points. They looked alike, but that was it.

“It seems we didn’t find that rare of a code after all.”

Hmm, but this is no time to get depressed, right?

Since we went into the positives for sure.

“I see~... That’s too bad. But you know, even with the participation fee, we did win 90 000 so that’s more than enough!”

I was so happy that when I looked at his face, I noticed how close we were to one another.

I somehow wanted to avert my eyes, but still thought of it as a little bonus.

“Thanks a lot, Ayanokouji-kun.”

And I’m so sorry Kei-chan. But this is a game so it can’t be helped, right?

“I’m the one who needs to thank you. The one who found this QR code was none other than you, Satou.”

“...Hehe.”

I had such a good time that I ended up thinking I maybe was a bad girl after all, only slightly though.

### **Kiryuuin Fuka SS - When you are the Older One**

I watched the sun rays through my sunglasses and became one with nature.

I've gone cruising with my parents when I was younger, but never since.

“Spending a holiday like this just relaxing ain't bad from time to time.”

If I had to raise a complaint, it would be how many students there were at this pool.

That being said, it was just a minor problem.

Let's just relax for the whole day, shall we?

After I had received the drink I'd ordered, I noticed a change in my surroundings.

The 3rd year students, my classmates in other words, suddenly changed their facial expressions.

They looked in the same direction in unison while conversing with their glances.

That piqued my interest and I followed their cue....and Ayanokouji was standing there.

It seems like he'd just arrived at the pool as he surveyed his surroundings.

But it didn't seem like he had noticed the stares from the 3rd year students, his facial expression unchanged.

Nah, there's no way he wouldn't have noticed stares this obvious.

It's better to say he's pretending to not notice.

The 1st years and the 2nd years didn't seem to have taken any actions whatsoever.

“I see... so that's what's going on.”

I had planned to be in my OFF-mode today, but my switch had oddly enough turned ON.

“Looks like you’re in for some trouble, Ayanokouji.”

I couldn’t suppress my curiosity anymore and called out to him from behind.

He noticed me, but he looked the same as always.

“What are you talking about?”

It looked like he was playing the fool, but there’s no way he was.

“I’m talking about the 3rd year students. There’s no way you haven’t noticed them, am I right?”

“I’m not quite sure what you are talking about though.”

“While I’m not taking part in it, I’m still a 3rd year student. I’ve at least heard a bit about it.”

“Are you perhaps talking about the stares in my direction?”

“So you did notice after all.”

“I don’t find it particularly troublesome though. I’m just being watched, that’s it.” He said as if it wasn’t worth paying any attention to, but that’s taking it too lightly.

Since the Student Council President is involved, that means trouble is brewing.

It seems Nagumo has started taking Ayanokouji seriously somehow.

Good grief, Ayanokouji is seriously an interesting man.

Indeed, If we were the same age, I could have observed him for yet another year.

Those feelings had unexpectedly begun to form within me.

That’s just how interesting this man is.

### **Karuizawa Kei SS - A Dream I've seen Before**

That day was the last of the summer vacation. The day that perhaps all the students on this yacht have been regretting it a long time ago.

And I too, like everyone else, looking back to those incredible and fun moments.

“Aah, today is the last day of summer vacation!”

To be more precise, the summer holidays are over.

Although I was a little sad inside, time did not necessarily bring me anything. I had the opportunity to meet Kiyotaka every day, anytime, anywhere, to chat without parting through the phone screen.

We have been together from morning to night.

Imagine that if two different kinds meet and go out, it can make people itch. Or maybe we couldn't even be a couple. I will be a fool as always, closing my heart and putting on a mask full of fakes.

It's the same word that I suddenly realized: "how happy I was."

"Starting tomorrow, it would be good for me to tell others about my relationship with Kiyotaka ... I'm a little nervous."

Although it doesn't change our relationship, things around him will be different.

"It is not necessary that you force yourself to tell others. I won't be held responsible if your status falls in the class. "

Even though he said so, I don't want to keep this secret forever.

I had a great lover and now I want to show him off to the whole world... Also... The love I have for him has grown so much that I can no longer remain silent.

"I will say it absolutely. Even if something happens, it's fine because you will protect me, right? "

I'll make it public, for sure, starting with my best friends. And then, it will spread to the entire school like wildfire.

He was surprised when he heard me say that, but he nodded.

Then he sat down next to me and squeezed my hand tightly. His hand is much bigger than mine, but it is not bottled at all, on the contrary it is very toned and warm.

Taking that hand, the world around me suddenly feels so peaceful. I whisper the wish that I could be with you forever.

"Kei".

When I hear my name being stored in my ears, my heart suddenly skipped a beat with embarrassment.

He comes over and calls me by my name.

I faced Kiyotaka and looked him straight in the eye. His face is chained closer to me than ever.

Here I am again, our second kiss.

Truth?... Really, I forgot. But if it is a dream that I have dreamed before, this is the third time that I have been next to your lips.

These Short Stories are translated by Cinnamon Translation.

## **Afterword**

Hi, I'm Kinugasa, and the hot season is getting harder and harder to bear. I'm dreading it now because it's the harbinger of my least favorite season, but I'm fortunate that I don't get angry when I stay at home because of the recent trend of self-restraint. However, I'm sure the kids want to play outside, so I wish there was a way to let them play without bothering others.

But that's where DIY and other skills come in...

Yes. I've started off with some unimportant chit-chat, but it was the summer vacation section of volume 4.5.

The summer vacation when I was a student was a long time ago, but ..... I never once thought that I wanted to go back to the past and redo my school days. It's not that I had a bad time, and I enjoyed my school life to a certain extent, but I never had the patience and confidence to repeat the cycle of getting up in the morning, studying, getting a part-time job, and going home!

This is the decline.

My eyesight is also deteriorating day by day, and just thinking about what I'll look like in another 10 years is terrifying... The future scares me too!

Unlike last year, this is a story of a holiday on a luxury cruise ship with no special exams.

Ayanokouji and Kei's relationship, and the changes in their classmates.

The new first-year students and the changes in Nagumo and the third-year students.

I think the students have grown a lot since the summer vacation a year ago. And while the students are growing, the adults who are overseeing them are....

Now, this is going to be a bit of a spoiler, but did you have any idea who the White Room students were?

Yes, you did, didn't you? I know, the story starts here.

Volume 5 will be the second act of the second year, and I think it will be a big turning point.

The next installment will be the start of the second semester and the special exam.

I hope you enjoy the next volume as much as I did, even though I was surprised to find out that this will be the first time in several books that there will be a special exam for second-year students only.

I hope you enjoy the next volume as much as I do. The world is going through a lot right now, but let's all do our best to get through it.

See you again soon, then!

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This is my Review of The Volume - [Review + Discussion](#)

Don't Forget to Check the Review and Also don't Forget to Enjoy your Day too.

Have a Nice Day Ahead!